Whatever

CHURCH

Happened

AS

to

PARABLE

Ethics?

Harry Huebner
David Schroeder

CHURCH AS PARABLE

CHURCH AS PARABLE

Whatever Happened to Ethics?

Harry Huebner
David Schroeder

CMBC Publications
Winnipeg, Manitoba
1993

CMBC Publications
600 Shaftesbury Blvd.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3P 0M4

All Scriptural references, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New Revised Standard Version.

We acknowledge with thanks
a generous publishing subsidy from
The Gerhard Lohrenz Publication Fund

Cover design: Gerald Loewen

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Huebner, Harry John, 1943-

Church as parable

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-920718-46-9

1. Christian ethics - Mennonite authors. 2. Social ethics.
3. Christian life - Mennonite authors. I. Schroeder, David, 1924- . II. Title.

BJ1251.H83 1993 241'.0497 C93-098013-1

First printing February 1993
Second printing March 1994

Printed in Canada by
Friesen Printers
Altona, Manitoba
R0G 0B0

CONTENTS


~~~~~
~~~~~

FOREWORD

The essays in this book have had a long gestation period. This is true in two senses. First, several of them were initially presented in 1988 at a Minister's and Lay Workers' Conference at Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) in Winnipeg. Participants encouraged us to publish our presentations. After five years and several rewrites they now are being made available to a larger readership. Second, in actual fact, these thoughts have enjoyed an even longer time of formation, testing and refining. Both of us have a longstanding practice of listening to what is happening in the Christian communities of which we are part and of genuinely trying to integrate these thoughts and experiences with our own vision of the Christian faith. This process always takes place as we participate in the very communities—the church and the college—which are shaping us and in which we have been entrusted to teach. Hence we do not see our thinking as simply emerging from the activities of our own minds just as we do not see the Christian way of life emanating from the mere impulses that drive people.

Thought and life belong together in a dynamic interplay; our own thoughts and lives and those of others are inseparably intertwined. It takes time for the fruits of such integration to be expressed on paper. As soon as it has, revision seems necessary again. This is the nature of serious theologizing. Add to this the dynamics of two writers critically reading each other's work, plus trying to co-ordinate writing time amidst other obligations, and it is actually remarkable that this project ever got done.

These essays arise from much serious soul searching on the matters addressed. The chosen topics are not simple ones but, in our view, are representative samples of issues which committed Christians and the church as a whole are facing. They include the perennial topics of philosophy such as truth and knowledge, being and acting and revelation. Even though this study cannot do justice to the complexities of the arguments, we feel obliged to face head-on some of the larger theoretical matters which often involuntarily intrude into our thinking.

In an earlier time the Mennonite church looked askance at a serious systematic assessment of theology. The Low German slogan,

"The more learned the more perverted," may have served us well in a former, more secluded environment. But, today, with a myriad of ideologies vying for loyalty in our churches, an unreflected theology can serve us no longer.

However, the enterprise of careful theological reflection has its own perils. Both of us have read enough theology and philosophy to know that, what at one time was considered knowledge and truth in the history of thought, later was pronounced untrue and sometimes even heretical. This awareness lends impetus to an historical relativism which, if true, would undermine the very knowledge claims we want to make. We find ourselves both tempted by, yet strongly resisting, such historical relativism.

We have gone through different stages of thought on what is an appropriate theological method. At times we also have been tempted to speak of knowledge as inherently historical. After all, a case can be made that the Bible sees truth and knowledge in precisely this way. The biblical narrative portrays God as present in every time and place, hence the suggestion might well be that we are unable to know God apart from the time and place of God's revelation. Yet, at the current stage in our thinking, we are not able to embrace an uncritical historicism. We are too deeply committed to the belief in the timelessness of God's character as definitively revealed in Jesus Christ and, even today, present to us as the same One who was present to Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Jonah and Jesus.

We have had to say no to historicism as an underlying framework for theology at the same time as we refuse one of the most compelling alternatives: naturalism. We reject the modern way of thinking that forces us into the unfortunate dichotomy of history and nature. Both belong together in ways which very few scholars have been able to articulate successfully. The push of history that everything changes must find a corrective in the givenness of the created natural necessity of things. Otherwise we end up with either an infinite progression of revelatory acts of God with no unitive core—which would make religious truth and knowledge impossible—or we end up with a rationally produced natural theology unrelated to the biblical stories of how God acts in concrete social history. The effort to find a proper way of uniting both will be evident in this book.

These essays represent a response to various voices that are vying for attention in our day. There are those who say that theology must begin with human experience motivated by an insistence that it must always speak directly and immediately to human needs. We say that theology must begin with the story of God's revelation in the Bible because only here can we find the real answer to our needs. We are well aware that much tragic violence has been perpetrated in the name of a theology of dominance and power—even by leaders of the

church. However, this is not the fault of beginning with God and the Bible, but the result of misunderstanding the very God who is made known in the biblical story. The God of Jesus Christ is the One whose power is invitation, not dominance, and whose authority is love, not manipulative power. All justification of violence and abuse of human beings in the name of the God of Israel and Jesus is idolatry.

Another tendency in our day is to measure salvation purely in terms of liberation from suffering. We regard this as unbiblical since so much of the biblical material addresses the question of how we can be saved while we are socially and even existentially unliberated. The reality of exile prompts everyone to ask, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Yet we are all aware of the diabolical ideology which can justify suffering as it preaches salvation. None of us wants a theology which will underwrite such practices. The problem is that modern theology has trained us to think that we must choose for our theological model between two exhaustive alternatives: the Exodus story and the Exile story. (One may well substitute the New Testament equivalents, Cross and Resurrection.) But neither model is solely normative for salvation. Whether one lives in exile or in exodus is often determined by historical, contingent circumstances. Hence, salvation will need to be grounded in something theologically more generic than either the Exodus or the Exile, that is, in the relationship between them. Our claim is that this relationship can best be understood as we aspire to open ourselves to the gracious activity of God. Then exodus (resurrection) is possible for every exile (cross) precisely because it is rooted in God's mercy.

Fundamentally, these essays focus on what traditionally has been called Christian ethics which both of us have taught to college students for many years. Much of what we say in these essays is a product of interchange with our students, both in the classroom and in churches. It is appropriate to acknowledge our indebtedness to all our students for being the excuse, often even the catalyst, for clarifying our thinking on these matters. Many times we have rushed to our office from the classroom to jot down important insights which came into especially sharp focus during discussion with students. Unfortunately, there is no way of giving appropriate individual credit, so we extend a sincere, general "thank you."

A word also needs to be said about our interaction with our colleagues at CMBC. Our way of understanding Christian ethics has been tested over and over again against the wisdom and insights of highly respected Christian co-workers. Their challenging affirmations, sometimes even their stubborn insistence that we are simply wrong, have proven to be invaluable incentives for clarifying our thinking.

The collective tenure at CMBC between the two of us exceeds half a century. This book could not have been written without the support from colleagues who also believe in the integration of serious theological reflection with excellence of Christian character. We find it hard to imagine a faculty where collegial interaction has more integrity both intellectually and morally. Our faculty may not always make important decisions swiftly, especially regarding matters involving the integration of faith and life, but in the end we usually know why we have made them. Needless to say this process has served as an excellent living laboratory in the functioning of the moral community.

Often we have been asked to address social issues: abortion, homosexuality, divorce/remarriage, war, violence, medical ethics, business ethics, sports ethics. Seldom have we refused the challenge, not because we knew precisely what to say or what to advise, but because we felt obligated to participate in the struggle with other serious Christians. However, we also have had serious reservations about getting involved in such issues-oriented discussions. The normal assumption of the approach which begins with issues is, "If only we understood the nature of these issues well enough we also would know what to do." A natural follow-up to this way of dealing with moral matters is to get especially clear cases to analyze with the implication that analysis of the issue will tell us what to do. We hold this approach to be fundamentally inadequate for Christians. A Christian knows what to do first of all by coming to understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, the Christ. Hence, we have resisted the pressure to understand the enterprise of Christian ethics as inherently different from that of biblical interpretation and Christian theology. We have come to believe that for Christians the simple answer to the question, "How can I know what is right?" is "Read the Bible and heed the call of God." We believe that ethics, theology, worship and pastoral care are not to be separated into independent disciplines. They belong together.

This emphasis on the integration of all knowledge and its implied reticence for doing ethics by case study may well frustrate some readers. We believe that it is more important to understand what Christian ethics is before dealing with individual moral problems. Although we consider specific issues in our last two essays, this is not a book for those who want quick answers to specific moral dilemmas. This is a book that invites readers into serious reflection on the meaning and implications of the Christian life.

We believe that within the biblical story there is a view of what it means to be human. This is a rather contentious claim for moderns since the social sciences try to teach us that there is no such thing as human nature. They would have us believe that we arrive at our

understanding of what is truly human via empirical investigation and observation of how we act. We deny this. We also believe that those endeavours within feminism and masculinism, which would espouse that we must understand ourselves fundamentally in our femaleness or in our maleness, are theologically misguided and are in danger of fanning the flames of inter-gender conflict. We believe that, according to the biblical story, we are called to become ever more fully the human beings that God has created us to be, despite the fact that we have sinned and fallen away from our true essence. Implied in this statement is an important distinction between who we are as a matter of contingent historical fact and who we would be if we were to become fully human as God created us to be. We claim that Christian ethics is precisely about how we move from the first to the second. Given this basic understanding of the nature of Christian ethics it should not be surprising that for us the church is the most important moral category, and the functioning of the church—worship, confession, prayer, Bible study, singing—are the most significant moral activities. The formation of the self is, after all, a social process. Hence, there can be no Christian ethic apart from the society called church.

This way of speaking about ethics will require an entirely new idiom from the one currently being supplied by the secular ethical vocabulary. This is the language of theology, especially of the church as a body that shapes Christian character.

Both of us are members of the Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. We have spent many long hours at meetings wrestling with problems. We have praised God in wonderful worship with our fellow church members. We have wept together when things went wrong and proved painful. We are passionately committed to the church, not only emotionally and socially, but also theologically. Yet our vision for the church and the real body which comprises our own fellowship are rather far apart. Many have asked us why we do not give up our emphasis on the church since it will never become what our vision for it requires. Our reply is: we need to remind ourselves that humans do not create the church; God does. Just as important, our vision for the church is, first of all, not really ours but God's. Moreover, this vision is given expression in a written account which the church has canonized—the Bible. Therefore, our own ecclesiology is a product of the Word preached by the church in earlier times. No one is ever self-taught with the acquired right to impose knowledge on others. Likewise, we remain forever servants of the church. Together we all are challenged to open ourselves to even greater spirituality in the presence of God and one another.

To the extent that we come to see the Christian life as rooted in the church, we will be able to use again the traditional moral

language of good, right, wrong and virtues which today has fallen into disrepute. Needless to say, this will require profound reorientation in thinking. Moderns have become so accustomed to believing that matters of the Christian life (moral issues) are purely private matters of personal opinion that it is hard to conceive of viable alternatives. Our study will attempt to construct just such an alternative way of speaking about the Christian life.

Of course this approach will challenge some well accepted assumptions about morality. The common view is that what human beings really are capable of, or how realistic they are when they work for peace and justice, are the real issues for modern Christians who seek to be ethically relevant. Given our point of departure, the matter will be put quite differently. We claim that the fundamental issue of morality is: Which world is real and which is not? If you like, it is a matter of metaphysics. We contend that the Christian life begins with confessing what God is doing in Jesus and how we might participate in that reality. Given that we take God's reality to be ultimately real, our primary task is to become the kind of people who, by God's grace, are able to bear witness to this new world by participating in it. Hence, two aspects central to the ethical task as we define it are: distinguishing between truth and illusion, and learning the skills necessary to live a truthful existence. Living truthfully requires no defence; it is its own security. However, the life of illusion requires defence and does so ultimately by invoking the use of the sword.

We acknowledge at the outset that, since we are two authors who have quite different styles of writing, the essays are not as integrated as might be desirable. However, we trust that the overall intent is clear and compelling.

A word about how to read this book. Because it is a collection of essays written by two authors, also partly because of the subject matter itself, the argument is circular rather than linear. Hence, the reader will not forfeit understanding by not reading the essays consecutively. The persuasive power comes with the whole rather than with individual parts forming a larger argument.

In concluding this foreword, we express profound appreciation to two colleagues, Gerald Gerbrandt and Margaret Franz, both members of the CMBC Publications Committee. Without their tireless coaching and support, this book would never have come to fruition. Gerald went far beyond the call of duty in reading and rereading drafts, evaluating arguments and their implications, and suggesting significant changes which forced us to articulate more precisely what we had to say. Margaret has done her characteristically superb copy editing job by making readable things which were said awkwardly. Her relentless quest for excellence and precision is a rewarding education for anyone interested in perfecting the skills of written

communication. We cannot adequately thank them for their labour of love.

Finally, a word to our families. Agnes, Mildred and the children have given us the gift of time to be alone at our computers. Their love for us and their support for our work meant that we were not unduly tormented, neither with incessant interruptions nor with excessive guilt as we logged many hours at what we actually enjoyed. Peace be unto you!

Harry Huebner
David Schroeder
January 1993

~~~~~
~~~~~

PART I

LOSS AND TEMPTATION

The two chapters in this section analyze why morality is a problem for us moderns. They provide the context for the rest of this study. The first chapter is theoretical and makes explicit reference to the great thinkers of the last three centuries. We explore why we think the way we do about ourselves, about God, about society, about right and wrong, and so on. Our main thesis is that moderns have lost their ability to think morally and theologically. Hence, moral language is no longer meaningful. It is important to see why this has happened.

The second chapter is more practical, even somewhat impressionistic. It focuses on the implications of this loss of moral and theological language for the church by examining the presuppositions of specific functions which the church performs, such as weddings, funerals and leadership evaluations. These are examples of a wider range of activities in which the church is not a neutral participant. What the church does is a significant sign of what it believes about itself and God. Therefore, it is important to inquire to what extent the church has been affected by the loss *and to what degree modern thinking is a* temptation *for those of us who worship together regularly.*

No doubt some will wonder what modern philosophy and sociology have to do with the church. Has our preoccupation with such worldly knowledge not itself contributed to the shift in thinking which has led us away from traditional theology, especially in the loss of a biblical basis for our self-definition? Perhaps so. But particularly then does it become important to know why. Unless we become aware of the convictions and concepts behind the modern way of life, we will not be able to differentiate clearly between the spirit of modernity and the Spirit which the church calls Holy. And unless we can do so, we have no means of knowing what a Christian way of life entails.

We are seriously critical in these chapters. Yet this ought not to be seen as a denunciation of the church—not even the existing one. We agree with William Willimon, an American Methodist preacher/professor, who, in a book entitled What Is Right with the Church? *points to the church as the place where the lostness of moderns can be overcome. This positive assessment of the church's identity as a moral community which can sustain Christian existence is the overall agenda of our study as well. Yet in order to get at the "right" with the church, it is sometimes necessary to identify some things that are wrong with it.*

1

A RUMOUR OF ETHICS

Harry Huebner

Over two decades ago, a noted American sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, wrote a little booklet entitled *A Rumor of Angels.*[1] He laments the loss of the supernatural in modern society and searches for ways it might be recaptured. A similar point could be made today about ethics.[2] Meaningful moral language appears to belong to a former age. Just try using terms like "right" and "wrong," "good" and "bad." Almost immediately you will be asked to define what you mean or be told, "Although something may be right for you, it is not necessarily right for me." Or, worse still, your assertion will be dismissed outright with a remark like, "That's moral language," or, "Don't bring morals into this," implying that in our day we somehow have transcended the need for moral language.

This way of thinking is so prevalent that most moderns are unaware that it has not always been this way. At least if things have changed they do not suspect that anything very significant has been lost. Even more astounding, those who take the time to think about it would argue that, instead of having lost anything, we have actually

---

[1] Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1970).

[2] Another sociologist of religion, Robert Bellah, together with four other researchers, more recently analyzed the moral "state of the union" in a book entitled, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1985). From a social research point of view they substantiate that in our day we have lost the language to make moral sense of our lives. We are answerable only to ourselves and not to any moral law, they claim.

gained something quite important: our freedom to be creative human beings unencumbered with outside "moral" constrictions.

Proponents of this view will contend that freedom from morality, that is, freedom from obligation, is precisely the liberation which moderns have discovered and do well to cultivate. Moreover, careful refinement of this freedom actually allows for life on a higher plain, they continue, and makes it possible for us to cope with today's pressure-filled existence. The self-evident why-didn't-I-think-of-it advice of The American Institute of Stress, that we

> stop the "shoulds." Watch out for thoughts that start with "I should, I ought to, I have to, I feel obligated to, I owe it to him, I deserve"[3]

is so prevalent that to quarrel with it suggests evidence of either masochism or some other, even more serious psychological malady. For us moderns, freedom from ought is the greatest freedom of all. After all, ought produces guilt, which is a still more repulsive notion from which we must free ourselves. The way to avoid guilt is to deny the power of ought over us. This is a crucial peg in the mythology of modern life. And it has far-reaching implications.

No matter which social issue is debated today—abortion, homosexuality, wife abuse, child abuse, national unity, poverty, racism, euthanasia or health care—the issue is almost always stated in terms of a clash of wills. There is a moral issue only when one person's will is being imposed on another. Hence, the issue is resolved by ridding oneself from the power of this other will. In other words, being right is acting on one's own will unhindered by any other will. To have acted freely is to have acted rightly.[4]

Surely this is not enlightenment. With this "discovery" we have lost much, including perhaps a way out of the morass. With this loss of moral consciousness, we are left entirely to our own power tactics. What we do is no one else's business. When others become a problem for us the "solution" lies in finding security from their power over us. Yet when personal freedom is crowned the king of values, power-brokerage and manipulation become the foundation of our conduct.

---

[3] Quoted in *Prevention: The Magazine for Better Health* (September 1987): 39.

[4] For a more extensive treatment of how the notion of freedom has shaped our thinking in modern ethics, see Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), especially 1-16. See also his essay, "The Church and Liberal Democracy: The Moral Limits of a Secular Polity," chap. in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 72-86.

Consider this practical test. Ask yourself: "What would be my first response if someone told me I had done something wrong?" Chances are your immediate impulse would be to wonder what business this person has asserting his/her power over you. But notice the presuppositions of this thought. How different it is from someone correcting your spelling or your addition! Although the latter also may irritate you, your frustration would centre more on your own ineptness—why you had never learned how to spell or add—than on the abusive imposition of another regarding what is genuinely yours—your behaviour. In fact, you may well be grateful for having been told the truth about spelling or addition. However, regarding moral discourse, truth language has lost its meaning. An independent standard to which all humans are subject no longer exists. What remains is only your attitude or opinion and my attitude or opinion. Regarding relationships we are left with power: your power and my power. The greater power imposes the "morality." "Might makes right." This may well be the reason morality has become so oppressive and why it is avoided at all costs by moderns.

Although a caricature, this description highlights the moral plight of modern society.[5] No readily accepted mechanisms are left for resolving moral disputes. The tendency is to believe that by avoiding moral discourse altogether we will be able to get along. But without any norms to regulate our behaviour we will continue to manipulate one another. This is our modern predicament. Yet the most profound, and in the view of the authors of this study, the saddest aspect of our plight is that most of us consider this state of affairs an achievement—as having reached a higher plane of existence—rather than as a devastating loss with potentially catastrophic consequences for the entire human race.

We do well to begin this study of Christian ethics with an analysis of how we have come to understand ourselves and our world so differently from the time when moral language still had meaning and to pursue why this shift has happened so unobtrusively. Understanding the matter historically is an important aspect of the inquiry. Although one short introductory chapter cannot possibly do justice to this complex subject, perhaps it can inspire the reader to pursue independently the quest to understand the amoralization of our society in greater depths. After all, it is in understanding the historical shift in our thinking and its impact on society and the church

---

[5] For a more thorough analysis of the state of modern moral discourse, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

wherein lies the initial hope for dealing with its debilitating effect on us.[6]

THE NATURE OF THE LOSS

It is difficult to know where to begin the attempt to explain how we have lost our ability to think morally. Do we start with the Genesis story, the New Testament, the early church, Greek philosophy, Thomas Aquinas, the Reformation, the Enlightenment or with modern sociology? It used to be thought that to understand the modern period one needed to start with the Reformation. Yet ever since Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), the Enlightenment, not the Reformation, has been seen as the inauguration of modernity.[7] However, if we simply began with the Enlightenment we would not be giving it (the Enlightenment) the historical explanation it deserves. There is really no logical starting point other than at the beginning—with Genesis. Yet if we were to do that, the chances of getting to the present in one chapter are rather slim.

In order to settle the matter of where to begin we need to probe further the precise nature of the loss. After all, if the problem is merely a matter of having forgotten something, then we need to call it back to memory at the point where it was forgotten. If the matter is of a different nature then we need an approach commensurate with that view of the problem.

Alasdair MacIntyre, a prominent British/American philosopher, speaks of the loss in fairly graphic terms[8] when he likens it to a

---

[6] It should be acknowledged that many good studies exist which deal with the effects of modernity. We can cite only a few examples. In addition to the writings of Hauerwas and MacIntyre, which have already been referred to, other examples are: Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto, ON: Irwin Publishing, 1987); George P. Grant, *Time as History* (Toronto, ON: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1974); Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Fredrick Lawrence (Cambridge, MS: MIT Press, 1987); Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethic for the Technological Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984); A. James Reimer, "How Modern Should Theology Be? The Nature and Agenda of Contemporary Theology," chap. in *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder,* ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1990), 171-198; Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, ON: House of Anansi, 1991). All would, in one way or another, concur with Bibby who, at the end of his book, steps outside of his descriptive role as sociologist and says "if religion in Canada and elsewhere is to move beyond its current state of impoverishment, the numinous, self and society must be linked in a manner historically insisted upon by religion," 271.

[7] The Enlightenment refers to that period of intellectual history which spans the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ending with the writings of Immanuel Kant (1770-1804).

[8] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1-5.

catastrophe in the field of natural science. He asks the reader to imagine that all the scientific books, tables, records and laboratories have been destroyed. We look in vain for records of what used to be a flourishing field of knowledge which directed human activity. Terms like "mass," "atom," "specific gravity" might still be used but without precise meanings. The belief structure behind these terms is completely gone. Hence any competing belief system and the terms which gives it meaning have a distinct advantage. Subjectivist theories of science inevitably will spring up with the persuasive impact that, insofar as people find this archaic "scientific" language meaningful, they might well use it for their own edification. But no one should use the language to pretend to say anything meaningful about how the world really is.

MacIntyre's "disquieting suggestion" is that "in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described."[9] Our moral language is fragmented and meaningless since the thought structure from which its meaning flows has been abandoned and forgotten. Language without context is meaningless and the context for moral language has been lost.

If MacIntyre is right, and many modern scholars accept that he is, then the primary task is to reconstruct the cultural and intellectual world which gave moral language its meaning. Following this we must assess how we have come to be in discontinuity with this world. We could accomplish such an explanation by concentrating on the world of the ancient Greeks or by examining the views of the Medieval imagination immediately prior to the Reformation since for them the Greek worldview was still largely intact. We will do the latter. For purposes of this study we will not be all that concerned with detailed nuances of the many important distinctions between the classical Greek world and late Medieval thought. Ours is the more general interest of presenting the traditional pre-Enlightenment moral worldview to the modern reader.

A word of caution is in order. It is not the aim of this study to promote a return to the Greek/Medieval naturalistic view of the world and suggest that this is the appropriate basis for Christian ethics. Although we believe that the ancient structure of thought had many things right—more than it is often given credit for by many modern theologians and ethicists—Christian ethics nevertheless must be rooted in biblical revelation. *We are interested in Christian ethics, not in Greek ethics.*

Yet the ancient notion that ethics is rooted in metaphysics is as

---

[9] Ibid., 2.

much a general biblical notion as it is Greek. The Bible also speaks of a world beyond the physical world. It presents a view of human beings as determined not on the basis of their experiences but on the basis of a conception of what it means to be human. It claims that to be good has to do with the extent to which we train ourselves in the virtues. Moreover, not only are these beliefs biblical, they were also originally the tenets of the church. To have lost this biblical, early-church language means that the church finds itself engulfed in the quagmire of moral unintelligibility. Therefore, the primary reason for examining the thinking of the ancient worldview is to come to a clearer understanding of why we today do not find moral language meaningful.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRADITION

Medieval thinkers accepted the classical belief that the world of empirical facts and the world of moral assessment were continuous realities. Facts and values were not seen as rooted in different realms as is the case today—one objective and the other subjective. They accepted the teachings of Plato and Aristotle that the highest form of being was goodness. Whether something was good was determined by whether it fulfilled its essential function. An eye was good if it did what eyes are supposed to do, namely see well. It was a bad eye if it did not. For the ancients, ethics and metaphysics were essentially united.

People then did not necessarily live more upright lives or were not better Christians than we are today, but their moral language did have meaning and power to shape their lives. They knew what they were saying when they called things right and wrong, good and bad.

The Medieval moral worldview, especially that of Thomas Aquinas, has been called "natural law." Contrary to popular belief, natural law does not imply that all you have to do to determine what is right is look to nature. Rather, it means that what is good is derived from what has been given to us, not from what is created by us, that is, not from our values. The human mind has access to the structured order of things from which we can come to understand how this world has been ordered by creator-God. *That* God created the world comes to us from the biblical story—revelation. We can come to know this world by rationally reflecting upon it as given. For example, in his *Summa Theologica* Aquinas argues that God must be seen as the "principle of all things" and as the *telos* of all things.[10] That is, the world is conceived and fulfilled in the being of God. Only God has

---

[10]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. 1, Pt. I, Q. 8, Art. 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, NY: Benziger Brothers, 1948).

being "in himself;" all creatures and all things have being only by participation in God. We are good insofar as we participate as human beings in the divinely ordered creation which has its *telos* as God. The Christian story makes this point concretely social in the incarnation of Christ. In Christ we come to know how participation in God's creation gets expressed in space-time existence.

The doctrine of natural law assumes that the divinely ordered universe governs not only the objects of nature but also the behaviour of human beings. For human beings to make choices on the basis of self-interest, or maximum utility, and not on the basis of participation in creator-God of Jesus Christ, is not in keeping with the way things really are. One could say that such choices contradict our essential nature. Hence, the consequences of this kind of act (an immoral act) may be as devastating for our lives as if we were to jump off a ten-storey building for fun. Both violate the divine law of the created order. When our choices are in harmony with the way things are ordered, then we have chosen rightly. We are made to live in accordance with this natural moral law just as in accordance with the physical laws of nature.

The ancients viewed the world as a thoroughly ordered system. George Grant summarizes their worldview as a "hierarchy in which all things have their place, from the stones which obey the laws of the physical world, up through the plants and animals to man, and beyond man to the angels; and finally to God, who is reason itself."[11] They spoke of "human nature," "the order of the universe," and "of God" as they spoke of the trees and the stars. They knew of what they were speaking. The difference between the two orders—the natural and the supernatural—was in the way they had their being: the first had *physical* existence, the second had *metaphysical* existence. Both were real, and metaphysical reality was clearly superior and indeed normative. Everything else had its being via metaphysical reality. Ultimately, everything had its being in God. To put it slightly differently, the transcendent reality gave this space-time reality its meaning and being. The metaphysical world had lasting existence, the physical world did not. The notion of change could be understood only if there was something permanent amidst the impermanence of the physical world. The notions of truth and goodness had intelligibility only on the presumption of a metaphysical reality.

Knowledge was attained in the same manner in both realms: through careful rational reflection. The science of the physical and the science of the metaphysical are different only with respect to

---

[11] George P. Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (N.p.: Copp Clark Publishing, 1959), 30.

object, not basic structure. In both "sciences" it is our capacity to reason from which we derive our ability to understand that which is. Once this is understood it becomes possible to structure our lives in keeping with this order.[12]

Precisely because there is a relationship between what is good and what exists in the physical world, both knowledge and ethics are possible. It is quite incorrect to understand the ancient dualism as saying that the two worlds—the physical and metaphysical—have no connection whatsoever. While it is true that on this model ultimate reality alone is perfectly good, nevertheless goodness in this world is measured by the extent to which it is in proper relation to ultimate goodness. In this relationship its true essence comes to be clearly understood.

Consider the example of the eye again. An eye is good insofar as it does the job of seeing well. That is to say, a good eye sees correctly, a bad eye does not. Yet no eye sees perfectly. The distinction between the perfect eye and a physical eye is absolute, yet the connection between the two is necessary so it is possible to distinguish good from bad eyes. Because we know what eyes really are we are able to distinguish good from bad eyes.

Similarly, a good person is one who participates in the fullness of humanity. Yet no perfect person exists on this earth. All are more or less good. Nevertheless, it is the relationship between the perfect human being and the actual human being which makes it possible to judge persons as good or bad. And how is it possible to become good? By cultivating those characteristics (virtues) which define us as humans, by developing the skills to do what good people do.

In the ancient world it was not for humans to determine what is good. Things were good insofar as they had existence independently of subjective consciousness. People discovered and came to understand that which is good. The givenness of ultimate reality made it possible to avoid the Sophist's relativism which is so tempting to the ancient mind.

It needs to be emphasized for us moderns that it was precisely in reference to the authority-less individualism of the Sophists—a way of thinking that has great affinity with our modern myth—that

---

[12] It does not follow, as is sometimes supposed, that this kind of "natural reason" is necessarily incompatible with revelation or faith. Thomas Aquinas has said that: "by grace a higher knowledge can be obtained than by natural reason." *Summa Theologica*, Vol. 1, Pt. I, Q.12, Art. 13. See also, Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Scribners, 1938), 67-99. For an example of how faith and reason are made compatible in modern theology, see Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1957), 74. He argues that when faith is properly understood as ultimate concern there cannot be conflict between faith and reason.

Socrates and Plato advanced their views of a metaphysical structure of the world which can be understood only through reason. Their success made it possible for society in their day to become moral and religious once again.

The Greek/Medieval worldview generates a uniquely different concept of education than often is seen in our modern technological society. For ancients, education was a process whereby students discovered what the proper purposes of human life were. To make the distinction between knowing the good and doing it was unacceptable. In our day we tend to think of education more as teaching people how to do things. In the old view, wisdom, not technological know-how, was the aim of education. Wisdom could disclose the ultimate purpose of human life. Wisdom put you in touch with goodness and truth. Hence, in contrast to our society, the aged, the ones who could not really *do* anything any more, had a very important place in society as the wise ones. They were the ones who knew of life's purpose.[13]

The Greek/Medieval moral imagination is often seen to be in tension with the Hebrew/historically oriented worldview. We are sometimes tempted simply to reject the Greek emphasis on "being" "because it is not biblical" and adopt the "becoming" approach of the Hebrews. Whatever may be said about the differences between the Greek and Hebrew ways of thinking, and there clearly are significant differences, one thing remains certain and very important for the perspective I wish to advocate: both made an unequivocal affirmation of the "ultimate" in relation to which we mortals are "subject."[14] Admittedly, the sense in which this "subjection" was understood is different for the two. For the Greeks it was subjection of the mind to truth which allowed for the possibility of sure knowledge in the face of Sophism and which guided them to a clear knowledge of the virtues which shaped their moral lives. For the

---

[13] See Grant, ibid., 32, for an excellent illustration of how the ancients viewed the relationship between wisdom and education.

[14] This is not an attempt to belittle the significance of the distinctions which can be made between Hebrew and Greek thought. Studies like Claude Tresmontant, *A Study of Hebrew Thought*, trans. Francis Bacon (New York, NY: Desclee Company, 1960) and Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1960) have made this quite clear. Nevertheless, we do well to highlight their common affirmation of a supernatural reality, which makes their common difference from the dominant modern worldview a significant likeness. It is gratifying to realize that more and more biblical scholars are moving in the direction away from a sharp distinction between these two thought forms. Two examples are: James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) and Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974).

Hebrews, subjection was to a supreme Being, an ultimate person—One who could act like persons act, that is, effect real change in this world.[15] This One gave people the law as a guide to their moral life and sustained this life through an ongoing relationship with them. (Notice the theme of the givenness of the world order—not all that different from the Greek model.) Both accepted the metaphysical dualism in which the standard of goodness and truth did not lie within the physical empirical realm but transcended it.

For Medieval theology the two ways of thinking—the Greek and the Hebrew—merged into one. This was possible because both views shared a fundamental assumption in relation to which all others became secondary: namely, that goodness, whether personified in God or in abstract universal "Goodness," was the indisputable standard of all that is. All of life was subject to the critique and ongoing evaluation by the standard of goodness which is not itself an item of, nor a product of, the empirical world. In fact, the empirical world owes its existence entirely to God, the ultimately good One. Other-worldly goodness and this-worldly experience/reality were not unconnected. They were in a very specific relationship—the relationship of the standard to the judged, the measure to the measured, the creator to the created. Other-worldly reality was always seen as perfect and good; this-worldly reality was always seen as imperfect, more or less good and capable of improvement.[16]

In the Medieval world people did not view themselves as the source of the good nor were they the creators of anything that really exists. They arranged and rearranged that which was given to them. It follows that the first appropriate human/religious act was gratitude for what they had received. Ancients did not see themselves as "creative" in the generic sense at all but saw themselves as learners and seekers of the truth, as disciples of the master. While God was creator, they sought to understand.

People of the Middle Ages lived in deep submission to what really is: the *truth*. Meaning and purpose in life were found by fitting into life's patterns as they were shown by God through the great stories

---

[15] It is important to note that the Hebrew Bible's attempt to explain the ordered universe was in opposition to the chaotic mythical interpretations of their world. A monotheistic deity created and directed the world in a unidirectional and purposeful fashion, not chaotically. It is also significant that creator-God gave "Torah" which was to guide followers to the good life. For the Hebrews, submission to the Torah was similar to submission to goodness for the Greeks.

[16] There may well be an important difference between the Greeks and the Hebrews regarding the notion of perfection. For the Greeks the impossibility of perfection on earth was derived from metaphysical necessity which it was not for the Hebrews. For them it was more of a practical moral unlikelihood.

of God's mysterious and gracious care for all of creation. Far from being mere senseless repetition, patterning one's life after another who was good was the way to righteousness. Participation in the divine through spiritual exercises was both the way toward and the expression of the good life. In fact the move toward the goal and embodiment of the goal were not significantly distinguished. Repetition was the process of enacting the future in the present as only the future could be expressed at present. It was the process whereby character formation and training took place. It was the way virtues were made one's own.[17] In turn the focus of the good life was not on what one did—individual actions that were right or wrong—but on training oneself to be a good person.

HOW OUR MINDS HAVE CHANGED

Gradually the worldview of the ancients has been dismantled. Yet changes have come about in such an incrementally sense-making manner that they have slipped by most of us without notice. We should not be all that surprised since an important dynamic at work in this shift is the prevailing conviction that adapting to present times itself is a beneficial moral value. Hence failure to accommodate to present conditions and the latest thinking is seen, at best, as morally dubious. "If you're not relevant to the times, you cannot be morally responsible."

In the following brief and admittedly oversimplified review of the shift in thinking, I highlight a few factors which are particularly important for understanding what has happened to our modern conception of Christian ethics. I make no pretence at dealing with all the literature on the subject; it is simply far too vast. I need to be content with a mere schematic overview which, I hope, will stimulate the reader to pursue independently further reading on the subject.

The sixteenth century is usually identified as the beginning of serious questioning of the traditional worldview, even though the substantial changes came later. Ironically it was the Reformation, the very attempt to get back to root foundations, that made its own peculiar contributions to dismantling the ancient imagination. Reformers like Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) found some good reasons to confront Medieval religion.[18]

---

[17] This is not the place to engage in a discussion of the importance of liturgy for the Medieval Church, but it relates to the imitation-repetition process. The assumption is that meaning comes from participating in divine Being instead of from creating something you can call your own.

[18] For a helpful study on this topic, see James Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

They saw the penitential system as a corrupt expression of natural law and they properly criticized the church for not linking natural law more closely to biblical revelation. Moreover, the church, via its heavy dependence on the abstract philosophical understanding of truth, was able to keep the standards of moral life from applying to the laity. This encouraged undue discrepancy between the life of the priests—the learned ones—and the life of ordinary people. An additional problem was the belief in the complete objectivity of the sacraments so that there was no necessary relationship between the life of those who administered them—or for that matter of those who received them—and the way of life symbolized by the elements. These factors provided the reformers with a rationale to take another serious look at the underpinnings of the Christian faith, one based on the content of the biblical story.

The reformer's theological reconstruction came in the form of emphasizing three things: the primacy of the doctrine of the grace of God over against works; the otherness or hiddenness of God over against natural theology; and the priesthood of all believers over against the necessity for priests alone mediating God's grace.

These theological affirmations appear quite obvious to Protestants today. But consider how they are in tension with some basic tenets of the ancient world. For example, emphasis on the otherness of God and the priesthood of all believers calls into question the objective knowability, thus teachability of God. It placed "the individual" on centre stage in the quest for religious knowledge where it played a major role in determining the truth of God's revelation. Add the emphasis on the grace of God and a substantial depreciation of the very notion of ethics results. Theology, the reformers agreed, should accentuate what God has done, not what we must do.

Together with the other theological motifs of the reformers, mainline Protestant theology set the stage for seriously undermining the very possibility of a Christian ethic. This is especially so if one lets some prominent subsequent theologians be the spokespersons for Protestant theology. For example, this kind of logic got the Danish philosopher/theologian, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), to argue that the notion of a Christian ethic is quite unthinkable, except perhaps in paradoxical ways, which really results in asserting both the good and the bad, the right and the wrong.[19] He emphasized that human beings have an unmediated relationship to God, and hence nothing—not our past, nor other people, nor a system of thought—

---

[19] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954) and his *Either/Or*, trans. & ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

can help in determining right from wrong for me and you. Then, of course, the church as a moral community is an absurdity.

In his book, *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard argues that life presents us with a radical choice. Not the choice between good and evil—that would be the traditional way of putting it—but the choice between whether to live the ethical life or the aesthetic life, the life of objective right/wrong or the life of subjective taste. Another way of putting it, we are faced with the choice of accepting the traditional metaphysical understanding of the world, which measured all in relation to the standard of goodness, or of conceiving the world in terms of a metaphysic of subjectivity, whatever that might be. The very fact that Kierkegaard was able to put the matter in terms of a choice between the ethical and the aesthetic indicates his thorough rejection of the traditional metaphysical model. The Medieval world could not have conceived of this as a choice for humans to make. Furthermore, Kierkegaard argues that truth itself must be seen as subjective and that ultimately who we are as human beings is determined by what we decide to do. Hence, our decisions cannot be guided by human nature but our "human nature" is determined by our decisions.

The reader needs to be clear on what is being argued here. It is not my intention to suggest that the Reformation was a big mistake. I am trying to clarify why it is that we have moved so far away from an intelligible Christian ethic. My suggestion is that this process has been affected by the mainline reformers' insistence upon, and their subsequent interpreters' advocacy of, the radical otherness and hence unknowability of God and at the same time the centrality of the act, rather than the being of God.

One sees this same tendency in a major contemporary Protestant theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968). Although in a different manner than Kierkegaard, Barth was sceptical of the category of ethics because it placed undue emphasis and importance on human efforts. Theology is not anthropology and he believes that many of the great modern heresies have their roots in confusing the two. While one readily can grant Barth his main emphasis on the primacy of God, it is still somewhat astounding that nowhere in the many pages of his *Church Dogmatics* does he find a way of bringing into clear focus the implication of theology on the Christian life.[20] In fact, most of

[20] We should acknowledge that Barth had good intentions of writing a fourth part to his "Doctrine of Reconciliation" (Volume IV of his *Church Dogmatics*) which was to deal with ethics. This was interrupted by his death in 1968. Today we have only a "Fragment" which deals with baptism. Yet what remains troublesome is that he managed to keep theology so sharply separated from ethics in his other writings.

his comments about ethics are negative. For example, "that general conception of ethics coincides exactly with the conception of sin. So we have every reason to treat it with circumspection."[21] Christian ethics remained a problem for Barth to the very end of his writing career.

Not all reformers went in the same direction as Barth and Kierkegaard. For example, the radical reformers and some of their followers readily accepted the renewed emphasis on the Bible, God's grace and the priesthood of all believers, but they rejected the assumed implications this apparently had for some thinkers in favour of a heightened theological role for the individual and a consequent erosion of ethics. They emphasized instead the importance of shaping a disciplined community of faithful followers of Jesus—the church—which alone could help individuals withstand the pressures of the world to make them something other than Christian in their daily existence. Their understanding of the Christian life, insofar as it emphasized the subordination of Christians to a transcendant truth—God as revealed in Jesus Christ—sounds more like an adaptation of the imagination of the ancients than it does like the Kierkegaardian (per)version of mainline Protestantism, for example.[22]

While the mainline reformers raised some questions about the ancient metaphysical understanding of the world, the philosophers of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries contributed even more significantly to the radical shift in thinking. Let us begin with two examples: Descartes and social contractualism.

The French philosopher, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), attempted to put philosophy on a solid "indubitable" foundation. In this he was engaged in the same quest as Plato and Aristotle. However, his method was quite different. He attempted systematically to doubt all that could be doubted and in doing so discovered that it was logically impossible to doubt his own existence. His own being was essentially connected to his thinking, he concluded. Hence his famous *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). This foundational principle

---

[21] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II,2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 518. See also, Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1975) for a helpful discussion of Barth on this subject. Perhaps a word of explanation is in order here. Barth is an important theologian in our survey in that he does represent a kind of return to orthodoxy which we want to applaud. Yet it remains striking to see how insignificant the role of the church remains in the shaping of the Christian life and how unessential the character of God is as the norm for the definition of human nature.

[22] Vernard Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), argues that it is Kierkegaard who has best articulated what the early Anabaptists wanted to say about the implications of being faithful Christians. I find his argument quite unconvincing.

became the logical starting point for the construction of his entire philosophical system.

While Descartes was seeking an objective base for knowledge, there is nevertheless a peculiar kind of subjectivity in his logic. Objective certainty was rooted in the structure of his mind and not in that which was given to the mind: independent reality. If you like, for Descartes correct thinking determined metaphysics rather than the other way around, as for the ancients. Hence, the historical impact of his quest for indubitable knowledge ironically has undergirded the autonomy of the individual.

Yet it was the empirical-social philosophy of thinkers like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) that was most instrumental in the seventeenth-century movement away from the traditional theory of moral knowledge. The argument was that the basis of moral responsibilities in society rests on the fact that we voluntarily make covenants with each other and that we together make covenants with a sovereign. On the basis of such a "social contract" we have rights—some derived and some inalienable—and we have corresponding obligations. As long as no one's "rights" are violated and everyone keeps the covenants made, we have a moral society. When this does not happen we must use whatever force is required to restore the social contract.

In very broad strokes Hobbes' theory goes as follows. To get at the "first principles" of a political society, Hobbes suggests that we abstract all established social institutions from civil society as we know it. (Not all that different from Descartes' systematic doubting methodology.) What we are left with is a state of nature. In this state of nature humans have two unlimited rights: first, the right to protect self and others using any means necessary; second, the right to things, that is, the right to possess, use and enjoy all one needs. Both of these rights are what he calls "natural rights" which are derived from natural laws.

As a result of these two basic natural rights, Hobbes argues that, "in the nature of man we find three principle causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence (mistrust); thirdly, glory."[23] The natural state is therefore a state of perpetual quarrel or war. In such a state the individual depends only upon self: personal strength and wit. Hence, in a state of nature there can be "no industry . . . no arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all [there is] eternal fear and danger of violent death."[24]

---

[23] *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, vol. III (London: J. Bohn, 1839-1845), 112. This volume is also published separately under the title *Leviathan*.

[24] Ibid., 113.

There can be no morality in a state of nature. In this state "the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law, where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues."[25] Since such a state of affairs is intolerable, we make a social contract with a sovereign to protect us by making laws of security, commerce, and so on. This is the legislative arm of the state. And we give this sovereign ultimate powers to enforce these laws, thus creating the judicial and military arms of the state.

This way of putting the matter of moral foundations is profoundly different from the ancients. Reference to an independent moral order is now all but gone. What is meant by natural law on this model is the human condition of perpetual conflict, profoundly different from its traditional meaning. In fact nature now becomes something evil which must be subdued and overcome; the power to overcome it lies within human hands. Morality, since it is derived from contract, has become synonymous with legality. That is, morality stems from our obligation to keep the contracts into which we have entered and our overall awareness that, if we do not keep our covenants, we may be punished.

Notice the implications of this shift. Social contractualism provides the basis for a "consenting adult morality" which is so prevalent in our society today. Yet the most important shift with this view is that there is now no reference to a source of morality other than ourselves, our reason and our voluntary covenants.

Whatever is said about the role of the Reformation, Descartes and social contractualism in the shift away from traditional moral thinking, the eighteenth-century philosophers are the major contributors in solidifying this shift. The Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), a radical empiricist, developed a way of thinking about ethics which supplied the philosophical rationale for social philosophers who were explicating the theories of Hobbes. Perhaps it is fair to say that Hume merely drew the logical conclusions from his predecessors. In any event, he articulated a dualism which severs two things that have traditionally been inseparably connected: facts and values.

Hume argued that the realms of fact and value were totally distinct. "Fact" designates that which is; "value" designates human judgements about what is. Valuing can only be done by a valuer. Human beings are the valuers. And morality is the language of values. We make judgements about what is on the basis of our own view of things, our wants, interests and aspirations.

---

[25] Ibid., 115.

This distinction between facts and values has been referred to as the Humean Guillotine, suggesting that Hume has cut the world into two. And so he has! At first glance this distinction may seem relatively innocuous and even obviously true. But on further reflection it becomes profoundly significant in light of the implications for an understanding of what ethics is. Think about it! The link between reality and moral goodness has been radically broken. What is, can now be known apart from metaphysical goodness; what is good (our "values") can now be known apart from an ultimate source. Granted that for Hume the source of goodness still lay within rationality—a principle which had at least a ring of orthodoxy—nevertheless, the human mind and human affective spirit have now become the source for moral goodness. It is now no longer possible to judge something's being good on the basis of understanding what it essentially is. Whether something is good or bad has only to do with whether it has value for someone. For example, a watch is now good if I like it but not because it does a good job of being what a watch is.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was probably the most influential philosopher of his century. He solidified this dualism of facts and values in the minds of the intellectuals with such finality that it has seen very few serious challenges even to this very day. Kant argued that there are two kinds of reason: pure reason and practical reason. Pure reason gives us knowledge of the phenomenal world—the world as mediated through the senses and the categories of understanding. We can have no knowledge of the way the world is in itself (*noumena*). Practical reason gives us regulative principles for living. But in both cases all we really can do is explicate the categories of our mind so that we can live consistently. Abstract truth and goodness, which had been the cornerstones of the Greek and Medieval philosophers, were simply not attainable for us mere mortals.

Although some of this philosophy sounds very abstract and somewhat irrelevant to social ethics, it is anything but irrelevant. The sociologists of the nineteenth century built their theories of society directly upon the insights of these philosophers. Consider the great sociologist, Karl Marx.

When Marx (1818-1883) made his by now famous statement, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it," he drew one of the most astounding conclusions of all time for social ethics. He was the direct product of Enlightenment thinking. Marx argued that since thought could not access goodness anyway, as the Enlightenment philosophers had taught him, there is indeed very little value in thought itself. In fact, this is what was wrong with nineteenth-century idealistic philosophers like Hegel, as Marx saw it. They spent time in contemplation for contemplation's sake. This was an entirely useless exercise, not because it involved

serious thought but because it produced nothing of real value. The value of thought lay in making society a better place to live.

The result of Marx's approach was that the split between metaphysics and ethics was now even more deeply ingrained in the minds of Western thinkers. Action became the controlling determiner of thought. Revolution became the way to truth. Or, to put it another way, how one thought was now seen as determined by what one did, by what values one held. What really was, depended on what we created. The superstructure was determined by the substructure.[26]

Such a social philosophy has profound implications for understanding ethics. Human beings are now seen as major actors, as the movers of history and the shapers of their own destinies. Of course, in order for Marx to be able to say these things consistently he had to denounce religion because any belief in a supernatural reality (metaphysics) would imply that we are subject to a structure which limits our freedom to create ourselves. Hence, he proclaimed religion to be an illusion from which we should try to free ourselves. Religion was seen as an ideology which had value only for the wealthy in society who used it to protect the social structures that undergirded their wealth. Note that Marx explained religion not on the basis of any appeal to truth (superstructure) but on the basis of how we act in society (substructure).

Marx tried very hard to be a consistent thinker. He believed that, although we are free to shape our own destiny to some extent, nevertheless we are bound by the necessary, just outcome of history. History finally is determined by necessary laws, not by human action. Marx argued that the laws of history are as natural as the laws of nature.[27] Hence the outcome of history—a classless society—was as inevitable as it is for water to run down a hill. This was so because of the way things are, not because of our actions or desires. His challenge was to get on board and stop fighting the inevitable. Hence his call for revolution.

Hence, Marx did not go all the way in replacing the traditional

---

[26] Marx managed to turn Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) on his head. Hegel had argued that the substructure, that is, how we live and what we do, was determined by the superstructure, namely, how we think. For Marx the ultimate tragedy of modern philosophy was that it had become totally impractical and idealistic. He argued the very opposite, namely, how we think is determined by what we do and by our social status.

[27] Friedrich Engels said in his "Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx" (1883), "Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history." Quoted from *Reader in Marxist Philosophy*, ed. Howard Selsam and Harry Martel (New York, NY: International Publishers Co., 1963), 188.

metaphysical superstructure with the call to revolutionary action. His belief in the givenness of the laws of history prevented him from doing so. Yet he went far enough to find it necessary to reject religion.

It is actually quite startling that mainline North American philosophy—pragmatism—not only did not disagree profoundly with the basic thought of Karl Marx, but actually built on it. In so doing the pragmatists went the next step beyond Marx to deny even the givenness of the laws of history. American pragmatists like William James (1842-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952) argued that we are the creators of value. There is no limit whatsoever to our freedom, not even the truth of history as Marx had claimed. We are the creators of truth itself.

At first glance this seems so astounding that we do well to resort to some direct quotations to make the point. Listen to William James:

> The true is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our acting. . . . Truth in our ideas means their power to work. . . . An idea is true as long as it is powerful in our lives. . . . Pragmatic philosophy turns upon action and power. . . . The world stands ready, malleable, waiting to receive the final touches at our hands. Like the Kingdom of Heaven it suffers human violence willingly. Man engenders truth upon it.[28]

But just as surprising as the total rejection of all reference to metaphysics is the assumption by these philosophers that there is no apparent clash between their view of the world and religion. Indeed another surprise is the integration of pragmatism and Christianity by some prominent American independent church groups. But this cannot preoccupy us here.[29] James and Dewey seem to believe that one can hold to a belief in religion without metaphysical assumptions. One would think that if Marx found it necessary to deny religion in order to be consistent with his dialectical materialism, which still requires a metaphysic of history, affirming religion would be even less acceptable for the pragmatist who can tolerate no superstructure. After all, any affirmation of the objective reality of God, that is, God's independent being, would necessarily seem to conflict with the pragmatist's notion of human freedom. Hence it is hard to understand how the pragmatists can affirm both.

---

[28] Quoted from George P. Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 90.

[29] The most glaring example of the marriage of pragmatism with Christian spirituality is Norman Vincent Peale's writings, for example, his very popular, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York, NY: Prentice-Hall, 1952).

Let me suggest two possible explanations for this apparent discrepancy. First, in their emphasis that the value of ideas lies in their "cash value" or in their practical import, they have seriously undermined the notion of logical consistency. They believe that if ideas work, that is, if they bring about the desired results, they are true. Abstract questions of truth or logical rigour are quite unimportant. Certainly, religious truth is quite unimportant. Pragmatism suggests that we postulate certain goals and then do whatever is required to attain them.[30] Consider now how successful secularized Protestant puritanism, or as Max Weber calls it, "worldly asceticism," has been in attaining our North American capitalist goals. Is it any wonder that religion of this kind has been affirmed rather than denied by the pragmatists? Why deny the illusory superstructure behind a working system, as long as it works? Only the consistent thinker would find the need to do this. As long as religion remains a purely private affair and aids instead of hinders in the practical attainment of society's general goals, it does not need to be denied nor does it need to make sense. In fact, its not making sense can be an asset.[31]

Second, religion consequently is seen purely as another *empirical* phenomenon. It is not that pragmatists claim that there is no way of getting to what is behind the empirical. This was Kant's claim. Pragmatists claim that nothing is there. Or, even if there were, it would be irrelevant. So whether people are or are not religious is empirically interesting, like it might be for some to determine whether people like rock music. But there is no sense in asking about its truth in a manner other than in terms of what it produces.

This brief survey indicates that we have come a long way from the traditional worldview. No longer are we able to affirm divine authority over our lives without going counter to the dominant views around us. Before we say more about this, we need to summarize the implications of our survey.

---

[30] The nineteenth-century English philosopher, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), makes this view, called utilitarianism, popular. He argues that nothing which precedes an act can determine its moral worth, only what follows as a direct consequence from it. Moreover, for Mill happiness is the consequence of an action which gives it moral worth. Hence we should all act so as to maximize happiness. This model is one of the most prominent for moderns who reject the connection between metaphysics and ethics.

[31] Space does not permit a discussion on the "privatization of religion" syndrome in our society. Nevertheless it is important to emphasize that this is the only way pragmatists can tolerate religion. If religion became a public matter it would almost immediately clash with the political/social forces within our society. It would then have to be debated on the merits of its approximation to truth. This is not tolerable for pragmatists.

THE MODERN MORAL IMAGINATION

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), more than any other modern thinker, realized the impact of what has happened to the modern way of thinking. He argued that traditional metaphysics is simply no longer a viable basis for thought and that such thinking has come to an end.[32] The only remaining alternative for moderns is to embrace a metaphysic of "the will to power."[33] For Nietzsche, philosophy, theology and ethics all become art in the sense that their basis is subjective valuation. Truth is then a matter of taste because we create it. It is no longer seen as rooted in a reality which is given to us. Nietzsche's entire way of thinking flows out of the aesthetic side of the great Kierkegaardian disjunctive. And on this model we have become the "last men"—the ones who cannot be transcended because we have become ultimate. There is nothing higher. We have become gods.

It is hard to believe that this characterizes us. Yet I recently read a book entitled, *The End of History and the Last Man*, which built an analysis of current world events explicitly on the presuppositions of Marx, Hegel and Nietzsche.[34] Francis Fukuyama, a former policy adviser to the American State Department, argues that the collapse of the Eastern Bloc countries represents a victory for liberal democracy. And North American liberal democracy, he says, cannot in principle be improved upon. Hence we have come to the end of history. The end is characterized by the imperatives of freedom, science, technology and a liberal democratic education, one which fosters individual liberties, rights and power. This, he maintains, is a description of American society. (My!! How this sounds like the rhetoric of pre-Second World War Nazi Germany which, it has been argued, was also grounded in the ideology of Nietzsche!)

Nietzsche's description of the modern world is stated so starkly that we have a hard time believing that he is really speaking about us. He says that religion and morality are dead. How can they not be since the imagination of the ancients has ceased being believable? The modern way of thinking about the world and our involvement

---

[32] For a helpful summary of Nietzsche's argument and a response to it, see Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking." This article appears in many anthologies which analyze the modern spirit. One place is in his *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1977), 369-392.

[33] For a further analysis of Nietzsche's thought in relation to modernity, see Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. I-IV, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1991). These are the lectures Heidegger prepared in 1939-40.

[34] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1992).

in it simply makes it impossible for us to continue believing in God and in moral goodness. Therefore, he says, let us declare God dead, perform the burial rites, and get on with life. In life, of course, there is no good and bad, right or wrong; there is only power.

Listen to his piercing words: "Whither is God? I shall tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this?"[35] G.P. Grant summarizes Nietzsche's answer to this "how" question as follows:

> We have been taught to recognize as illusion the old belief that our purposes are ingrained and sustained in the nature of things. Mastery comes at the same time as the recognition that horizons are only horizons. Most men, when they face that their purposes are not cosmically sustained, find that a darkness falls upon their wills. This is the crisis of the modern world to Nietzsche.[36]

This worldview which we have inherited is directly linked to the loss of the religious and moral imaginations. It is not as though ours is a meaningless world. The source of our meaning is now within us. Hence religion and morality can have no meaning. Nietzsche describes the modern world as follows:

> You will never pray again, never adore again, never again rest in endless trust; you deny yourself any stopping before ultimate wisdom, ultimate goodness, ultimate power, while unharnessing your thoughts; you have no perpetual guardian and friend for your seven solitudes; you live without a view of mountains with snow on their peaks and fire in their hearts; there is no avenger for you, no eventual improver; there is no reason any more in what happens, no love in what happens to you; no resting place is any longer open to your heart, where it has only to find and no longer to seek; you resist any ultimate peace, you want the eternal recurrence of war and peace.[37]

Not only has the view of the world changed, the view of the self has changed along with it. We can no longer understand ourselves in terms of a given essence which shapes our being, because the imagination whereby we understand ourselves in relation to something given has been lost. Now we are what we do. We have reversed the ancient belief, that our existence is determined by our essence,

---

[35] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Quoted from Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1968), 95.

[36] George P. Grant, *Time as History* (Toronto, ON: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1969), 31.

[37] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 98.

to a modern belief, that our essence is determined by our existence. Observe Nietzsche's apt description of the modern self:

> They have something of which they are proud. What do they call that which makes them proud? Education they call it; it distinguishes them from goatherds. . . . A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end, for an agreeable death. . . . Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: Whoever feels different goes voluntarily into the madhouse. . . . One has one's little pleasure for the day and one's little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health. . . . "We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink.[38]

With the disappearance of the traditional understanding of human nature, we have lost our ability to be rational in the traditional sense. Nothing makes sense in and of itself any more. Everything has only instrumental value. Then there is but one recourse: individual self-affirmation and self-actualization, that is, the will to power. One last word from Nietzsche:

> Behold I teach you the overman [last man]. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman *shall be* the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so let them go.[39]

Nietzsche has completely dismantled the world in which there once was room for God and goodness. In fact, he makes the very rumour seem distant. Yet Nietzsche has not done this alone. He has merely drawn the conclusions of the cumulative effects of modern thinking. He has given expression to where we have come in our thinking. Has he overstated his case? The extent to which we as Christians really have succumbed to the way of thinking he depicts will be discussed further in the next chapter.

~~~~~

[38] Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 128-130.

[39] Ibid., 125.
~~~~~

2

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AS ART?

Harry Huebner

This chapter will focus on how the thinking of post-Enlightenment liberalism has influenced the church's self-understanding. Has the church succumbed to the belief that the source of truth and goodness is within us or within ultimate reality—God? If the latter, then theological and ethical language will be indispensable. If the former, then theological ethics has become art in the sense that Nietzsche advocated: mere personal taste.[1]

Alasdair MacIntyre has argued convincingly that modern ethics generally has become emotivism where the sole criterion of right and wrong is the self. The modern post-metaphysical world has little room for normative reality beyond the self. Hence no moral disputes are ever resolvable. In fact, emotivists argue that, although ethical statements like, "Pre-marital sex is wrong" or, "We should love our enemies," appear on the surface to be saying something which is capable of being true, they are instead merely disguised expressions of personal taste. That is, emotivists agree with Nietzsche that ethics, like theology and philosophy, is art. Hence there can be no truth or falsity in this discussion because nothing is being asserted that is capable of being true or false. The claim is that when we speak ethical

---

[1] Perhaps a word to explain my use of the term "art" would be helpful. I am not suggesting that there is no merit in speaking about the art-like qualities of ethics. Ethics also requires creativity, imagination and careful honing of skills somewhat like art does. Yet in modern philosophical circles (especially with Nietzsche) the term "art" is used to designate that which emanates purely from within human subjectivity. It is this latter use I am employing when I ask to what extent Christian ethics has come to be seen as art.

language we are merely expressing our emotions or attitudes or feelings. And these cannot be judged true or false.[2]

Obviously the loss of moral and religious consciousness prevalent in modern culture does not apply unilaterally to today's community of believers. We still use God-language and moral language in our churches. Nor are all churches affected by this loss in the same way and to the same extent. Some congregations are quite conscious of its debilitating effect and are doing all they can to counteract its power, while others are celebrating the new-found (illusory) freedom it supposedly promises.

Yet it is fair to say that we all have been touched insidiously and profoundly by the spirit of modernity (post-Enlightenment liberalism), often without being fully aware of its impact. We need to remind ourselves that this is true of both the conservatives and the liberals among us. We would do well to work far more conscientiously at proper theological thinking within the church—thinking that emanates from the basic conviction that we are Christians, people who structure their lives and thoughts from the standpoint that God is real, that Jesus is of God and that the Spirit of God wills to mould us into a faithful people. Unless we do, the church will become progressively less relevant as we become ever more influenced by a way of life and thought which flows from the prevailing doctrine that *we* are the real shapers of the world. It is profoundly misguided to adopt the approach—far too prevalent in our day—which holds that, since moderns have difficulty accepting the transcendence language of biblical theism, therefore the task of church leaders is to articulate faith in language that moderns already possess. Of course we must use language which has meaning for us, but to begin and end with already meaningful language and assume that with it we can understand all that the biblical story contains is mistaken. Unless the language of the God of Israel and Jesus is given meaning, we will not be able to know the reality of God. Not every imagination can capture this reality. The church's task is to teach us the language which can.

For those of us who come from the tradition in which we have attempted to shut out the world by somewhat arbitrary means, the

---

[2] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 6-35. For additional material on emotivism, see the writings of some of the Logical Positivists, for example, A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1946), especially Chapter I, "The Elimination of Metaphysics," and Chapter VI, "Critique of Ethics and Theology;" Rudolf Carnap, "The Rejection of Metaphysics," and C.L. Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," chaps. in *20th Century Philosophy: The Analytic Tradition*, ed. Morris Weitz (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1966), 207-219, 237-253.

analysis given here presents a special challenge. We must recognize that the enemy is not only something outside us which can be rendered powerless by objective exclusion; it is deep within us, in our way of thinking and our way of life. Hence we cannot forever be sustained by the false conviction that we are a specially endowed religio-cultural people unaffected by the world around us because of the unique theology of separation our forebears espoused. We are no less affected by the influences of modern liberalism than Christians from other theological traditions, albeit perhaps more subtly. Our pursuit should be seen as one common to all Christians: how to be faithful followers of the one who was sent from God to invite us into the life which alone can save us. In discovering the true meaning of worshipping the Holy One, in the presence of whom we all are relativized to participate in common subordination, the doors of our cultural purity will be burst wide open, not so we will forget who we are, but precisely in order to come to know the true Christian convictions which have characterized the faithful church throughout the ages. There is but one church, the church of Jesus the Christ.

In this chapter I will identify several areas in which the a-moral and a-religious worldviews prevalent in our day have affected the church deeply. No doubt this description will be more accurate for some churches than for others. These comments should be seen as rooted in a sincere hope for purification and new possibility. Critical reflection on faithful living and hope-filled encouragement are in fact profoundly complementary. The central theses of all these chapters is that the modern failure of theological ethics and the growing depreciation of the church go hand in hand. Hence the restoration of the one without the other is not possible. Just as ethics without a "society" to sustain it is not possible, so the church without a moral identity which defines it is not a church.

SPEAKING ABOUT GOD AND GOOD

Many modern Christians tend to be embarrassed by theological and ethical language. Especially those who are self-conscious liberals do not like to think of the human condition, or for that matter their own lives, in terms of theological language. Take the language of sin, for example. Karl Menninger was right in telling us already twenty years ago that the language of sin has largely disappeared from the scene of interpreting how human beings understand themselves.[3] The notion that humans sin is far too judgemental for us

[3] Karl A. Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York, NY: Hawthorn Books, 1973).

moderns. It is the doctrine *par excellence* which presupposes a standard outside of us against which the state of our own being is measured. For most of us the language of sin has become meaningless. Yet we do not often think of the implications. When sin becomes an empty category, salvation is also meaningless. And what can Christianity mean if we cannot talk about salvation?

Similar things could be said regarding how we think about even more basic theological notions like God. Recently in a church study group, we discussed what we mean when we use the word "God" (as if we had the prerogative of deciding this for ourselves!). Since we did embark on this exercise, it is not surprising that the most widely accepted view was that "God" represented the best in each of us. The concept of an independent being who somehow can be present to us, who can effect real changes in this world—including transformation of our lives—a being whom we dutifully should worship and adore, simply had lost its meaning for the majority of members in this church-going group of Christians.

It is truly puzzling to realize what many modern Christians have come to believe about themselves and this world. Why embrace Christianity if its most basic tenet—a transcendent God acting in this world—is seen as untenable and perhaps even oppressive? For the people in this discussion group the meaning and power of traditional theological language was gone. And yet they attended church regularly. This implicates the church. It is the church's task to give theological language the power to illuminate life's deepest realities. When it fails at this task the church indirectly contributes to the misguided belief in the ultimate value of the individual, which in turn leads us to think that we alone are worthy of praise and worship.[4]

A few years ago Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon wrote an article entitled "Embarrassed by God's Presence," in which they spoke of the church as follows:

> The central problem for our church, its theology and ethics is that it is simply atheistic. Therefore it forever builds its social structures on the presupposition that God doesn't really matter. We endow pensions for our clergy and devise strategies for church growth as if God were not here.[5]

This rather radical statement about the state of the modern church

---

[4] For an excellent study on this topic see Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977).

[5] Hauerwas, Stanley and William H. Willimon, "Embarrassed by God's Presence," *The Christian Century* 102, no. 4 (1985): 100.

illustrates what can happen as a result of the shift in thinking that has taken place in the modern world. The modern suspicion of theology and ethics means that all we have left to talk about is ourselves and projections based on our visions.

In an attempt to link this concern explicitly to official acts of the church, I will focus on three specifics: how we perform marriages, what we say at funerals and what we believe are the qualities of good pastoral leadership. The source of information will not be library books but my experiences in the church. Admittedly this makes the following discussion subjective and somewhat vulnerable. I do this with the intention of inviting readers into similar critical reflection.

First, concerning what the church says at Christian weddings. What is believed theologically about marriage often becomes most apparent by observing what church officials say when couples get married. It appears to me that weddings more and more are becoming celebrations of two people's love for each other. Of course, this is a beautiful thing to celebrate. But if that is all we are doing at Christian weddings then why do it in the church?

Wedding sermons and marriage vows can be astoundingly pagan by permitting only a peripheral place for God in the ceremony. Ought Christians not to marry on a different set of assumptions about the nature of life and wholesome relationships than non-Christians? Christians believe that in order for two people to be lifetime partners and to nurture a wholesome and peaceful context for living, it is important that they be blessed of God. They believe that life is a gift given by the giver of life. Therefore, a Christian wedding is an act of asking God for such blessing; it is a celebration of the gift of life from God. Hence it is one of the most radical acts of submission before the One worthy of worship and adoration. It is an act of two people opening themselves up to a way of life which God alone can bring about through repeated transformations—a life of gentleness, compassion, love and kindness. It is an act in which the couple's intentions, although important, are dwarfed in comparison with the graciousness and revolutionizing power of God's almighty love.

What is said and done publicly at modern Christian weddings does not always give evidence that this is our faith. The focus is mostly on what the couple brings to the marriage by way of love and commitment and perhaps on the special role of the body of believers present to help keep the couple married. Granted, these are not unimportant, although it is quite difficult to see how the scattered group of people attending the ceremony could possibly provide a meaningful social function in developing a new relationship characterized by Christian love and joy. It is equally hard to believe that the couple's commitment and love, which at this stage is ideal and perhaps even naive, can form the basis of a lifetime union.

In the spring of 1991 I spent a month in Iraq and had the opportunity to attend a Syrian Orthodox wedding in Baghdad. It was a remarkable contrast to the kind of weddings I attend in Canadian churches precisely at the point being considered. The Orthodox Church believes in the objectivity of the sacraments which presupposes a transcendent God capable of effecting important earthly transactions. Marriage is seen as one such transaction which God performs. Hence, the couple was never asked if they loved one another or if they committed themselves to one another for life. They had come to the church for marriage. Their coming was the sign of intent to marry. In the wedding ceremony God was asked to marry them and mould them into the kind of people who could stay married for life. The priest, who in this case also happened to be the archbishop, was the mediator between God and the couple. He performed the sacrament of marriage on the two who had come to be so blessed. It was clear to everyone that God—not the priest, nor the two people seeking marriage, nor the gathered congregation—was doing the marrying. In fact the congregation was quite preoccupied with unrelated matters. For example, the person sitting beside me was interested in talking to me throughout the whole proceeding about his chances of immigrating to Canada. Many others also were engaged in fairly audible conversation.

I admit this was somewhat extreme for a Mennonite theologian not trained in sacramental theology, one who is even somewhat critical of modern loss of the transcendent. Nevertheless, it reminded me of how different our weddings are. As I have listened to "words of marriage," traditionally called marriage vows, I have heard everything from couples promising to be married as long as their love shall last to being asked if they have confidence that their love is strong enough to last a lifetime. The latter is presumably to emphasize that marriage is for life and not only for as long as love lasts. Yet both, and many versions in between, are implicitly atheistic. Being able to live together for life has much less to do with confidence in ourselves than it does with our openness to God and belief that God can transform even the darkest obstacles in marriage into blessing.

Many people today are asking how we can still be so pretentious as to make a marriage commitment for life. Modern psychology teaches us that we are being unduly harsh on ourselves. Would we not be much better off if we were more honest with ourselves and with one another about who we really are and promise marriage for as long as love lasts, they ask. Lifetime commitments are unrealistic and dishonest, they say. But this is precisely the point: they *are* unrealistic. That is why another reality is required, one in which God, the creator of this world, is affirmed and seen as an active agent of redemptive change. This is the proper context for lifelong marriages.

Acknowledging a higher authority is the only way for Christians to participate in the "unreality" of marriage. To become "realistic," as proposed by some modern advocates, is to reject the reality of God and to be left with living by the impulses of human instincts and emotions. Then marriages should dissolve once love is gone; otherwise spouses will destroy one another. It is precisely because empirical reality is accepted as normative that marriage in the traditional sense has become an irrational act.

Second, concerning what the church says at funerals. Most often modern funerals turn out to be celebrations of the dead person's good life and achievements. Hence it is very difficult to conduct funerals for people who have not been all that good or who have achieved very little of public value during their lifetimes.

I find our lack of focus on God at funerals especially odd since death represents the one human experience which poses absolute limits. If no other event calls us face to face with God, funerals should. That is why they are a particularly good theological weather vane. If death does not get us to admit our total dependence and absolute vulnerability, probably nothing will. Hence it is rather strange that we should find the dead person's achievements theologically so compelling. All this is not to say that reflecting on the life of the deceased is entirely inappropriate at Christian funerals, but unless our faith in the God of creation and resurrection is at the core of our thinking about life and its end on this earth, our funerals are but the last public commemoration of a human life. This might be in order as a general public event, but Christians must do more.

Several years ago at my grandfather's funeral, I was especially struck with what has been lost. My grandparents were members of the Old Colony Mennonite Church in southern Manitoba. This conservative church has tried very hard not to change its theological language over the years. In his sermon the Old Colony minister made only one reference to my grandfather's personal life. He said that he was a good man, then very briefly substantiated this by listing a few of his unusually self-sacrificing acts. The rest of the sermon focused on God's power over life and death, on God's graciousness and love as we find it in the biblical story. I am sure that the same sermon had been given at many funerals before. In fact, traditionally the practice of this church has been for ministers to read sermons which other ministers have written. This was done to ensure against alien theologies coming into the church.

Although I found myself in periodic disagreement with some theological assumptions in the sermon, nevertheless it was refreshing to hear funeral preaching on the "right stuff:" how a Christian community mourns and deals with death in the face of a belief in the God of life over death. Its central emphasis was that death is part of

God's good intention for human beings; therefore the fact of death should not be seen as a victory of evil over God. Many people have died before. Personally I found it very reassuring to hear that death was normal in God's order of things. If it was okay for others of God's children, even Jesus, God's only Son, to die, surely it was okay for my grandfather and for me. The sermon did not camouflage death by focusing only on the life of my grandfather. Nor did it glorify death as that great transition from the entrapments of physicality to the freedom of heavenly spirituality. Death was dealt with realistically from the standpoint of the reality of God's grace as we come to know it in the biblical story. Death hurts, death is awful, but God is God. In God even the greatest pain and the greatest tragedy have been transformed into life in the deaths of others. This same God continues to transform death into life today.

I found it especially interesting to hear relatives reflect on the sermon after the funeral. Someone said he was sure glad that he did not have to listen to those kinds of sermons in his church, insinuating that we have certainly come a long way. And everyone in the room seemed to agree. They thought the sermon was abstract and boring and had nothing to do with us, that is, with the life of grandpa and our experiences with him. It was dry and irrelevant theology.

Again I come to the main point. I loved my grandpa dearly and cherished the many good times we had together, but if my coming to terms with his death depended only on the memory of these experiences in the face of this event of ultimate separation, I was doomed. "We do not mourn as those without hope." And to give this conviction meaning requires theology—God-language.

I want to make one other comment in connection with funerals. Some, myself included, have touted the importance of the category of narrative for understanding theology. Narrative theology has given many pastors the excuse to tell stories rather than preach. This is an unfortunate misrepresentation of what good narrative theology is and seems to have affected especially what we say at funerals. The assumption is that the only relevant story to tell is that of the deceased. To do so is a blatant embrace of the spirit of modernity and a profound distortion of proper narrative theology.[6]

---

[6] For an understanding of proper narrative theology see, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," and "Story and Theology," chaps. in *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977); James William McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974); James M. Smith, *Understanding Religious Convictions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

It is quite appropriate to focus on narrative if the relevant story is God's. But telling the story of God can never justify an avoidance of theology. Theology is, after all, the act of making sense of God's story in relation to human experience. The biblical story tells us that God is the One who saves us from death. That's the good news at funerals. Mere reflections on the life of the deceased are probably not very satisfying for the loved ones. They simply cannot answer the basic questions which glare at us in times of death.

Third, concerning our evaluation of good pastoral leadership. In my work as teacher at a Bible college I am asked to fill out many reference forms for people who are seeking leadership positions in the church. These forms are most telling regarding basic convictions about the nature of the church. By defining the qualities of a church leader we indirectly identify the characteristics of the church which is to be led. Hence by reflecting on the content of these forms we are able to observe both the qualities of the church as well as how we "evaluate" ourselves as Christians.

At no place is there greater hesitancy to use theological and ethical language than in our church leadership evaluation forms. This is not true of all, but the tendency exists in many of them. Consider some specific examples of questions that appear on some forms asking for an evaluation of potential church leaders.

The general preoccupation is with developing a "personality profile." What are the person's emotional tendencies? Is the person sensitive to the feelings and needs of others? Is the person a good listener? These questions are not unimportant. No one wants a leader who is difficult to work with or who is not sensitive to others. But why not ask these questions with language that describes a Christian? The psychological language assumes that who we are is determined by our emotional states. That is, how we feel and what attitudes we have towards a range of things are the basic factors in shaping our identity. These are precisely the assumptions of the modern understanding of the self. In an earlier time our identity was determined by the virtues we embraced which in turn gave shape to our character. There was an acceptance of a given model of Christian behaviour specifically characterized for our emulation. This no longer appears to be our belief. I have yet to see questions about the person's passion for righteous living or about the person's dutiful submission to God. The latter focus the matter in a theological-moral manner and suggest a process of openness to God with power to mould and transform character. The former types of questions are theologically vacuous.

What does the absence of theological-moral questions in reference forms tell us about what we have come to believe about ourselves? Do we really believe that we are shaped by an inner

"personality core" which is unique to each of us and to which we must be faithful to be healthy human beings? Is this not inherently atheistic? Does this not represent an *a priori* exclusion of God and the Christian story? Is it not essential for Christians to believe that sometimes human lives can be changed radically so that we can become what we were created to be?

Consider another popular question in evaluation forms: Is the person capable of realistic self-appraisal? A good recommendation for church leadership apparently begs for a positive answer. Yet often I am compelled to answer negatively if I think the person would make a good church leader. When I do answer positively, usually I would be excluding the person—in my own estimation, that is—from qualifying for church leadership. Why is this the case?

The problem has to do with what I believe I am compelled to assume about human beings when I take this question seriously. Why should we be capable of the ability to appraise self realistically or, if we are, why would we believe it to be an important skill to cultivate? Several answers present themselves. Let me consider two. No one else will evaluate us so we are left to do it ourselves. This is the pragmatic answer. Or we are the only ones who truly know ourselves so we are the only ones who can do the job. This is the philosophical answer. Both answers are fraught with difficulties. The first is empirically wrong; the second is theologically false. If Christians do not take seriously the responsibility of evaluating each other—and I am not only speaking about job performance evaluations but also of life performance evaluations—then the notion of church in any meaningful biblical sense cannot be sustained. Appraisal of self is, for the church, one of the most dangerous temptations.

Furthermore, the "realistic" qualifier to this question should also be noted. As we have already seen, Christians ought to be deeply suspicious about "realistic questions" because they always beg another question: Which reality is being presupposed? From within the Christian reality, humility is an important virtue, even for a leader. There may well be some institutions where humility is a distinct detriment for good leadership. That is, humility is not an important quality for every leader to have. But humility is important for *Christian* leadership because God is God. In placing ourselves under God's sovereignty we find ourselves in an in-spite-of relationship: loved in spite of our inadequacies, accepted in spite of our sins, and so on. Such a relationship requires humility. Arrogant people do not understand in-spite-of existence. Not being humble implies the impossibility of a God-human relationship, or, for that matter, even a human-human Christian relationship. Of course, there is no necessary conflict between the skill of self-appraisal and Christian humil-

ity, although I suspect that humble people will tend not to be overly preoccupied with the notion, and when pushed to do so, will tend to underevaluate their own abilities. However, the problem with the question is that the "realistic" qualifier does not explicitly presuppose Christian humility as the context. Without it, we are engaged in a profoundly different activity.

The token "ethics" question—and most forms have one—is also interesting. Usually it gets couched in "decision-making" and "situational" language. It asks whether the person is good at making decisions, as if decision-making were somehow an independent administrative skill which one can master with enough experience.[7] It is really quite amazing that even in relation to this question there is no interest in knowing which virtues the person embraces. What guides our decisions if not what we hold to be good? And how is our view of the good expressed if not through the virtues that guide our behaviour? The way this question is asked indicates that we tend not to think about ourselves as guided by an outside standard of goodness. Instead we tend to believe that what is good comes from inside us, from our ability to choose from available options presented to us in specific situations. Yet this makes Christian ethics quite impossible. Modern liberalism has taught us that ethics is all about making decisions and that one gets good at this skill with a lot of practice, especially by learning how to make the "best" decisions in model cases.

Focusing on decision-making undermines the basic tenets of the Christian faith. As Christians we cannot view life as coming to us in the form of dilemmas that must be resolved by choosing the best of available options. Christians believe that we are participants in "a whole new reality." Dilemmas come with preconceived worldviews, most of which are not Christian. The world of patience, love, gentleness and humility is not the given social reality of our day. Hence options emanating from these virtues will not come to us from our social environment. They must be envisioned by us from the standpoint of a different world. For example, to make decisions on the basis of options presented would make it impossible to be pacifists. Often all the options before us are violent ones. Unless we train ourselves to make decisions on the basis of the virtue of peace, which on occasion implies the rejection of all the options with which we are presented, we cannot be pacifists. Later chapters will show precisely how decision-making ethics capitulates to a realism which Christians must hold suspect.

---

[7] For an interesting analysis of how the concept of "manager" has shaped our modern self-understanding, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 75-78.

What is most revealing in some church leadership forms is the way the "theological question" gets asked. It is already problematic that the theological, ethical and psychological aspects of a person are so neatly separated, but leaving that issue aside, consider the way the question is asked in one form seeking church leaders: "What do you see in this person's religious attitude and/or practice that is distinctive, noteworthy or of special interest?"[8]

Perhaps this question should not be taken as literally as I tend to take it. Yet if one does, the assumptions it appears to make are very disturbing. First, the distinction between being religious and being Christian is unimportant, or there is no distinction to be made. But this is precisely the great myth of the modern understanding of religion. It is important to understand that religion is like language; it needs a qualifier. You cannot just speak; you must speak a specific language. You cannot just be religious; you must be either Christian, Jewish, Hindu, etc. In our modern culture we have been taught to speak of the religious feeling which is common to all and which can be cultivated in personal privacy because its essence lies within each of us. Access to it is impeded by interference from outside. But this is the very notion which disciples of Christ must reject. Being Christian has to do with living a life together with others of like faith in openness to the one who can recreate us into truthful and peaceful disciples—the body of Christ.

The second assumption which the "theological question" makes is that religion—I would say Christianity—comes in attitudes. Whatever happened to the ancient belief in truth and doctrine? The question suggests that there is no such recourse, no right beliefs. All that is left is your attitude and mine, and, I assume, each attitude is of equal value. Certainly I would not know how to adjudicate among competing attitudes. As we have shown, the logical positivists of the twentieth century have tried very hard to convince moderns of exactly this position, arguing that religious and ethical language is cognitively meaningless precisely because there can be no trans-empirical reality. Surely Christians cannot find this acceptable. Unless we believe that God truly was in Christ, why would we be followers of Christ? No mere religious attitude can have the power to shape our lives in a direction other than the standard social mainstream.

The third assumption is that it is in our uniqueness, in our individual creativity, that we are theologically interesting. One would expect this to be the assumption of those who reject the

---

[8] I realize that this may not be the only place in the process where the candidate's theology gets evaluated. Nevertheless, I believe it is very important that it be examined also at this point.

possibility of theology in any disciplined sense, but not of those who believe in the church. Church presupposes common theology. It would seem to me very important to enquire whether the person who is being considered for leadership affirms what the church as church believes. Precisely the common theological affirmations, not the distinctive ones, ought to be scrutinized. It would be a different matter if this question were coupled with others about the candidate's view on the basic beliefs of the church and then comment was sought on what additional concerns and interests this person would bring to ministry. But this particular reference form has only one theological question. There is no inquiry about whether the person accepts the basic theological tenets of the church.

It is really quite astounding that church leadership is not evaluated on the basis of correct theology integrated with Christian living. In fairness we should mention that the second part of the "theology question" is: "Comment briefly on this person's doctrinal viewpoint." But even this statement reinforces the notion that doctrine comes in viewpoints—another name for attitude. Still no reference to correct theology and Christian life.

Whenever I write a reference for a potential church leader I remind myself of an earlier understanding of church leadership where a passion for wisdom, truth and righteous living was essential. St. Bonaventure's (1217-1274) little essay entitled, *The Six Wings of the Seraph*, is an excellent example.[9] The seraphim were the traditional vanguard symbols which protected the heavenly host from the prowling powers of evil. Church leaders are the ones whose task is to keep the flock together, safe and pure. And the protective training required is Christian character training. "You need someone to teach you . . . the first principles of God's word." In this manner "wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will watch over you; understanding will guard you; delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech."[10]

The essay is a description of the character of a church leader. Bonaventure examines the essence of church leadership: the notion of the good this person embraces, the virtues this person has to accept in order to be one who is capable of embodying Christian goodness. Here is Bonaventure's description of what Christian leaders should be like:

---

[9] This book has been translated by Philip O'Mara as *The Character of a Christian Leader* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1978). The original title refers to Isaiah 6.

[10] Ibid., 4.

> Zeal for righteousness, like *scarlet twice dyed* [reference to Exodus 26:1, 31 and 36], shines with the double glow of charity—love of God and love of neighbor. A person who loves God not only desires to enjoy his goodness and be close to him, but loves to see his will accomplished, his worship carried out and his honor exalted. He wants all people to know, love, serve, and honor God more than anything else. A person who loves neighbor desires not only health and prosperity for him, but, even more, eternal salvation. The more complete this charity becomes, the more fervently do we desire to help people to be saved, the more determined is our eagerness for them, and the purer our joy when they find salvation. For charity *does not insist on its own way* but seeks what is of God.[11]

Bonaventure adopted the Psalmist's vision for leadership: "You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you" (Psalm 45:7).

The rest of the essay is devoted to highlighting the key Christian virtues. "Brotherly love" is essential so that a church leader can care for the physically and spiritually weak members of the community. Patience is necessary to model for church members that life is a gift and not a commodity to be obtained by our own hand. Being a good example in simple living, humility and maturity is the core of good leadership. Also important is exercising good judgement when admonishing those who display unchristian behaviour and in administrative matters which are necessary for taking care of the church. But above all, complete devotion to God in private and public prayer is what keeps a church leader from falling prey to powers which will lead to unfaithfulness.

The substantial difference between Bonaventure's understanding of good church leadership and the view reflected in modern leadership forms is that the former expresses it in explicitly theological-moral (biblical) language and assumes the givenness of God and goodness. In today's understanding, theological-moral language is virtually absent. Since God is the source of our being and goodness, the language of the church must be theological and ethical. In our compulsive avoidance of this language we have lost much.

THE PSYCHOLOGIZATION OF MORALITY

One specific way in which we reject theological-moral language in modern society is by replacing it with psychological language. This should not be surprising since psychological language begins with the self whereas the language of theological ethics begins with God and the Christian community. If Nietzsche and other decoders

---

[11] Ibid., 11.

of modern liberalism are right this indeed should be the expected result. However, it is surprising that the church has been swept along in this momentum of change to the extent that it has. Nowhere is this influence more evident than in the area of pastoral care.

A detailed analysis of the tension between Christian ethics and models of pastoral care would be out of place here. But permit me just one general comment. It is hard to understand that adherents of a particular religion like Christianity, who have a specific view of what salvation is—a belief in a distinctive way of becoming whole—consider it possible to offer healing to people while avoiding the use of explicitly Christian language. In other words, how can a Christian counsellor, who believes that the way of peace, compassion, love and forgiveness alone brings fullness to life and withstands life's many challenges and threats, refrain from encouraging "people in difficulty" from trying on these very qualities?

It is encouraging to note that several studies exist where the loss of religio-ethical language is beginning to be recognized by those who practise and teach pastoral care.[12] Therefore my task here can be more basic: simply listing examples of the shift from explicit moral-theological language to psychological language in ordinary usage, not specifically in the context of pastoral care.

First, one of the most basic changes is that we no longer use the term "character." Instead we now speak of "personality," a psychological term.[13] The two are very different, however. Character is something we shape by training ourselves to live according to the virtues. This takes time and effort and a lot of discipline. One can have a good character or a bad character, depending on whether one embraces the virtues or not. Character is a product of social formation. Personality, on the other hand, is not something that is either

---

[12] Examples of recent studies dealing with this topic are: Don S. Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983). See especially his chapters entitled, "The Estrangement of Care from Ethics," "The Movement toward Ethical Neutrality," and "The Church as Community of Moral Discourse;" also his *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976) and "The Pastoral Counsellor as Ethicist: What Difference Do We Make," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* XLII (Winter 1988): 283-296; Stephen Pattison, *A Critique of Pastoral Care* (London: SCM Press, 1988); Al Dueck, "Ethical Context of Healing: Peoplehood and Righteousness," *Pastoral Psychology* 35 (Summer 1987): 239-253 and "Ethical Context of Healing: Ecclesia and Praxis," *Pastoral Psychology* 36 (Fall 1987): 49-62 and "Ethical Context of Healing: Character and Praxis," *Pastoral Psychology* 36 (Winter 1987): 69-83.

[13] In the early 1960s, at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba, grade twelve students, myself included, took a course called "Charakterbildung" (character formation). Needless to say, this course is no longer being offered. Today we tend to think that "character formation" is something that cannot or should not be taught because a person is his/her own moral authority.

good or bad, although we do judge it in reference to a standard of "normalcy." We analyze personalities into types and study their development on the basis of statistical averaging of empirical data. We draw conclusions about associations between ages and types of behaviour, then show how moral development and personality development are interrelated. But the norm now is "average human behaviour" since all reference to an independent notion of goodness has vanished.

One especially apt example of an attempt to integrate personality language with the notion of moral development is the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's very influential argument for the "moral stages of development." He believes that personality development and moral development are natural processes, and as long as there is no "abnormal" association between them, everything is in order. However, to do this he explicitly has to deny the traditional moral language of virtues since that language makes particularly metaphysical assumptions which he rejects. He says,

> ... the objection of the psychologist to the bag of virtues is that there are no such things. Virtues and vices are labels by which people award praise or blame to others, but the ways people use praise and blame towards others are not the ways in which we think when making moral decisions themselves. . . . Let me recapitulate my argument so far. I have criticized the "bag of virtues" concept of moral education on the grounds, first, that there are no such things and, second, if there were they couldn't be taught or at least I don't know how or who could teach them. Like Socrates, I have claimed that ordinary people certainly don't know how to do it, and yet there are no expert teachers of virtue as there are for the other arts.[14]

Personality language assumes a fundamental givenness and continuity to individual identity; character language assumes that who we are can be changed, even radically. Character language assumes that who we are is connected with what is good; personality language assumes that the notion of goodness is a debilitating factor for healthy personal development. Hence children should be permitted to develop "naturally" and should not be inhibited by a notion of good character. Character language assumes that who we are is determined by a standard of goodness which is outside of ourselves; personality language assumes that who we are comes from within each individual or perhaps from biological and hereditary factors.

---

[14] Lawrence Kohlberg, "Education for Justice: A Modern Statement of the Socratic View," chap. in *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1981), 34-38.

Character language is moral; personality language is not.

Second, the terms "right" and "wrong" have been replaced with the term "values." Basically nothing is right or wrong any more. Instead we explain why people do certain things now which they did not do at an earlier time by reference to a change in values. "Young people nowadays have different values than we had when we were that age" is the explanation for why children live by a different morality than adults do. It is important for moderns to know what values they have. So "values clarification" has become a carefully cultivated exercise. But notice the assumption: the greatest evil is to be untrue to ourselves. As long as we "know what we believe" everything is okay! "Know thyself" and "to thine own self be true" are two very important guiding principles today.

Values language has come into prominent usage only since the nineteenth century. Today "value" serves as the most fundamental moral term. But surely this is an illusion. Whatever values are, they have little to do with morality, certainly not with what is right or wrong. Not that we should stop using the term, but we should not make the mistake of assuming that we are speaking morally when we do. There is no inconsistency in valuing what is wrong and not valuing what is right. Values are no more than cleverly disguised wants and desires. In an earlier era, desiring to do what is wrong was referred to as temptation. It is indeed ironic—and tragic—that what was once a vice, namely desire, has in our day become the basis of moral language. "Right" and "wrong" are moral terms; "value" is a psychological or aesthetic one.

Third, we no longer talk much about convictions. Instead we talk about our feelings. There is a profound difference between the two and in the shift from one to the other, everything has changed. Feelings are purely private and, of course, morally neutral. No one would claim that a person's feelings are morally wrong. That is the whole point of using feeling-language: to avoid moral judgement. Convictions are public and open for moral evaluation. The assumption is that something outside of us forms the content of our convictions; feelings assume no such thing. Feelings can never be judged in relation to anything; convictions are evaluated in relation to public performance. Convictions are moral; feelings are not. Again this does not mean we should not talk about our feelings; we should just not take it to be morally significant when we do. We easily can feel good about doing something that is bad. In fact, I have heard people speak of exactly this as the greatest personal liberation. This only substantiates the point: concentrating on "feeling language" liberates us from the need for morality.

Fourth, instead of talking about "the good," we talk about goals and objectives. Granted, goals can be grounded in what is good, but

they are not good by definition. They can actually be bad. In our society, it is far more important to be clear about what our goals are, then concentrate on how to attain them, than it is to know the good. Again, "good" and "bad" are moral terms; "goals" and "objectives" are not. I will say more about this in subsequent chapters.

Fifth, a moral term which we find especially intolerable today is "ought." Although all moral terms carry judgemental freight, it is most strongly felt with the word "ought." This is the basic reason for the negative reaction to its use. We tend to think that only the morally perfect can tell others what to do and, since there is no such person, there can be no moral guidance from anyone else. Hence all "ought" language is out.

Moderns find it extremely difficult to imagine a moral reference point other than the self. Hence moral language sounds like power language where the person making the moral judgement is seeking dominance. And so "you ought to" becomes "I want you to," or "I would like it if . . . . " We find this intolerable because the wants and likes of others belong to those others and not to me. Other people have no business imposing their wants on me. Wants are totally private things. The discomfort with "ought" stems from its being a moral term.

Sixth, another reprehensible moral term is "guilt." "Good," "judgement" and "guilt" are correlative terms. Where there is goodness, truth and excellence, there is judgement. Where there is judgement there is guilt. This is true even in the sciences. If, for example, you remind a student of an incorrect answer on a mathematics quiz the student feels judged and may well feel guilty for not knowing better. The only way around that would be to make all answers acceptable, that is, make them right simply on the basis of having been advanced as right. (Things then become right *for you* and *for me.*) This is what we have done in ethics to avoid the possibility of judgement. In a world without judgement there can be no guilt.

We simply cannot live in a moral world without the reality of guilt. When you deny the one, you deny the other. Moreover, forgiveness cannot do its job of restoration and re-creation unless it does so for those who are guilty of sin. Hence, a person who is trained not to feel guilty about anything can also not feel forgiven about anything. The feverish attempt in our society to get rid of guilt language is part and parcel of the effort to eliminate moral language.[15]

---

[15] It needs to be clear that I am not advocating that we embark on a process of making each other feel guilty. Rather, moral evaluation cannot, in principle, be separated from the notion that when we do something wrong we ought to feel guilty.

This short list of examples shows that our moral language has largely been replaced with another. Yet it is hard to believe that we are aware of what we have done to ourselves. We tend not to draw the conclusions of our own thinking. *When ethics becomes synonymous with personal opinion and attitude it ceases to be ethics.*

The shift from moral language to psychological language is a classic example of reductionism, that is, the false assumption that the understanding of reality which uses one set of terms remains unaffected when it is substituted by another set of terms. After all, moral language is inherently prescriptive; psychological language is not. How can prescriptive language be replaced with descriptive language without change of meaning? We must acknowledge that we are talking about something other than morality when we use psychological language. Since we find this "something else" so much more comfortable, it has come to substitute for our moral language.[16]

THE POLITICIZATION OF MORALITY

What is true for personal ethics is equally true for social ethics. Such powerful notions as public opinion, majority vote, democracy and freedom of expression all provide modern western societies, including the church, with a base for evaluative language which often masquerades as morality. But this is really language of the self from the standpoint of the majority instead of the individual. It is as devoid of God-language as is the language of individualism. On this model, it is the collective opinions, attitudes or feelings that matter. As a base for Christian social ethics this is as problematic as individual wants and desires are for Christian personal ethics.

We do well to remind ourselves that Christians cannot escape

To dismiss the notion of guilt entirely is to understand ourselves apart from morality since an implicit part of morality is judgement, that is, measuring ourselves by the extent to which we participate in the quality of life given to us. It is precisely our indefatigable effort to escape judgement that drives our attempt to eliminate guilt from our lives. Yet to endeavour to understand ourselves as entirely "outside of judgement" is an illusion, especially for Christians. A non-moral self-understanding simply will not sustain the complexity of our existence. Guilt is a fundamental human reality because creator-God has willed into existence a life of moral order.

[16] I want to ensure that I am properly understood regarding my criticism of psychological language. I am not contending that the discipline as such is in any way illegitimate or that Christians should avoid careful reflection on the nature of the self. On the contrary, the exercise of gaining a clear understanding of the self is absolutely indispensable for theological ethics. My argument is that it is impossible to describe moral phenomena in psychological terms, and that we should avoid doing so. In this regard my critique of modern psychology is very similar to my critique of modern philosophy.

politics. The Christian story is political through and through.[17] It cannot be understood correctly without presupposing a King (God), loyal faithful followers (the Israelites, the disciples, the church) who are invited into the rule of the King, and a larger kingdom (the people) where many vie for competing political goals and strategies, wilfully seeking to undermine the platform of the King.

In the present century the Christian church has held two main interpretations of the kingdom of God and on how we are to understand politics. Both have resulted from an inability to relate properly the character of God with the character of the Christian community. Hence both are examples of ethics not rooted in God and the church.

The one is represented best by so-called liberals. It argues that the rule of God on earth is done by human beings. We have been placed on earth to bring about the kingdom and all we can do is our best. We are not perfect but we have the Word of God to guide us. We know that the goals of the biblical story are justice, wholeness and peace. Therefore we must do what lies in our power to realize them. The difficulty with this position is that God becomes essentially irrelevant as an agent of social change. The result is a church with a strong ethic but with a weak theology. Liberals can do this because they have an optimistic view of human nature and a diminished view of the power of sin.

Conservatives, on the other hand, capitalize on this weakness. They maintain that it is presumptuous to think that we can be the agents of kingdom change. We are sinners! They believe that bringing about the kingdom of God is God's business, not ours. Hence we should not be involved in trying to change society. Instead, we should present individuals with the Gospel message so they will be saved from their sinful ways. God will change the world in whichever way God wills; it is not our task to take the lead. We should concentrate on curbing the power of evil where we can and not on capitulating to its power. Conservatives have a strong theology but either no Christian social ethic at all or one that also is not integrated directly with the character of God and the church as moral agents.

In the final analysis the two positions amount to much the same thing as far as Christian ethics is concerned. Both end up being able to justify virtually any action they wish: the liberals on the basis of striving to bring about a kingdom goal, the conservatives on the basis that God does what God does and we must support it.

Unfortunately, in the absence of an integrated theological ethic, the dominant momentum of society tends to carry the day. If these

---

[17] See John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

are the only models available, the church is left without social significance. Public opinion and the spirit of democratization then become normative for the church as well. Yet, according to the biblical story, the moral character of the King and the moral character of the faithful body are in moral continuity offering the world real social/political alternatives. Hence the process and means of social change proposed by the Christian community will be different. One of the most important matters for Christians to get straight in order to give content to social ethics is who their King is and how they can "participate" in the active ongoing rule of their King.[18] Subsequent chapters will attempt to deal with this issue further.

I will comment briefly on three aspects of this process of politicizing morality. *First*, the democratization of morality. Politics is all about power. When morality becomes politics it becomes synonymous with the exercise of power. Those who have the greatest power are those who can determine what is right and wrong. This is what Nietzsche meant when he spoke of "the will to power." In our society, and to a lesser extent in our churches, the democratization of morality has resulted in a process whereby the majority of people can determine what is right and wrong. We vote to determine what is right. If the majority of people wants abortions, then abortions are right. If the majority favours capital punishment, then that is right. If the majority supports the Gulf War, then that war is given Christian blessing. If the majority wants to fire the pastor, then that is right. We have practically no mechanism left for determining right from wrong other than the democratic tallying of opinions.

Second, within modern society, where morality and politics are virtually indistinguishable, we tend to see ourselves as moral insofar as we are able to "bring about" the platforms or goals we posit. We do not think of ourselves as "be-ers," that is, as being particular kinds of people who must concentrate on not allowing our deciding and our doing to shape us into people we ought not to be. When there is no outside "ought not to be," we bring about whatever we can and wish. The worst evil in our society then is to do nothing—an old person or "the unemployed housewife!" We define ourselves not by who we are, that is, our "role in society" (because no one really has a "role" anymore), but by what we produce.

Third, the politicization of morality has led effectively to reducing morality to a model that stems from contract law. We have "legal-

---

[18] For further discussion on this topic, see my essay "Christian Pacifism and the Character of God," chap. in *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1990), 247-272.

ized" morality. Hence the only way we can still speak morally is on the basis of the model of covenants. These can be either natural covenants like family—although increasingly these are losing their power over us—or artificial covenants like purchasing a car or a marriage contract. Legal contracts are about the only context where we can still understand the meaning of "moral language," and here that language changes to "rights" and "obligations."

There are two problems with this view of morality. One, if covenants are known to be made by us, then they can also be broken or redefined by us. Moreover, then they are binding on us only as long as they are to our benefit. Secondly, moral language is reduced to rights language. "Rights" and "obligations" are legal terms. If they have no outside enforcer, then the one with the biggest stick becomes the enforcer. Morality then becomes politics without government, that is, power without structured controls. Therefore this kind of morality is the perfect recipe for wanton violence and war.

Time and space do not permit more nuanced refinements regarding the proper use of rights language. Yet one comment is necessary. "Human rights language" presupposes a natural covenant within the larger human family (and usually these have been carefully worked out in international legal documents). It could be argued that these rights can be derived from the Christian virtues of love of neighbour and graciousness. Therefore we should not be too harsh regarding this way of speaking, especially since it still holds some moral power for us today. Yet as Christians we need to remind ourselves that the basis of our obligations to the hungry and the dispossessed is our compassion and mercy which is derived from the compassion and mercy of God rather than the victim's right not to be in these conditions.

The integration of politics and ethics is fraught with theological minefields. As with the integration of psychology and ethics, the dominant tendency is to base social ethics on our own interests and power to bring about specific goals and objectives. Human creativity and imagination then become the controlling forces. To this extent, social ethics also has become art.

CONCLUSION

I have intentionally been hard on the church. This is not to admit that what was said is not so, but rather that I have concentrated more on what is wrong than on what is right with the church. Emotivism is alive and well in the church. Even the intentional Christian community has a hard time basing its self-understanding and concern for justice in the world squarely on the affirmation that God is real and active in this world. Therefore, modern Christians do well to

heed the insightful words of warning that come from the pen of W.H. Auden:

> We would rather be ruined than changed,
> We would rather die in our dread
> Than climb the cross of the moment
> And let our illusions die.[19]

~~~~~

[19] From the "Epilogue" in W.H. Auden, "The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue." *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems,* ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 407.
~~~~~

PART II

FOUNDATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

Theologians in this century have not been able to agree on how to lay the foundations for Christian living. Some want to begin with nature, others want to start with history. Yet neither has been able to supply a convincing rationale for Christian ethics. The natural law approach has not been successful in stating Christian ethics in terms which are practical enough for moderns to take seriously. Hence, Christians have been able to dismiss this approach by insisting on realism and relevance to a complex modern world. The historical approach maintains that being responsible Christians occurs precisely through our human abilities to act and bring about what we understand to be good within the relativities of life. Hence, on this way of conceiving the foundation, realistic strategies and contextual embodiments become normative. Perhaps one could summarize these two positions thus: the first approach has provided a place for God at the expense of human responsibility; the second has made humans accountable by relegating God to spectator status.

Both approaches have failed largely because in neither does the concrete body of believers function significantly in the discussion of what it means to be faithfully Christian. Neither views the church as that body which trains disciples of Jesus to become skilled at being God's people and in turn be the context for God's redemptive activities. The practical result has been that individual Christians are left to the forces of modern liberalism for which their personal convictions are no match.

In the following two chapters we propose a different perspective on the Christian life—one which integrates both history and nature. After all, God created this world, God acts in it and we are invited into meaningful participation with God's activities.

The first chapter examines how it is possible to claim to know God in a scientific culture where supernatural knowledge is repudiated. It explores how we can make theological knowledge claims which are concretely historical without relinquishing the fundamental givenness of creator-God—the standard of all goodness.

The second chapter explores how Christian ethics has been understood by mainline Catholics and Protestants and by specific theologians and philosophers. We argue explicitly for an approach to Christian ethics which makes it possible for the church to become a significant moral category.

3

REVELATION: LEARNING TO KNOW GOD

David Schroeder

The first two chapters of this volume indicate the need to recover a moral/theological base for a Christian view of the world and of self. But where does one begin? My short answer is, "With the church." But how can the church recover what has been lost or taken away? Only by acquiring a basic reorientation of imagination, a change in worldview. The church needs to take another look at what it means to be human, what it means for humans to be part of the cosmos, what it means for us to be responsible persons and to acknowledge God as creator and Lord.

In order to address these matters, one must first understand revelation, the most basic theological concept. Christian revelation is coming to know who God, humanity and the world are. Furthermore, it requires that we learn the language and life skills specific to the stories of Israel, Jesus and the church, and that we interpret our own identities through these stories.

The phrase "Christian revelation" presupposes what the ancients, both Hebrews and Greeks, always believed: that there is a givenness to the order of the universe and that it makes a difference how humanity relates to this ordered world. Christian revelation also assumes that what is revealed undergirds all that is. More importantly, all human existence is bound up with revelation. Answers to the riddle of life are possible only when we see our lives as connected to what is fundamentally given. In short, revelation assumes that there is something other than the physical world which gives this

universe meaning and explanation.[1]

This reality which is not empirically present to us is the One whom we identify as creator-God. Hence, for Christians revelation is the self-disclosure of God, the One who is foundational to all that is: matter and life. God addresses and calls us to respond, sets the moral order of the universe and determines the beginning and the end. There is life in God alone. These are bold affirmations which call for further elaboration.

My specific concern in this chapter is to clarify how God and the moral order become known to us. When we respond to the One who speaks to us and invites us, *revelation* can become *knowledge*. By presenting the concept of Christian revelation in its manifold characterizations, I will address some of the common questions which assume that revelation is impossible: Is revelation not purely imaginative or subjective? Is it at all reliable knowledge? Does the concept of revelation not run counter to scientific knowledge?

The most important aspect of these questions is the context in which answers are to be sought. More often than not the context for Christian knowledge is post-Enlightenment liberalism where the mind and individual experience are seen as the locus for knowledge. My assumption is that the church is the setting for Christian knowledge. Knowing God is impossible apart from commitment to a life of worship and faithfulness. For Christians, knowing and doing cannot be separated, as is the case in most modern theories of knowledge. Knowing is not merely a theoretical exercise. Knowledge of God requires testing in the narrative of the Christian community. It requires learning a particular kind of language which will disclose a whole new world. One of the most difficult aspects of knowing God is the integration of knowing how and knowing that. Christian revelation must bring these two forms of knowing together. Hence the central challenge of Christian revelation is to learn to live as Christians in fluid interaction with the biblical text which gives us the content of Christian knowledge.

To see revelation in this way it is necessary to begin with an analysis of how the concept itself functions in everyday language. Revelation is not merely the reception of propositional items of information. Instead it must be seen as personal. In order to make the notion of an incarnational, embodied truth intelligible, revelation must be seen as concrete and historical. Furthermore, Christian knowledge is best understood in the context of story and parable

---

[1] Herman Bavinck argues that physics presupposes metaphysics. Herman Bavinck, "Revelation and Nature," chap. in *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 83-112.

because that is what church is: a storied people in continuity with the stories of Israel and Jesus.

REVELATION AS PERSONAL

To state that revelation is personal in character is an affirmation that God is—or can be—present to human beings in this time/space world. It also affirms that humans as subjects find their fulfilment in ultimate subject, that is, in person, not thing.[2] Moreover, the nature of God's presence may be compared to the way human beings come to know one another. Two people can be together (exist) in the same room and yet not be present to each other. They become present only when one is addressed or invited by the other. As Walter Brueggemann states, "Presence equals thereness."[3]

But is it not impossible to speak about the presence of someone whom we have not seen and cannot see? We do this all the time. When we come to know someone, we see not the person but the manifestations of that person. Through these manifestations, or the story, we come to hold certain convictions about the person's character. Even though there may not be agreement about how to characterize a particular individual, nevertheless the person's character is revealed through deeds, speech and gestures.

It is important to note that this does not imply an existentialist self-understanding. Just because we come to understand people by what they do does not mean that they are defined by those actions. Character determines action. Because actions flow from character, it is indeed possible to see character revealed through action.

To say this another way, both immanent and transcendent aspects are involved in the revelation of character. The immanent aspects arise from what is apprehended with the physical senses. Two examples are speech and behaviour. However, immanence alone suggests that only what we see and nothing beyond unites our perceptions. This is not so. Our manifold apprehensions point beyond themselves to that which transcends them, namely character which is made intelligible by the story which shapes us. Hence, we learn to know someone by beginning with what is immanently

---

[2] See John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1956). Baillie speaks of divine self-disclosure as disclosure from subject to subject. He also indicates that "there can be no valid knowledge except of what is already there, either waiting or striving to be known," 19.

[3] Walter Brueggemann, "Presence of God, Cultic," in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, supp. vol. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 680. See also, Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984).

present to us. Then we go farther by relating and responding to the character of the person, not to the elements immediately before us.

Without transcendence there could be no constancy to character. In fact there would be no character, merely an unconnected series of actions, past and present. On this basis the very notion of person would be impossible.

Compare this way of seeing things with the world of science. Scientists come to know theoretical entities by beginning with empirical evidence at hand. They operate as if theoretical entities are real even though they cannot observe them. They also make knowledge claims that transcend empirical data.[4] Scientists also use their imaginations—imaginations informed by earlier observations—to become aware of what transcends the known facts and what will help them make sense of additional phenomena. Scientists experience moments of awareness to envision a new hypothesis which, through testing (response), can be confirmed, rejected or corrected.

Religious knowledge is not that different. Revelation of God means coming to know a presence which, in principle, is not observable. It means coming to know that which is the cause or ground of all that is. Religious knowledge may well be more fundamental than other knowledge, but structurally it is the same.

The biblical record is filled with people who experienced what may be called moments of awareness in which God is present to them in a special way. They then speak of God having been revealed to them. Examples of people who experienced such revelation are: Moses (Exodus 3), Abraham (Genesis 12), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Peter (Luke 5:1-11), Paul and many others in the early church.

We also have this kind of awareness in our relations with other people. It is not unusual for someone to be present to us in a new and unexpected way. This gives us the possibility of knowing that person in greater depth. This is an example of knowing through revelation.

One of the most basic expressions of this revelation of God's presence is the creation account with its affirmation that humans are created in the image of God. Another is the incarnation through which we see God as radically personal in Jesus Christ and Jesus as profoundly human. Consequently we are helped to see God through Jesus Christ and to see Christ in ourselves. These insights enable us to view ourselves as personal beings relating to God. Since we

---

[4] John Hospers makes the distinction between law and theory in *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), 236. He claims that a theoretical entity cannot be observed under any conditions. Stuart C. Hackett uses a similar argument in *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim: A Philosophical and Critical Apologetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 311-316.

manifest our own specific characters through all that we say and do, we reveal who we are, whether such manifestations are in keeping with the character of God or not. Similarly, when we reveal the character of God through the expression of our being, others can see God in and through us.

To say that revelation is personal in nature also implies that our knowledge demands response. Revelation does not come through an objective tabulation of data, no matter how complete. To gain knowledge of a person one needs to respond to what is received from that person. In this response one comes to know whether an understanding is correct or not. Personal knowledge requires response and ongoing empirical confirmation.

Similarly, knowledge of God requires involvement and response. God is revealed in all creation and is present in all events. Yet God is not always experienced as present. God *could* be present to us in all events, but we sometimes fail to *apprehend* God as present. To act on the basis of the manifestations of God's presence is to learn to know God. Knowing God is dependent on an awareness of the presence of God and demands a personal response to God. This is why corporate worship is integral to learning to know God.

Finally, to claim that revelation is personal in nature is to claim the unity of the subjective and objective poles of revelation.[5] God (the objective pole) invites us into an objective reality—the church in the world—in which as subjects we can find our fulfilment. Yet our awareness of God and of God's world (the subjective pole) is always in process as we open ourselves to God and discern our appropriate response to this invitation.

REVELATION AS PROMISE AND FULFILMENT

An understanding of reality comes to us, first of all, as promise and not as knowledge. As we experience life in all its complexity, we are compelled to become selective in our response and to name what we experience. At first our understanding is mere possibility. It *promises* to be true. In scientific jargon these first understandings are hypotheses. We are happy whenever a new way of seeing life concurs with what we thus far had believed to be true. Whenever this happens, we are confirmed in believing what we took to be knowledge in the first place. In other words, it confirms the promise. When

---

[5] See Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter* (Westport, MS: Greenwood Press, 1943), 15-41; 84-90. Brunner has a lengthy discussion of the tendencies toward either objectivism or subjectivism in the history of christendom and the problems it has created in theology. See also H.D. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation: An Historical Survey* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1959), 266-270.

the new experience is inconsistent with previous understandings we have a whole new kind of sorting out to do.

In either case, our newly found awareness must be tested and retested before it can become knowledge. It must be responded to and acted on. We respond to it by believing it to be true. We order our lives according to it and ascertain whether or not it is confirmed in our experiences. We try to understand how it was confirmed in the lives of others. If repeatedly it is shown to hold true, to truly account for all aspects of life, then we begin to speak of knowledge.

Of course, what is true of knowledge more generally is true of divine revelation as well. God has always come to people in the form of a promise.[6] Knowledge of God is not handed to humanity on a platter any more than is knowledge of the world. God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) was perceived when God became present to Abraham through the promise of a son, land and a future. Each of these elements was crucial to Abraham's well-being. From the source of life he received the promise that, as he continued his life along the Fertile Crescent, he and his people would be given prosperity and fulfilled existence. It was a promise; it was not yet knowledge. It had to be acted on and responded to before it could be known to be true. When Abraham acted on the promise it became knowledge for him *and* to all who came after him. Through this event Israel came to know a God who promises and gives life to the people.

What is true of knowledge generally is true also of interpersonal knowledge. As we learn to know other persons a similar process occurs. Spoken or unspoken, we receive the promise that a person we have met will be our friend. We do not yet know whether it will come true. Then we respond to the person in the belief that he/she will be our friend. That is, we act on the promise. If in our further relations, the promise is confirmed, not betrayed, then we know that person to be our friend. However, if we would not respond to the promise at all, or respond in a way that is inconsistent with the promise, we would never be in a position to know people as friends.

Knowledge of the material realm is not that different. For example, we come to an old bridge with a heavily loaded truck. We want to make sure the bridge is safe before we cross it. We have some knowledge of bridges, so we go underneath to assess its strength. From all we can gather, it is safe. We could say that the bridge promises to support the weight of the truck. Only after we are across do we *know* that it is safe. The promise has been confirmed to be true through its fulfilment.

---

[6] See Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 71-78.

As signs of fulfilment appear, promises receive stronger and stronger confirmation until such a time when they can be called true or factual.[7] If no signs occur or if disconfirming signs appear, a point will come when the falsity of the promise will be recognized.

When Abraham received the promise of land, a son, many descendants and that through him the nations of the earth would be blessed, he *believed* that the promise was true but did not yet *know* it. However, he trusted in the promise strongly enough to commit his life and the life of his people to it. When Sarah bore him a son and when he received his first piece of land, the cave of Machpelah, he received the signs of confirmation from God. He took these signs as indications that the rest of the promises also would be fulfilled. Later, when the children of Israel entered the land of Canaan, they saw these events as a continuation of God's faithfulness to Abraham. The truth of the promise was known through its fulfilment.

This was knowledge not only for Abraham but for all who came after him and believed as he believed. The children of Israel now knew not only that God promises life to people but also that God is a faithful God.[8] God keeps promises made to those who respond in faith and trust.

REVELATION AS HISTORICAL

The Christian faith is based on the belief that God is revealed in and through concrete events and experiences in history. That is, the revelation of God occurs in such a way that historical human beings can have knowledge of it. I need to clarify how this is to be understood. For example, how can we know that what I call the revelation of God is more than a vision, a dream or a wish? How can it be shown to be more than subjective experience? In what way can the objective and subjective be held together so that we (subjects) can be said to have knowledge of God and God's world (object)? How can all this be explained, especially by taking both the metaphysical world of God and our historical existence seriously?

The moments of awareness I mentioned earlier are always concrete historical events, such as a speech, a dream, a vision or a

---

[7] It should be noted that so-called facts in science always refer to things that have been confirmed *to a degree of probability* to be true. Knowledge of facts in science is always contingent knowledge.

[8] Ronald F. Thiemann argues in *Revelation and Theology* that the revelation of God comes as promise. However, I agree with Michael Root that the theme of fulfilment ought to have received further attention. See Ronald F. Thiemann, "Review Symposium on *Revelation and Theology*: Five Perspectives and a Reply by the Author," *Dialog* 26 (Winter 1987): 63-78.

personal experience. The truth of God becomes known to us through a specific story or history. Abraham experienced the presence of God in a time when he and his people were threatened by an unknown and seemingly hopeless future.[9] Isaiah experienced the presence of God when the people were still unaware of the dark days soon to engulf them.

Yet the event itself must not be confused with the revelation that comes through the event.[10] What is received is an insight that points beyond the event itself to a truth about reality or about relationships. The truths of revelation are mediated through events but are not identical with events. They transcend the events.

This distinction between the content of the event and the event itself is important. Although the event may be private, the content of the revelation that arises from the event is not. It is subject to public testing. Only in this way is it possible for the revelation of God through Abraham and Isaac to become knowledge for the people of that day and for us today. For example, the concept of God as One

---

[9] Note how carefully the book of Genesis through its genealogies locates Abraham and Sarah in a specific history. The movement is from Adam, who represents all humankind, to Noah (Genesis 5:1-5). The whole earth was populated through Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth (Genesis 9:18-19). Shem was the father of the Semites; Abraham and Sarah are located in this particular tribe and history. See Bernhard W. Anderson, "Abraham, the Friend of God," *Interpretation* 42 (October 1988): 353-366.

[10] The issue regarding the relation of revelation to history is helpfully discussed by James Barr, "Revelation in History," in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, supp. vol., 746-749. Reimarus already asked how a contingent event, an event in time and space, could be said to have universal significance. Much later Oscar Cullmann separated out from the totality of history the significant revelatory events, but this resulted in two histories and the problem of how they related to each other. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, 2d ed. (London: SCM Press, 1962). On the other hand, Rudolf Bultmann emphasized revelation as an eschatological event, a proleptic anticipation of the end of time and thus as not significantly related to history. Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1957). Past events, for example the history of Israel, were no longer considered as revelation. G. Ernest Wright emphasized the "God who acts" but interpreted the events in a naturalistic way. G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1950) and *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM Press, 1952). This equivocation did not go unnoticed. Gerhard von Rad focused on the message of the kerygma in the various strata of biblical texts. Again there are two histories: the one assumed by the text, the other perceived by the biblical scholar. Von Rad held that the history confessed in the biblical texts is the important one for theology. For Wolfhart Pannenberg history is revelation. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," chap. in *Revelation as History*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1968), 123-158. The revelation of God must deal with the totality of history, hence is related to the end of history. More recently the biblical record is seen more as story than as straight history. The story which is related to historical events in which God became known transcends mere history. The point is that any awareness one may have of the presence and working of God has some concrete historical nexus.

who promises fullness of life and as One who is faithful to the promises made became known through Abraham's experiences. It came to a people at a specific point in history and in specific circumstances, but the truth of the insight they received extends far beyond any of the incidents through which it became known.

Since the revelation of God is mediated through history it is necessary to take history seriously in trying to understand theological affirmations. Theological statements about God are not unreasonable statements; they are not leaps of faith into some dark unknown; they are not simply wishful thinking. Good reasons—even empirical, historical and objective reasons—undergird these truths of God. They have been sufficiently confirmed to stake our own lives on them. But even when the stories of history have revealed knowledge of God, ongoing testing and refinement continue to occur. After all, this is life-knowledge. If it is not confirmed in life it is dead.

For Christians, the coming of Jesus is the historical event *par excellence*. Jesus is God incarnate. This is the faith of the Christian church. Hence, the Christ event gives an understanding of the revelation of God in the history of Israel. It is important to see Jesus in this manner because he lets us see who God is even though God was active long before the historical Jesus. To say that Jesus is the incarnation of God means that the character of God comes into exceptionally clear focus through the story of Jesus. And what did Jesus reveal?

Jesus stood in the tradition of Judaism and the law. He came to fulfil the law and the prophets. The way in which he did so shows us how to read Scripture and interpret God's revelation. Jesus criticized and rejected part of the tradition of Israel and Judaism like the prophets had done before him. Jesus made it clear that some things were not of God. He did not accept some scribes' interpretation of tradition; he did not accept what they believed the law of God required of the people. Rather, he saw what the law pointed to, what God promised and how God gifted those who honoured God. Jesus pointed to the life of wholeness to which God invited all people. To say that Jesus was the paradigmatic historical revelation event is to say that we see concrete revelation of God in history via the story of Jesus.

In pointing out the historical nature of revelation, I have simply made explicit what I earlier said implicitly regarding the personal character of revelation. Since revelation is a process of promise and fulfilment it must of necessity be personal and historical. Yet it is precisely the historicity of revelation that makes confirmation possible. In this way revelation can be communicated to others as knowledge; they in turn may accept it.

As we communicate the knowledge of God which we have re-

ceived through other people's history, we become able to narrate our own history as one in which God is present. When we communicate our knowledge of God we tell the story of how God has become known to us. However, telling the story relates not only the events of history, but also that which transcends history, that which has become known to us through the events. What is received is an insight that points beyond the event itself to a truth about ultimate reality.

REVELATION AS "PROGRESSIVE?"

Human factors prevent an evolutionary process with respect to the understanding of revelation. People can reject knowledge; they can respond in disobedience to the truth; they can become insensitive to revelation altogether.

However, there is a "progression" in the sense that persons cannot comprehend certain truths until the conditions which make this truth leap out have occurred. Hence, it is not surprising that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ waited so long. It could not come until the "time was fulfilled," that is, until conditions were present which allowed people to be able to respond to the promise that Jesus was the Messiah. Certain truths have a time when they are ripe, then burst upon the world.

There is also a progression of understanding in the simple sense of changing perceptions and apprehensions of truth. Truth is not static. Truth is like life itself. Jesus said, "I am the Truth." Hence, truth is better understood as truth-fullness. The apprehension of truth is context bound.

Let me illustrate. It is not very helpful to transfer into the twentieth century without further translating the sixteenth-century understanding of what it meant to be nonconformed to the world regarding a simple cut in clothes. People today cannot be expected to do precisely as was done then. Although the understanding of nonconformity is truthful—it relates properly to its time and place—it loses its truthfulness if it is imposed unchanged on a new time and context. To remain truthful the appropriateness to time and context which originally was present must be there in the new application.

Furthermore, as time and circumstances change, questions that are significant also will change. This is simply a fact of life. New questions will arise which previously were not asked. The earlier questions may have been answered truthfully, but they are not the ones which require present attention. Old answers are not sufficient for new questions. We live in history and a new understanding of truth will be related to a history which is in constant flux. Revelation must be truthful in time and place.

Therefore, to claim that revelation is historical is to assert that the truth of God finds expression differently in diverse contexts. On the face of it, the same truth expressed in two different settings will look like two dissimilar truths. And yet they are the same truth. Moreover, once we have been given the truth of God in one context, we can move on from there to more comprehensive expressions of that truth in other contexts. That is, one truth fully understood opens the way to understanding further truth for which the first becomes preparation. A response of trust and commitment to a revelation, and its subsequent confirmation in experience, sets the stage for deeper insight into the work of God, for greater commitment to God and consequently to others.

Conversely, if we neglect the truth of God already received and do not commit ourselves in the direction of the promise made, we will never know the truth of that revelation. If we continue to mistrust the revelation received, we will begin to doubt even what we already had confirmed to be true. In fact, we will begin to lose what we had. This is what Jesus explained to the disciples: "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Mark 4:24-25).

In summary, there is a sense in which revelation can be "progressive." Not all truth is revealed at one time. Rather, it always comes in a given cultural context. One truth newly perceived causes us to call other things into question. It makes us open to new understandings in many areas of life. Truths of God usually call us out of our culture in some ways because they often stand at variance with culture. For example, the Israelites, who lived in a culture of revenge, received the revelation that they should never require more than an eye for an eye. This understanding opened them up to the concept of mercy and finally led them to understand that evil is overcome only through forgiveness. This "progression of understanding" can happen only if there is an appropriate response of trust, faith and commitment to the promise received. New understanding of the truth develops only if there has been faithful response to the truth as previously understood.

REVELATION AS PARABLE/STORY

Jesus often told parables. A parable does not supply direct information in the form of propositions or statements, nor is it an argument with premises and a conclusion. A parable invites people into a story. It is like a window on life and allows the hearers to see some aspect of life in a new way, to gain insights they would not otherwise

know.[11] Hence, to say that revelation is parabolic means that it comes to us as a story into which we are invited and out of which we are to interpret our own lives.

The Christian life is not abstract but associated with concrete everyday activities. Yet how God is working in our lives requires interpretation. How our events are interpreted depends on the imagination that is brought to the events. This is precisely what makes the parable so powerful. The challenge of Christian revelation is that those things which are revealed be interpreted from the standpoint of the graciousness and justice of God just as the many parables and stories we find in the Bible were.

Parables and stories *invite*, not force, us to see something to be the case. We can discount them and say that they have no relevance for us, or we can accept the invitation they hold out to us and allow our lives to be defined and shaped by their power.

It is important to recognize that the content of the story is essentially given in what the church calls canon.[12] But our response to it is not given. The story is there; our embrace of it makes it our story. When it becomes our story it can save us as it has saved others.[13]

This saving story functions in two ways to sustain and shape the community. First of all, it allows the community to be formed by the story. As it is told and thereby becomes part of people's lives, generation after generation can be part of the people of God. This is its second function: the story is remembered and retained for future generations by those who have been entrusted with it. It is made available to others in oral or in written form. It is held out as a promise for all future generations.

The canonical story consists of a narration of events which have a crucial influence in shaping the life of a people. Through remembering the story, people or individuals receive a revelation of God. The event and its interpretation give rise to a way of thinking about

---

[11] See Leander E. Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971), 243-249. Keck indicates that Jesus' whole life was a parabolic event of the kingdom of God.

[12] Recent emphasis on canon as the basic document for the content of the story of God's people is helpful both in understanding the history of its formation—see James Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1972)—and its significance in its final form—see Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1970).

[13] David Schroeder, "Biblical Authority and Denominational Tradition," chap. in *The Believers' Church in Canada: Addresses and Papers from the Study Conference in Winnipeg, May 15-18, 1978*, ed. Jerold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen (Brantford, ON: The Baptist Federation of Canada; Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Central Committee Canada, 1979).

God, the world and humankind. In this process the imagination of the people is more and more formed by the story and its accompanying implications.

Consequently, revelation as story becomes a way of being and shapes the life of the community. It informs the imagination of the people as they live their lives in harmony with the story. Their words and actions flow from the same story-formed way of life. The story is not a static relating of events. Events are interpreted and reinterpreted as time and situations change. According to James Barr,

> The story is cumulative: each stage provides material that is essential for what follows. . . . The sequence is not a development in an evolutionary sense, since it does not necessarily rise to ever higher forms; but it is a cumulative story in which new elements are made meaningful through that which has gone before.[14]

This is evident in the ongoing way in which the Law of Moses is interpreted in the rest of the canon.

The experience of revelation compels one to share it with others. The person who becomes aware of the presence of God is grasped by the truth and goodness of life which cannot be concealed. Precisely because it is "good news" it must be shared with others as promise. When the promise is acted upon corporately it becomes story. As repeated generations share the story and increasingly are shaped by it, it becomes part of the sacred trust of the community, its sacred tradition.

However, telling the story is not a substitute for doing careful theological and ethical thinking. In fact, the very tendency to speak of three separate entities—story, theology, ethics—is a problem. In coming to understand the biblical story, theology and ethics become united in faithful living. For example, it is quite possible that our understanding of God is informed by elements of culture which do not share the content of the biblical story. When this happens our theology ceases to be Christian. Similarly, our reasoning about what kind of people we should be may be influenced by the exigencies of the moment rather than by the biblical story. Discord with the story will be felt by the community. Then the church must use the biblical story to call people back to what is central and crucial. For Christians, the biblical story, not the reflection of the moment, is normative.

The apprehension of revelation is much more than head knowledge. Growth in the life of an individual Christian and in the community of faith happens only as the promises of God are rightly

---

[14] James Barr, "Revelation in History," 748.

perceived and appropriately responded to. That is, the promise and the response are discerned in community and agree with the biblical story that has shaped the church over the years.

Perception of the story's truth is always indigenous to the church and it speaks to its specific needs. It promises life to the people in specific situations. It is not mere understanding of, or assent to, a system of thought or acceptance of a code of conduct. It is much more a question of relating to God, of becoming aware of the presence of God and relating to the promises of God in faith and trust. It is a matter of becoming God's people, of hearing the story of God's relationship to them and of becoming formed by that story.

Growth of the community and its members depends on faithfulness to the story which has come to be recognized as God's Word. Within the church the truth becomes known and is obeyed. In the last analysis the truth of God is known not primarily through our minds but also through commitment of the heart. The biblical story of God is the story of a people shaped by a theology. It is the story of God's truth incarnated in concrete history.

~~~~~
~~~~~

4

HOW CAN ETHICS BE CHRISTIAN?

Harry Huebner

The overall task of this section of the book is to lay the biblical/theological foundations for Christian living in the face of our modern temptation to abandon moral language. One aspect of this process is to evaluate the conceptual context into which the biblical material is often put. It makes an acute difference, for example, whether we read the Bible with the usual assumptions of modern individualism or political triumphalism in mind, or whether we read it from the standpoint of the corporate body of Christ. This chapter will analyze and evaluate contemporary Christian ethical thinking in dialogue with selected Christian ethicists. Much has been written on the topic of Christian ethics yet not all is continuous with the content and structure of the biblical understanding of the good life. However, I humbly need to acknowledge that space is too limited to do justice to the massive body of literature available on Christian ethics. Hence this chapter must remain highly schematic.

A word of explanation is in order at the outset. The critical stance towards post-Enlightenment thought should not lead the reader to conclude that I am intent upon making another case for a pre-Enlightenment approach to Christian ethics. Very little about going backwards in history is convincing, just as it is not wise to move forward without properly understanding what is being left behind. The claim I wish to make is that the pre-Enlightenment natural law approach to ethics and the post-Enlightenment subjectivist approach are both inadequate for modern Christians since neither can adequately elucidate the biblical imagination. Perhaps even more prob-

lematic is that we have been taught that we must choose between these two alternatives. I am inclined to agree with much of what George Lindbeck argues for in his programmatic study on the nature of doctrine.[1] He critiques the modern theories of knowledge which are associated with each approach: the "cognitive-propositional" model which has its roots in pre-Enlightenment naturalism, and the "experiential-expressive" approach, which builds on post-Enlightenment subjectivism. In their stead he proposes the "cultural-linguistic" model as a theological method which, he argues, is better able to integrate life, thought and language. This approach is much more in keeping with how the early Christians understood themselves. The early church never thought of itself as having an ethic; it *was* an ethic. That is, it tried to be the incarnation of its theology. This is the best definition of Christian ethics one can find. For the church to be the church is far more important than for the church to be preoccupied with what kind of an ethic it will have.[2] The latter way of putting it suggests that the church's identity can somehow be understood apart from its way of life. This is exactly what the early Christians did not believe. Unfortunately, this is what the modern church tends to affirm.

CURRENT ASSUMPTIONS

In 1912 Walter Rauschenbusch, a then prominent American social ethicist, wrote a programmatic book called *Christianizing the Social Order*[3] in which he outlined the basic tenets of the Social Gospel Movement. In 1975 James Gustafson, a contemporary social ethicist, wrote a book called *Can Ethics be Christian?*[4] Although he answered this question affirmatively, the very fact that it still needed to be asked after 63 years of discussion on what Christian ethics is, is significant. It is no accident that the Gustafson question followed the Rauschenbusch way of identifying the Christian moral enterprise. If our task as Christians is to "christianize" the social order, then the inevitable pull to "realism"—which is the very thing the Niebuhr brothers have so thoroughly demonstrated, and Gustafson

---

[1] See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984).

[2] For a helpful discussion of this theme, see John Howard Yoder's essay, "Let the Church be the Church," chap. in *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972).

[3] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1912).

[4] James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

is a disciple of the Niebuhrs—will be so strong that in the end one will need to ask: "What difference is there between such a realistic 'Christian' ethic and a common sense ethic which flows from the desire to maintain the natural structure of things?" At most such an ethic will be "Christian" in a highly figurative sense with little or no real Christian content left if measured by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. For ethics to be Christian in the latter sense requires a Christian cultural-linguistic community which refuses to be "realistic" precisely because it defines its existence in relation to a higher reality. The church lives by a different script than does mainstream society. Christian ethics requires that the church be the basic moral category, the place where the Bible is read, studied and preached and where intentional character training takes place. Otherwise there is nothing to ensure that Christian ethics will remain Christian.

This is not how Christian ethics normally has been perceived. Although Christian ethicists talk about what Christians ought to do, the prototype formulation of the ethical task is to provide guidance for the *individual* Christian *deciding* how to *act* in a specific *situation.* With this as its emphasis the church seldom has a significant role in the process of moral determination. This chapter will analyze the role which each of these elements—the individual, the situation, the act, and the decision—plays in Christian ethics. Then I will propose an alternative way of stating the task of Christian ethics.

Before I begin the analysis, I need to take a cursory glance at the way Christian ethics is perceived today by the main denominational bodies. The Roman Catholic tradition, with its reference to "natural law," has been preoccupied largely with maintaining a well structured church discipline system and undergirding the confessional practices of the priests.[5] Since God created a rational universe, recourse to the Scriptures has often become subordinated to "natural understanding." While this approach holds out the possibility of appraising the finite way of life by appealing to transcendent normativity—an enterprise we heartily endorse—it is ironic that "natural law morality" has become a way of legitimating structures in society, in fact, even emulating some of these structures within the church. Perhaps this trend is related to the church's belief that it is beholden to these structures and as church is not charged with the task of envisioning alternative structures which flow from a new vision for God's creation. If so, it should come as no surprise that the church was perceived as a partner with, not an alternative to, mainline society. Thus the church as moral community would be rendered

[5] See, for example, Timothy E. O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1978).

pointless. Certainly this charge has been brought against the larger Western church by those who identify the Constantinian shift as the main point of theological error.[6] And with this it is hard to disagree.

Nevertheless, contemporary Catholicism has not felt bound by this rather narrow interpretation of its tradition.[7] Catholic scholars have made a significant contribution to Christian ethics by insisting, even when modern society thought it oppressive, on the language of virtue and character as essential to Christian ethics. Here the Catholics are right.[8] I argue, along with scholars like Stanley Hauerwas, that without the revitalization of these concepts, meaningful Christian ethical language is not possible. To put it differently, largely because we have lost the power of this language, we have lost the ability to conceive of the church as morally significant even though this language does not yet guarantee the church its proper place.

In contrast to Catholicism, mainline Protestant theologians—especially the Lutherans—did not until very recently, even engage in a discipline called "Christian ethics."[9] For them ethics has been an altogether dubious enterprise from the start since it borders on "works righteousness." After all, in the divine economy of things, what God does is seen as infinitely more important than what humans do. Hence, theology took precedence over ethics, justification over sanctification, atonement over Christian life.[10]

---

[6] See, for example, John H. Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," chap. in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 135-147.

[7] For a helpful summary of the thought of different Catholic theologians, see especially Charles E. Curran, "Horizons on Fundamental Moral Theology," *Horizons* 10/1 (1983): 88-110. See also his many other writings, among them, *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1972); *Directions in Catholic Social Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); *Toward an American Catholic Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

[8] In his writings Stanley Hauerwas has demonstrated how it is not essential to presuppose the traditional tenets of natural law theory in order to speak of Christian virtues and character.

[9] For helpful studies on the nature of Protestant ethics, see Waldo Beach, *Christian Ethics in the Protestant Tradition* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988); S.N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Protestant Ethic and Modernization: A Comparative View* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1968); James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[10] For an attempt to overcome these dichotomies, see J. Denny Weaver, "Atonement for the NonConstantinian Church," *Modern Theology*, 6 (July 1990): 307-323 and his "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 2 (Fall 1984): 200-204. Also see Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63 (April 1989): 171-192.

Insofar as Protestant scholars—especially those from the Reformed tradition—did concern themselves with Christian ethics, they overlapped methodologically with their Catholic counterparts even though some have tried to distance themselves from this emphasis.[11] Yet reliance on the "orders of creation" as a base for Christian ethics is not all that different from beginning with "natural law." Both anchor morality in the givenness of nature. Hence, both traditions have considered it their ethical task to maintain and defend the given structures of society rather than to critique them. Thus both have aligned themselves with the cultural and political mainstreams.

Of course, there are many other Christian traditions and ethicists with whom I cannot deal in this short chapter. For example, some ethicists are not so easily linked to their ecclesiastical bodies, scholars such as: Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Ramsey, Paul Lehmann, James Gustafson and others. This is not the place to give deserved analysis of these scholars' contributions to an understanding of ethics. Nevertheless, my claim, along with John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, James Wm. McClendon and others is that the major deficiency among contemporary Christian ethicists is their failure to take seriously the church as a community of disciples.

A further word must be said about North American Evangelicals. Insofar as evangelical scholars have engaged in the ethical enterprise at all, they have traditionally done so somewhat haphazardly. This is changing. In the past decade several attempts have been made at a systematic study of the subject.[12] Yet it still remains somewhat difficult to know exactly what an evangelical approach to ethics is.

Some general observations can be made. Evangelical ethicists traditionally have concentrated on the personal and have largely emphasized the dispositional aspects of Christian ethics.[13] Even when they engage in social ethics, the types of issues they address, as well as the mode of address, are person-oriented. They tend to focus on the individual person and on issues that promote individual

---

[11] For a helpful interpretation of a Reformed theologian's approach to ethics, see Richard J. Mouw, *Distorted Truth: What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Battle for the Mind* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989); *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976) and *Political Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973).

[12] For example, Douglas D. Webster, *Choices of the Heart: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 1990); Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986); Milton L. Rudnick, *Christian Ethics for Today: An Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979).

[13] See, for example, Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971) and *God Who Speaks and Shows* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976).

freedom and growth like abortion, the individual politician's integrity, family values, freedom of religion and personal rights. Their assumption appears to be that Rauschenbusch was not wrong in trying to "christianize" the social order; he simply had his strategy all wrong. You cannot make an unjust society just by changing its structures; you do so by changing the hearts of individuals. The structures will change, if at all, as a result of the individual's change. But there is little consideration of the church as moral community.

Jerry Falwell, and those modern evangelicals who speak for the "Moral Majority," are a special case. It is questionable whether they are in fact engaged in *Christian* ethics at all since their pronouncements, although made in the name of Christianity, find both their ideological roots and their sociological power base in political conservativism and not in the Bible. As is often the case with modern evangelical theologians, Falwell has bought so heavily into the cultural norms of individualism, competition, freedom, power/security and democracy—incidentally, all essential elements of post-Enlightenment liberalism and far removed from conservativism in the sense of being traditionally Christian—that there is no significant place for the church in their theology, at least not the biblical view of church as defined apart from mainstream society.

Ronald Sider may well be another exception to the more general portrayal of evangelical ethics. Sider, who heads the Evangelicals for Social Action group as well as an evangelical organization called JustLife, tries to move the evangelicals beyond a sporadic discussion of ethics to a more holistic and biblically based ethic. But even he is not quite successful in finding ways to view the church as morally relevant. There is no clearer testimony to this than his study on ethics called *Completely Pro-Life.*[14]

The book assumes that the Christian ethical enterprise works as follows: intellectual analysis determines what is morally right and wrong; then Christians are to do what they can to change public policy to ensure that the right view is enshrined in public law. The issue for Sider is not: How does the church as a moral community sustain its moral identity as church and, by being church, open up the possibility of God's creative and transforming power to become incarnate through it? Rather, he asks: How can those of us who know something about the issue think morally (about abortion, for exam-

---

[14] Ronald J. Sider, *Completely Pro-Life: Building a Consistent Stance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987). Some of Sider's other writings on Christian ethics are: *Christ and Violence* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979); *Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1982) and *Lifestyle in the Eighties: An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1982).

ple, is it murder or not?); then how can we get ordinary people to pressure their public officials to change public law? The assumption appears to be that if only we could elect the right politicians who would enforce the right laws, we could have a just (Christian?) society. By speaking about morality in this way he has made the church only very marginally relevant and has suggested that God's primary arena of activity is the elected government of the day.

What Sider has accomplished—and he needs to be commended for it—is push evangelicals from an excessive preoccupation with personal ethics to a consideration of biblical social ethics. But in the process he has embraced the typical evangelical inclination to presuppose that the primary vehicle of God's grace is the individual and, through the individual, the socio-political system. Hence he has not moved sufficiently beyond the Rauschenbusch mandate to make the social order Christian, although he has adapted it to fit the evangelical concern for individual salvation. Indeed, given his commitment to evangelical theology, he appears to have few other options. Unless the church is considered a counter-culture, which is socially relevant as an alternative social body whose faithfulness to Jesus is its critique of society, the only other recourse, if one wishes to be socially critical, is to try to make society Christian via the process of converting its leaders. Yet even in Sider's case, which I would hold to be the most convincing evangelical argument for Christian ethics, one wonders whether ethics can be Christian.

The modern inability to conceive of the church as a moral community should not be altogether surprising since the ethical imagination on which we have so heavily relied is based on assumptions that make ethics an individualistic enterprise focusing on decision, action, the situation and the individual. This focus must be overcome if we are to understand how the church can be the moral community. Before considering each of these elements in turn I will discuss their theoretical base.

DISCUSSING THE THEORETICAL BASE

Since much of the thinking about Christian ethics is borrowed from discussions in modern philosophy we are compelled to interact with this material. The dominant distinction which has characterized philosophical ethics is between end-directed ethics, sometimes called teleology (although I prefer to call it consequentialism or utilitarianism), and duty-oriented ethics, also called deontology.[15]

---

[15] See William Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963), 13-16. It needs to be noted that Frankena talks about teleology rather than consequentialism. This is confusing. It is important to distinguish between the modern

Consequentialism argues that what makes an act right is what it brings about: its consequences. For example, if something has the consequence of producing happiness or pleasure (for those who see happiness and pleasure as good), such an action or rule is right. If this is not the case, then the action or rule is wrong. This is the view from which the dictum, "The end justifies the means," is derived.

Two inherent difficulties with consequentialism make it an untenable basis for Christian ethics. First, it presupposes that determining moral rightness on the basis of values rooted in human desire is legitimate. It may well be true that people desire happiness. But what Christian rationale can be brought forward to argue that receiving what we desire, in this case happiness, is good? What is it about happiness that obtaining it is morally good? Certainly, the ethics of Jesus teaches that doing what is right often results in unhappiness—taking up the cross, for example. Even more generally, the attempt to justify moral rightness by appealing to personal wants and desires is fallacious reasoning. Such logic could well be called the psychological fallacy paralleling G. E. Moore's "Naturalistic Fallacy."[16]

The second inherent difficulty with consequentialism confirms the reason for the first. Philosophers simply have not been able to agree on which basic values are good because they have not known what constitutes an adequate ground for such a claim. However, the shortcomings of consequentialism have not kept Christian ethicists from employing its logic. Nor has it kept us from thinking this way in our churches. How often don't we determine issues like homosexuality or abortions or lotteries or remarriage on the basis of how many people feel good about it or desire it? The utilitarian dictum, "Whatever results in the greatest satisfaction (happiness) for the greatest number of people is good," is alive and well.

Deontology denies what consequentialism affirms. It states that the good which results from an action does not make it right. Whether an action or rule is right or wrong must be determined on the basis

---

representations of teleology (consequentialism) and the classical view of teleology held by Aristotle and St. Thomas. The basic difference is that Aristotle saw the *telos* as inherent in the nature of things, whereas Frankena's teleologists see the *telos* as a non-moral good projected by the human will. For Aristotle, the end which we are to pursue is not ours to create. It is given, and it is ours to discover. Such fundamentally different approaches should not be called by the same name.

[16] At the beginning of this century, G. E. Moore charged philosophers, who thought they could move logically from descriptive to moral statements, with a logical error he called the naturalistic fallacy. I am much less convinced than Moore that this is always fallacious, since I consider it sound reasoning to say that because I am a Christian father (a description of who I am) I ought to love my children (a moral statement). Nevertheless, I am quite convinced that justifying moral actions on wants and desires is always reductionistic and fallacious. Certainly no Christian rationale can support it.

of the inherent moral value of that action or rule itself. Hence, deontologists will often argue "in principle" that one should always be good and do what we know to be right even when harmful results are produced.

At first glance this view sounds much more like the reasoning Christians could adopt. And indeed some have. Nevertheless, the difficulty with the deontologist's position is not all that different from consequentialism in that there is also no agreement on how to define what is good. British intuitionists, who attempted to solve this problem, only managed to draw attention to the fact that there appears to be no solution.[17] They argued that goodness is not a definable property. We come to know it intuitively. But then one may well ask why there is so much disagreement.

Neither deontology nor consequentialism has been all that successful in settling the matter of a basis for moral reasoning. Some Christian ethicists have explicitly rejected both and have argued for a base that is quite different. H. Richard Niebuhr is one such example. Niebuhr argues that instead of asking what the ultimate end of life is, as the teleologists do, or what the basic law of life is, as Immanuel Kant and other deontologists have taught us to do, we as Christians need to inquire how we might in every situation act in response to God acting upon us.[18] His "responsibility theory" has formed the basis of much modern mainline Christian ethics. We need to note how much "act" and "situation" are the basis of his approach.

Another alternative to both consequentialism and deontology has been proposed by Joseph Fletcher in his book, *Situation Ethics*.[19] His "new morality," as the German edition of the book entitled *Moral ohne Normen?* (Morality Without Norms?) aptly suggests, was heralded by many as the perfect marriage between the modern free spirit and Christianity. He argued that there is but one moral norm and that is *agape* (love). Christian ethics has no general rules or principles. Instead each moral action or judgement must be evaluated in relation to how love is actualized within the specific situation. The one intrinsic good is love, so in every situation do the loving thing.

Fletcher makes a major contribution to the debate on Christian

---

[17] For further discussion of British intuitionism as it was originally proposed, see the classic book by G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

[18] See especially, H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Philosophy* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1963).

[19] Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1966).

ethics in that he repudiates its abstractness. The reason he wrote this book to begin with was his disdain for abstract legalism. And with such disdain it is not difficult to agree. Ethics is by definition a practical discipline, linked to the concrete situation, not to abstract rules, principles or theories, he argues. Moreover, we are not consistent teleologists or deontologists anyway. Sometimes we use one form of reasoning, the next time another. How we think about actions has to do with practical context and not with abstract thought, argues Fletcher.

We could well cite other ethicists who have quarrelled with the basic distinction between teleology and deontology and have advanced nuanced shades of refinements on one side or the other. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, scholars like Niebuhr and Fletcher end up affirming more of teleology and deontology than they reject. What most tend to assume is that the central focus of Christian ethics is a preoccupation with the situation, the actions, the individual and the decision. The real debate within Christian ethics today is between those scholars who assume that ethics is about these things and those who challenge this assumption. I throw my support with the latter.

Before I elaborate further the precise nature of the alternative model of Christian ethics, I move now to assessing the implications of the modern preoccupation with these four elements.

THE SITUATION

I have argued that the situation plays a major role in the approach to ethics formulated by modern scholars. But this is the case not only for scholars. It is just as crucial among ordinary Christians discussing ethical matters. How often don't we hear the reply, "it depends" to the inquiry whether something is right? If we then ask, "on what?" the answer is, "on the situation."

My claim is not that the situation is morally irrelevant. In the final analysis morality is nothing if it is not embodied in real life situations. In this Fletcher is quite right. Nevertheless, there must be the moral content to embody in order for ethics to be Christian. And that moral content must be more than merely the "abstract" love principle. We seldom realize how much normative power we give to the situation when we approach ethics in the standard way. The situation is often so construed that the agent's moral base is all but completely eroded. And usually we do this without being aware of what we are doing. Let me illustrate.

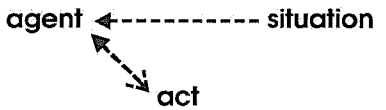
Recently I was invited to a local university to give a guest lecture on the topic of pacifism in a philosophy class on war and peace. After I finished my presentation, someone asked the standard "What

would you do if . . ." question.[20] He "described" a situation somewhat as follows: "Suppose a student with a gun came into this classroom right now and wanted to kill the professor for giving him a failing grade in his last term assignment. Exaggerated revenge, perhaps, but some people are like that. What would you do? It is clear from the demeanour of the student that he is intent on killing the professor. Oh, and I should add, we all have guns, you and all the students. What would you do?" My response: "I am a pacifist. Therefore I am surprised and deeply disappointed to hear that everyone at this university takes guns to the classroom." His response: "That might be, but will you please answer the question?" My reply: "I am a pacifist; I just did."

It may not be immediately clear that I did in fact answer the question. Let me explain. The question came from a situationist perspective. My reply did not. It came from the perspective that ethics is rooted in character. My main point was: this makes all the difference. So the conversation sounds somewhat strange. I was trying to show that the moral agent is not a vacuous form, who simply executes whatever the situation dictates ought to be done. In other words, the situation, however perceived and/or described, should not dictate the content of our actions. What is good, not the *situation*, is decisive in determining what I must do.

Let me analyze further. At least three empirical elements come together in every moral action: the situation, the act and the agent. But in terms of deriving an ethic, everything depends on how the lines of interaction among them are drawn. Like all loyal situationists, the student asking the question assumed that the agent's character is irrelevant to the action. He believed that by "describing" the situation in a particular way, he could determine how I would act and thus undermine my pacifism which could not be separated from my character. For him, the lines of interaction would be drawn thus:

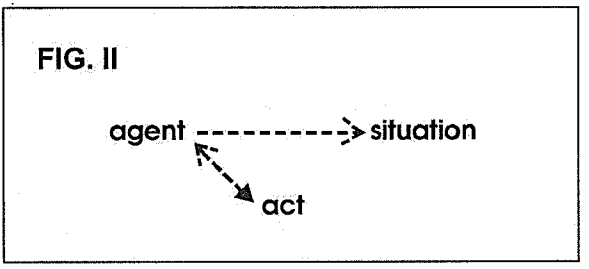
FIG. I



[20] For an excellent analysis of this type of question and the presuppositions it makes, see John H. Yoder, et. al., *What Would You Do? A Serious Answer to a Standard Question* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983).

The situation determines me and the act. Indirectly, the act then determines my moral character. In this case it would make me a violent person, a non-pacifist. Hence, having a gun becomes essential. My freedom to exercise all conceivable choices demands it. The only determining element of the act by the agent is that it is done by the agent (indicated by the broken-line arrowhead).

This way of conceiving morality was the very thing I refused to concede. For me to say, "I am a pacifist," was to not accept his definition of me as a gun-carrying person. That is, when he was "neutrally describing" the situation, he was in fact creating my character. Hardly a neutral description! For me the lines of interaction went something like this:



My character as a pacifist refused to allow the situation to determine how I would act. Instead, as a Christian my action flowed from my understanding of what was good: the teaching of Jesus to not be violent. In this way, I, at least partly, determined the situation (signified by the broken line arrowhead). Although I could not ultimately determine whether the student would kill the professor, or even the rest of us, I could determine that I would not be a killer.

Moreover, as a pacifist I naturally lamented the way he described the situation over which I had no control: how everyone at the university was not a pacifist. But regarding my character, which I could determine—that is, when he wanted to set up the situation in such a way that he changed me from a pacifist to a non-pacifist—I, of course, had to object. Notice how powerful and normative the description of a situation is.

Quite apart from the way the discussion actually went, notice also how logically absurd his question really was. What he in fact asked was, "Suppose a pacifist like you became a regular gun-carrying non-pacifist like the rest of us. What would you do in a situation of violence?" Obviously, if I were to take this question seriously, I would have to say, "Be violent like non-pacifists are in situations like this." But this would give him no information on what a pacifist would do, which was ostensibly his question and the rationale for

my invitation to the class in the first place. I was trying to tell him that the first thing a pacifist must always do is to resist allowing him/herself to be recast as a non-pacifist by tricky situationists who cannot really conceive of pacifists as serious about their professed way of life.

The ethical trends in our society are dominated by concern for "situating" our decisions or making them relevant to what is really going on. The modern distaste for abstraction has led us to believe that there is no other option. The alternative to this approach is to change our standpoint of thinking from situation to character.

THE DECISION

Have you ever had a friend come to you with a "moral problem?" When you ask what it is, she describes a particular quandary which she must resolve by making a decision. "I must decide and I want you to help me," she says.

It is not uncommon for us to think of ourselves as being engaged in the moral process only when we are faced with choices demanding a decision, especially when we are confronted with a dilemma where the implications are less than desirable regardless how we choose. Neither option seems right. As James McClendon reminds us, this way of perceiving ourselves morally pertains no less to Christians than to anyone else in our society. "Christian ethics in our century became a theory of decisions, thereby lining up with trends in ethical reflection outside the Christian community."[21] In some circles choice has become almost synonymous with ethics. One needs to think only of the abortion debate between the pro-choice and the pro-life voices. Unless we are free to choose, we do not consider ourselves as capable of acting morally. We seldom remember, for example, that pacifists are not free to go to war or that honest people are not free to tell lies or that kind people are not free to be unkind or, more generally, that a person seeking to live morally is not free to be immoral. The current understanding of the moral enterprise has become so thoroughly identified with decision-making on the basis of free choices that to think otherwise appears absurd.

Decisionism is particularly tempting for Protestants, especially for "evangelicals" who emphasize the "hour of decision" as the pivotal "religious experience." Of course, any church that is rooted in the discipleship and believers' baptism tradition can hardly di-

---

[21] James Wm. McClendon, "Narrative Ethics and Christian Ethics," chap. in *Ethics: Systematic Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 383. See also, Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 116-134.

vorce itself entirely from this particular emphasis. Therefore, my claim is not that decision-making should be depreciated or that we should not make decisions. Rather that when we make decision-making morally central and thereby define the moral enterprise as dilemma ethics, we distort the nature of the Christian story.

The approach that focuses on decision is especially troublesome because it leaves no room for the moral relevance of the church. Since its basis is freedom of the self and not submission to the good, the church in fact often becomes one of the obstacles to freedom of choice. Three aspects in particular require further examination.

First, decisionists are interested in knowing, "What ought we to do and what are our options?" Without options they will not decide. The concern is centred not on the kind of persons we are or should be, but on resolving perplexities in such a way that they are genuinely ours and that they do not inhibit us in any way in the future. Therefore, moral training for decisionists will centre on becoming skilled at decision-making, developing tools and models for a good decision and creating options so that they are never stuck with having to make bad choices. The current discussion regarding AIDS is an especially good example of these preoccupations. We are scrambling to find options that minimally inhibit our freedom to have sex in whichever manner we decide without negative consequences. Although abstinence, condoms and sex with only one partner are all possible options, they are inhibiting because they restrict "free sex." They prohibit us from making choices we want to make. One important reason that AIDS is such a threat to us moderns is that it challenges our very self-understanding as free choosers.

Second, decisionists perceive themselves as managers of their choices. In fact, they see the "good administrator" as the paradigm of the good person. She is well informed, she is impartial, and chooses the best among available options. As long as we remain genuinely free to choose among several "good" options, as long as our choices lead to ever greater freedom and as long as the choices are indeed ours, the decisionist is morally happy. But the interesting thing is that very little moral reflection goes into examining who we, who have these moral choices, are. It is somehow seen as irrelevant to the decisionist to think from "who we are" to "what we do." They have learned from the existentialists that personal freedom must be both the goal and the presupposition of moral actions. That is, doing precedes being for decisionists.

But in this they are simply wrong. Consider, for example, how important it is that you are a medical doctor when deciding whether to return a call from a stranger who says he is sick and needs your assistance, or that you are a competent car driver when asked to drive someone to the hospital, or that you are unmarried or married to

someone else when asked to have sex, or that you are a pacifist when asked to go to war, or that you are a disciple of Christ when asked to pay for social injustice and violence. In each of these cases we are not free to choose from among neutral options. Our choices are decided for us by being particular kinds of people unless, of course, being certain kinds of people is irrelevant to us. For us to decide on the basis of the best option before us presupposes that we are morally empty vessels waiting to be filled by the actions we choose. For ethics to be Christian, the existential relationship between doing and being—that we are nothing *per se* and only become someone by doing something—must be repudiated. This is very hard for moderns to accept.

Third, focusing the ethical task on decision ignores one of the most basic factors in morality. It suggests that all people are the same—morally empty—and that the story of our life, which gives us our identities, is irrelevant. Neither is the case. Decisionists tend to see moral agents as abstract beings, all acting the same way when confronted with the same facts. This is how the law perceives people. In a courtroom relevant questions have to do with whether the car was speeding, which direction it was travelling, whether the light was green, whether it was raining, whether the driver had been drinking, but not whether the driver was a Christian, Muslim or Jew. Whatever the similarities between law and ethics, at this point they are quite different. People have different moral visions and convictions. When we engage in moral activity, we act on the basis of our perceptions and our beliefs. We act on the basis of who we are as social/moral beings and on the basis of the characters into which our communities/families have shaped us. This is very difficult for decisionists to recognize. Nevertheless, it is extremely important.[22]

Being Christian certainly has to do with learning to make the right decisions but, more importantly, it has to do with learning to look at the world as well as our own lives in a particular way. Learning to live by the conviction that in the story of Israel and Jesus we see the Godly way of life which alone can sustain us and that we are invited to be followers of this Jesus, entails far more significant moral

---

[22] The issue is more complicated than is possible to pursue here. Hence a word of caution is in order. It does not follow from what I am arguing that our visions and convictions alone determine what is right. That is, our actions are not right simply because they flow from our visions and convictions. That would result in a relativism I wish to reject. What makes an action right is whether the visions and convictions which give rise to them are based on the truth. Admittedly, determining this is a complicated task involving biblical exegesis as well as careful theological/philosophical reflection. Yet my claim here is a simpler one: to abstract our decisions and actions from the social context in which they are made intelligible in the first place is a mistake.

training than learning to make decisions effectively. Learning how to decide is morally important, but coming to understand who we are and training ourselves to be good Christians are much more basic.

THE INDIVIDUAL

When the modern concept of the individual self was "invented" a few centuries ago, everything changed for us, especially how we think about ethics. It is hard to imagine a different way of thinking about ethics not based on the individual. It is even difficult to conceive of an analogy. But consider how we live with our very young children. We tend to think of them as individuals very early in life. Yet, at least for the first little while, parents determine the child's welfare since they know what is good for the child. This process used to last much longer. The family would decide the child's vocation, marriage partner and place of residence. Today we scoff at such practices because we think of ourselves as human beings detached from others, or as moral agents who "do it ourselves." But when we stop to analyze this logic, it really is rather strange.

If making the decision is morally decisive, then the current way of thinking about ourselves makes sense, but if doing what is right flows from a standard of goodness outside of ourselves, then it does not. If I am guided, or perhaps even pushed, by my parents' or community's moral advice, I am probably much more prone to do the right thing than if I am left to my own devices, even though the decision is not as exclusively mine this way. What used to be important was that we live moral lives. But as we have seen, because moral living has become synonymous with individual choice, it is better to act freely and allow others to do the same than to do what is right. So today we abandon our children and each other to a veritable moral wilderness in the name of liberty and happiness.

Recently I heard a mother speak of her teenage son's suicide. She said that she found solace in knowing that it was his decision. And then she made this most astounding comment: "I would rather have him decide to commit suicide than to impose my will on him. It would have been wrong for me to do so."

Moral individualism finds expression in many ways. As I already have pointed out, about the only moral language which moderns seem comfortable with is the language of rights. The positive side to using rights language is that it is one way of speaking about obligation, even though most often the language is used to emphasize what we are entitled to and not what we are obligated to. The negative side is that it turns out not to be morality at all. Rights language is really legal language and the law sees obligation primarily in individual

terms. Each individual is an autonomous legal entity.

Consider the oft used example of abortion. The issue is now discussed almost exclusively in terms of the rights of the pregnant woman and the rights of the unborn. (Occasionally a potential father will claim his rights, but that rarely goes very far.) Anti-abortionists call the unborn a child with rights. Pro-abortionists call the unborn a fetus with no rights. Both use rights language. Is it not interesting that this debate revolves entirely around who the unborn are and does not reflect at all on who we are? Rights language is especially skilful at pitting people against people. Notice how this happens in the abortion debate. Pregnant woman is put against the unborn, pregnant woman against potential father, those pro-life against those for abortion, those pro-choice against those for life. Does this not raise the most fundamental moral question of all: What kind of people are we when we deal with such basic matters as bringing life into this world in such an adversarial manner? Yet because this is about the only question that does not get addressed, I find it very difficult to participate in the debate as a Christian.

While I agree with the pro-life conclusions that abortion is an immoral act, nevertheless I disagree that it is because the unborn are human beings with rights. My disagreement should not suggest to the reader that I do not respect the unborn as much as I respect any human being. Precisely because of this respect I cannot speak about them as individuals with rights. It is demeaning to speak of human beings over against one another. To be human is to be intersubjective and communal. To be human means that we have been "gifted" life by God, the One who alone is ultimately good. Hence, the rights language approach to abortion has no Christian base. As Christians we cannot argue convincingly the wrongness of an act by focusing on the nature of the act and on the rights of the individual caught in an unhappy situation. Although it is important to analyze the nature of complex acts like abortion, the case against it or for it eventually has to be made on the basis of who we are and what is good.[23]

Rights language is the language of individual demand for the insurance and protection of what individuals can claim to be theirs and for the enforcement of individual obligation. Therefore, it can not be the language of Christian ethics. The language of the cross and the language of demand have little in common.

However, this is not to suggest that Christians cannot speak of

---

[23] For a helpful discussion on the abortion issue, see Stanley Hauerwas' two chapters, "Why Abortion is a Religious Issue," and "Abortion: Why the Argument Fails," both in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

obligation. Of course we can and we must. But it makes all the difference where our obligation finds its ground. If obligation is a community matter, that is, if what we ought to do derives from the kind of people we have committed ourselves to be—the body of Christ—then what we do or do not do is not determined by the rights we and others as individuals have or do not have. Rather, our moral obligation then comes from the character of the community which we have given shaping power over us. Then what we do does not have its origin in what we can legitimately claim, but in what we have been graciously given and in turn are inspired to give.

THE MORAL ACT

No doubt, an ethic that holds the situation, the decision and the individual as primary also will see the act as morally central. But, you ask, what else is there? Is not the discipline of ethics precisely intended to help us do the right thing? Ultimately perhaps, but it makes a big difference whether one's moral considerations begin from the standpoint of being or from the standpoint of doing (acting). Consider the following.

A person, who all her life has seen herself as an advocate and supporter of the poor, does not need to spend much time considering how to act when asked to support a local initiative to upgrade housing in the poor section of town. For her, what to do is determined by who she is. Because her moral identity is clear, how to act comes naturally. The person whose moral identity is unclear—perhaps because it has never been cultivated—will lack the moral basis to decide how to act. Attempting to come to decision by focusing on the act and the need to decide, or on the situation, will only produce anxiety.

The moral act is a complex notion. For the past several hundred years the dominant emphasis in explaining the moral act has been on the will. We do what we will. Will determines our actions. As long as the will is mine and is free or, as Kant said, as long as one does only those things which can be willed to become universal, the person has acted morally. Nietzsche and Sartre, both modern existentialists, went beyond Kant and removed the reference to "universalizability" and have left us with only the "will to power."

Under the influence of such thinkers, moderns have tended to see morality as "indeterminate will enactment." That is, it is important that we will something, for in willing we define ourselves as moral human beings. *What* we will is less important. In fact, according to the existentialists, no outside moral guidance can be given to this latter concern.

The implications of this logic are really quite alarming. If "that we choose" instead of "what we choose" guides us morally, then it

is not possible to choose that which is morally wrong. Then our choosing is what makes something morally right. Only that which is not our choice, that which we are forced to do against our will, is morally wrong. To say it differently, an act is right if and only if it is my action and wrong if and only if it is done by me but is not genuinely mine. Then life's basic question simply is, "What do I really want?" or, "What are my values and how can they be brought about?" which means the same thing.

However, for those who claim that moral language is meaningful, and indeed can be Christian, this action-based approach to Christian ethics is hardly adequate. We want to claim, for example, that it is quite possible to will that which is wrong. But in saying this, we are acknowledging that the criteria of right and wrong actions are outside the will. Moreover, this way of putting it changes the central focus of morality. The real question has to do with what shapes the will or what empowers the will. The focus has shifted from the "will to power" to the "power to will." The crucial question now becomes, "How is the will to be trained?"

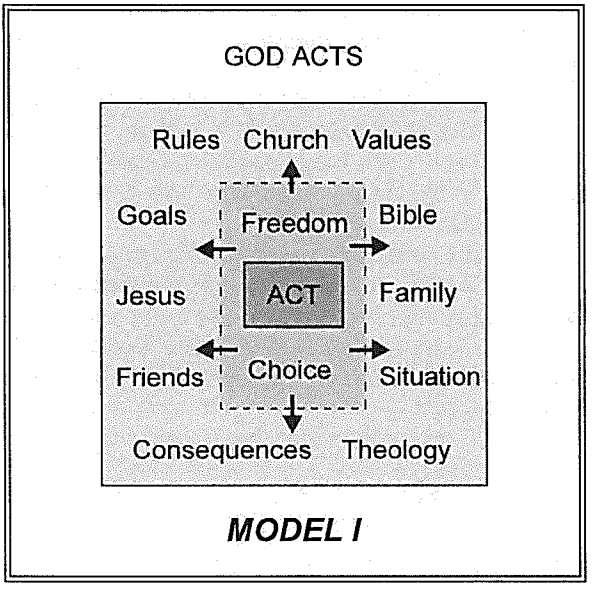
By shifting the focal moral question in this way we are, in fact, no longer viewing the will from the standpoint of "act." To view the will from the standpoint of act means that the primary question is, "What do I will to do?" Then freedom and choice are the determinants. Insofar as I will freely, I will rightly. To view the will from the standpoint of being means that the primary question is, "Who do I will to be?" And here training and submission are the determinants. Then insofar as I will what is consistent with who I am, I will rightly.

Let me illustrate with several diagrams. If the central moral focus is ACT (as illustrated in MODEL I below), then the connecting concepts to the moral categories are "freedom" and "choice." How to act requires decision. Unless your decision is free, that is, genuinely yours, you cannot be held morally responsible for it. In other words, unless your decision is free, it is not a moral matter at all since then it is not considered to be your act. And if it is free, then it is considered right because it is your act.

Such act-oriented self-understanding is often quite consciously harmonized with theological thinking. The argument is that we ought to understand ourselves on the basis of how we act precisely because this is the biblical understanding of God in whose image we are created. God is fundamentally an actor; hence we also see ourselves as actors.[24] But this way of identifying the moral relationship be-

---

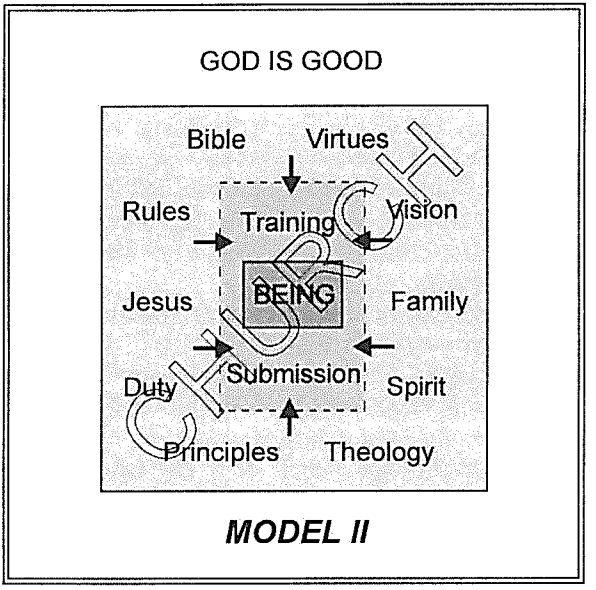
[24] This is what I take Gordon Kaufman's argument to be in his, *Systematic Theology: An Historicist Perspective* (New York, NY: Scribners, 1968). See especially the chapter entitled, "The *Imago Dei* as Man's Historicity," 329-351.



tween God and us is only formal; it has no moral content. We are as God is—free to act—hence we must do as God does. However, the implication of this kind of self-understanding as illustrated in the diagram, is that the source (moral content) of our acting is within us in the same way that it is within God for God's acts. But this makes God morally irrelevant to us. Hence the arrows of moral intention flow outward indicating that the individual freely chooses from the smorgasbord of options available.[25]

If the central moral focus is BEING (as illustrated in MODEL II below), then the connecting concepts to the moral categories are "training" and "submission." Since we are morally empty in ourselves, we are opened beyond ourselves to be morally shaped. This requires commitment and training which shapes us into particular kinds of persons or communities. Of course, there is freedom involved in the choice of the commitment, but the disciplines of training and submission, rather than radical freedom and choice, determine who we will become. On this model, if we wish to be

[25] I believe this problem to be significant beyond our capacity to fully discuss here. Certainly I do not wish to imply with my criticism of this model that God ought not to be seen as an actor in our space-time existence. It is precisely the affirmation of God's radical transforming activity on earth that is essential to our entire approach. Yet to begin with God's acts without the quest to understand God's character from which these acts flow renders God morally unintelligible and irrelevant.



Christian, then opening ourselves to the forces which can make us a Christian is our primary preoccupation. Then, to a significant extent we are not free to choose from among a range of options. Then we are bound to act out of commitment to our moral identity.

It is significant to note that on this model the arrows of moral intention flow in the opposite direction from the first model. *Moral content comes from God since God alone is good.* This goodness, however, is mediated through the other shaping forces in our lives such as theology, Jesus, Bible, family, virtues. And the locus for this to happen is the church.

These two models are basically at odds with one another. My claim is that within current society, and indeed in much of Christian ethics, we tend to think in terms of the first model. Yet it is the second model which makes the Christian life intelligible and provides us with an answer to how ethics can be Christian.

Practically it makes a lot of difference on which model one operates. Let me illustrate. Consider being the recipient of a letter from the clerk of a provincial court which requests that you appear at a jury selection hearing for a local murder trial. You are a Christian and want to do the right thing. On the act-oriented model your first impulse is to think, "How am I going to decide what to do?" It is important to you that the *decision* is yours. You are not going to do it just because you have been asked. Although you can consult with friends and peers and listen to what others have done in similar

situations, nobody can make this decision for you; it must be yours. Not only do you decide, but you decide how to decide. You choose whether to listen to your friends, or your spouse, or the church, or to someone else. The people you seek out are expected to give different advice because they are distinctive individuals. In fact, you think diverse advice is helpful because it gives you a variety of options to choose from. And just because at other times and in other situations you listened to one of them does not mean that you must do so now. This situation is different and you alone can do the moral thing by deciding how to decide.

On the being-oriented model the process is quite different. First, "being true to your moral identity as Christian" takes precedence over "doing something." This may mean doing nothing and doing it intentionally. Second, "how to decide"—this is not the same as what to decide—has already been determined for you by how you, who are part of the church, consciously have trained yourself to be a particular kind of person. You make a decision on the same moral basis—your identity as Christian—as you have done many times before, only now you apply it to the current reality. You can consult a variety of sources—family, Bible, Christian brothers and sisters—but you expect the advice to be consistent because all are linked to a common source of goodness: God. This does not make the job easier but it does make it different.

The act/decision model of Christian ethics makes it practically impossible for ethics to be Christian. Its primary weaknesses are: it suggests that moral deliberations are arbitrary—the actions of yesterday are not relevant to the actions of today—and there is no relevant outside source of goodness, hence each individual is morally unique.

DEVELOPING THE ALTERNATIVE

We are now ready to reflect briefly on the implications of the alternative model of Christian ethics. It is distinct from the dominant act-oriented model in that it assumes that our being is primary to our acting, that our decisions flow from our moral character and not from our own will, that we are storied people and not individuals, and that moral goodness comes from God and not from within ourselves. It might seem difficult for the modern mind to grasp this difference so let me illustrate with another analogy.

Christian ethics properly understood is like hockey. Yet hockey can be conceived of in two very different ways. First, suppose a hockey coach is teaching his team to play hockey in the way that MODEL I (the act-centred approach) suggests we can be moral. He would gather his team regularly and remind the players that in every

game they will have many choices to make. The puck will be shot to them and they will be called on to decide what to do with it. The coach will remind the players of two other things: there are rules and there is an ultimate goal—getting more pucks into the opponents' net than they shoot into our net. It's called winning. Of course, these two qualifiers are slightly restrictive to the freedom of the players but then that's just the way it is, not unlike life itself.

What would the training on this model be like? The coach would need to teach each player the art of good decision-making. They might well study classic decisions made by the "great ones," perhaps by watching videos of Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux making great plays. The point of the exercise would be to teach them how to decide what to do when they find themselves in similar situations. Then at the game their performances get evaluated on how well they have made decisions while out on the ice.

The alternative model is quite different. The rules and the goal are the same but the process of learning to play the game is different. Each player has a position to play (a role in the overall game) and receives training in the "excellence" of that position. Defencemen require one kind of skill, forwards another, goalies still another. What constitutes a good play for one player might well be a bad play for another. Players do not all have the same responsibilities. No one is called on to do everything. Decision-making training is not stressed, but skills training relative to each player's role is emphasized above all else. This is not because the coach believes that making decisions on the ice is unimportant but because he believes that good decisions will flow naturally from players that have become "good" (well practised) in their role. When the team is losing a game the coach does not instruct everyone to go out there and score goals, but tells them to play their positions with excellence and then the goals will come. The game is set up to score goals. Just go out there and play the game well. The goodness of the individual player is determined by how well he performs the function he has been given in the game.

I am suggesting that we consider the Christian life analogous to the second way of playing hockey. The Christian life has gamelike qualities: it also has a specific history, a specific goal, rules and regulations which facilitate the attainment of this goal. Skills are required to play it well. One can play it well and win or one can play poorly and lose. Not all Christians have the same role within the "Christian game." The major difference between a game like hockey and the Christian life is that a game is usually played for fun, often even as a diversionary event, whereas the Christian life is purported to be "the only game in town." Games are arbitrary and could just as well be played differently while adherents of the Christian faith see

themselves participating in truthful existence. Nothing is arbitrary about the elements that govern their life.

This approach to the Christian life highlights especially two claims that are in significant tension with the act-oriented approach. First, our nature as human beings is determined by what we have been given by God in creation and in the biblical story of salvation. Our essential being is not determined by us and our actions. Neither are rules of life determined by us. Secondly, we are required to work at becoming the kinds of people who will become good at living the Christian life. We are free to reject or accept this view of ourselves. When we accept it we commit ourselves to a task of training ourselves to become good, just like athletes do.

We noticed in the hockey analogy that we cannot criticize a goalie or defenceman for failing to score goals. Goal scoring is simply not the role they are called to play in the game of hockey. Similarly, being morally responsible and holding people accountable cannot be done apart from understanding our roles within the Christian "game." Our place in life becomes intelligible only when we understand the story that shapes us as a Christian people. If there is no story, there can be no ethic. We understand ourselves as Christian when we understand who we were created to be and what our mandate, given by creator-God, is. That is, according to the biblical story we are called to a specific purpose. Only in relation to this purpose can our roles and hence our actions be evaluated.

Even more specifically, our coach does not demand that the goal of life be realized by us. We are only called to "play the game well." Hence we are invited to train ourselves in the skills of the Christian life which are designed to bring about the kingdom. We cannot be criticized for not "winning" but we can be criticized for not having developed the skills required to win.

~~~~~
~~~~~

PART III

REMEMBERING THE BIBLICAL STORY

In one of the last speeches recorded in Deuteronomy, Moses recites the "words of the law" to the people of Israel in order to keep them from "doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord." He says: "Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders and they will tell you" (32:7). More recently Stanley Hauerwas has reminded us of the role of remembering in the process of becoming and remaining faithful. He says: "The formation of texts as well as the canon required the courage of a community to constantly remember and reinterpret its past. . . . That we no longer consider remembering as an ethical or political task manifests our questionable assumption that ethics primarily concerns decisions whereas politics brokers power" (A Community of Character, *53). In other words, remembering is the key moral category for the Christian moral community. Actually this should not surprise us. We know that when old people lose their memory they change character. We should apply the same process to churches which forget the biblical story. Their character also changes. Memory loss and character change are inseparable.*

This section presents selective themes from the biblical story. The first chapter examines the implications of remembering our creator. It emphasizes the importance of seeing ourselves as those who have been given an identity with responsibilities to exercise within the created order. From this standpoint it addresses the moral significance of recalling that God redeems, covenants, judges and blesses. Since the rule of a kingdom is defined by the visions and character of the king, it is impossible to understand kingdom ethics apart from coming to know the virtues and political platform of the king.

The second chapter examines the biblical structure of justice. It deals with the same issues as the first chapter—what the biblical narrative discloses about the nature of God and how that knowledge impacts our understanding of Christian ethics—but it does so in a different mode. It surveys the biblical material with the following question in mind, "What is the relationship between God and human beings from which we are to understand and do justice?" The biblical answer to this question maintains that God invites a people to make the story of Israel and Jesus so totally its own story, thereby becoming a living parable. That is, God gives us the very essence of life; in turn we give God our allegiance through grateful acceptance and faithful living.

5

GOD CREATES; WE REMEMBER

David Schroeder

The parameters of human existence and obligations are set by who God is and what God has created. God's ordering of things in creation and in history determines what it means to be human, what humans can be and become, what is moral and immoral. We must know God to discern what is right and good and true.

Through knowledge of God we come to know ourselves in relation to God and to the world we inhabit. We come to know what belongs to God's intention for life. Scripture is the record of God's revelation to all humanity. A group which makes this narrative its own becomes part of God's people and a moral community. The biblical record provides knowledge of God's created order: knowledge of what it means to be created in the image of God and knowledge of a proper human response to the creator's gifts.

THE CREATED ORDER

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void . . ." (Genesis 1:1-2a). Thus begins the record of God's revelation. But how do people come to know God as creator?

As they learn to know the power of God over humanity and history, people come to understand that God is creator and lord of all. Then they can express who God is in terms of a cosmological confession that sets them apart from other peoples and other religions. The creation account (Genesis 1-11) is a marvellous confession of who God is and what God intended the world and humans to be. But the prophetic writings and wisdom literature also confess God

as creator and sustainer of the cosmos.[1]

The creation account in Genesis is a confession by faithful believers.[2] It is not an argument for creation versus some other explanation of the origin of the universe. Its claims transcend empirical experience and attempt to state what is basic to Israel's and our understanding of human existence. This is the nature of confessional theology.

A confessional statement gives a specific interpretation of life. This definition cannot be simply a logically plausible "arm-chair" explanation that has no relationship to events and realities of the material world. The truth of a confession is confirmed in human experience. That is, the confession is deemed to be true because life is actually experienced as indicated in the confession. Once life is viewed in this way and has been confirmed in experience, it becomes part of our faith and an integral part of our worldview. Then, as a response, by telling it—confessing it—means that we invite others to be part of it.

God created a world. The creation account in Genesis confesses that God has always been but the world has not. The world came into being by the word and intentional will of God, through an act of God.[3] God spoke, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3a) and there was light as God commanded! It came about because God willed that there be something rather than nothing.[4] Creating the world was not an arbitrary act on God's part. It was a personal, purposive act that

---

[1] Isaiah 40:26,28; 42:5; 45:18; Jeremiah 10:12-16; Amos 4:13; Psalm 33:6,9; 90:2; 102:25; Job 38:4-39:30; Nehemiah 9:6.

[2] The creation accounts, which contain both earlier and later materials, were the result of a long history. After Israel came to know God as a righteous, loving, redeeming, faithful and almighty God, it could conclude and confess that God is also creator and sustainer of the cosmos. It is generally recognized that the P (Priestly) material of Genesis 1-11 (for example, 1:1-2:4a) is later and the J (Jehovah) material is much earlier in origin. However, in the canon the two sources have been placed together and are intended to be interpreted as such. Although the knowledge of God as creator may have come somewhat later in Israel's history, the material on creation is placed first in the record so that it sets all of God's work in the context of God as creator and lord. See Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974).

[3] Creation is not to be thought of as an emanation but as an event. See Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 463. It is a contingent event and not a necessary event. The world did not have to be and would not have been apart from the freely chosen act of God.

[4] Creation cannot be pushed further than this. We cannot fully explain why there is something rather than nothing apart from the confession of belief in a creator. See Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 158.

flowed from the very character of God.[5]

By willing two different realities—one infinite, the other finite—God chose a kind of self-limitation which necessitated a specific type of relationship between God and that which God created, between the creator and creation. Nothing in the created order is absolute or autonomous but is entirely a gift of God and dependent on the creator.

To confess that God created the universe implies that a fundamental unity is present in the created order. The unending diversity in the world is not chaotic but is held together by the purpose and goal of intentional will. This makes variety meaningful. Each form of life is separate from, yet interdependent with, all other forms of life. Plant, animal and human life were created alongside and for each other. No aspect of creation is outside of or autonomous from the purpose and character of God.

God created life. God created all forms of life. On the third day, vegetation and plant life were created as a support for all other forms of life. On the fifth day, fish and birds inhabited the waters and the heavens which had been created on day two. On the sixth day, animals and human life came into being to enjoy and benefit from the rest of creation (Genesis 1:9-31).

God's created order implies a goal toward which things were created. The purpose of creation (*telos*) was life and fullness of life (*shalom*). God created not only all forms of life but also the order, the infrastructure, the ecosystems which make life possible and help sustain life on earth.

God established the good. Each day of creation is called "good."[6] At first this seems like an innocent, simple statement but it has much wider implications. In order to create life God needed to overcome that which stood in life's way: chaos. Chaos is the absence of structure and purpose, the lack of order and direction without grounds for evaluating life. It is a state of total individuality and unconnectedness. As God ordered the universe—separating light from darkness, dividing water from dry land, creating each form of life—God created the possibility of continuous structured existence

---

[5] For a brief review of the doctrine of creation: its classical formulation, the challenges and contributions of recent times, and a general consensus, see Julian N. Hartt, "Creation and Providence," chap. in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Tradition and Tasks*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, 2d, rev. & enl. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 141-166.

[6] The creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:4a notes after each order of creation was completed, with the exception of day two, that God called it "good" (Genesis 1:4,12,18,21,25). For day six it was said to be "very good" (1:31).

on earth and called this "good." God was satisfied with creation.

God intended wholeness and harmony for life on earth. That which is in harmony with God's will and purpose is good.[7] That which is contrary to God's will and moves in the direction of chaos and death is evil. Therefore, the created order is God's moral claim on all people.

The creation story confesses God as the ground of all that is. God has determined what is good, right and true. What is true remains so whether people hold to it or not. People can discover the good but they cannot invent it. It originates not with humans but with God. To know the good requires that people come to know the character of God as revealed in the act of creation and in ongoing history.

God created humans. Humans were the crown of God's creation in that they were given responsibilities in relation to all of creation:

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26).

Humans were created to share in the work and character of God. They were finite, created beings who could relate and respond freely to God, who could answer to and be in fellowship with God. Humans were created to share God's purpose and will for all of creation. They were given a wide range of responsibilities on earth. They are responsible (response-able) and accountable (answerable) to God.

Humans were invited to be obedient to God and do the will of God but this implies that they could also be disobedient. They were invited to say yes to God's invitation to open themselves to the divine order of things, but they were also free to reject this invitation. This is the fundamental freedom that belongs to human life. However, once we say yes to God, we bind ourselves to a particular way of life. Then we are no longer free to do certain things like acting in harmful ways toward others or to the environment. Saying yes to God implies giving up our freedom to do certain things. On the other hand, in saying no to God we bind ourselves to something else like self, pleasure and money. The great modern myth—that to be radically free moral agents we are not bound to anything—is simply not a possibility.

God's command was both permission and prohibition: "You may

---

[7] See Claus Westermann, *Creation*, 60-64.

freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Genesis 2:16b-17). Genesis 3, as does the rest of Scripture, makes it clear that humans exercised their freedom so they could become like God and know good and evil. The narrative tells us what we know to be true in our own experience: that our human desire for knowledge of good and evil is rooted in our autonomous will, our need to act in accordance with our own ends and purposes. We separate ourselves from God by rebelling against God.

The consequences of such rebellion are described vividly. Adam and Eve feared God and hid (Genesis 3:8). They were embarrassed by their nakedness before each other (3:7,10). Both suffered as a consequence of sin as they began to look for ways of "lording" it over the other (3:15-16). Cain murdered his brother and lived in fear of God (4:1-16). Finally, sin led to a society of revenge (4:23-24) as people grasped for the ultimate power of God. Eventually they stormed the final frontier of outside authority—heaven itself (Genesis 11:1-9). They wanted to be liberated from the need to obey, to be free to be themselves. This sin led to judgement, not life.

Sin is the act of denying our creatureliness and our accountability to the creator. It is the denial of our finiteness as we refuse subservience to others and to God. Sin establishes its own autonomy and its own control, lordship and power over other people: spouse, the poor, women, those without power. It results in putting people against people, against the world and against God.

Sin is basically self-seeking. It strives for selfish ends, not the welfare of others nor the will of God. This self-centredness brings only suffering to those involved and conflict with others who also seek their own self-interest. It leads not to life but to death.

Ironically, humans are misled by the very glory which was given to them in creation. They were created in the image of God as free persons responsible to God. They were given work under God to keep the garden and to support all forms of life. Their task—nay, their honour—was to manage the world with God. But they forgot that they were God's stewards and sought to be lords themselves. That is, they usurped the place of God. They acted as though God did not exist, as though they could determine right and wrong. They grasped all the authority and took none of the accountability.

This is the story of human sin. It seems as if the purpose of God for humankind has miscarried badly. Yet the creation account indicates that God has not deserted sinful humanity. God removed Adam and Eve from the garden for their own welfare (Genesis 3:22-24). God provided clothing for Adam and Eve (3:21), protected Cain (Genesis 4:14-15) and saved Noah's family from the flood (Genesis 6-9). The rainbow in the sky is a sign that God wills to sustain the

created order (Genesis 9:12-17). The hope for our redemption comes from God's graciousness and mercy.

One of the astounding aspects of the creation story is that creator-God does not violate our personhood, rather incorporates our frailties into the process of redemption. That is, God operates with self-imposed limits.[8] God desires us to choose life but does not arbitrarily prevent us from choosing evil.

One might well ask: Does it not reflect negatively on God's loving character if God allows humans to face the consequences of sin and evil in their lives? Not at all. God has ordered the world as good. If the violation of this order means nothing, then God's creation is not good. If our violation of good creation were prevented, our freedom would mean nothing. Precisely because God created the universe good, to reject it is to choose evil.

Adam represents all of humanity in his choice of evil and sin and his need for salvation. But Jesus, the last Adam, modeled what it means to be a fully responsible person before God. He came to do the will of God, to be obedient to the call of God in a sinful world and to offer life and salvation to all.

God blessed creation. Genesis 1 indicates that God blessed the sea creatures and birds (Genesis 1:22), the animals and humans (1:28), and the whole creation on the seventh day in connection with the Sabbath (Genesis 2:3). The divine blessing, expressed in terms of "be fruitful and multiply," gave God's creatures the power to be co-creators with God; it gave them the power of self-propagation.[9] Claus Westermann speaks of this blessing as the "quiet, continuous flowing and unnoticed working of God which cannot be captured in moments or dates. Blessing is realized in a gradual process, as in the process of maturing and fading."[10]

This blessing is intended for all God's creation. It is related to sustaining life on earth, to the social and economic maintenance of society and to the succession of life from one generation to another.[11] The blessing of God is that activity of God which sustains the whole

---

[8] Hendrikus Berkhof speaks of God as the defenceless, superior, powerful God, an approach not often explored in systematic theology. Berkhof speaks of "that attribute by which he [God] leaves room for his 'opposite' and accepts and submits himself to the freedom, the initiative, and the reaction of that 'opposite.' It has do to with . . . the enduring and the suffering of God." Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 141.

[9] Charles T. Fritsch, *Genesis* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959), 25.

[10] Claus Westermann, *What Does the Old Testament Say about God?* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1979), 44.

[11] Claus Westermann, *The Genesis Account of Creation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964), 19-22.

created order where God allows the rain to fall and the sun to shine on the just and on the unjust. It is God's stamp of approval on the good creation and guarantees God's continuing interest in preserving the whole creation. Blessing is governance of the world which is always there but is often taken for granted or overlooked.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

The biblical text makes it explicit that humans are created in the image of God: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). It is important to emphasize, in light of much theologizing on the subject, that it is humanness *per se*, not a particular aspect of humanness—mind or soul—that is in God's image.[12] Only in this way can we understand what being created in God's image means and what being representatives of God on earth implies.[13] An examination of the moral responsibilities which humans are given will demonstrate what it means to be created in the image of God.

Becoming responsible persons under God. First and foremost, humans must answer to creator-God. They are to be responsible in exercising their stewardship under God and in the choices they make. They are to discern the will of God for their lives and commit their lives to that will.

To be created in the image of God means being God-like in character. Fortunately, God gave humans a concrete model. In his life of faithfulness Jesus revealed the character of God. He manifested the holiness, justice, love and compassion of God. As God's people our primary obligation is to become God-like and Christ-like in character. Then we can come to know and do the will of God.

It is very difficult for humans to respect the personhood of others. We practise crude forms of disregarding people as persons through slavery, exploitation, war and discrimination. But we also use more subtle forms of dehumanizing other persons. For example, our knowledge of psychology becomes a tool for devising tactics through advertising and salesmanship to have people act against their own best interest and judgement. Even when we want to be kind and help people, we assume that the best way is by deciding things for them and disregarding them as responsible persons. We find it

---

[12] See Waldemar Janzen, "Created in God's Image," chap. in *Still in the Image: Essays in Biblical Theology and Anthropology* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982; Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications), 51-60. All too often the image has been restricted to the rational, emotional or volitional nature, but all of these are included in personhood.

[13] Ibid., 52-53.

very hard to treat others as persons the way God treats us.

Recently I attended a workshop for handicapped persons in my home church. The noon meal was served cafeteria style. The lineup was already long when I noticed that none of the people in wheelchairs were in the line. Since I was at home in this church and because it did not seem right for persons in wheelchairs to be discriminated against, I said to the young woman pushing Theresa's wheelchair, "Why don't you put her into the line right here? The people won't mind." Theresa's response was quick and pointed: "Why do you speak to the person that has been hired to serve me? I decide where I will go. You have just made me a nonperson!"

Theresa was right. We make people nonpersons when we treat them in terms of the classifications to which we think they belong rather than as persons in their own right. We often stereotype people according to race or nationality, as criminals, as the poor, as those on welfare, as the rich or powerful, as professionals, but not as persons whom God has given life. We give less freedom to some and make decisions for them. To others we give power to make decisions for us, thus denying our own personhood and personal responsibility.

Because God created us as human beings and honours us as such, we should see all persons in the same light. To be human is to respect others and ourselves as persons. We are morally obligated to treat people as responsible people because God treats us that way.

Being co-workers with God. Human work is not the consequence of sin nor is it a burden to be accepted as a necessity of existence. It is a gift from God, a gift that gives meaning to human existence and puts human life in perspective. God placed humans in the garden of earth and asked them to "till" and "keep" it (Genesis 2:15). In providence God asked humans to participate in God's work on earth.

God orders, sustains and redeems the world. Jesus said, "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (John 5:17). Jesus came to carry out God's work on earth and invites us to join him. Part of what it means to be human is to participate with God in sustaining creation and moving things in the direction of fullness of life. Thus work is a gift, a privilege, as well as a moral responsibility for all humankind.

However, because of sin work has not always been what God intended. Workers have been exploited. People have been enslaved and oppressed for the benefit of their masters and the ruling class. Work has become drudgery and found to be meaningless and purposeless. Sin has altered the nature of work. The "thistles and thorns" which sin has introduced are powerful, yet they have not cancelled out the basic value and worth of work.

To equate work with vocations or jobs is too restrictive. Although

jobs and professions are included in work, everything which is done to advance the work of God in the world also must be included: prayer, worship, proclamation and all other human actions designed to fulfil God-given obligations. Purposeful work does not require remunerative employment, but it does need to make a meaningful contribution and be in accord with God's will.

When people retire they often feel they have lost their reason for living. Because they are no longer engaged in remunerative work they feel they are useless to society and have become parasites on others. So they despair of life itself. Everything we do to fulfil the responsibilities with which God has entrusted us counts as work. Meaningful work allows persons to participate in God's creation from childhood through old age. It gives meaning to life and is an expression of our being and God's being.

Naming the world. God named the light and the darkness, the day and the night (Genesis 1:5). God named what was good and asked humans to participate in naming the world. Adam was told to name the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). The account adds, "whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (2:19b). What seems like an insignificant part of the creation account is very important. Naming the world belongs to being human and is one of the responsibilities which God has given to those who are created in God's image. It belongs to cooperating with God in creating a world.

Naming is an awesome responsibility. By naming things we humans create a world of meaning, orient ourselves in the world—the world of persons, animals and things—and set our goals and aspirations in life. In naming we also relate to and influence others. What we call things for a child is how the child will see the world and relate to it; the way we characterize people is how they will be seen by us and others.

In one sense we are free to name things any way we like, but if we do so incorrectly we will be deceived by it. To call what is evil good is to mislead ourselves and others. Today it is common to delude by misnaming weapons of destruction. For President Reagan to name the deadliest bomb a "peacemaker" rather than an instrument of death is to deceive the world.

Through naming we allow ourselves the possibility of control or influence over things that threaten us and goals we wish to achieve. All our scientific and educational activities are a process of naming the world. We name the cause of a disease so that we are able to cure it, guard against it or overcome its effects. We name virtues in ethics or in literature so that we will see the world from that perspective.

Naming presents to humans the possibility of participating with God in the creation of the world, but this can be so only insofar as

our naming coincides with the moral order which God established and with the goals and purposes which God has for life on earth. When we name things falsely we create a world or a culture that will be judged by the truth of God. It will not lead to life. Only as we honour God in our naming will the blessing of God rest upon us.

Taking responsibility for life on earth. The creator invites humans to cooperate in sustaining life on earth. God asked the first parents to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28). One obvious way humans participate in God's creation is by birthing children. We marry, have sexual intercourse and open ourselves to the possibility of having a child. We carry out God's design and purpose for the world by receiving the child as a gift of life from God, a gift that is a sacred trust. The cycle of birth and death reminds us that extinction is always only a generation away.

Replenishing the earth extends well beyond the birthing of children to responsibility for all aspects of creation that make it possible for human life to survive on earth. The sanctity of life needs to be addressed in every area of life, not only by keeping people alive but by allowing life to flourish and helping people to be truly human.

The sad truth is that human life is often sacrificed to other goals and purposes. From Cain's murder to present "clean" wars, life has been offered in payment for sin and for personal and national pursuits. Sin has cheapened life and made people insensitive to God's call for cooperation in sustaining human life on earth.

Moral infrastructures are required for life to be sustained. Notice how this was done in Israel. Laws guaranteed that every male adult would have at least one male offspring. If he could not have a son by his wife, he could take a second wife. If he had no son at death, his brother, through a levirate marriage, had the responsibility of raising a son for the deceased brother, thus continuing the lineage. The goal of these laws was to ensure the possibility of continuing life on earth.

Today threats to life come in different ways. It used to be difficult to keep enough persons alive to ensure an ongoing community. Hence, people sought to raise as many children as possible. But that has changed. Infant mortality is down and people live much longer. The population is growing exponentially. Now pollution and weapons of mass destruction threaten the whole human race. War, starvation, disease or abortion certainly cannot become strategies for controlling the rapid population growth. To achieve good through doing evil is counter to everything taught by the creation story. Yet the very population explosion threatens life and presents a new crisis.

God has given us awesome responsibilities to work for maintaining life on earth. We have not done well in speaking to moral issues

regarding life and death. Yet as humans we are created to represent God in addressing these issues and in working toward those things which lead to life.

Exercising dominion. God invites humans to have dominion over creation with the words:

> . . . let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth (Genesis 1:26b).

It seems incomprehensible that God would entrust humans with such sweeping power to influence and shape the physical and cultural world. In fact, we cannot help but shape the material world. When we build roads and cities we withdraw land from food production; when we clear all the trees we reap a desert; when we dispose of refuse without regard for the environment we pollute air, land and streams. Our actions have an impact on the world.

The temptation is to see ourselves as lords and managers, as autonomous beings who need not answer to anyone for what we do. We like to believe that we are free moral agents, free to make whatever choices we desire.[14] But such is not the case. We are called to exercise dominion under God. Any actions counter to the will and purpose of God lead to judgement rather than life.

Exercising dominion is part of what it means to be human. Whether in obedience to God or in rebellion against God, the choices we make and the values on which we act influence the direction of change. If we hold material things to be of greater worth than persons, then we will reap a materialistic culture. If we hold the individual's freedom to be of greater worth than the welfare of the corporate community, then we will reap an individualistic society. The fact that so many of our public institutions are based on an adversarial system of relationships and justice indicates that we place worth on being able to fight and defend ourselves. Undeniably, our choices have concrete effects, both physical and cultural. The only question is how and in what direction we shape the world.

God has given us concrete guidance on how to exercise respon-

---

[14] Lynn White objects to this notion of absolute lordship of humans over nature and correctly so. But White incorrectly identifies such a view with the biblical position. Lynn White, "Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* (1967): 1203-1207. For a critique of White's position, see Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Redeem Life on Earth* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1984), 31-32.

sibility. We are invited to live in a way that participates in the end (*telos*) toward which God already has pointed. We are invited to be signs of what the world in its essence is. We are invited to participate in the truth of God. This means that our dominion will be exercised in a particular manner. We will participate in acts that are freeing rather than enslaving, that overcome strife and conflict rather than make them systemic, that value people as persons and not as means to ends. Dominion as outlined in Genesis reminds us that God acted first and that God's ongoing creativity can be as radical as the initial act of creation. We are invited to follow. Our dominion, therefore, is the proclamation of God's dominion. Our actions are signs that we have put ourselves under God.

Being people of God. The creation account points out that we have been created to be a people under God. God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Genesis 2:18). Humans were not meant to be alone, to live in isolation or as individualists, but as people in community with one another and with God. God created us to live in immediate families as well as in the larger family. We are to benefit from our forebears but also carry obligations toward future generations.

So much modern thinking runs counter to seeing ourselves as a people, a community of responsibility or a fellowship of faith. The rights of individuals take precedence over those of the community. Individual rather than corporate obligations are emphasized. Each one is expected to look out for him/herself. But this is to negate the creator's design in making us mutually dependent on each other and giving us joint responsibilities.

Humans were created to be social beings. They need ongoing support and nurture from parents and families. We cannot become persons apart from our association with parents, siblings, the extended family and others in the community. We are persons only in the larger context of relationships. Who we are comes from what we receive from others, which we then "put on" to make it ours.

The Bible calls us to become a community of people under God. When humans become a people, they often establish their own domain or kingdom without much regard for the will of God. They do what is right in their own eyes but may not necessarily be right in the sight of God. When nations and people have chosen evil to be good, the result has been conflict and death rather than true life. A community apart from God inevitably is destructive.

Even in the community of God's people, the church, the tide of individualism and nationalism has not always been stemmed. Focus is on *individual* rather than on *personal* salvation. In the church people must come to faith in the context of the Christian community.

We are called to appreciate the gifts—biological, cultural and spiritual—we have received from our forebears. We are called to give thanks for the gift of the faith community and the larger human community, past, present and future. We have come to be what we are through those who have passed on a legacy to us. We owe a debt of gratitude to others who have opened the world to us and have given us a rich inheritance. We are to remember past generations.

On the same basis, we have a duty to those who will follow us. The tendency is to live only for ourselves and our generation. To do so is not only selfish but robs succeeding generations of the gift of life. It is to wish death rather than life on our own children. The use of nuclear energy is a case in point. Many serious, life-threatening and unresolved implications are associated with nuclear energy (for example, stockpiling nuclear wastes without any solution for safe disposal). A second case in point is fighting wars for our own immediate benefit (to gain oil or land, for example) and leaving the residual animosity and hate to be overcome by the next generation. It is so easy to live our lives in a manner which leaves a legacy of grief and death for our children.

Even people who do not honour God are God's creation, are accountable to God and are intended to be a people of God. In becoming a people which honours and respects God's creation we have hope for salvation and life.

Following the second Adam. Jesus came to do the will of God (Matthew 5:17). He offered proper worship of God. He was holy as God is holy and manifested the love of God in all its purity. Jesus did not shrink from sacrificing his very life to do the will of God (Matthew 26:39). Jesus was God incarnate. Small wonder then that Paul speaks of Jesus as the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45).

The Christian church is convinced that Jesus shows most clearly what it means to be human. This view of the essence of humanness is not in discontinuity with the creation story but was already present there. This is the implication of saying that Jesus is God, the One who already was in the beginning, the creator without whom not one thing came into being (John 1:3). Therefore, the Genesis account of our humanness cannot be read apart from the Gospel account.

Jesus came to do the will of God and to offer himself for the purpose of God. He came to make possible a redemption that would allow sinful humanity to become fully human. He is the model of the truly human person not only because of what he did—heal the sick, cast out demons, teach with great insight, give hope to the rejected—but because he manifested the love, compassion, justice and mercy of God. When we are called to follow Jesus, we are expected not to repeat his precise actions but manifest the spirit in which he worked.

The New Testament states that Jesus was "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) and that "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (1:19; 2:9). That is, Jesus is God incarnate. In him the character of God is expressed in person. We can know the character of God by coming to know Jesus. In Jesus we come to know the fullness of life (Colossians 2:10) and the peace of God: *shalom* (Romans 5:1). Just as in Adam we come to know sin, so in Jesus we come to know life through redemption from sin (Romans 5:19).

A PROPER HUMAN RESPONSE

Called to worship. After completing "good" creation, God instituted the Sabbath rest. Thus the whole account of creation is set in the context of worship. The Sabbath was given for humans to pause and to remember the creator. It was given as a day of rest in which persons and the community could be renewed and re-created, a time for orientation or re-orientation to the creator. The Sabbath is a sign that we need to be reminded of our creatureliness, our dependence and obligations to God, each other and the world.

Our relation to God is expressed most profoundly in our worship and adoration of God, our praise to God and our petitions to God for ourselves and for all people. Our worship is an expression of our desire to know and do the will of God and our willingness to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

As we acknowledge the will and purposes of God we can recognize life and be empowered to choose it. This applies not only to us as individuals but also to the corporate community of faith. In worshipping the creator, we acknowledge and receive life as a gift of God; we recognize the God-given moral order and our responsibility to the creator; and we bring proper honour and praise to God.

When we honour the Sabbath, we also see ourselves as God's stewards over all creation, stewards who answer to God's manifold grace. Then we no longer are interested in exploiting what God has entrusted to us, knowing that to do so leads not to salvation and life but to conflict and death. To worship God is to acknowledge the gift of life and the call to be truly human.

Called to be holy as God is holy. The call to be a holy people is emphasized in both the Old and New Testaments. God's command to the people was, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).[15] The same command is given in the New Testa-

[15] See also Exodus 22:31; Leviticus 20:7,26; Deuteronomy 28:9; Joshua 24:19; and Isaiah 5:16.

ment in reference to Christ: ". . . as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

This command invites us to be God-like in character. To become holy as God is holy means to be cleansed from sin and unrighteousness. Thus Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins" (Joshua 24:19). When the people insisted on being God's people, Joshua informed them of the changes that had to take place. "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel" (24:23). The response of the people was, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey" (24:24). To worship God is to open ourselves to being transformed by the holiness of God.

The same correlation of holiness and obedience to God is evident in the New Testament. Peter states that since the people have been given "a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3), they are to be holy as God is holy (1:16). The author fully expects them to leave the life in which they were "conformed to their desires" and to become obedient to God (1:13-14). They are called to obedience to God just as Joshua called the people of Israel.

Jesus refers to the admonition in Leviticus but uses slightly different wording: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The use of "perfect" gives it a much more deliberate "character" flavour than the term "holy" suggests.

The word "holy" had both a cultic and a moral meaning. God is holy (Isaiah 6:3; Hosea 11:9). Holy also are things, buildings, places, events, days and persons which are set apart for God's use or service (Exodus 28:2; Leviticus 16:27; Deuteronomy 7:6; 26:19; Psalm 65:4; Ezekiel 36:25-29). But the word also has moral implications. It refers to a new life and a different lifestyle. God's people are called to embody God's character of justice and righteousness. First Peter uses the term *anastrophe* for "holy," meaning a way of life, conduct or behaviour. He uses it positively to refer to the chaste and pure behaviour of Christian women (1 Peter 3:1-2) and to Christians who are persecuted for their good conduct in Christ (3:16).[16]

The call to be holy is an invitation to become God-like in character. It is a call to become a people set apart from those who do not honour God, to become people who are created in the image of God, representing God on earth.

---

[16] The same Greek term also appears in Ephesians 4:22; 1 Peter 1:15,18; 2:12; 2 Peter 3:11; 1 Timothy 4:12; Hebrews 13:7.

Called to love as God loves. The revelation of God in history focuses first of all on God's holy love.[17] God is experienced as the giving, gracious and merciful God. In relation to our sin God is gracious and forgiving; in relation to our need God is merciful. This is an expression of God's self-giving love.

The act of love is fully in harmony with and an expression of the very character of the transcendent God. It is the "holy other" that is revealed to us in our world. In this act of love, God acts freely out of God's own being and not out of any need or compulsion.

Two Old Testament passages are picked up by Jesus to indicate how humans are to respond to God, the creator. These two passages represent Jesus' reading of what the Torah of God required: Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. Jesus combined these two commands as a double commandment of love to express the essence of Old Testament Torah:

> The first [commandment] is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these (Mark 12:29-31).

But, we may ask, how can this be when the law of Moses gave such detailed instructions for specific circumstances? Did the law not require that every detail of the law be kept? Yes and no. It is clear that some of the Pharisaic scribes thought so. However, others tried to understand the spirit of the law and what the law was pointing to in its formulations. Jesus did the latter. Jesus came to fulfil the law (Matthew 5:17) but he made no pretence at following all the rulings which the scribes held to be binding on Israel. Jesus sought to live in his being according to the will of God and saw love as the central requirement of the whole law. Paul later echoed this when he said, "Love does no wrong" and "Love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10).

Jesus could summarize the law in this way because he knew that God is love (John 3:16) and that the law is of God. The law seeks to give expression to what will lead to life and what will lead to death (Deuteronomy 30:15-20) in a specific period of time. It points beyond its own time to that which ultimately is in harmony with the

---

[17] See H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 126-140. In an effort to speak simultaneously about God's transcendence and God's condescension, Berkhof combines a noun with an adjective in naming the attributes of God. He speaks of God's holy love, God's defenceless superior power and God's changeable faithfulness.

very person of God. Thus, to love God and to love the neighbour as God loves is to do the will of God and fulfil the law of God.

Again the point is the same. We are to be God-like and Christ-like in character. Yes, we are to do good deeds. But more than that, these deeds are to be an expression of our being. We are to be loving in character so that all we do is an expression of true love, the love of God.

REMEMBERING THE CHARACTER OF GOD

If we are to be God-like and Christ-like we need to call to mind the character of God. We need to hear and respond to the story of God's self-revelation. Remembering is one of the most profoundly moral activities in the entire biblical story because it causes us to connect and reconnect ourselves to our roots. Hearing the story implies being shaped by the story to become a people who know God.

We are to remember because God remembers. God remembers the covenant (Psalm 105:8; 106:45; 111:5; Luke 1:72). God does not simply call things to mind but rather "in the covenant and in remembering the covenant, God establishes an identity and is faithful to it, determines a cause and acts in accordance with it."[18] God's remembering determines conduct. When God remembers the iniquity of the people, a warning is given to them through the prophets (Jeremiah 14:10; Hosea 7:2; 8:13; 9:9). When God no longer remembers the sins of the people, a word of salvation is uttered (Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:20). God's promise to remember their sins no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34) was fulfilled in Christ (Hebrews 8:12; 10:17).

For humans, remembering also is more than simply recalling events that happened. It relates to the formation of our identity and determines our character and conduct. Israel remembered God in their worship, their feasts and festivals. In remembering they participated in that history and made it their own. It was important to instruct the children (Deuteronomy 6:20-25) because not to remember the story was to lose their identity as a people. Forgetting the story was the equivalent of unfaithfulness, disobedience and failure to keep the covenant. It was moral failure.

The moral character of the people of God is determined by remembering or failing to remember the story of God's people. That is, remembering is foundational to the character and conduct of a people. It is not possible to remember the common story of God's people and not be united with that people in character and in moral

---

[18] Allen Verhey, "Remember, Remembrance," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 667.

sensitivities. Remembering the story is done in community—a community of worship, education, action and love. The story of God's coming to all humankind must be heard over and over again.

Remembering God the creator. Remembering God as creator brings home the fact that nothing, except the creator alone, is to be worshipped as eternal or self-sufficient. To do so would be immoral and idolatrous. Creation calls to mind our relatedness to God and our being dust of the earth, our finiteness and our high calling in God, our freedom as persons and our accountability to God. Remembering God as creator is, in essence, a call to worship and to honour God for the gift of life.

We remember and honour the order God created. God established the physical universe, the ecosystems that support life on earth, and the way humans relate to and are interdependent with the rest of the cosmos. God also established the moral order of the universe and made us humans responsible to God in our actions. Remembering makes us mindful of our moral responsibilities to God, to one another and to the whole cosmos. We call to mind the place or niche we are given to fill in God's world (Psalm 8), the responsibilities we are given and the purposes of God toward which we are to work. We remember that we are created free moral beings who, at all times, are accountable to God the creator.

God took a risk in creating us free moral beings. God was willing to allow humans to be persons distinct from God even though God knew that this would lead to sin and rebellion. It was a risk that only love would take. God had pleasure not in robots or automatons but in personal beings who could answer to God. When we remember that creating humans was done at such a risk, we marvel at the depth of God's love and return praise and worship to God.

God is creating still. God did not create the world, then leave it to function on its own. God responds to what human action—through obedience and disobedience—brings about. God creates new possibilities for life and for fullness of life. God is not removed from ongoing events in history (as in deism) nor is God seeking to return to an earlier golden era. As God's people we participate with God in leading and working toward accomplishing God's purposes in history. To do so we need to commit ourselves to the will of God.

In Jesus Christ we see God's purposes unfolding in a new way. In him we see promise of abundant life, the way of salvation, and how God responds to humankind. Ultimately our hope is in Christ and the cross which determines our identity and our ethic.

Remembering God's promise of life. Sarah and Abraham learned to

know God as a God of promise.[19] Israel experienced God's faithfulness in the promise of a son, of land and of a great future for the people. Israel came to know God as One who comes again and again with the promise of life. It is in God's character to seek out people and invite them to accept the gift of life. Each revelatory event contains a promise of life which becomes a warning of judgement for those who ignore or reject the promise.

Humans of necessity live by promises. No one knows the end from the beginning. As husbands and wives we promise each other love and fidelity. In business we rely on promises of honesty, integrity and honouring of contracts. In society we live on the basis of promises to be law-abiding citizens where each seeks to function according to custom, tradition and law. In learning to know the will of God we count on the promises of Scripture to be true.

Our problem is that so often we rely on and respond to promises that are not true and that have no possibility of leading to life. As a society we have placed our trust in the promises of individualism, on human rights, on materialism and on militarism. But these do not lead to life. We have placed our trust in capitalism but it does not provide for the exploited poor and for third world peoples. Often we have placed our trust in church institutions and structures that were self-serving. Only those promises which are in harmony with God's purposes in history find fulfilment and then only when we are faithful in our response to them.

Promises of life are badly needed today for those who have lost meaning, those who are poor and helpless, those who are exploited, those who hide behind power and those who search for God. In every area of life, people need to hear God's promises.

That God is a God of promise is seen most clearly in Jesus Christ who was the promise of God to humankind. In him and in his ministry could be seen the kind of life God came to give. His person was an invitation to life and his teachings held out life to all people. His death and resurrection promised victory over sin and death.

Those who know God and the way to true life have a moral responsibility to invite others to share in the promises of God. These promises must be expressions of our character as God's people. They focus less on performing specific acts and more on pointing in the direction of life; they focus less on the agent and more on God and on the receiver; they focus less on making decisions and more on expressing who we have become in Christ.

---

[19] This theme is explored by Paul J. and Elizabeth Achtemeier in *The Old Testament Roots of Our Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1962). See also chapter 3 above on the nature of promise and fulfilment.

But how do we do this? If we have love for others, we will make promises of life to them; if we have received life in Christ, we will share it with other people; if we have been freed from powers that enslave us, we will hold out to others the possibility of overcoming such enslavements. The proclamation of the Gospel compels us to convey the promise of God to people. But the form of the Gospel must be accommodated to the specific crises or needs in the lives of people. To the despondent, we promise hope; to the poor, that they will be filled; to the sick, healing; to the dying, life everlasting. Love finds a way of making the promise case or need specific.

These promises are communicated most clearly by our presence, by our being. Those who simply sit with a suffering person promise much more to the sick than they realize. "Being with" someone restores hope and trust in humanity and a promise of new life. The person who, out of love and concern, gives bread to the hungry, does much more than feed a few people. A new and different reality is made known, a reality that promises something else than the systemic evil they have been suffering. We do not promise *something* as much as we give *ourselves* to others.

Part of the character of God's people is to share the promises of God with everyone. They do so through their presence, their speaking and their deeds. To do so is simply part of them; it is automatic. Not to do so would be a denial of their life in Christ. When Christians witness to a world in need, they must manifest the character and the truth of God in the promises they make.

Remembering the redeeming God. The children of Israel experienced the saving work of God in the Exodus, in the wilderness wanderings and in the entrance into the land. Through God's mighty acts they were set free from captivity and could escape into the desert to live freely unto God. In these events God became known to Israel as a freeing, saving, liberating and redeeming God. In love, God liberated the people from captivity and oppression and returned them to the freedom and responsibility which was given to them in creation. Once more the people were allowed to be fully human in responding appropriately to God, to others and to the world.

In Jesus Christ we come to know God most fully as a redeeming God. Jesus freed people from bondage to the law as interpreted by the scribes; from the customs and traditions of the day which kept "sinners," outcasts and outsiders from salvation; from subjugation to sin, sickness, possession and death. Jesus came to save, to free people.

God knows how much we today need liberation from captivity. Much is said about freedom, but the underlying reality of our day is captivity and despair. We are held captive by a plethora of princi-

palities and powers, by ideologies and powers that promise us everything but the truth of God, by social structures that have become dysfunctional, by economic systems that force us to do evil when we seek only to do good, by educational structures that prepare us for a world which we cannot totally affirm, by material powers or governments whose interest is survival rather than service to the people, by sickness-care systems rather than a health-care system.

Wherever people are in bondage we are to respond as God does and free people from oppression. As Christians we are not free to pass by unaffected when a neighbour is in need. Because human captivities are so many and so varied, we need to address the particular area of bondage just as God meets us in our specific place of need.

It seems so self-evident that we should act out of the same character of love as God does.Then why are we often not concerned at all about the bondages that we have identified? Is it not because we are bound to the principalities and powers of darkness? When this is the case, we have no place, no community from which to communicate to the world a totally new reality, the reality of God's liberation. Before we effectively can share the liberation of God, we need to become a liberated people. Paul envisioned this kind of a church when he spoke of the "new humanity of God" (Ephesians 4:24).

When the church has been cleansed and liberated to be Christ's body, then the freeing, saving power of God will become evident. Some will be liberated from sin and guilt through forgiveness; some will be freed from the oppression of poverty by sharing work and gifts with people; some will be saved from meaningless existence by becoming engaged in purposeful work; others will be saved from despair by seeing how God uses and multiplies the little we have to offer; still others will find strength through the support of the church to leave their former addictions, ideologies and idolatries. Where a people manifests the character of God, there the freeing, liberating power of God's love will be evident.

Remembering a covenanting God. God did not set the children of Israel free only to abandon them in the desert! Setting people free is not an end in itself.[20] The biblical record knows nothing of absolute freedom. God liberates people so they will be free to carry out the responsibilities God has given to humankind, free to respond to God's call to be fully human, free to do the will of God.

---

[20] The problem with some liberation theologies is that freedom from bondage is seen as an end in itself. Such liberation has no guarantees that the oppressed will not become the oppressors.

We often think of freedom as an absolute value. Such a view can quickly lead to irresponsible actions. For example, in economics "free enterprise" is seen as the goal to be achieved. But having a free enterprise economic system does not guarantee moral responsibility. In fact, business people and corporations may use their freedom to waste resources or to pollute the environment at great cost to all citizens.

God frees people from bondage so they may be free to act in the direction of life. That is why Sinai follows Exodus. At Sinai God invited people to bind themselves to become God's people. God covenanted always to be there for the people's welfare and salvation, to come to them in love, mercy and forgiveness. The covenant was an act in which God bound himself to the people. Through Moses, God gave them the law or Torah with its alternatives of life and death. The people were asked to choose life. Despite their promise to do so, the people of Israel failed to keep the covenant. They promised to be God's people but at the same time followed the Canaanites' gods and other idols. They often failed in their loyalty to God and to the law of God. As a consequence they frequently reaped the judgement of sin and rebellion.

As humans we cannot do without covenant agreements, both informal and formal. Marriage is such an agreement; the family is a covenant based on blood relationships; the social community exists on the basis of a network of covenants. We use formal contracts in business, in government and in international agreements. Whereas the idea of covenants is not new or strange, not all of them work toward true life.

Christ came to establish a new covenant—a covenant based on truth and love and righteousness or justice. Jesus covenanted to do the will of God. He came to speak the truth in love and exercised love in all relationships. Jesus called on his followers to follow him, to bind themselves to him and to receive him as Lord. Those whom Jesus had set free bound themselves to God and received life in him.

The Christian church has many ways in which it binds itself to God. Worship, proclamation, exhortation, admonition and nurturing the gifts of the Spirit are some examples. All are aids in helping persons and the corporate body to be more Christ-like in character and in action. All are covenanting activities.

The church as the people of God also stands in covenant relationship to others. Like God, it covenants unilaterally to be there for others, to make known the things that lead to life and the things that lead to death. It calls on people to bind themselves to the will of God, to truth and to the spirit of Christ.

Remembering God as sovereign king. The sovereignty of God is a theme which is addressed in the story of the rise of kingship in 1 Samuel. Will the chosen kings be sovereign lords or will God remain king? That is the question. Christian theology has remained clear that God is sovereign Lord. The story that most often is not told is how God exercises that sovereignty. Hendrikus Berkhof's emphasis is a good corrective: Under the formulation, "the defenceless superior power" of God, Berkhof holds together God's sovereignty (transcendence) and God's choice to honour the freedom which has been bestowed on humankind as bearers of God's image (condescension).[21] There is no question that God is God and all-powerful, but that is not manifested to humankind in actions that override human decisions and choices. God allows that our choices make a real difference in the world, both for good and for evil. God allows created beings to be a real "opposite" to God. And in the sense that God in his sovereignty has freely chosen to honour humans as persons, God is "defenceless" when we do evil. The consequence of evil will not be stayed arbitrarily, but will be allowed to work itself out in history. Our actions are taken into account when God's purposes are worked out in the world.

But time and again these purposes are thwarted by our rebellion. God does not reject us but always comes to us in love and forgiveness. God neither overrides our actions nor compels us to do the will of God. God, the sovereign God, the all-powerful One, chooses rather to show love in forgiveness and in a renewed invitation to choose life and to be God's children.

The history of God's people is a story of sin and failure. The Israelites had good reasons to call for a king and for centralized government. Humanly speaking, this was the only way of defence against the Philistine threat, but it introduced a new form of government. The history of the monarchy tells a sad tale of failure. Most of the kings did not resist the temptation to be absolute monarchs and to do what was right in their own eyes. As a consequence, the people suffered hardship, loss, enslavement, war and exile. But one king, David, was seen as a pattern of the kind of king God had intended. David sought to know the will of God. He placed the presence of God (the ark of the covenant) in the midst of the people (the city of David) and wanted to build God a house (temple). In turn God promised to establish a house, a dynasty for David. God promised to place a son of David on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7:1-17).

Through the institution of the monarchy a new aspect of the character of God was revealed to the people. God was both king and

---

[21] Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 120-140.

servant. From the beginning the relationship of the king to God was debated among the people. Samuel and others felt that to have a king would mean that the people certainly would reject God as sovereign Lord (1 Samuel 8). But God found another way, difficult as that might be. They could have a king, but then he was to be crowned "son of God" (Psalm 2), be a servant of God and do the will of God. As servant of God, the king could be instrumental in leading the people to walk in the way of truth.

The actions of God were accommodated to the choices of the people also in another way. Through the monarchy the promise of Messiah was made known to the people by the prophets. This Messiah, this king, would be a prince of peace, a righteous ruler, a servant of the people. In his Servant Songs[22] the prophet Isaiah made it known that this king would be a suffering, dying servant. However, the people did not understand what this meant.

Through the monarchy it became known to the people that God is a *servant* to the people even though God is sovereign Lord. This basic revelation was so strange and, in the context of the autocratic monarchies of the day, so unacceptable that it was lost in the shuffle of king following sinful king. The rejection by the kings of their servant role under God had its consequences. The people suffered untold loss and, in the end, exile.

Isaiah's prophetic vision went even further to suggest that, in essence, God is the *suffering servant.* God gives life to the people but they reject the giver of life. God suffers the rejection of creation and of the chosen people, people who have come to know the redeeming, covenanting God. God suffers because people are invited to life through the appointed servant but reject him.

The full account of God's suffering love came to be known in Jesus. God came in human flesh, as a human person, to make God's appeal to the people. Now they could see the sovereign lord, the king or Messiah (Anointed One), in a human person. Surely they would follow him! But they did not. Jesus was crucified as a false teacher, as a blasphemer against God and as a traitor to the emperor. But he was lord and king nevertheless.

Notice that Jesus as king is not the autocratic despot of earthly lords. He remains the servant king. He is the *defenceless,* superior power. He is the suffering servant of God who asks only to do the will of God. That he remains sovereign lord and king of kings is made evident in the resurrection. He is shown to be victorious over all powers, whether in heaven or on earth (1 Peter 3:22).

The ethical implications that flow from this revelation of the

---

[22] Isaiah 42:1-4, 5-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

character of God are most difficult for humans to accept. They are dismissed outright by the unbelieving world as foolishness, by the people of God as a stumbling block. The reason is that God never uses power as might against people but only for people. God uses the power of love, not the power of brute force that overpowers others against their will. Jesus shows most clearly that God respects humans as persons.

We can hardly imagine a world where power and violence are not used toward good ends. How could the state exist without power? How could evil be punished or deterred without it? Any suggestion of a world without the use of physical and violent power is absurd to most people. They would rather opt for the model of the kings who renounced their servant role and became autonomous, autocratic and despotic lords. At least they created some kind of order!

The sad thing is that the church also has bought into this worldly and ungodly pattern of leadership. It has gone so far as to suggest that the state in its violent use of the sword—in war and peace—is the servant of God! But how can this be the case when Jesus as God incarnate did not call down an army of angels to save him from death on the cross, when the only power Jesus used was the power of love, when the only action Jesus took was to do what was right? Zechariah already knew that God does not work by might or power but by the spirit of God (Zechariah 4:6).

Christians have followed the model of worldly power also by living comfortably in the structures of society. Patriarchal family patterns are accepted as self-evident; hierarchical structures in business, in the professions and in education are readily accepted; training persons in the skills of manipulating people are not questioned; in the church bishops and pastors are invested with power over people in spite of the biblical admonition not to lord it over others (1 Peter 5:1-3). All too often the church has been happy with the structures of power.

As Christians we need to remember what it means for God to be sovereign. The character of God's love is never violated in God's actions. Jesus instituted no programs to force people to do his will. Jesus did not vest any office in Jerusalem or in Rome with power of violence over people. Jesus relied on the power of truth, of goodness and of love and justice. Such reliance on love could become for the church its clearest witness. It would show most clearly the new reality to which Christians are calling people. It would demonstrate a power that does not come from within but from God.

Remembering the judgements of God. The story of God's people repeatedly refers to the judgements of God on an erring and rebellious people: judgments against the children of Israel in the desert,

against Israel when they occupied the land, against David and most of the other kings in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Whenever the people of God defied the covenant they were punished.

In one sense it seemed natural that judgements were necessary. If God created the universe and established the moral order and if by their action people shunned the good and chose evil, then they must suffer the consequences of their choice. We expect that kind of judgement on our actions.

But the more difficult question is: In what sense can this be said to be the judgement of God? God is not a capricious God and does not take revenge nor delight in the death of the wicked. God never acts out of character. God is always and ever the God of love, goodness, righteousness and wisdom. Clearly, we cannot think of judgement in terms of an angry, vindictive God.

We experience judgements of God in the sense that they are occasioned by what God has done. If we accept that God has ordained the moral order, we also understand in what sense God judges us. God established purposes and ordained that those actions which were in harmony with God's purposes on earth would work toward wholeness of life; those actions which were in rebellion to God's will would lead to judgement and death. That is, they are judgements of God because God created the universe that way.

The judgements are of God also in that they are occasioned by God's revelation of the truth. When God gave people the law they could distinguish good from evil. Without that revelation there would be no knowledge of sin, no realization that what they experienced was really a judgement of their sin. Revelation of truth judges and exposes the false and the untrue. Goodness judges evil and love judges hatred, anger and ill-will. Judgements are not pronouncement on sin except through the revelation of the true, the good and the right.

When exhaustive categories are used, statements which appear contradictory can both be true. We find this to be the case with respect to Pharaoh. His rejection of Moses' requests for his people led to judgement. The narrative indicates that Pharaoh hardened his heart against God (Exodus 8:15) and that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 10:20). Both are true. Pharaoh was responsible for his repeated rejection of God's call. In this sense Pharaoh hardened his heart against God. But Pharaoh would not have hardened his heart if God had not come with requests to which Pharaoh had to respond. In this sense the appeal of God, or the word of God, occasioned the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh is culpable for his actions and the hardening of his heart is a judgement on sin. God's intentions with Pharaoh were not evil. In fact, he had repeated opportunities to respond differently.

In Jesus we see the character of God most fully and most clearly. We see no evidence of a vindictive, angry God. We see rather a person who is set against all that entices people toward evil and against God. In fact it was Jesus' zeal for God that caused his crucifixion in fulfilment of Psalm 69:9.

Christians are not asked to punish evildoers and to avenge the evil which people have done. God said, "Vengeance is mine" (Romans 12:19). That is, God will deal with evil in God's way. We are not to play at being God. This is difficult for us because we feel sin must be dealt with. As Christians we are never asked to change our character in order to deal with evil. We should continue to act out of the love of God. Like Jesus, we are to speak the truth of God and in that sense judge the untruth of the world. John tells us, "This is the judgement, that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

We are called to live as people of God who manifest the character of God in all we do. We are called to represent Christ in word and deed. We are not to become culpable for evil nor are we to do evil in order to accomplish good. We are not to take judging into our own hands and thereby put ourselves under judgement (Matthew 7:1). Rather, we are to proclaim and live by the truth of God and in this way judge what is against the truth.

Remembering the blessing of God. "Blessing may be understood as a performance utterance, the effective activity of pronouncing and bringing about good for someone else."[23] In this sense blessing is related to all God's work in the world. In Genesis 1:22,28 the blessing of God is related to the power of fertility given to living creatures. It provides for the possibility of generation following generation to assure continuing life on earth. It is related to successive generations (Genesis 5) and to the blessing of Abraham.[24]

God blessed all of creation by providing for each species of plant and each form of life on earth. The falling of rain on the earth is such a blessing and is seen by Jeremiah as fulfilment of the covenant (Jeremiah 14:21-22).

Claus Westermann emphasizes that the blessings of God should not simply be subsumed under God's saving activity.[25] They need

---

[23] William J. Urbrock, "Blessings and Curses," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, 755.

[24] The promise of a son, of land and of becoming a great nation are all related to the blessing received by Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3.

[25] Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 1-14.

to be distinguished from acts of intervention such as those in saving, freeing acts. God's blessing is the ongoing work of God in the world: sustaining life; nurturing growth, development and maturation; giving prosperity and success. Blessing relates to God's active work which leads toward wholeness, fullness of life, *shalom* or peace. Blessing speaks to the many contingent events in which God is present, events that are not easily recognized as saving events but that provide for human well-being.[26]

God's blessing is to be seen also in the dominion which God has given to humans on earth. Through meaningful, purposeful work, through naming and through making choices that benefit life on earth, the blessing of God comes to all humankind.

Furthermore, the blessings of God are associated with the ongoing way God works. When the children of Israel became established in the land, the daily provision of manna ceased. In the land, the temple rather than the ark became the centre of God's blessing. God blessed the kings who honoured God so the people could receive God's blessings through the king. In the same way the blessings of God were mediated to the people through the cult and through the priests who were responsible for worship and sacrifice in Israel.

In the New Testament the blessing of God in all its forms is related more specifically to character or being. The Beatitudes give us a picture of the person who will be blessed of God. This is a very different description from the one that is generally accepted in modern society. It calls for a person to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to hunger after righteousness, to be merciful and pure in heart, to be a peacemaker and be willing to be persecuted for what is right (Matthew 5:1-11). The book of Revelation also presents the blessing of God in terms of beatitudes.

In remembering the blessing of God, first of all, we return thanks to the creator. We acknowledge the goodness of creation and God's providence toward us. The recognition of God's blessing in creation opens us up to enjoy and dwell on whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and to what is excellent and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8). We bless or praise God for all that is good.

God also intends us to be a blessing to others. We are to relate to others in the same way that God has acted toward us. To bless others is to act toward them in such a way that they will be blessed of God in their lives. Peter indicates that Christians are to conduct themselves with honour so that others might see their good deeds and glorify God (1 Peter 2:12). His further exhortation is:

---

[26] Westermann claims that without this contingent and ongoing blessing of God there could be no history. Ibid., 5.

> Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing (1 Peter 3:8-9).

Our whole life is to be lived in such a way that, knowingly or unknowingly, God can bless others through us. This gives us a mission in life that is related to who we are and who we become in Christ.

~~~~~
~~~~~

6

JUSTICE AND THE BIBLICAL IMAGINATION

Harry Huebner

Previous chapters have shown that the dominant way of thinking about ethics today, even among Christians, arises out of the act/decision model. This approach is problematic because it makes personal freedom and moral autonomy both the foundation and the goal of morality. And this, in effect, makes ethics atheistic because it dislodges the norm for earthly living from its divine source.[1]

The implication of this way of thinking is equally serious for the church. It renders the church impotent as a community that can re-empower the biblical imagination through recollection and appropriation. If our consciousness is claimed by perceptions and rhetoric which are inconsistent with the biblical imagination, how can it be a sign of God's graciousness fostering a Christian view of existence?

Narrative ethics[2] which often is seen as an alternative position to

---

[1] An earlier draft of this chapter was presented on April 22, 1987, as the Herman Enns Memorial Lecture at MacMaster Divinity School, Hamilton, Ontario. Subsequently the lecture was published in *Theodolite* 8, no. 3 (1988): 2-15. It has been revised substantially and is re-presented here with permission.

[2] See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); John H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986).

act/decision ethics[3] is gaining momentum among Christian ethicists and is unique precisely at the point of the concern about the church as moral community. Narrative ethicists invoke a different family of terms for talking about Christian faithfulness, terms such as character, virtue, story, convictions, vision, discipleship and community. Their argument is that the question, "What kind of people are we?" is a more fundamental question than, "What should we decide to do?"[4] They believe that only when we conceive of the Christian life as participation in and appropriation of the biblical narrative are we able to understand and then adopt virtues necessary to sustain ourselves as Christians in our complex world.

THE THESIS STATED

The central thesis of this chapter is that the basis of the biblical structure of justice is not the act/decision-oriented model of ethics to which we are accustomed. This does not imply, however, that the biblical view of life is premised on the inevitability of justice being forced on us by a deity who is unaffected by the will and decisions of the people. We are invited to participate. People are called to decision and action. This approach is best understood in the "being model" as explained in chapter 4. Moreover, the God of the Bible does not merely point in the general direction of justice which we are called upon to implement to the best of our abilities (utilitarianism). The God of Israel and Jesus invites a people to participate in God's justice—a community willing to commit itself to being radically open to God's will and guidance. God wills to create a people in contradistinction to those who see God as an intrusion into their lives. God invites a people to claim the stories of Israel and Jesus as their stories. Hence their ethic will be distinct. They will need to rely

---

[3] For a helpful analysis of act/decision ethics, see Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," *Mind* 80 (October 1971).

[4] This is a tricky distinction and warrants further explanation. To say that who we are determines what we do, rather than the other way around, is to point out that, unless our actions are rooted in our essential nature given by God, they have no defensible moral base. If who we are is determined by what we do, as the modern existentialists claim, then we are radically free to determine our own nature. Yet we need to take note of what the notion that our nature determines our actions presupposes: the incredibly unpopular modern belief in the givenness of our nature. That is to say, "who we are" means "who we are insofar as we are essentially human," not merely insofar as we have a past track record or a story. This latter view is represented by those who would say, "Since I am stubborn, do not expect me to forgive," or "In my family we have always done it this way." If the latter interpretation of human nature were accepted, then the theory being proposed would be quite hopeless. It would condemn us to historical determinism. As Christians, our humanness gets defined through the biblical imagination.

on models or paradigms which are particular to their own story.[5] The biblical structure of justice is rooted in the justice of God which becomes clear to those who are willing to be immersed into the story of God from Genesis to Revelation. Such a radical redefinition of justice necessitates a major modification of the contemporary Christian language of justice, especially regarding the role of the church.

Much has been written about the content of biblical justice.[6] We have come to see how God shows bias for the marginalized in society, how the prophets warned the people of the consequences of their sins and how they constantly reminded the people of their commitment: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [their] God" (Micah 6:8), how Jesus claims for himself the Isaiah 61 passage in which the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed are all to receive "good news." Recently scholars have made much of the notion that Jesus identifies fully with the prophetic justice tradition by claiming for himself the agenda of the "Jubilee Year," and that the message of Jesus was not any more or less "spiritual" than the message of the prophets.[7]

I have no quarrel with what is affirmed about biblical justice in these claims. Yet the urgent need today is to address the dominant tendency within contemporary Christian ethics to believe that we know how to act once the goal of God's kingdom has been clearly identified. This is not the case. In fact, knowledge of the good alone tells us very little. We all want to know how the good is achieved. For example, does God bring it about? Do we? If we do, what means are legitimate? The standard response has been to accept various forms of act-oriented consequentialism which presuppose that we ought to do whatever we can to bring about this God-given goal. Yet this approach does not adequately reflect the biblical structure of justice.

Hence, I will concentrate explicitly on the relationship of the

---

[5] For a helpful study on this subject, see Waldemar Janzen's forthcoming book, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* to be published by Westminster/John Knox Press.

[6] Some examples are: Robert J. Daly, *Christian Biblical Ethics: From Biblical Revelation to Contemporary Christian Praxis* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1984); Clinton E. Gardner, *Biblical Faith and Social Ethics* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1960); Richard M. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); T.B. Maston, *Biblical Ethics: A Guide to the Ethical Message of the Scriptures from Genesis through Revelation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982); Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[7] See especially, John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

content of justice to the means of justice. That is, what does the Bible tell us about how we are to be involved in bringing about God's justice? Such an agenda will require that we speak about some basic issues like: how the biblical character of God is portrayed, what the relationship between God and the people is, and how, out of this relationship, justice is to come about. All of these, of course, are major biblical and theological themes. Hence, one short chapter can only present an overview, not adequately treat the finer nuances.

THE "FALL"

One instructive story for understanding the biblical structure of justice, which is usually overlooked in this discussion, is the so-called "Fall of Man" in the second account of creation (Genesis 2:4-3:24). Note especially that Adam and Eve were asked not to eat of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (2:17).

Taken literally, this story forbids Adam and Eve from acquiring the knowledge of good and evil. What is even less comprehensible is that when they do acquire such knowledge they become sinners. What a startling observation! It seems to imply that our knowledge of good and evil is what makes us sinful.

Often theologians ponder the grounds for this prohibition. Gordon Kaufman, for example, says:

> It is in terms of the good/evil distinction that man's moral autonomy—and thus his freedom *from* God—becomes possible. The good/evil dichotomy serves as a kind of internal compass enabling men to chart their course, to decide and act and set purposes without reference beyond ourselves to the transcendent Lord of history. So they become their own masters, and the question of God's purpose for them drops out as superfluous. It is on the basis of "knowledge of good and evil" that every autonomous humanistic culture is created. Through this knowledge, as the serpent has claimed, man becomes his own lord: ". . . when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5).[8]

Karl Barth says very much the same: "When man thinks that his eyes are opened, and therefore that he knows what is good and evil, when man sets himself on the seat of judgement, or even imagines that he can do so, war cannot be prevented but comes irresistibly."[9]

---

[8] Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 354.

[9] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV, 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 451.

According to Kaufman and Barth (two strange bedfellows), the punch line of this story is that, because God alone is good, the advent of the knowledge of good and evil results in breaking the human relationship between creator and created. If we can know the good apart from God—via the products of nature itself, that is, by listening to the "wisdom" of serpents—then we, in our natural state, become God. We relate best to God when we "get in touch with ourselves." But let's get back to the story.

The story as presented has three principle characters: God, Adam and Eve, and the Serpent. It begins with an account of the creation by God of all that is, including Adam and Eve. God is creator! God gives life! God is good! The initial relationship between God and Adam and Eve is idyllic. A reciprocal openness exists between them, symbolized by intimate dialogue. This openness is not only found between God and the people but also among the people themselves. They were fully exposed to each other (naked) and to God, and this in a totally uninhibited manner (they were not ashamed). Nevertheless, God is clearly the One with ultimate authority.

As long as the relationship between Adam and Eve is superseded by an openness to God, everything is fine and life is beautiful. The problems begin when Adam and Eve's subservient relationship to God is put into question. "Did God say that he is the only giver of life? C'mon, you don't need God. Grow up! Become independent! Life apart from God is real life. Indeed, it will make you like God: you can determine your own destiny. You won't die if you turn from God; you will see life in all its fullness and splendour." (Isn't it amazing how much the serpent sounds like a contemporary atheistic existentialist?!)

Kaufman continues his interpretation of the story:

> It is significant that another creature than man first raises this question leading to man's critical reflection on his own being and his relation to the reality to which he is grounded. This reflective movement did not arise directly out of the immediate relation between God and man: that would be incomprehensible. Rather, the question about the relation to his creator arose for man because there was also a third thing to which he was related—namely ***nature***, the finite world around him, the context in which he had been placed. The fall occurred when man began to orient himself by and toward dumb, impersonal nature, thus turning away from God.[10]

This story is best interpreted with the aid of Paul Tillich's cate-

---

[10] Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology,* 355-6.

gories of autonomy and theonomy.[11] It invites us to look at life from a theonomous perspective—one that derives purpose and value from God rather than from the standpoint of our own and/or nature's ultimacy. It invites readers to consider their identity within the context of an intimate relationship with God. Sinfulness is presented in terms of any power that threatens the relationship between people and God. This relationship can be severed by becoming convinced of the ultimacy of something other than God. Pursuit of knowledge is one way in which such separation can happen. If the origin of our knowledge of good and evil is from outside our relationship to God—nature, the serpent, ourselves—it will indeed separate us from God, each other and ourselves. Hence it is not our knowledge of good and evil as such that is the problem but rather the fact that this knowledge is not rooted in the One who alone is good: God. The advent of autonomous or natural knowledge necessarily gives rise to insecurity and the need for self-justification. This results in shame. "They hid themselves" (3:8). It is not tolerable to be confronted by God when you, apart from God, have become like God—knowing good and evil. Then self-protection becomes the hallmark. Then both God and others become the enemy.

This story tells us that theonomous justice is justice properly understood and autonomous justice is no justice at all. The subsequent stories of the Flood and the Tower of Babel bear this out dramatically. Not only does God become excluded from the lives of the people but God becomes the enemy, the One who is ultimately wrong because the people are ultimately right. This is what happens when people claim to know good and evil apart from divine goodness.

GOD, THE GIVER

How can life be oriented from the standpoint that God is the sole source of goodness? The entire biblical story attempts to answer this question. For faithful people the question is, "How can we live in a way which shows that we know God? How can we allow God to shape our lives?" God wills that the people live justly, but does not impose that justice on them. God's will comes to the people as invitation and gift which they are invited to appropriate. God wills to be the giver of life. "I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Leviticus 26:12).

As the story develops, it becomes clear that God is also the giver

---

[11] See Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 44-48 and *Systematic Theology I* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 83-86 and 147-150.

of promises. Central to the story of Abraham is the promise: "I will give you descendants, and you will be the people of God." In the Exodus story, slaves are given freedom. In the desert when the people are hungry, God gives manna and quails. God gives the law to people so that they will remember who God is and who they are expected to be. And God gives land, a place of rest and security.

It is significant to note that people receive what is given to them because of who God is and not because of who they are. They have not earned or even deserved what they get. People receive not because they have a right but because God is gracious. God is the One who gives, gives, gives, as is emphasized repeatedly in the biblical story.[12]

> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . To your offspring I will give this land (Genesis 12:2-7).
>
> The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you (Genesis 35:12).
>
> It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all people. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors . . . (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).
>
> The Lord will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings (Deuteronomy 28:12).

To be defined by one's relationship to a giver-God makes us gifted people. In this way gifts are never neutral. Gifted people are those who act on what they have received, and hence hold out life to others.[13] The nature of such people is determined above all not by what they do or by how they define themselves, but rather by what God has done for them and how the relationship to a giver-God moulds them. Such people understand themselves as nothing in and of themselves and as the most precious of persons in relation to what they have received.

The biggest danger for gifted people is forgetfulness. In their forgetting they act unjustly. When people forget the primary relationship to the giver-God they cease seeing themselves as gifted

---

[12] I have found the writings of Walter Brueggemann helpful on this point. See especially, *The Land* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977) and *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978).

[13] See, for example, Proverbs 25:21, which is repeated in Romans 12:20: "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink."

people and become concerned about their own security.

The tendency to forget is directly related to the people's sense of their own autonomy. The more self-sufficient people become, the more they rely on something other than an open relationship with the giver of life, hence, the easier it is to forget. In the biblical narrative forgetting and injustice go hand in hand.[14]

> . . . take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Deuteronomy 6:12).
>
> Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes . . . when you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses . . . then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:11-17).
>
> Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshipping them (Deuteronomy 11:16).
>
> When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you . . . the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people (Deuteronomy 18: 9-15).

Those who help the people not to forget are called prophets. Their task is to remind the people who they are, hence, what they ought to do. Their primary message is to bring to memory what the people have been given. One of the most common misunderstandings surrounding prophecy is to see it as a call to social action while seeing the rest of the Old Testament as a call to be religious. This kind of bifurcation is thoroughly unbiblical. Prophets simply remind the people who they are under God and the consequences of forgetting that their identity is rooted in God. This is not a new call, rather the same call that came via Abraham. The story of God's people is thus united at the core. Being people of a giver-God means being those who care for their neighbour, who love kindness and walk humbly, who do not live by coercion or security. It means being invited to see life as a gift in that we relate to others like God has related to us.

---

[14] It is important to qualify these comments about forgetting. Forgetting is not bad in itself just as remembering is not good in itself. What is bad is forgetting God, the source of our identity as a people. What is good is remembering this source. In fact sometimes it is important to forget: "Forget what lies behind; forget your old nature; forget your temptations; forget what is false. Do not let what is not from God determine your being and actions. Forget it!" Yet it is in remembering the God who brought us out of the land of Egypt . . . that we come to understand ourselves properly as people created in the image of God.

> Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place (Jeremiah 22:3).
>
> Enough, O princes of Israel! Put away violence and oppression, and do what is just and right. Cease your evictions of my people, says the Lord God (Ezekiel 45:9).

Gifted people live by being givers of God's life to others. Gifted people give of themselves; they do not hoard. Gifted people know no other God but the giver of life. Gifted people know that the meaning of life rests not on what they own or possess, but on what they give because of what they have received. Hence, the prophets can say, "If you do not turn from your ways of ungiftedness (injustice), then you will be destroyed." The way of injustice is fundamentally incompatible with the way of the giver-God. Hence it cannot be the way of salvation. Salvation exists in the way of God alone.

It is important when speaking about God, the giver, also to say something about punishment and judgement. Clearly the story of God's people does not move neatly in the direction of greater and greater liberation. Not only is there exodus, there is also exile; not only is there peace, there is also war; not only is there justice, there is also injustice. How is this to be understood?

It needs to be acknowledged that life based on the concept of truth requires a kind of disciplined instruction which alone can make knowing it possible. This is no less true of God-knowledge than it is of mathematical or scientific knowledge. The possibility of knowing truth implies the possibility of failure. However, since for God-knowledge, ultimate truth is at stake, failure is catastrophic. Lasting failure means death. Hence, assistance must be found and incentives must be employed in an effort to get people to turn around and remain disciplined pursuers of the truth. Furthermore, what would be the meaning of truth if rejecting it were without negative consequences? What could possibly be the reason for pursuing it? It is simply impossible to see God as the good creator without also speaking about judgement and punishment for those who reject God. What does not follow, however, is that we are bound to speak about judgement as emanating from the dark side of God, that is, from a quality inconsistent with the love of God. God wants all people in this world to see and do God's will. God does not have two natures, only one and that is goodness.

It should also be acknowledged that suffering can come precisely from doing the will of God. But this kind of suffering is different than that which comes from rejecting God. To view this kind of suffering as punishment and judgement would be nonsense.

JESUS-GOD

Jesus, like the prophets, sometimes is understood in discontinuity with the main emphasis of Old Testament Judaism. While it is true that he refined, critiqued and "fulfilled" the "law and the prophets" (Matthew 5:17), Jesus would have been appalled at the idea of beginning a new religion. No one understands more clearly than Jesus what it means to structure life in a gifted relationship to God. To illustrate this point let me highlight one of the many parables which Jesus told.

In the story of the so-called "Prodigal Son" Jesus speaks about all three elements I have already identified as crucial for understanding the biblical structure of justice: What is the character of God? How does this God relate to the people? What do the answers to these questions tell us about how the children of God should live justly?

The scene for this story in Luke 15 is set when Jesus is challenged to respond to the charge, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). A distinction is made between those inside and those outside the kingdom of God. And Jesus takes up the challenge in effect by saying, "Let me tell you about the insiders and the outsiders."

The story is a simple one. The father-God has two sons. That is, both insiders and outsiders are God's children. This simply affirms the givenness of creator-God. God created all people, the difference is: one accepts the gifts of the father, the other rejects them. Throughout the story we are not exactly sure which of the two sons is the real outsider. One chooses to remain, the other chooses to "de-father" himself. But the loving father-God responds with exactly the same graciousness to both. There is only one God; there are two kinds of people: those who allow God to embrace them and those who do not.

According to ancient Palestinian culture, the father would have been in the right to disown the younger son completely.[15] He would have been justified in beating and even killing him. After all, in requesting his inheritance out of season, the son was declaring impatience for his father's death. Yet the father never wavers in the desire to have his son restored to full life. Instead of punishing him for making an unjust request, the father simply grants it.

The story emphasizes that the father's love for his son ultimately makes it possible for the son to return. When he does return, there is full restoration of sonship. When the son attempts to work himself

---

[15] I am relying for my interpretation of this parable on Kenneth Bailey's very interesting study, *The Cross and the Prodigal: The 15th Chapter of Luke Seen through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1973).

into the good graces of his father with a face-saving speech, the overbearing compassion and extravagant love which the father showers on him results in the son's convenient amnesia. The restoration of the relationship is not dependent upon what the son brings to the father, rather on what the father gives to the son. What *does* depend on the son is his openness to the father's graciousness.

Meanwhile, the older son—the supposed insider—is expected to respond as the father responded to the younger son. "It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive . . ." (Luke 15:32). To be in relationship with the father you were expected to reflect the same character of graciousness and compassion in response to your siblings—insiders and outsiders. The older son refused to act graciously toward his brother because he had closed himself off to the father's love, thereby, in effect, becoming the real outsider. That's the issue in the parable: Are you open or closed to having God's graciousness transform you into merciful and loving people?

In this story, as in earlier ones, the nature of the father-God is seen as compassionate and loving toward his children. Justice is not seen in terms of desert or merit, but the justice of God comes via forgiveness. Of course, forgiveness is fundamentally unjust from the standpoint of any natural concept of justice. Forgiveness is not deserved; forgiveness is not fairness; forgiveness ignores the natural balance between pleasures gained and pleasures sacrificed. Forgiveness is the prerequisite for coming into honest and open fellowship with God, hence is also the prerequisite for lasting fellowship with other human beings. The justice of God is grounded on forgiveness.

CROSS-RESURRECTION

Since Jesus is the Christ, the cross-resurrection becomes the central symbol of the justice of God. We must reject those interpretations of the cross that see the suffering which it symbolizes in discontinuity with the nature of God.[16] Since Jesus is the Christ the cross must be seen as the godly way of dealing with sin. The cross is the only way that sinners can be made just—can be justified. That

---

[16] For the classical modern text which defends this theory, see J.K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1926). Here the argument for interpreting the cross is to associate it with the human Jesus. Jesus suffered insofar as he was human and was raised insofar as he was divine. Hence the separation between divinity and suffering can be neatly maintained. However, the problem is that this makes sense only via artificially importing categories into the story. The biblical story suggests that God is profoundly present in the suffering of Christ. In fact it is the people—the disciples—who remain absent (see, for example, Mark 14:37-42).

is, the cross—suffering—symbolizes that God is the only One who can justify (make things right). In this way the Prodigal Son story is actually a story of the cross-resurrection. In fact, the cross-resurrection is the biblical symbol of God's way of bringing about justice for the individual as well as for society.

I know of no better way to explain how the cross does this than already has been done by John Howard Yoder in *The Politics of Jesus:*

> The triumph of the right is assured not by the might that comes to the aid of the right, which is, of course, the justification of the use of violence and other kinds of power in every human conflict; the triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of any calculation of causes and effects, not because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys. The relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.[17]

Therefore the cross-resurrection symbol expresses simultaneously who God is, who God's faithful ones are and how justice is to be brought about. It suggests that the embodiment of God's holy will is the only requirement of those who claim to be God's people. Through it God will be victorious even if its immediate effect for us is suffering and death. This symbol demonstrates that the just response—the giver-God response—to sin is the response of the radical embodiment (incarnation) of life as gift. That is, it is the refusal to sacrifice character in exchange for expedience.

Nowhere is the connection between the embodiment of God's love and the cross stated more clearly than in the exchange that takes place between Jesus and his disciples at Caeserea Philippi (Matthew 16:13-28). When Jesus asks his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" (16:15) and when Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus assumes that they have understood what he has answered. So he proceeds to be open and honest with the disciples and talks of the suffering which is inevitable in the face of the evil around them. But alas, Peter did not understand and suggests that this could never happen. Jesus' rebuke, ". . . you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (16:23) is instructive. From God's standpoint, the embodiment of redemptive love is the only saving response to evil and this cannot rule out suffering. If the possibility of suffering rules out bearing witness to God's love,

---

[17] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus,* 238.

that indeed reflects a lack of faith in God's redemptive power. Jesus then tells the disciples what is in store for them if they want to be his disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (16:24). That is, if you are of Christ—a Christ-ian—then you are actually being transformed by the love of God. Then your character will be such that you will want to overcome evil the same way God does: via the incarnation of God's love. Then suffering cannot be ruled out and, more importantly, it can be endured.

Lest this sound too abstract, consider another biblical parable. Jesus was always quick to become practical. One case in point is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Not unlike the Prodigal Son story, this is a specific example of how to "take up the cross." The religious leaders who were berated in this story had forgotten how to be open to the giver-God of Abraham, Sarah and Moses. Hence they had forgotten how to be neighbour. The Samaritan, who is commonly seen as the outsider—the one who had forgotten his tradition—becomes the insider—the one who remembers God's mercy. He takes enormous risks (the cross) to his personal life simply to be to the robbed what compassion compelled him to be. We have all heard sermons that develop what dilemmas the Priests and Levites might well have had when they encountered a person who was "half dead." Taking the many complex factors into proper account resulted in the decision that the risks were too high. The expedient choice was to pass by uninvolved. The Samaritan acted on mercy and compassion, not because his risks were not just as high, but because that was how he had been fashioned by his open relationship to giver-God. His decision was not made by counting the cost; it flowed from the virtues which shaped his life.

POWER AND EVIL

I conclude the analysis of the biblical structure of justice with a brief look at the book of Revelation. This book is confusing and difficult in its complex symbolism, yet it is absolutely clear about one thing: evil is rampant now but it will be overcome in the triumph of the One who was slain. This One is called the Lamb, because he is a follower by nature, a follower of the truth of God.[18]

One of the key battles which the early Christians faced is how to respond to the evil around them. This is not unlike Christians everywhere. Revelation 13 gives a helpful perspective on the nature

[18] Some of the thoughts in this section have been inspired by Vernard Eller, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible: Making Sense out of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974).

of evil and how the followers of the Lamb are to respond to it. The chapter makes reference to two beasts, the Sea Beast and the Earth Beast. Both symbolize social-political structures of evil. The Sea Beast is given all manner of power: it is haughty and blasphemous; it is allowed to exercise power for a time; it makes war on the saints; it has authority over every tribe, tongue and nation; it is all-powerful, at least so it seems; it recognizes no God above it. And people worship the beast because it has so much power. They say, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it" (13:4b)?

The Earth Beast is much like the Sea Beast. Its duty is to get all inhabitants of the land to worship the Sea Beast. "It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all" (13:13). This beast exercises full control over all its citizens. There is no buying or selling apart from allegiance to the beasts.

So what does this mean? Let me suggest three things. First, these powers flourish through legitimate structures of order in every society. The state is a special symbol of this but it is not the only evil power. Other structures—economic, health, poverty, education, religious—even the structure of language and thought itself, must be included.

Second, these structures of evil are empowered by sin and by disobedience to the purposes of God. There is no neutrality with respect to the powers. If we are not against them, then we are for them. If we do not oppose them, then we support them. The powers thrive on loyalty and worship. They die without it.

Third, the powers are powerless over those who refuse to worship them. Even if they kill us, the basic question is: Whom did we worship? Did we put our trust and our hope in the power of the Lamb or in the powers which can deliver some things but promise to deliver everything? Ultimate victory rests alone with the power of the Lamb.

Chapter 6 in Revelation refers to the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Each symbolizes an evil power structure in society. There is an interesting contrast between these horsemen and the one on a white horse in chapter 19 who is described as "Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges (19:11b)." This One is the Lamb that was slain and in him there is true victory; all other horse riders are false pretenders.

Let us review the honour guard—the characters of these four "living creatures"—who promise the very meaning of history and life, yet are unable to deliver on their promise. Enter horseman number one: "I looked and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer" (6:2). A bow is an instrument of war, a crown, a symbol of royal power. Kings and nations make war to bring about what they desire. They do not need God; they *are* God.

Enter horseman number two: "And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men would slay one another; and he was given a great sword" (6:4). This rider is an agitator. He is able to turn peace into war. We are not told how, whether through revolution or guerilla warfare, through education, through selling arms. Or might it be that he was the great polluter of the earth? We are not told explicitly. All we are told is that he makes a peaceful earth unpeaceful.

Enter horseman number three: "I looked and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, 'A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and wine'" (6:5b-6). This is an interesting image, perhaps one which is less glorious than the others. Perhaps the black horse symbolizes a more subtle temptation. What is his platform? He is a merchant—not any old merchant but an exploiter and a manipulator. He controls the prices of food; he controls the products. And why the reference to not harming olive oil and wine? Oil and wine represent the rich. The hallmark of this horseman is the exploitation and manipulation of the poor and the protection of the rich.

Enter horseman number four: "I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth" (6:8). Perhaps the strangest of all images—one who kills for no apparent political reason. But perhaps not so strange after all. We might well know this horseman by a different name: disease, famine, plagues, natural disasters, substandard housing, alcoholism, drugs, sexism, racism, AIDS. We could go on!

The two beasts and these four horsemen represent the powers of evil in our world, those powers which exert all that lies within them to deter the redemptive will of God. They are powers that emanate from pride and hubris; powers that get us to think that we are God and that a living, saving God does not exist; powers that feed our appetite to conquer and control; powers that get us to exploit the earth, to abuse fellow human beings, often the very ones we love most; powers of greed that increase poverty; powers of profit and structurelessness that promote loneliness, drug dependency, crime and death; powers of racism and segregation. The destructive powers are as rampant around us as they were for John the Seer. We also can see them once we are able to look with the compassionate eyes of the Lamb.

The text continues with an image that is out of step with the former ones.

> I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed (6:9b-11).

The martyrs, the witnesses, cry out to God. When will justice come? When will poverty be no more? When will crime cease? When will the oppression stop? These cries come from the ones who had stood up for the truth of the Lamb. They were the ones who said "No." No to the evil powers—and the powers killed them. No to structures of injustice, poverty, illness, wife and child abuse, sexism and racism—and the structures devoured them. No to violence—and violence consumed them. No to war—and war destroyed them. No to death—and death took them. These are the saints and their cry is heard even after their death. Killing the truth does not silence it. The cry of justice is heard even when the just ones die. The cry of peace knows no end.

The last scene in this chapter portrays the whole earth dissolving into a completely new reality. This is the judgement and revenge that the saints longed for. The Sun and the Moon and the Stars all disappear; the kings and the generals, the slaves and the free—all are frightened and try to hide. But no one gets killed in this drama. In fact the text says that many beg to be killed by falling debris to escape from the "wrath of the Lamb" (6:16).

The wrath of the Lamb! What is this? What a contradictory image. How can lambs—innocent followers of the master, willingly led to their deaths rather than defending themselves—be wrathful? Surely this twisted imagery is not accidental! The Lamb has as its only weapon the exposure of falsehood by following the truth. This is the wrath of the Lamb, the power of the Lamb. When the truth comes in its fullness, then that which it exposes as false will be judged.

Revelation 4 and 5 emphasize more directly the role of the church. The Lamb, the One who died and now lives, has just spoken to the churches. The churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea are addressed specifically.

The scene is again complex in its symbolism, but in the basics it is quite simple. History is put on stage.[19] The drama of life is

[19] For a helpful interpretation of Revelation 4 and 5 as an answer to the question of the Christian interpretation of history, see John Howard Yoder, "The War of the Lamb," chap. in *The Politics of Jesus*, 233-250.

envisioned. At the centre are the big issues of life: What is life all about? Who is in control? Who has the greatest power? What shape does this power take? The writer uses the language of thrones and dominions to answer these questions. There is one central throne with God almighty on it, the only One truly worthy of worship. And worship is the very thing the twenty-four elders, who represent the church, are engaged in.

> You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you create all things, and by your will they existed and were created (4:11).

Now we come to the absolutely fundamental questions: Who is this God? How does God exercise power? How does God rule the world and overcome evil? The elders seem to think that the answer to this question is self-evident. Power is power, is it not? Sovereigns are sovereigns, and when you are one you rule like one. But this is not the way the story goes. See what happens in chapter 5.

Here the discussion centres on who will open the scroll. "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seal" (5:2)? What is this question really asking? We might think that it means, "Who has been good enough to deserve the honour of doing this job for God almighty? After all, God is pretty fussy." But that is not what the story suggests. The scroll represents recorded history. So the question of who is worthy to open it means: "Who is able to tell us what history is really all about?" Who understands it? How can we make sense of it? What do history and the events around us look like from the standpoint of God, the sovereign One? What body, what force, what power is really in charge? How are we to understand the senseless poverty and injustice around us? "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seal?"

Immediately an answer presents itself, "Do not weep. See the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals (5:5)." Fear not, we know what the real power is. Power is power! The lion is a symbol of brute power: manipulative and destructive with physical prowess and top-down strength. It is so easy for us to think that there is but one kind of power: linear, goal-oriented power. Success, achievement-power! We are tempted to think that the only two relevant questions are: "What is the job that needs doing?" "Do we have the power to do it?" Yet the lion as a power-candidate cannot open the seal of the scroll of history. This view of power cannot disclose to us the meaning of the events around us. God does not rule history that way. If we want to see it as God sees it we must keep looking.

The full impact of this text is really quite remarkable, yet ex-

tremely hard to grasp. It suggests that history, from God's perspective, is not all about wars and death and crime and poverty, after all. What we hear, read and see every day is really not what it is all about! That is the illusion. The real thing is something else. Is this perhaps why some recent world events like the changes in Eastern Europe, in South Africa, in the Middle East are so unintelligible to the Western media? Have we really been so mesmerized with "the ones who have the biggest guns always win" logic of history that any other view is impossible to understand?!

The next paragraph in our text tells us how God rules history. "I saw . . . a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered . . . . He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne" (5:6b-7). And what happens? The people break out in worship and praise:

> You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth (5:9-10).

The lamb that was slain is the meaning of history. The lamb has the greatest power of all because it represents the redemptive power of God on the throne. Sovereign God is a ruler using Lamb's power. This is not a lesser but a greater power. It is the power of the cross-resurrection. It is the power of presence in the midst of pain being healed. It is not manipulative and success-oriented power which always rebounds with even greater evil. Jesus died because he gave up his interest in this form of power.

The last part of this text gets even more unusual. Let me repeat it:

> You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, *and they will reign on earth* (5:9-10, italics mine).

Who are "they?" The text calls them "the ransomed of God"—the church—who are to reign on earth. We, the body of Christ, have become centre stage in God's historical drama! The non-illusory, real history of God puts the church at the centre. This sounds so strange to our ears that we immediately think it cannot be taken seriously. But this is exactly what the text says and we have every reason to believe that this is what it means. When we think about this further, we ought not to be that shocked. God has always sought to

rule the world via the faithful community of believers bearing witness to God's truth. To say this slightly differently, the rule of God always has been manifested via the incarnation of God's word. The children of Israel are an example of this; Jesus is the paradigm. The fact that the church is called to the same witness should not be that surprising.

However, the call to the church that it should rule the world does not mean that all of us ought to seek to be presidents and prime ministers. Nevertheless, it does imply overt social and political involvement. Our problem is that the usual manner of conceiving of political and social relevance is through the top-down, manipulative model of power. This model is rejected in the biblical story. That story is essentially about another model of ruling. It is the way of the Lamb. It is about simply speaking the truth. It is about the weakness of manipulative power and the ultimacy of God's redemptive power. It is the incarnation of the good news of peace, wholeness and justice where it hurts. The church is called to be that power. This is cause for worship and celebration. The good news is that God's ultimate power will redeem suffering. Even better news is that we mere mortals can already participate in this redemption.

GOD, CHURCH AND JUSTICE: A SUMMARY

I have suggested that the biblical structure of justice is best understood in relation to three questions: Who is God? What is the character of the faithful community? How can we understand our involvement in bringing about justice in this world? I have presented the following biblical answers to these questions. First, the overwhelming biblical motif is that God is a giver-God, gracious, the absolute standard of goodness, the One who becomes radically present in this world (incarnation) in order to redeem us from destruction. Second, the community of Christ's disciples is called to concentrate on being open to the story of Israel and Jesus which promises to shape it into God's faithful people. Third, the church is to be involved in bringing about justice in the world by bearing witness to the goodness and mercy of God in both word and deed.

In this section I will show how each of the three guiding questions has become a focus for debate among contemporary theologians. I do this to indicate the centrality and importance of these questions for contemporary Christian ethics and to provide a kind of theological road map for the integration of theology and biblical studies—a task all too necessary within contemporary theological scholarship.

The *first* question deals with the character of God. One of the major juggling acts within modern theology has involved finding ways of speaking about both the transcendence and immanence of

God. Those who emphasize the former are preoccupied with the otherness and authority of God and are criticized for making God irrelevant to human needs. Those who focus on the latter speak about radical presence but are faulted for portraying God as all too human, therefore incapable of lifting us out of our misery. If the debate is taken far enough one discovers rather quickly that the issue centres on the interpretation of christology. It is clear that Jesus Christ was radically present in this world and all the early church creeds confess that he is God. Hence, according to orthodox theology both transcendence and immanence must somehow come together in Jesus.

If the matter is pushed further than christology one realizes that a crucial aspect of the discussion is the "impassibility of God" thesis, that is, the notion that God cannot suffer.[20] Traditional thinking has often posited that "suffering is intrinsically evil."[21] Since God is good, it is impossible for God to suffer, the argument says. How one settles this matter, perhaps more than any other, determines how one integrates transcendence with immanence.

It is instructive to note that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the first modern theologians to question seriously the traditional wisdom on the impassibility of God—instructive because he knew something of the cost of discipleship. He experienced suffering and eventually martyrdom because he directly confronted evil. But what was his theological rationale for doing so?

Bonhoeffer puts himself squarely over against the mainline Barthian interpretation of God as the dominator of humanity, that is, against the radical transcendence of God. The God of Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer argues, does not save us by having dominion over us but through suffering with us as only God can. From this conviction he draws conclusions about his own identification with the suffering victims of Nazism. He argues that at the centre of God's revelation through Jesus is not the power displayed by God through the resurrection event—this power of God over life and death had always been known and was never in dispute for the people of God. What came into especially clear focus in the Christ event was God's healing power through suffering on the cross, the power of God's willingness to become radically present with us as a medium of

---

[20] For a helpful summary of this discussion, see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1974); also Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

[21] Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses in the Philosophy of Religion*, 2d series (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1926), 199.

redemption. God through Christ Jesus is willing to give up one kind of power—the power that destroys the evildoer (remember the rainbow!)—for another kind of power—the power which remains faithful to the truth that God's mercy, love and compassion, not destruction and violence, are at the core of life.[22] That is, in essence Jesus suffered death on the cross because he refused to sacrifice character for expedience. He bound himself unwaveringly to God's compassion. It takes as much power to remain steadfastly good as it does to radically change things from evil to good. God in Christ has done both.

Bonhoeffer argues that what makes us Christian is our ". . . participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life."[23] We are called to seek out places of suffering in the world, then go there and represent the redemptive love and mercy of God. This act of participation in divine suffering brings the healing presence of God—the suffering One—to the suffering ones. In this way, God's loving presence can heal and redeem.

Scholars like Jürgen Moltmann, James Cone, Geddes MacGregor, Daniel Day Williams, Warren McWilliams and Rosemary Haughton[24] challenge the hitherto virtually uncontested belief that God cannot suffer. All take the cross seriously as an event of God, that is, as centrally revelatory. They argue that it is precisely via the cross that God becomes real to us. Since Christ suffered, God also suffered. Since Christ suffered as a result of human sin, God continues to suffer because of human sin. The suffering of God in Christ is no accident. It flows naturally and logically from God's loving presence and the fact of evil. If God were not loving, God could avoid suffering. Since God *is* love, God cannot avoid suffering.[25]

---

[22] For a distinction between "character power" and "linear power," see my article, "Christian Pacifism and the Character of God," chap. in *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1990), 247-272. I should perhaps add that I do not take this motif of the suffering presence of God to be all that new with Jesus. It is part and parcel of the giver-God notion which we have spoken to earlier in this chapter.

[23] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enl. ed., ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 361.

[24] See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God;* James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1975); Geddes MacGregor, *He Who Lets Us Be: A Theology of Love* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1975); Daniel Day Williams, "The Vulnerable and the Invulnerable God," *Christianity and Crisis* 22 (5 March 1962): 27; Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God*; Rosemary Haughton, *The Passionate God* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1981).

[25] It is interesting to note that this notion of a suffering God is defended not only by Christian scholars but also by some Jewish scholars. Elie Wiesel, particularly in his novel *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1960), makes this

Thus the justice of God entails the suffering of God. God deals with the suffering ones and with those who wilfully violate God's way by being present to them in forgiveness and *agape.* Because this is the form of creator-God's presence, it is resurrection. Suffering presence for its own sake would be hell. Suffering presence for God's sake is participation in radical restoration: resurrection. Without the resurrection the presence of God in our suffering would be but a mocking presence. With the resurrection it is redemption. In this way peace and justice are seen as gifts from God.

Our *second* question deals with the character of the church in relation to God. The argument of this chapter invites us to consider relating the life of the church and the justice of God with the category, "participation." That is, we are invited to participate in God's redemptive activities in this world. To state the relationship in this manner avoids the pitfalls of both Social Gospel liberalism as well as the social irrelevance of the church which comes with modern conservativism.

I will present three contemporary Christian ethicists, who have addressed the question of the moral significance of the church in a manner similar to my proposal. They are John Howard Yoder (a Mennonite), Stanley Hauerwas (a Methodist) and James Wm. McClendon Jr. (a Baptist).

Already in 1961, Yoder wrote an article entitled "The Otherness of the Church."[26] In it he argues that the church properly understood is defined as a community of disciples. It must understand itself over against the rest of society which does not pattern its life after Jesus. Hence, the main task of the church is simply to concentrate on being what it is, namely, a body of disciples.

According to Yoder the church is the embodiment of the prophetic message of a minority witnessing to a majority. Hence, to say that the church is a minority is a theological, not a statistical claim. Yoder's view of the church is rooted in Bonhoeffer's view of God:

---

point quite dramatically. The Jewish philosopher, Hans Jonas, aligns himself with modern "process theology" and argues against the "omnipotence of God" thesis. His conclusion is that: "Having given himself whole to the becoming world, God has no more to give: it is man's now to give to him. And he may give by seeing to it in the ways of his life that [injustice] does not happen or happen too often." Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice," *The Journal of Religion* 67, no. 1 (1987): 12. It is interesting to note that Jonas accepts the thesis of the suffering of God. Nevertheless, his argument takes twists and turns that are quite problematic. For example, his conclusion is in continuity with the dominant argument of modern liberalism and is the very conclusion which I believe is not warranted by the biblical story.

[26] John Howard Yoder, "The Otherness of the Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35 (October 1961): 286-296.

its nature is best understood via the concept of witness, character power and even "weakness." Says Yoder, "Now that the church has become weak may we not recognize with joy that her calling is to be weak? Should we not, by definition and without reluctance, renounce all grasping for the levers of control by which other people think they can govern history?"[27]

Stanley Hauerwas essentially agrees with Yoder. He says, "It is in the church that the narrative of God is lived in a way that makes the kingdom visible. The church must be a clear manifestation of a people who have learned to be at peace with themselves, one another, the stranger, and of course, most of all, God."[28]

For Hauerwas the church is a sanctified people, set apart and pledged to be different from the world. Church and world differ not only in thought and belief but also in how each structures life. The church consists of a community of people called together by God to be a storied people, that is, an incarnational parable of God's healing love as manifested in Jesus.

Hauerwas makes several other comments about the nature of the church. First, the church is a social ethic.[29] Often we ask what social ethic the church has. This suggests that we can understand the church apart from its essential moral identity. A social ethic is not derived by the church via reflection on something other than itself. This will mean, among other things, that "the church does not let the world set its agenda of what constitutes a 'social ethic,' but a church of peace and justice must set its own agenda."[30]

Second, the church defines the nature of the world, says Hauerwas. Given that the church *is* a social ethic, it "helps the world to understand what it means to be the world. For the world has no way of knowing it is world without the church pointing to the reality of God's kingdom."[31] The essential difference between church and world is that the church consists of those people who have claimed the story of God to be their story; people of the world have not.

Third, according to Hauerwas the church is a community of virtues. To be the church we must continue to remind ourselves of who we are by re-embracing the Christian virtues to which we have

---

[27] John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution* (Scottdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1971), 116.

[28] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 97.

[29] Ibid., 99-102.

[30] Ibid., 100.

[31] Ibid.

opened ourselves. The church has certain virtues which other communities simply do not have: virtues such as faith, hope, love, forgiveness and patience. For the church to remain the church those who are its members must consciously and continuously cultivate, refine and practice the skills of living by the unique Christian virtues. This alone can make the church church.

James McClendon supports the views of Yoder and Hauerwas and suggests that the nature of the church ". . . is found in congregational reflection, discernment, discipline and action, whose model is nearer to the Wesleyan class meeting or the Anabaptist *Gemeinde* than to the denominational social action lobby agency or the mass membership churches of today's suburban society."[32] For him one of the key elements of the church has to do with the "politics of forgiveness."[33] ". . . my suggestion is that *Christian community is exactly one in which forgiveness not punishment is the norm.*"[34]

McClendon goes on to suggest that worship is one of the most powerful moral acts in which the church can engage. In worship the church defines itself through its devotion to God and solidarity with one another. In worship an entire community opens itself up to being shaped by the transforming power of God. To share in the body, the blood and the covenant is to share in the process of self-definition.

All three scholars agree that the nature of Christian justice is meaningless apart from the church and the justice of God. Therefore, the church is that community which sets itself apart from the rest of the world in order to bring to the world the reality of God through Jesus Christ. The church is that body of believers which lives in openness to God, ready and willing to receive the gift of God's graciousness and to be the sign of that grace to the world around it. This will inevitably drive the church into the heart of the world where it will testify to the goodness of God through such activities as feeding the hungry, comforting the sick, speaking peace to the conflicted, showing love to the unloved and being light to those in darkness.

Our *third* and final question deals with the character of the church in relation to justice in the world. How should the church be involved in the process of bringing about justice? Again conservative Christianity has tended to argue that this is not the task of the church at all, whereas liberals have suggested that it is enough for the church to ground its actions on the goals of the kingdom. The nature of the

---

[32] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 210-211.

[33] See especially, ibid., 219-230.

[34] Ibid., 224.

acts which can bring about justice must grow out of our own creative imaginations.

My contention is that the biblical story has addressed the "how" question concretely from beginning to end. Toward the end of the story the cross-resurrection event becomes an especially helpful symbol for understanding how justice is brought about even though the content of the symbol was repeatedly expressed in the Old Testament long before Jesus.

Several very helpful studies address this issue by discussing "the powers" which, in the New Testament, symbolize the structures of injustice.[35] Hendrik Berkhof and John Howard Yoder are especially helpful in their explication of a Pauline theology of power and in showing its implications for the church. They refer to the following passage of Scripture:

> And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us our trespasses, having cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. *He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him* (Colossians 2:13-15; italics mine.)

Berkhof points out that it is through the crucifixion-resurrection that the real nature of the powers comes to light. These earthly powers are not foundational. History is not ultimately moved by the accomplishments of earthly power struggles. History is ultimately moved by the power of the Lamb—the One who was slain. God's history is moved by grace, not by brute force. Hence, these powers are shown up for what they really are through the cross-resurrection. "Now they are unmasked as false gods by their encounter with Very God; they are made a public spectacle."[36]

---

[35] See, for example, Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962); G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956); Martin Hengel, *Christ and Power* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977) and *Victory over Violence: Jesus and the Revolutionaries* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1973); Albert van den Heuvel, *These Rebellious Powers* (London: SCM Press, 1966); G. H. C. MacGregor, "Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background to Paul's Thought," *New Testament Studies* 1 (September 1954): 17-28; Gordon Rupp, *Principalities and Powers: Studies in the Christian Conflict in History* (London: Epworth Press, 1952); Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers*, vol. I (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984); *Unmasking the Powers*, vol. II (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986); *Engaging the Powers*, vol. III (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987); John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, especially 135-162.

[36] Berkhof, 30.

Therefore the powers of injustice have been disarmed. Their power is derived from a reliance on untruth. They are able to convince people because the people allow themselves to be lured into accepting illusion for reality. Now that the Truth has appeared the powers of injustice are vanquished. Triumph can already be declared. ". . . wherever (the cross) is preached, the unmasking and the disarming of the Powers takes place."[37]

John Howard Yoder concludes from this view of the cross-resurrection that the church already has been liberated from the dominion of the powers. Hence, "the church does not attack the powers; this Christ has done. The church concentrates upon not being seduced by them."[38]

Therefore, the task of the church vis-a-vis injustice in the world is simply to bear witness to the redemptive love of God by being present to suffering people and to sin in the world. No greater love can be shown than for the church to lay down its life for the ones in our world who are deprived of life. The church's task is to bear witness to the truth, for it is truth's power that will set the enslaved ones free.

This is no mean challenge. It requires that we train ourselves to resist the temptations that entrap us. For example, one of the greatest seductive powers that the church is facing today is the lure of taking charge of history to make it turn out right. It is very difficult for us to be a servant community—a community that bears witness to the truth. The overwhelming temptation is to claim the truth, bend it, pry it and mould it to suit our own expedient goals. However passionately we may be concerned about injustice in the world, people of the cross are called to bear witness to the truth of God's grace and of God's willingness to be crucified rather than to destroy enemies violently. God refuses to participate in evil! We are called to do the same. God in Christ was willing to sacrifice his very life to bear witness to the fact that the power of love is more fundamental than any other power. Our challenge, especially in a technological world that worships the gods of control and self-determination, is to do likewise.

The way of justice for the Christian community is rooted in the character of the justice of God. God gives the disciples life through forgiveness and peace and, as gifted people, we can do no other to those who have been caught in the grips of injustice. We simply cannot respond to their injustice in violence or in hatred or in any

---

[37] Ibid., 31.

[38] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 153.

other way that compromises the justice of God. If we do, we become participants in and contributors to the very injustice which we are invited to overcome.

CONCLUSION

Biblical justice refuses to be separated from the concretely present love of God. Therefore it should not be surprising that those who adopt a biblical narrative approach to ethics find it difficult to speak about justice in terms of rights language which is the language of demands, or natural justice which is the language of desert and punishment, or utilitarianism which is the language of achieving results at all cost. The biblical structure of justice is fundamentally incarnational and hence witness-oriented.

This view actually makes it dangerous to see "justice" as the primary category for Christian social strategy. Justice too easily assumes its own rationale and definition uninformed by fundamental biblical convictions. In fact the concept of "justice" is not nearly radical enough to be the watchword for the Christian church. The Christian church is called to walk the way of Jesus Christ. Hence, unless justice is informed by discipleship and witness which is expressed through care for our sisters and brothers, it cannot be Christian justice.

~~~~~
~~~~~

PART IV

THE GOOD LIFE

We live in a society which believes that the good life is a life of freedom from outside impediments. In fact, often moderns are so blinded by the dogged quest for freedom of the individual to make personal choices that quite absurd notions result. For example, recently I heard the argument that a compulsive gambler should not be stopped from gambling because doing so would infringe upon his right to freedom of choice. The assumption was that as long as you "choose freely," the good life is assured.

The two chapters in this section address the question: If freedom of choice does not characterize the good life, what does? We contend that the concern with freedom is the wrong place to begin. Rather than asking, "How can we protect our right to act freely so that we can live the good life?" we argue that we should ask: "How can we train ourselves to live the good life so that we will not be lured into a life of enslavement to sin?" This question better guides us to the Christian view of the good life.

By now it will not be surprising to the reader that our answer to this question focuses on the church. In its normal practices of worship, discipling and virtues-training, the church can be the community which teaches us the liberating power of the gospel. It can become the alternative to the dominant culture which promises freedom based on the ability to secure its people with might. The church promises hope that the good life can be found as we bind ourselves to the life to which God invites us in order that we might be freed from the powers that wish to destroy us. That is, according to the Christian narrative, the good life begins with an account of what we are willing to bind ourselves to, not with what we must do to ensure the longevity of our freedom of individual choice.

Both chapters in this section centre on aspects of the Christian community which are intended to help people become the kind of people which God created them to be—people filled with "abundant life." The first chapter addresses the issue of what we are bound to within the Christian narrative and what this binding frees us from. In addition, it speaks to how we ought to see the relationship between church and world.

The second chapter explicates what it means to understand the church as a community of virtues. We examine how "putting on" the "fruits of the Spirit," according to Galatians 5, can shape ordinary people into a whole new reality in which the Holy Spirit dwells and through whom God's renewal of the world can become visible.

7

BINDING AND LOOSING: CHURCH AND WORLD

David Schroeder

When Jesus calls the people of God to become a binding and loosing community,[1] he invites the *church* to participate fully in God's work of redemption in the world. He invites the church to be in the world as he was in the world. Jesus came not to establish a new religion but to dedicate his ministry and give his life for this true covenant community of God. Jesus anticipated that this community would become a binding and loosing fellowship which would do God's work on earth.

The signs of this new community were evident already in Jesus' call of the disciples. He gave them a simple, straightforward invitation: "Follow me!" (Mark 1:16) and invited them to bind themselves to him. To obey this call involved leaving, that is, being loosed from father and mother. No one can obey this call without believing that Jesus has the authority to call people into God's service. This invitation is extended to all people, past and present.[2] The binding and loosing aspect of the call means that people are freed from bondage and bound to God's will.

Jesus distinguishes this community of followers from hereditary communities. The church is not based on blood bonds but on its

---

[1] See Matthew 16:13-19; 18:15-20; John 20:19-23.

[2] Jesus called twelve disciples to be with him (Mark 3:13-19). The number 12 makes the connection with the Israel of God. Jesus came to fulfil and complete the work that began with God's covenant people.

relationship to God. Jesus declares:

> "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:33-35).

He announces that those who bind themselves to the will of God are the people of God on earth.

Jesus gives a more detailed invitation to his disciples once they recognize, at least in some form, that he is the Messiah of God (Mark 8:27-30). He bids people follow him as he bound himself to do God's will. He knows that, as a consequence of his obedience to God, he will suffer and die,[3] and calls his disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34b). It is an invitation to bind themselves to God as Jesus did even if this leads to suffering and death; it is Jesus' invitation to be the church.

The binding and loosing function of the church in the world is part of the great commission which is given new meaning with the words, "I will make you fish for people" (Mark 1:17b). These words were given as part of the original call and when Jesus sent out the disciples as witnesses (Mark 6:7-13). The commission asks people to "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15), or as Matthew states it:

> All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

The task of evangelism is given in terms of inviting people to bind themselves to God and to the will and commands of God. Such binding implies a loosing from that which is not of God.

Jesus' call to be the church is given in a different way in his high priestly prayer (John 17). He first makes reference to having finished his work on earth (17:4) and having made God known in the world. Then he indicates in his prayer to God, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (17:18). It is clear that

---

[3] An announcement is made three times (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34), but each time it seems as if the disciples do not fully understand this call of God. It is understood fully only after the resurrection and Pentecost.

he expects his followers to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. He knows that the world will receive his disciples no more kindly than he has been received (17:14-15). Nevertheless, the church is to be the body of Christ in the world. As a binding and loosing community, the church participates in the work of God in the world and also proclaims how God works in the world. The church is to bind and loose the way God does. This connection will become clear as I review what it means for God to be present in the world.

GOD AS A FREEING AND COVENANTING GOD

God comes to humanity as a binding and loosing God. God frees us from bondage to sin and evil and invites us to bind ourselves to the purpose of God. When we do so, we are set free—loosed—to become the children of God. However, God does not bind us against our own wills. We are not compelled or forced to honour God. We are allowed to say "no" to God even though God's desire is for all to be saved and to receive life.

Each revelation of God includes the feature of binding and loosing. Each revelation requires a response of faith, trust and commitment—a binding—before it becomes operative in shaping the people of God. As people bind themselves to the revelation of God, they are freed from those things which keep them from God and from becoming the people they were destined to be in Christ.

Binding and loosing in the Old Testament. The direction of God's actions already are apparent in the Old Testament. Abraham and Sarah trusted God's promise of a son and were set free from bondage and fear of the future which accompanied childlessness.

Exodus and Sinai are the Old Testament's supreme examples of how God's acts of loosing and binding belong together.[4] The people bound themselves to God in their longing to be delivered from bondage in Egypt. When God miraculously set the people free from slavery, they knew God to be a loosing, liberating, saving and redeeming God.

The people had been freed from slavery, but they now needed to bind themselves to that which would bring life. God revealed to them in the law of Moses what that would be. If they bound themselves to the covenant law, to the will of God, they would receive true life. Exodus and Sinai do not stand alone but belong together as the loosing and binding work of God.

Similarly, if the kings bound themselves to the covenant in

[4] This has not been considered enough by some liberation theologians who place the emphasis almost entirely on the Exodus as a paradigm of liberation.

righteous and just rule, God blessed their reign. They were liberated from the power of their enemies and prospered in the land. But as soon as the kings trusted in their own strength and strayed from the covenant, they were taken into captivity.

In exile the people repented, acknowledged their sins and bound themselves anew to the covenant. They were freed once more to return to the land which God had given them. It was never a question of power and might. Liberation and life depended on both king and people honouring and serving God. It depended on the people binding themselves to the revelation they had received from God.

Binding and loosing in Judaism. The Exile in Babylon had a profound effect on the development of Judaism. Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem the people had neither believed nor heeded the prophets who charged that they were living in defiance of the covenant. In exile, they came to know the truth of the prophetic word. They repented of their rebellion against God and committed themselves to keep the covenant law. They bound themselves to the will of God. But they also realized that the law had to be interpreted correctly. Theologians, or scribes, arose who devoted their entire lives to studying and interpreting the Scriptures. Gradually over the centuries, in much of Judaism the task of binding and loosing was transferred to these scribes.

The scribes determined for the people what the law required, what was permitted and what was forbidden. Among themselves they debated possible interpretations and applications of the law. If an acceptable quorum of scribes agreed to an interpretation, it became binding on the people. Thus the will of God was mediated to the people through a casuistic interpretation of the law of Moses.

The binding and loosing which developed in this form of Judaism had its problems. For one thing, the requirements of the law multiplied with the years of interpretation. A whole body of oral laws was added to the written law. Also, the interpretation of the law focused more and more on determining which acts were required, permitted or forbidden. More and more the law became a set of requirements without righteousness, justice and love rather than an invitation to honour God. People bound themselves to keep the interpreted laws but they did not necessarily bind themselves to God.

Regardless of the context in which they were given, the laws of Moses were considered as binding for all times. They were not seen as laws pointing people in the direction which they should walk or pointing beyond themselves to the will of God which would be more fully revealed in Christ. Because of these shortcomings, Jesus was sharply critical of the practise of binding and loosing as exercised by the Pharisaic scribes.

Binding and loosing according to Jesus. Jesus understood Old Testament law as pointing to the will and purpose of God, not as the final or full expression of the will of God. Jesus could say, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer" (Matthew 5:38-39); "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44). The laws as stated in the Old Testament (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21) were truthful in leading the people away from a society of revenge, but they were not yet the full expression of the mercy, forgiveness and self-sacrificial love of God. The law pointed toward a fuller, more complete realization, to the ultimate statement of God's will which came in Jesus.

Jesus regarded binding and loosing as God did. He came to set people free, to save the lost and to reconcile them to God.[5] Jesus set people free from their bondage to the laws of the scribes. He did not dispute the zeal of the scribes nor their sincerity, but he rejected oral law as a full or final statement of the will of God.

In binding himself to the will of God, Jesus became free to reject the self-imposed customs of the scribes that kept people away from God and free to turn away from the traditions that separated Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles. Jesus saw slaves and women as responsible, accountable persons who were no less deserving than others of the love of God. Jesus had power to heal, to forgive sins, to cast out demons and to raise the dead. Jesus liberated people from the principalities and powers of evil and death.[6] In binding himself to God, Jesus withstood the temptations of the Devil to accomplish the work of God by some other means than by doing the will of God (Matthew 4:1-11).

In his earthly ministry Jesus demonstrated what it means to be truly human. He showed what it means to be a person in the image of God, obedient to God, manifesting the fullness of the spirit and character of God in this world. This exacted a tremendous cost, but it was Jesus' mission in life. He came to live out the truth of God in his own life, to proclaim it to all people and to invite them to bind themselves to the same truth.

Those who bound themselves to Jesus experienced the freeing, liberating and saving grace of God in their lives. Lepers and the blind received healing; prostitutes and despised tax-collectors were rein-

---

[5] In no way is setting people free to be interpreted in an absolute sense. The Bible knows nothing of freedom in the sense of doing what we please. We have freedom only in Christ. We are slaves either to the powers of darkness or to Christ.

[6] The Gospel of Mark sees Jesus' work of casting out demons as a manifestation of Jesus' power over Satan and over the principalities and powers of evil.

stated into the people of God; the poor and accused found an advocate in Jesus. All who responded to Jesus in faith and trust received life. In binding themselves to Jesus, they were free to be truly human; they were liberated from the powers that held them captive; they were freed to be God's people.

Jesus' binding and loosing ministry did not cease with his death on the cross. On the contrary, God honoured Jesus' life of obedience by raising him from the dead. The resurrection confirmed and vindicated the true and righteous life of Jesus. Love, forgiveness and justice were shown to have overcome the powers of evil and death. Furthermore, the resurrection indicated that the way of the cross is God's ultimate way of dealing with sin in the world. It confirmed that those who bind themselves to the truth, love and justice of God will be vindicated.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus also opened the way of salvation for others. Those who believed in him received the Holy Spirit and were born anew to a living hope (1 Peter 1:3). They received new life and were freed from a life lived to self. They became new beings in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:16-17). They were free to bind themselves to God, to purify themselves and to become more like Christ.

Jesus was both Lord and Saviour: Lord because they bound themselves to him, Saviour because they found salvation and liberation in him. The early proclamation to the people was: "Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). To express that Jesus was Lord meant that they accepted his will as binding for their lives.

JESUS' CALL TO THE CHURCH

Jesus expected the church to continue God's work of loosing and binding on earth, to manifest the character of God in its life and ministry. Three passages emphasize this commission of Jesus to the church: Matthew 16:13-19; 18:15-20; John 20:19-23.

Unfortunately, these passages have not received the discussion they deserve in the church, despite the attention they have received from scholars.[7] This may be true because of the interpretive difficul-

---

[7] Following are some examples: J. Duncan M. Derritt, "Binding and Loosing (Matthew 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102, no.1 (1983): 112-117; "'Where two or three are convened in my name . . .': A Sad Misunderstanding," *Expository Times* 91 (December 1979): 83-86; John H. Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," *Concern* 14 (February 1967): 2-32; J.A. Emerton, "Binding and Loosing—Forgiving and Retaining," *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962): 325-331; J.R. Mantey, "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20:23, Mt

ties presented by these passages, but surely that is not the only reason.[8] These passages place before the church an agenda which it is often unwilling to meet. They demand that we speak the truth to each other in love (Ephesians 4:15), painful as that may. They demand that we recognize our failures and shortcomings and help each other grow in Christ-likeness in our relations and in our deeds. The truth of the texts can be known only in the process of being and becoming a binding and loosing community.

Before I elaborate more fully what being a binding and loosing community might mean, let me consider these texts and sense the direction they take. Working through the problems of interpretation will allow us to focus more fully on their central meaning.

The relation of the texts to each other. The relation of the three texts to each other is important.[9] Matthew 16:19 is set in the context of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (16:16). Jesus indicates that Peter's knowledge of him has come via revelation. He changes Peter's name and gives him the keys of the kingdom of heaven (16:17-20). The passage in Matthew 18:18 is obviously related to 16:19 but is set in the context of Jesus' words on church discipline.[10] It is followed by Jesus' teaching on forgiveness of sins (Matthew 18:21-22).

16:19, and Matt. 18:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58, no. 3 (1939): 243-249; Henry J. Cadbury, "The Meaning of John 20:23, Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58, no.3 (1939): 251-254; W. von Meding and D. Müller, "Bind," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 171-172; C.H. Peisker and C. Brown, "Open, Close, Key," in ibid., vol. 2, 726-734; J. Jeremias, "Keys," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol.3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 744-753; Vacher Burch, "The 'Stone' and the 'Key' (Matt 16:18ff)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 52, no. 2 (1933): 147-152; D.O. Via, Jr., "Jesus and His Church in Matthew 16:17-19," *Review and Expositor* 55 (1958): 22-39; P.H. Menoud, "Binding and Loosing," in *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962): 438-439; Raymond F. Collins, "Binding and Loosing," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 743-745; Z.W. Falk, "Binding and Loosing," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974): 92-100; Richard H. Hiers, "Binding and Loosing: The Matthean Authorizations," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985): 233-250. For literature on Peter as the "Rock" see the bibliographic note in Max Wilcox, "Peter and the Rock: A Fresh look at Matthew XVI. 17-19," *New Testament Studies* 22 (October 1975): 73-88.

[8] Interpretations of Matthew 16:13-19 have focused mainly on the place of Peter in relation to the church. This preoccupation with apostolic succession has shifted the attention away from rather than taking into account the other references to loosing and binding.

[9] See J.E. Emerton, "Binding and Loosing—Forgiving and Retaining."

[10] Notice the reference to "temptations to sin" at the beginning (Matthew 18:7 *RSV*) and to, "If your brother sins against you . . ." at the end (Matthew 18:15 *RSV*).

At first sight John 20:23 seems quite different in that both its words and context differ somewhat from the Matthew passages. It states, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained." This statement is made after the resurrection in connection with Jesus' greeting of peace and the commission to go into the world. It is also given in the context of receiving the Holy Spirit. But its relationship to the passages in Matthew 16 and 18 becomes clear only when we notice that it speaks directly about binding and loosing.[11]

The fact that in all three passages Jesus is addressing the disciples regarding forgiveness of sin suggests that the commissions go back to a common tradition. In each case, the words of Jesus refer to a basic charge to the church: that it is to be a binding and loosing community.

Problems of interpretation. In Matthew 16:13-19, Peter is the central figure.[12] Peter, as an apostle and one sent by Jesus, is given special recognition in terms of his confession and in relation to the church. When we note how the singular in Matthew 16:19 is plural in Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23 it becomes clear that Peter represents all the apostles who in turn represent the church.[13] The word to Peter becomes a word to the whole church.

But what is meant by the "keys of the kingdom" in the context of Matthew 16:19? In Revelation 3:7, Jesus has the keys and is seen as the chief steward of the house of David. In Isaiah 22:22, the keys to the house of David were given to Eliakim who had authority to open and to shut.[14] In Matthew 16 Jesus is the lord of the house and gives stewardship of the keys to Peter, the apostles and the church. They are to execute the will of the master in relation to opening and shutting. By indicating what was required (bound) and what was permitted (loosed), the scribes exercised stewardship of the keys, but

---

[11] The words "binding" and "loosing" are not used but the meaning of "forgive" and "holding, retaining" are the same in relation to sin and in relation to the commission to the disciples.

[12] The play on the words "Petros" and "Petra" makes sense only if they refer to Peter.

[13] See J. A. Emerton, "Binding and Loosing—Forgiving and Retaining," 325-326 and Raymond F. Collins, "Binding and Loosing," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, 744. The prominence of Peter has received a great deal of attention in the Roman Catholic Church tradition. If the primacy of Peter was viewed as historical, then what was said to Peter would apply as well to the apostles as guardians of the tradition about Jesus.

[14] See W. von Meding and D. Müller, "Open, Close, Key," 732 and J. Jeremias, "Keys," 744-745.

they did not fulfil this function appropriately.[15] The "keys" emphasize the evangelistic, invitational ministry of the church.

What is "bound" in this action of the church? Surely it cannot be that the church determines what God will bind or that anything which the church binds automatically will be bound in heaven just because the church said so. If this were the case many contradictory things would already be bound in heaven! The translation, "will be bound," is a misunderstanding based on a mistranslation.[16] J. Duncan M. Derritt suggests that a better translation is: "shall be (already) bound."[17] J.R. Mantey translates as follows:

> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, but whatever you bind on earth *shall have been bound* in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, *shall have been loosed* in heaven (Matthew 16:19).[18]

This indicates that the disciples are not to exceed their power[19] but are to bind and loose only that which already has been bound and loosed in heaven. In his translation, Charles B. Williams uses "forbid" and "permit" with the same result: "Whatever you forbid on earth must be what is already forbidden in heaven."[20] What God has ordained, namely the moral order, remains and cannot be changed by God's representatives on earth. Hence, Jesus pointed to a binding and loosing which would honour what is already bound in heaven.

THE CHURCH AS BINDING AND LOOSING FELLOWSHIP

The church is first and foremost a binding fellowship. Members bind themselves to the truth of God, to each other in the community of believers and to a given place in the world. The church's basic

---

[15] Jesus chides the scribes for taking away the keys of knowledge by not entering the kingdom themselves and by hindering others from entering (Luke 11:52). See Kaufmann Kohler, "Binding and Loosing," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1925), 215; P.H. Menoud, "Binding and Loosing," 438.

[16] See J.R.Mantey, "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense" and Henry J. Cadbury, "The Meaning of John 20:23, Matthew 16:19 and Matthew 18:18."

[17] J. Duncan M. Derritt, "Binding and Loosing," 112. He claims that nothing is said about the abuse of this power but that it could only refer to that which is already bound.

[18] J.R. Mantey, "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense," 246.

[19] Mantey suggests that a proper translation does not allow priests as successors of Peter to claim that they have special or extraordinary powers to forgive the sins of people. He also suggests that the disciples are being warned not to bind and loose what was not already bound in heaven as the scribes did.

[20] Charles B. Williams, trans., *The New Testament: A Private Translation in the Language of the People* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1953).

commitment is to the love, truth and goodness of God which it has come to know through the revelation of God in history and in Jesus Christ.[21]

The binding and loosing of the church is often misunderstood or misconstrued. First, as stated above, the church or its representatives do not determine what will be bound in heaven. The moral order is given of God. We can only bind what is already bound in heaven.

Second, binding is not an imposition of a law or a set of principles but an endorsement of that which is true, right and good. It invites people to honour that which leads to life and wholeness of life as known in and through Christ. It is an invitation to participate in the reign of God on earth through following Christ. It is an invitation, not a demand.

Third, binding is a clear statement of the church's commitment, not an instrument of punishment for sin in which a person is excommunicated from the fellowship. If a person totally disagrees and does not bind him or herself to God's way, a break with the community in fact already has occurred. Excommunication recognizes this reality and is a formal act through which the church invites the person to repent and to return to the covenant with God and the people.

Christian communities often act in ways that make binding and loosing impossible. As John Howard Yoder indicates, this happens when we shift attention away from reconciliation to punishment, when we shift the focus from the person to the offense or when we become more concerned about the church than the person.[22] At other times, we do not allow binding and loosing to happen by assuming falsely that the loving thing to do is not to intervene or raise questions, that we have no right to admonish anyone, or that we are mature and strong enough just to forgive and forget. These are false notions of what binding and loosing in love and truth are all about.

The church as binding fellowship. True binding consists in covenanting to be God's people. Baptism is the sign and seal of this covenant. Baptism, circumcision and an offering were the formal steps taken by a proselyte entering Judaism. These signs marked the transition from the Gentile world to the people of God. It was made clear to the inductees into Judaism that they would no longer have a father, mother, brother or sister outside of Judaism. They would be

---

[21] I noted in chapter 3 how the truth of God becomes known to people who respond in faith and trust to the revelation of God in history. As the church binds itself to the truth of God it frees itself from idolatries of all kinds. But the church is the church of God only as it stands in a covenant relationship to God and to Christ, the Lord of the church.

[22] John H. Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," 20.

admitted into an entirely new people and community. They were born to a new life altogether. In the Christian church baptism has a similar significance. It is the sign of having been born to a new and living hope (1 Peter 1:3), of having been born from above (John 3:3). It signifies a total dedication to God, the giver of life, through Jesus Christ our redeemer.

Binding to God entails also that members of the church bind themselves to *each other* under God. For Anabaptists, baptism signified a clear commitment and submission to the admonition of the Christian community. They spoke about "the rule of Christ" which a person accepts at baptism.[23] This rule of Christ referred to the obligation of giving and receiving the exhortation and counsel of the church as referred to in Matthew 18:15-20.[24] The church was correctly understood as a covenanting community. They covenanted to know and do the will of God as made known in Christ; they covenanted to assist each other to become mature in Christ; they covenanted to take responsibility for each other and to exercise the gifts of the Spirit.

The church binds itself to the truth of God in many different ways. It does so in its worship of God the creator, in the study, reading and proclamation of the God's Word, and by making the story of God's people its own story. Binding happens also in the discernment of gifts and the encouragement to use them for the edification of all. It takes place in the teaching ministry of the church: Sunday school, catechism instruction, Bible study in groups and at home, in narrating the history and experience of the church through the ages. The hymnody of the church has an amazing way of binding the church to God's truth. Even making decisions on what to do about specific issues is part of the binding activity of the church.

The binding which is most crucial for the church is what Jesus refers to when he tells the disciples:

> If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it (Mark 8:34-35).

---

[23] Balthasar Hubmaier, "On Fraternal Admonition," *Concern* 14 (February 1967): 33-43. This is part of his tract, *The Truth Is Unkillable* (Nikolsburg, 1527).

[24] According to John H. Yoder, this was one reason that the Anabaptists were against infant baptism from the very beginning. Infants could not participate in giving and receiving counsel. Conrad Grebel said, "Even an adult is not to be baptized without Christ's rule of binding and loosing." Quoted by John H. Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," 16.

We are to bind ourselves to the way of the cross. This means dealing with evil like God does: through love and forgiveness. It can very well lead to suffering and death, depending on how the world chooses to respond to the truth of God. Our greatest witness to the world comes in taking up the cross and following Jesus.

The way of the cross—the way of forgiveness and love—was vindicated by God when Jesus was raised from the dead. The resurrection indicated that, in spite of and through Jesus' death, God overcame all the principalities and powers of evil, including sin and death. The cross and resurrection are the true symbols of binding and loosing. We bind ourselves to the cross of Christ in the knowledge that God will vindicate those who commit themselves to the way of love.

The church as loosing fellowship. With binding comes also freeing, loosing and overcoming (resurrection or victory). In true worship of God, we are loosed, or freed, from the worship of idols. In worshipping God as creator, we are freed from idolizing nature, the seasons, sun, moon or stars, sexuality or any created thing or order. By binding ourselves to the truth of God we are freed from falsehood and untruth of all kinds. By binding ourselves to the spirit of Christ we are freed from insecurity and self-defense and from a false spirit toward others. Each binding brings with it a simultaneous loosing. Sinai and Exodus belong together.

By binding itself to the truth of God in Christ, the church judges the world. That is, the church declares what is not of God and what will not lead to life. In binding itself to the good, it judges evil to be what it is. In binding itself to the spirit and character of Christ, it judges that which is contrary to the character of Christ.

The church does not claim to be perfect, to be already what it seeks to become: the church without spot or wrinkle. Every church has its disputes, errors and shortcomings. Precisely because the church is imperfect, because it does not always know the truth of God and the spirit of Christ perfectly, it needs to practise "the rule of Christ" in its midst. The church is not the church only where it is perfect but precisely where it becomes a binding and loosing fellowship on the basis of God's revelation in Christ. Apart from this no standards of truth, right and goodness can be known.

Because the church still contends with sin, falsehood and error, its binding and loosing functions are also stated in terms of sin: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23). Sin separates us from God and from one another. Apart from forgiveness, reconciliation is not possible. God acted in Christ to forgive sins, to atone for sin and to reconcile us to God (Mark 10:45). We are set free to serve God

through the forgiveness of sin. We are reminded to pray that we too will be able to forgive as we were forgiven (Matthew 6:12).

Often we are slow to forgive. We want the one who has done wrong to be judged—to receive what he or she "deserves." As Christ forgives, we are called to forgive and to offer forgiveness so that the erring person may come to know the love of God, repent and be reconciled to God and to others.

Forgiveness presupposes that the church is a discerning community: discerning what is right and what is wrong, what is of God and what is not of God. Only as sin is recognized as sin can forgiveness be possible. To forgive is not to deal lightly with sin but to deal rightly with it. Forgiveness is both a declaration of what is right and good and a call to repentance, confession and reconciliation. According to John Howard Yoder, being forgiven "necessitates forgiveness,"[25] since in every right decision (binding) there is an element of reconciliation.

A new understanding of binding and loosing. The church, if it is to be the *church* in the 21st century, will have to take its binding and loosing functions much more seriously than in the past. Society no longer takes for granted what the church upholds and affirms. The church will need to point to a totally new reality and life than what is assumed by most people. I will consider several areas which call for new understanding and binding.

First, the church must commit itself anew to be a binding and loosing fellowship. This requires overt acceptance of the responsibility to encourage and admonish each other in Christ, to hear each other and correct each other, to speak the truth in love to each other.

Second, the church is called to be a moral community. The whole community needs to bind itself to what is just and right before God. It needs to speak to injustice in its own community as well as in the larger society.

Third, the church must help and discipline its members to be Christian in their stations in life.[26] A station is the foundation of one's duty or obligation to someone.[27] As a son, I have an obligation

---

[25] John H. Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," 6.

[26] For a further explication of the thoughts given here, see my "Once You Were No People . . . ," chap. in *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1990), 37-65.

[27] A "station" is not to be confused with vocation or class structure. It refers to a state of being such as the state of marriage in which persons have specific moral obligations toward each other. See F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

to my parents; as a husband, to my wife; as a teacher to my students; as a repairman to the people I serve.[28] Binding and loosing has to do with manifesting the character of Christ in all our stations so that people can see what it means to be God's children and to possess the spirit of Christ. That is, we should do what is right and good and we should do it in the spirit and character of Christ. We need the loving, insightful and caring admonition of the church if we are to grow in being Christian in our stations.

Fourth, the covenant of marriage will need to be upheld as a lifelong commitment within the church. If it is to lead to life, marriage cannot be treated lightly or as a covenant entered and broken at will. It is a commitment within a covenant community and is binding in a way that is passing out of style. The entire Christian community needs to speak to the issues that cause marriages to become dysfunctional and sinful.

Fifth, the church needs to covenant to be a community of character. It must be a community in which Christian virtues are learned, known and exercised. Members of a loosing and binding church will become more and more Christ-like in their character and in their relations to others.

Sixth, the church must hear more fully the plight of the poor, the oppressed, the defenceless and bind itself to them. We cannot walk on by when others are in need. Witness the Good Samaritan whom Jesus used as an example of someone with a proper spirit and a right response to those in need (Luke 15:11-32). Notice how God protected the poor, who received gleanings each year and the volunteer crop every seventh year (Leviticus 19:9-10; 25:1-7); the widow and orphan, who could not be taken advantage of in the patriarchal family structure (Exodus 22:21-29); the criminal who could flee to the free city (Numbers 35:6-8); and the stranger, who had to be protected with one's life. We are called to follow God's example by binding ourselves to those in need. We cannot do this without the constant admonition and support of the church.

We bind ourselves to others by becoming advocates on behalf of those who are powerless against their oppressors, by giving physical aid to free people from economic exploitation, by sitting with someone who is terminally ill and needs an anchor in life, by developing programs to free people from dependencies and addictions, by forming support groups to walk with people through a maze of bureau-

---

[28] These duties are not erased when we become Christians or friends or think of each other as equals. These are moral obligations that we have to each other because of our stations in life. Sons or daughters have responsibilities to their parents regardless of how they feel about one another or whether they have respect for each other.

cratic tape. As the church binds itself to others and to the work and will of God, it is loosed to become a people of God in the world.

THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

The church is the sign of the future of the world. It is the arena for God's work in the world,[29] not just another institution alongside other institutions. In the church the kingdom of God is present, even if not yet in its fullness; here the reign of God becomes visible for others to see. The reality of the church, its covenant with God in Christ, its manifestation of the character and will of God point in the direction of the kingdom of God that will be established on earth—on the new earth.

The church as a sign of the kingdom. The church is a sign of God's promises to the world. Just as Abraham received a sign that God's promises would be fulfilled in the birth of a son, so the world has received a sign of God's faithfulness in the birth of the church. The church is a visible indication that God's revelation to the people of Israel is true and will be honoured by God.

The church is the sign of God's salvation. As the Exodus demonstrated God's saving work, so the church represents to the world what a redeemed community is. The more the church becomes what it is in Christ, the more it becomes a sign of the saving work of God in the world.

Like Sinai, the church is a sign of God's covenant relationship to the people of God and to the whole world—a covenant established through Jesus' death and resurrection. This community has Christ as its Lord. As God promised to be there for the people, so the church covenants to be there for all. The church is God's invitation to life for those who will hear and respond to the call.

The church is where the rule of God already has begun; it also points to the coming reign of God.[30] God's sovereignty is seen most clearly in Jesus' obedience to God. In him all the world could see

---

[29] The church is not the only arena in which God is at work. In other areas of the world God's work is more hidden and opaque but in the church it is open, overt and confessed even if not everything in the church is of God.

[30] Articles on the kingdom of God by Million Belete, David Schroeder, Paul G. Hiebert, Hank B. Kossen and Albert Widjaja are available in *The Kingdom of God and the Way of Peace* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, Peace Section International; Lombard, IL: Mennonite World Conference, 1979). See also Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984); Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978); Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980); Bruce Chilton and J. I. H. McDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

what a life lived under God's reign looked like. As the church seeks to be true to its Lord, even as it does so imperfectly, it becomes both an indication and a portent of the kingdom of God.

The church is the sign of God's judgement on evil. The revelation of what is good, true and right judges all that is evil, false and wrong. In this sense the church defines what is "worldly" in the world. That is, the church makes known to the world what is not of God and what will lead to destruction. The church is the sign of life, of what it means to honour God's moral order, to be truly human, to love and forgive and be reconciled to God.

The church is the incarnation of Christ in the world. Here the work, will and character of Christ become visible; here the love of Christ shapes a whole community. By fully sharing the work of Christ, the church is a sign of the cross to the world. It makes visible how Jesus responded to sinful humankind in love and forgiveness and suffering. In its ministry of reconciliation the church lives out the peace and salvation of God.

The structures of the world. The church has no option but to live within the structures of society. In this sense, it is always in the world. When we speak of the church being "*in* the world but not *of* the world" we are playing on two meanings of the word, "world." Being "in" the world means that it is related to and part of the structures of society. Saying that the church is not "of" the world means that it does not belong to the worldliness of the world, that is, the world which does not recognize God.

God created the world, the cosmos. God ordered the world so that all forms of life would be interdependent. Eco-structures were intended to enrich continuing life on earth. What God created was good and worthy to be sustained but it was not static. The dynamic world of growth moved toward a goal and an end.

God gave humans special privileges to care for, to shape and to sustain creation. They received power to "keep" the garden; to name and to shape the physical and cultural world. Humans were to order things so that continuing life on earth would be possible. The world was to be shaped largely by their choices.

As humans we have no choice but to be involved in naming, shaping and altering the structures of society. When we name some aspect of the world, we bring into being a reality that was not there before it was named. In the process of naming we call into being structures of thought, of definition and of differentiations that help us cope with life on earth. Through our choices we alter and give shape to the physical world in significant ways; we call into being structures of society that relate to goals and purposes which gave rise to our choices.

Structures can be created overtly or inadvertently. When a whole community of people makes similar choices, structures that support their actions are created. For example, often the sidewalk is placed where people already have chosen to walk! At other times structures are deliberately invented and established. When we want to deliver news to many persons and places, structures of communication are put into place. In ordering our relations to other people, social structures are called into being; in regulating and standardizing trade and exchange of goods, an economic structure is created; in ordering public life, political and governmental structures are put into place; in settling disputes in society, legal structures become necessary.

Society might have been structured differently if people would have made other choices, acted toward different ends or lived by a different imagination. Structures are in constant flux. Furthermore, not all people, communities or nations structure society in the same way. Each society has basic structures related to family, government, economics, law, education and religion. For example, each society has some form of government. It could be a theocracy as in early Israel, a monarchy as in King David's time, a republic as in Rome, an oligarchy, a socialist/communist state or a democracy. These specific structures of government are not created of God. Rather God has created us in such a way that we must participate in ordering the society in which we live if we are to survive. In this sense governing is an integral part of what it means to be human and to be of God.

Each society is a network of interrelated structures. All of them are of God in the sense that ordering of life is necessary. The structure *as* structure is not as important as what may or may not be achieved through the structure. For example, a benevolent and just monarchy may achieve as much good for the people as a democracy. Structure can be used for good or evil, life or death.

Often the structures in society, though intended for good, turn out to be a mixture of good and evil. Because of human ignorance and sinfulness, we hold to what may be "good" for us but has negative effects on others. We endorse structures that retain a high standard of living but do so at the expense of exploiting other nations and peoples. Given time and human sinfulness, most structures become dysfunctional in the sense that they no longer serve the purposes for which they were intended but more and more encourage, support and perpetuate evil. They are in need of redemption.

Structures can become self-sustaining and autonomous. They become resistant to change. They begin to exercise a power of their own over the lives of people in society. Those who have vested interests in the current structures oppose any significant change. Of course it is possible to change the structures of society. In a revolution this may happen suddenly and abruptly; in a program of reform

it may come about more slowly and less violently. Changes also occur where none were intended. Yet the new is not always better than the old. The new may solve some problems but introduce a whole new set of difficulties. It is impossible to invent a set of structures that will automatically cause people to do what is right.

Structures can become demonic by becoming captive to the powers of darkness or evil. For example, if the legal system is controlled by people who use it to exploit people unjustly, systemic evil results. The institution which should maintain justice is held captive to evil and allows a person to exploit others with impunity.

The apostle Paul knew about this form of evil. He spoke freely about the powers that lie behind what people do. He spoke about principalities and powers of evil, those structures that gained autonomous power and are used against rather than for people (Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 2:15). He knew these powers were behind persons, governments, astrology and human philosophies. Revelation 12-18 portrays the governments of this world as being taken captive by Satan and becoming instruments of evil. Although they pose as human benefactors, in actuality they mislead people to worship that which does not bring salvation. Any structure which is given over to evil leads to systemic wrong, injustice, oppression and death.[31]

The betrayal of the church. The church is not the church when it is both in and of the world. The church is always tempted to become part of not only the structures but also the spirit of the age that gave rise to the structures. Unless the church binds itself to the truth of God and becomes free from the spirit of evil in the world, it will not reflect the work of God in the world. This has been demonstrated over and over again.

During the reign of Constantine, the church saw itself as being in a position to control the world. Secular government was no longer antithetical to the work of the church but taken captive by the church. All people of the empire were made members of the church. Hence it was possible to use structures of society, including the sword, to carry out the program of the church. The effort to "christianize" the world compromised the church with the evils of worldly power. This unholy alliance was not really questioned until the Reformation.[32]

---

[31] See Vernard Eller, *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987); Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*, vol. II (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986); Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962).

[32] Notice the position of the Anabaptists with respect to government as outlined in Walter Klaassen, "Government," chap. in *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 244-264.

Over the centuries the church has been enlisted in many "worldly" or evil causes. From 1095 A.D. to 1291 A.D., at the request of the emperors, it participated in the Crusades in a perverted notion of holy war against "infidels."[33] This action was hardly an expression of the love of Christ to the unbelieving world. During the Reformation the church became the "grand inquisitor" as it searched out and executed those who were suspected of heresy. It saw no problem in demanding that such persons be put to death. The church also was aligned with secular powers in colonizing other lands and people and making them slaves and subjects of the conquerors. In many countries the church has been swept up by nationalism in which the cause of the state is identified with the cause of God. Even today the Christian community is caught in the grips of democracy as a pattern of government and of capitalism as a system of economics.[34] Such unholy alliances are a constant temptation to the church.

The church is not of the world. The church is in the world but lives by a totally different imagination. It serves a different lord and master. First and foremost, the church is subject to the reign of God in the world and not to the nations or cultures within which it defines itself. Its claim that God alone is sovereign Lord stands in critical opposition to and in discussion with the powers. It lives by the imagination of the justice, mercy and compassion of God.[35] The Christian community lives with the hope of God's coming reign, a reign not enforced by violence but on the basis of a gracious invitation and gift of God. The church lives by the belief that through the church God is present in the world. It challenges and invites people to new life in Christ.

Furthermore, the church lives on the basis of obedience to Christ, its Lord. This obedience to Christ means that no power, government institution or ideology can be seen as absolute or autonomous. All such powers are relative to or made subject to the church's supreme loyalty to God. Arthur Gish says, "The proclamation that God is lord means that Caesar and the President are not."[36] The will of God is discerned in the Christian community through the spirit of Christ.

---

[33] T. L. Underwood, "The Inquisition," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 511.

[34] See Craig M. Gay, *With Liberty and Justice for Whom? The Recent Evangelical Debate over Capitalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

[35] See further Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8; Isaiah 61; Jeremiah 4:19-20. God's anguish over injustice is portrayed in Hosea 11:8-9; Mark 6:34; and Matthew 9:35-36.

[36] Arthur Gish, *The New Left and Christian Radicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 87.

The church recognizes that the "powers" are of God: the power of human structures and institutions (1 Peter 2:13). It is aware that governments have power to prosecute justly or unjustly the people of the land. However, the church does not set up its own power structures to coerce people to do the will of God. It does not use force to persuade people to accept the truth of God or to abide by the morality of the church. It recognizes that God permits powers to order the world until sin is ripe for judgement.

Jesus modelled how the church must subject itself to the powers. He did not rebel with violence against the Jewish authorities or the Roman procurators. He believed that Pilate would have no authority over him unless it had been given him by God (John 19:11). Jesus did not call down legions of angels to save him from the power of the state (Matthew 26:52-53) nor did he want the disciples to defend him. He was subject to the powers in that he willingly placed himself under the power of the authorities. There was no attempt at rebellion or subversion. Jesus knew that he would be sentenced to death and spoke only of the responsibility carried by those people who put him to death (John 19:11). In this sense the church practises the ethic of submission and subjection.

To be subject to the powers is a choice which the church and Christians make in Christ, a choice to be servants of God in the world. The objective is not to be free of all constraints and powers. Even in captivity the people of God are free to be obedient to God, to be moral and to do what is right. The ethic of submission does not require freedom from the structures of this world but takes full cognizance of such structures in its obedience to Christ.

The church is called to do what is right, good and true in the structures of society. This call is given most clearly in the New Testament station codes.[37] Christians are admonished to be "subject" and at the same time to do what is right. These admonitions show that, even though children, women and slaves were subject to other persons, they were addressed as morally responsible persons, as persons who were able to do what was right before God.[38] The

---

[37] David Schroeder, "Die Haustafeln des Neuen Testaments: Ihre Herkunft und ihr theologischer Sinn" (Th.D. dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1959); James E. Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* (Goettingen: Vandenhoek und Ruprecht, 1972); J. Paul Sampley, *"And the Two Shall Be One Flesh": A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21-33* (Cambridge, MS: Cambridge University Press, 1971); John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981).

[38] It is evident that their choices were limited. But they could choose to do good rather than evil. They could choose not to do evil even if they had to suffer for such disobedience (1 Peter 2:18-21).

assumption was that even the slave is able to avoid doing what is wrong and to do what needs to be done out of proper motives.

Peter assumes that the slave, who refuses to do evil and as a responsible person does what is right, will have to suffer. His comfort and encouragement to the slave is that Jesus also suffered for us and left us an example to follow (1 Peter 2:18-25). Peter fully accepts a theology of the cross, a theology of suffering. He knows that the clearest witness is given precisely at the point where the unbelieving world feels threatened by the right, the true and the good. The church is open to such suffering because it knows, through the resurrection of Christ, that God will vindicate the righteous and the just. Their faith and trust in the coming reign of God strengthens and comforts those who suffer for what is right.

At times doing what is right may constitute a break with the structures of society. For example, because of plurality of beliefs within, each nation develops a kind of civil religion on which the order of its society is based. To do what is right, Christians may need to break with and challenge the structures of the society.

In its obedience to God the church models a new and alternate way of living in the world. The love of God expressed among its members and in society brings into being a new and different set of structures, structures that lead to wholeness of life, structures that support and nurture Christian virtues, structures that are more just and equitable.

In God's providence these new structures—rather, the life of the people which gives rise to them—act as a light to the world. The old structures are judged to be unjust and as leading to death rather than to life. The new structures point as a promise to greater justice and goodness in the world; they represent hope for a world that does not know true life. Occasionally these new structures so clearly point to and promise a way out of evil and toward a new life that society accepts those structures for itself. In this way the church becomes salt to the world. The more just and true life in the structures is, the greater is their preserving and saving power. The church repeatedly has modelled new structures for the world[39] and how structures can be redeemed to be more just.[40]

---

[39] Examples of modelling include establishing hospitals and hospices, setting up universities and other educational institutions, and calling for penitentiaries so that people would not be executed without possibility for repentance and mercy.

[40] Many Christians in politics have made this their main concern. But real modelling occurs in the Christian community where it is supported and affirmed by everyone, where it is not a compulsion from the outside but an expression of our being in Christ.

Modelling a structure is different from imposing a structure. It presents an invitation to a new way of living. The more strongly the Christian ethic is opposed in society, the greater is its witness to a new order. The more Christians are called on to suffer for their faith, the more convincing their commitment to God becomes. However, modelling is done not to achieve some kind of specific new order but simply out of faithfulness to Christ. What happens as a result of the Christian witness in the world is the work of God. God may use what we do to create a new order and to achieve greater justice in the world; or, God may choose to allow evil to rise up against the good until a time when evil is ripe for judgement. Christians may or may not be called on to suffer for what is right. That decision is in God's hands. But in due time God will vindicate that which is of God. Both sin and righteousness will receive their just reward.

The church as a community of Christ is a witness in the world in every way. As it lives by a different imagination it shocks and challenges the world. In its message it holds out the promise of God for salvation and life. In its ethic and in its warning to the world it judges evil of every kind. The very light it brings into the world judges untruth and unrighteousness. The church's suffering is a witness to another world in which the peace of God will be known and the will of God be done. As the church becomes obedient to Christ, the Lord, the reign of God on earth becomes visible for all to see and invites people to repentance and faith.

~~~~~
~~~~~

8

A COMMUNITY OF VIRTUES

Harry Huebner

In previous chapters reference has been made to terms like "virtue" and "character" as the preferred language for the Christian life. The explicit task of this chapter is to provide an extended explanation of what these terms mean and how their use can change our understanding of self and church.

It would be incorrect to see the effort of vitalizing this language as advocating something new. It is the ancient vocabulary of morality. In a society where the notion of community does not figure significantly in the understanding of self, the concepts of virtue and character have very little meaning. Conversely, in the generation of my parents, where community was a powerful force in shaping the lives of individuals, these notions were prominent, even if only implicitly.

MY MOTHER AND ARISTOTLE

As I grow older I often reflect on how I came to learn what it means to be good. (This is not to suggest that I have "arrived," only an acknowledgement that much effort has been expended on the task, primarily by others.) I grew up with few do's and don'ts. Moreover, I would not consider a proper description to be, as is often said today, that I "adopted the values" of my parents and community. To describe my own development with "values language" is problematic because the term "values" has such an individualistic and arbitrary ring. It is nearly impossible to show that one set of values is better than another. In fact, the word was invented largely to avoid this kind of comparative assessment. A much more accurate descrip-

tion of my upbringing—at least as I now reflect on it—is to say that over the years I became a particular kind of person. I was socialized to become a specific individual. I was given, I accepted and I participated in shaping a particular character. And my actions flowed from who I was. I was conscious at a very early age that my identity was the controlling mechanism of my behaviour. My parents saw it as such and I recognized it as such. Hence, I knew what it meant to act "out of character" and, whenever I did, a crisis of relationship developed with my parents, one which made *me* feel I was lying to them about who I really was and *them* fear that I would not "turn out."

However, I did not have my identity by reason of my individuality. I did not grow up in a modern liberal household. I was raised to be *good*, not creative and unique. I shared my identity with my people. We were not like some other people, imagined or real. We were different. (It needs to be said that this "we" is a relatively complex concept and did not always refer to the same entity. Sometimes it was the extended family, sometimes the church and sometimes the entire Christian world. Usually it was a diffuse mixture of all or some of these. And some of these "we's" were much stronger in their shaping power over me than others.) I was constantly reminded that we did not do certain kinds of things. The reminders often came with a story to illustrate. It was these multiple stories that defined the composite "we." Sometimes they would be from the Bible, sometimes from our Mennonite history and, on occasion, they would be from my parents' personal history. Yet, even as I separate them out in this way, I am aware that they were told in a way that brought aspects of each together into one story.

The personal stories were most interesting for us children because it felt as though they were most immediately ours. Included were heroic events of how my father as a child with his parents had stood up for their convictions in the face of threats of death during the Russian Revolution. Some of my relatives were even killed, yet they remained faithful.

These stories made me immensely proud. The message I got as a little boy on hearing them went something like this: "My people know what they believe and take their convictions to be ultimately true. They are not about to sacrifice their identity for an expedient end, even at the threat of death. Wow, this is who I am! These are my stories. I can (want to) participate in them by 'putting on' the character that makes such stories mine." Although I was not personally involved in any of them I experienced these stories as being about me.

It is important to note that the stories of my youth shaped my identity in exactly the same way that they shaped my sisters' identi-

ties. I was not me by reason of my detachment from others. I was me because I embraced my parents' tradition as my own. I was who I was insofar as I accepted what made my parents who they were.

This description of my childhood made for a specific style of moral training in my family. My parents would seldom confront us with specific prohibitions. Instead they would explicitly remind us of our identity. "Remember who *we* are!" or, "Remember who *you* are!" were the phrases often repeated by my mother as we walked through the door for an evening out with the "young people." It made perfect sense to my mother and to us to think that our actions flowed from our sense of social self. She also understood that in our acting we fashioned a public image. Hence, if how we lived was not rooted in our identity as disciples of Jesus, then we, in fact, would take on an alien character. And living like that, in effect, would be living a lie.

An important moral category for my mother was the low German word "*aundasch*" which literally means "different." It functioned as a moral term for her because whenever she saw someone outside the community do something we should never do, she would call it "*aundasch.*" She seemed to know implicitly that just as their actions flowed from their historical narrative, ours had a different narrative. Because the narratives were different so were the actions. She was not critical of their story. It just was not our story, hence could not be used to justify our actions. It made no sense for us to act on the basis of someone else's identity. She knew that acts come not in isolated and disconnected episodes but they arise out of religious and cultural identities. Our story was the story of Jesus and the church. We must be the kind of people capable of "putting on" that story.

This understanding produced frequent frustrating discussions with my parents as I was growing up. When I tried to argue that I should be allowed to do certain things which they deemed questionable, they responded in ways that made no sense to me. For example, my argument that others engaged in such actions without serious negative consequences, which I thought was the clincher, made no difference to my mother. "They are different," would be her reply. At that time I did not understand what her response had to do with my argument. Now I do. It has been an interesting insight to find that I had to study Aristotle in order to understand my mother!

WHAT IS A VIRTUE?

Aristotle and my mother both knew about the importance of virtues. Aristotle spoke about them with extensive philosophical apparatus; my mother, even to this day, does not know the meaning of the word, neither in English nor in German. Therefore, to explain

what virtues are I will need to rely on scholars like Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. It does not help to ask my mother. Yet to understand how to live by the virtues, I can do no better than to observe my parents.

Both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas speak about virtues as habits. Aristotle says:

> Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching . . . while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name *ethike* is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit).[1]

Aquinas says that "virtue denotes a certain perfection of a power" and that "human virtues are habits."[2]

This sounds strange to our modern ears. In our day, habits are not viewed positively because they are not seen as intentionally our own. To say of someone that "she does it out of habit" is hardly a compliment. Yet the ancients understood something we have forgotten: what we do habitually shapes us into specific kinds of people.

However, not all habits are called virtues, only those which make us good. Habits which make us bad are vices. For the Greeks it was good to be just, temperate and brave. So Aristotle argued that, in the same way as someone becomes a good builder by building or a good harpist by playing the harp, "so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."[3] Virtues are the qualities which, when practised habitually, make us good. Alasdair MacIntyre states it very similarly when he formulates what he calls a "tentative definition of a virtue."

> A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevent us from achieving any such good.[4]

Virtues, therefore, are those excellences, skills or qualities which

---

[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* Bk. II, 1103[a], ed. Richard McKeon, trans. W.D. Ross (New York, NY: Random House, 1941).

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* Vol.2, Pt. I-II, Q. 55, Art. 1., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, NY: Benziger Brothers, 1948).

[3] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* ibid.

[4] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 191.

make us good at what we do. Or, if you like, virtues are those powers which enable something to fulfil its proper function. This has analogues in many other areas of life. We are good students insofar as we have mastered the excellence of learning. We are good hockey players insofar as we have acquired the skills peculiar to that game. We are good plumbers once we know how to do well what plumbers do. In the same way we are good Christians insofar as we acquire the skills of living like disciples of Jesus, that is, open ourselves to the transforming power of God.

Notice how beginning with virtues changes our understanding of Christian ethics. Praying, fasting and loving enemies are habits which Christians must master in their quest to become disciples. "Ethics" is not one kind of behaviour different from "religious" behaviour. Praying and worshipping are as much a matter of Christian ethics—habitual behaviour that shapes us into Christian people—as is practising the love of neighbour. The whole task of Christian ethics becomes one of learning to become the kind of people who can love God and neighbour. Hence, Christian ethics and the church are inseparably connected.[5]

One of the unfortunate tensions in church history has been between morality and spirituality. The stereotypical way of viewing Christian spirituality is via personal piety and the interior life. Spirituality has been seen as God-directed. It has concentrated on developing the relationship between God and the individual. Christian social ethics has been viewed as a call for people to set their sights on the world and to change it. While spirituality has been God-directed, Christian ethics has been directed to the world.

Theologically this parallels the dispute between grace and works. The first is inner-directed and the second is outer-directed. The first speaks about what God has done for us, the second about what we must do for God. But the Christian life must be united at precisely this point. A community of virtues simply cannot tolerate a distinction between morality and spirituality.

Henri Nouwen, the great American spiritualist, after spending time together with Gustavo Gutierrez teaching a course on Liberation Theology, came to precisely this same insight. He says,

---

[5] It is important to note that once we stop believing in "good" and "bad," as Friedrich Nietzsche and Lawrence Kohlberg suggest we moderns have and must (see chapters 1 and 2 above), then we also stop believing in virtues and vices. On the other hand, when we approach the matter as we are suggesting, then religious epistemology presupposes ecclesiology. That is, knowing God requires a particular kind of practice: praying, studying the Word, worshipping, loving enemies and giving alms. Knowing God presupposes living rightly. As the Anabaptist theologian Hans Denck has reminded us, "One cannot truly know Christ unless one follows him daily in life."

> But as I reflect on the impact of this spirituality on my own way of living and thinking, I realize that a reductionism has taken place on my side. Talking with those pastoral workers during that summer course, I became aware of how individualistic and elitist my own spirituality had been. It was hard to confess, but true, that in many respects my thinking about the spiritual life had been deeply influenced by my North American milieu with its emphasis upon the "interior life" and the methods and techniques for developing that life.[6]

The language of virtue and character makes the unity of spirituality and morality necessary. By opening ourselves to God in prayer, by fasting, through worship and Christian education, we say "yes" to the transforming power of God in our lives. Thereby we declare our willingness to participate in the ongoing story of God's activity, that is, in God's loving kindness. Hence, an openness to God cannot be separated from a commitment to the way of God. The way of God is the kingdom of God which is seen to be "at hand" in Jesus, the Christ. That is to say, our spirituality is our morality. We are invited into the very way of God.

This interpretation of the Christian life is built on the belief that we become good by doing that which makes us what we essentially are, that is, by acknowledging that we are created of God. Or, if you like, we become what we essentially are by participating in goodness. Not all ways of being human are the same. Different views of human nature are integrally linked to differences in what the virtues are. For example, Aristotle did not believe that forgiveness and humility were virtues nor that practising these qualities would make us into the kinds of people we essentially are. This means that his view of human nature was different from the Christian view. For Jesus and the early Christians, humility, forgiveness, patience and compassion were all virtues essential for becoming the kind of people we were created by God to be. While the difference between Aristotle and Jesus can be stated in terms of different virtues, and hence a different understanding of human nature, it really had to do with a larger worldview, or story, in terms of which their understanding of God, the world and being human were expressed.

VIRTUES AND STORIES

To refer to the practice of virtues is to speak of the formation of character. Yet character becomes intelligible only in the stories of

---

[6] Quoted from "Foreword" in, Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1984), xvi.

communities. Consider how a character is developed in a novel. It takes time to recount details of a person's experiences, thoughts and actions, vision and projections, deep relationships, acceptance and rejection of choices. These are all necessary in order to develop the character. And the character never stops evolving until the story stops. Moreover, understanding character cannot happen apart from the ability to conceive—even if only superficially—the narrative in which it takes shape.

We describe our moral character, not by telling the story of our lives in any manner whatsoever, but by concentrating particularly on the story that displays the virtues by which we live. If we tell the truth we are said to be honest. But the virtue of honesty cannot be established by telling the truth merely once or even a dozen times. There needs to be some indication in the story that the person was habitually honest, that the person acted "in character" when displaying honesty, or that the context for honesty was exemplary. We know how to describe character only after we know what virtues (and/or vices) a person embraces.

Virtues and character do not make sense unless there is a story to tell. That is, unless a person lives by some unity of conviction or vision there is no stuff for a story. This does not mean that there cannot be character change. The most fascinating stories are about people who go through remarkable changes of vision, convictions and virtues. But try to imagine a story of someone whose life's moments are completely discontinuous, where there is no continuity of character. Is there really a story at all?

Another important fact of life is that character formation happens in relationships with other people. A fundamental truth is that character first of all is given to us before it can be shaped by us. Parents and grandparents tell stories about their children as soon as they are born. We are not the sole determiners of our own stories. We have input, but we do not have ultimate control.

The Christian story is powerful precisely at this point. It is a story into which we are invited. We are asked to become part of it, to join in and give our lives to it. It is important to note that the Christian story cannot be told any old way. The script for the story has already been written. We are not in control of it; it is in control of us once we embrace it as ours.

The central person in the Christian story is God because the story tells us that everything that exists has its fullness in God. This awareness shapes our understanding of who we are. We are not autonomous beings; we are God's. The story tells us that we do not create life; we receive life. That is why we best understand ourselves as disciples, as students and followers of the one who has given us a concrete historical expression of God. Our story and our character

become complete and full only as we relate them to the being of God in Christ Jesus. We participate in the divine drama with God, but God remains the hero in our story.

To interpret the Christian life in this way is to understand why the parables of Jesus have such shaping power over us. Story integrates all aspects of life: the intellectual, the social, the psychological and the physical. This is one of the strengths of narrative ethics. To account for the multifaceted nature of morality by appealing to the goals of life (teleology), or duty (deontology), or by concentrating on the situation (Fletcher), is simply not sufficient. The fact of the matter is that consequences sometimes do play a major role in shaping specific decisions as does our sense of duty or even the specific situation. The problem with modern ethics is not that these factors are irrelevant; the problem is that modern ethicists have tried arbitrarily to reduce ethics—and hence life itself—to a single component of a multifaceted existence. Christian ethics is about virtues and character lodged in God and Jesus; secondarily it is about all these other factors of decision-making.

VIRTUES, SITUATIONS, RULES AND ACTIONS

It is important to understand how an ethic based on virtue and character helps Christians act and make decisions. In chapter 4, I criticized the approach to ethics which makes the decision, the individual, the situation and the act morally central. Yet, unless the approach based on virtues can help us act and decide as Christians in this world, it remains useless. Questions have been raised about "virtues ethics" precisely in this regard. Duane Friesen, in evaluating Stanley Hauerwas' ethic of virtue, says:

> An ethic of virtue alone, therefore, cannot satisfactorily direct Christian people on how to act *in this world.* In order to act faithfully, we cannot avoid developing principles or rules that guide our actions.[7]

I agree with Friesen in his emphasis that Christians must develop rules and principles to guide their behaviour. Yet I can see nothing inconsistent about an ethic of virtue producing such principles and rules. A possible inconsistency would be if these rules and principles were not based upon or were, in fact, in violation of the virtues. Yet virtues ethics *per se* has no essential quarrel with rules and principles. It merely points out that rules and principles are of little use if

---

[7] Duane Friesen, "A Critical Analysis of Narrative Ethics," chap. in *The Church as Theological Community: Essays in Honour of David Schroeder*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1990), 241.

we are not the kind of people who have the moral capacity to follow them. That capacity must be fostered by habituation in community.

Consider an example. Christians are told to cultivate the virtue of love. This applies to all Christians including Christian fathers. The principle or rule for Christian fathers to "love their children" is clearly demanded of them all and is easily derived from the virtue. Yet we live in a society which has produced some men who find it very difficult to know how to love. It is not all that helpful to hold a father to the principle which demands a practice that is foreign to him. What is helpful is to create a context—the Christian community—in which fathers can learn what love is and how to act lovingly in order for them to be able to love their children.

To suggest that it is possible to train yourself in a virtue yet not apply it to any specific situations—that is, that virtues are by definition abstract and passive, unconnected to actions—is simply to have misunderstood what a virtue is. I remind the reader that a virtue is a habit that makes a person good. Habits, like virtues, are meaningless apart from specific actions. You cannot possess the virtue of love without habitually acting lovingly. And you cannot possess the virtue of honesty without habitually telling the truth. A virtue is not a mere intention.[8]

To call the church a community of virtues is to identify the habits of the church. The church is that body which out of habit tells the truth; which out of habit loves enemies, feeds the hungry, takes care of orphans and the elderly, forgives sinners; which out of habit praises God for what we have received; which prays and worships. To call the church a community of virtues is to identify it as that body of people which is constantly training itself to do that which flows from its calling. The church must work hard at developing rules and principles to guide it in its life together as well as in its relationships with those not in its midst. The church must work hard to act and make decisions that are in keeping with the virtues it claims.

VIRTUES AND COMMUNITY

It is important to highlight two further implications of viewing the church as a community of virtues. *First*, it is a community set apart. In the first chapter of this book I suggested that modern society has lost the ability to think morally. Precisely by considering the

---

[8] In part I am responding to Friesen's comments about Hauerwas' approach to ethics. He says: "Although Hauerwas would deny it, one possible interpretation of his position is that he has developed an ethic of good intentions, one that calls for the practice of certain virtues, but he has failed to develop clarity on what acting on those virtues in the world might entail," ibid.

church as a community in which the virtues are cultivated is there hope for Christians to speak and think morally. But to do so we, in some measure at least, will need to set ourselves apart from society around us.

I am not suggesting that we withdraw or physically separate ourselves from society. Instead our moral identity as church must consciously be given shape by who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ, not by who we are as members of society. The agenda of the church is set by the Christian story and not by any other story. Therefore the church's identity cannot be determined solely by the urgency of matters forced on us by the world, not even when these are moral issues like homosexuality, abortion, capital punishment or euthanasia. This is not to de-emphasize the importance of the church's response to each of these issues; it is rather to emphasize that the church's identity is not derived from what, according to society's agenda, it responds to. The church's identity is determined by what it in essence is. The church's character is seen in everything it is and does: from its outreach to the poor to its administration, by how it structures itself to how it worships, by how it welcomes visitors to how it prays, by what it believes to how and what it says to those in secular authority. The church is moral by how it exists, by how it trains its members to exist and even by what it refuses to do.

Another way of making this point is to say that the church does not *have* an ethic, it *is* an ethic.[9] However the church exists and whatever the church does are expressions of its ethic. The real question is whether the life which the church embodies is of God. Is it the kind of body that is characterized by a conscious, diligent and humble attempt at living a life which is ordered by the confession that Jesus—the one from God—is Lord over our lives? Is it the kind of body that conscientiously submits itself to formation by the one who calls us to be humble, kind, compassionate and to love even our enemies?

Second, the church does not define itself by itself. To say that the church is a community of virtues is to suggest that it is a body of people which submits itself to a process of definition and redefinition by a moral standard that comes from outside of itself. That is, the church is a heteronomous, not an autonomous, community. It ac-

---

[9] I owe this way of stating it to Stanley Hauerwas who has emphasized this theme in several of his recent writings. See especially *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) and *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

knowledges moral authority in God, the One whose character is seen most sharply in the person, Jesus Christ, the one who gives identity to "the body." This identity can be received, understood and claimed by us.

Since the church is that community which endeavours to incarnate the character of God in Christ, its nature is not determined simply by what its members happen to agree upon. For example, it is not optional for the community of faith to be concerned about its members' way of life. Nor is it optional for the church to be concerned about the well-being of those who are not its members. God is concerned about the life of all people. As God's people, how can we do otherwise? Just because the church does certain things—permit or even encourage abortions in some situations, not permit conscientious objection to payment of war taxes, find itself too busy for Bible study and is uncomfortable with prayer, is unconcerned about the wealth of its members and about how decisions are made, or has a constitutional right to dismiss its pastor with a 60 percent plus one majority votes—does not make it right for the church to do them. What makes something morally right for Christians is its participation in the story of God as seen in Jesus, the Christ.

The church is by definition that body which affirms the reality and relevance of God for its own existence. Therefore, it is not possible for the church to define itself in relation to anything other than God in Christ. Insofar as the church is defined by its membership list only it is not the church.

I stress this point because I believe that we moderns in fact find this difficult to accept. We tend to think that the church can do whatever it collectively wills and still be the church. We tend to think of ourselves as twentieth-century folk, as Canadian or American, as enlightened or educated, or as people defined by our vocations.[10] But when we think this way we are appealing to a normative context which is often determinative for our self-understanding and for our actions. For example, we talk of being the twentieth-century family, or about conducting business in the church in enlightened or "sophisticated" ways, and compare our way with the "archaic" ways of our parents and grandparents. We say things like, "In our day we just don't do things like that any more" or, "Wake up to the twenty-first century." But how often do we talk about the *Christian* family or the *Christian* way of conducting church business or the *Christian* way

[10] I am not suggesting that we ignore all these things but that we become more conscious of what is really going on when we think in these terms. To be consciously Christian takes a lot of careful work. Too often well meaning churches do not spend enough time sorting all this out.

of raising children? If we were to do so more consciously we might well discover that the "older generation" had a very profound understanding of what it means to be a Christian body.

NAMING THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUES

The early Christian writings, especially the Pauline epistles, consistently use virtues language to show what Christian living entails. They call upon disciples of Jesus to "put on" (Colossians 3:12 *RSV*) the characteristics of Christ so that the "peace of Christ (may) rule in your hearts" (3:15) and "put to death" (3:5) what is "earthly" or "of the flesh." In Ephesians we read:

> Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm (Ephesians 6:11-13).

The early Christians understood life as a battle between the forces of truth with its "weapons" which are "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Colossians 3:12), and the forces of untruth with its "weapons" which are "fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed" (3:5).

In Galatians the language of "the fruit of the spirit" (Galatians 5:22) is used. "Fruit" is spoken of as qualities which habitually are expressed by those who "walk by the Spirit" (5:16). This is another way of speaking about virtues. These virtues are the characteristics that set the Christian apart from others. They are the fruit—the product of—being in open relationship with the living God.

I prefer to identify the list given in verses 22 and 23 according to the translation in the Revised Standard Version. The reasons for this are sermonic, not textual. They are nicely arranged in three units of three: the first triplet consists of one syllable each, the second triplet consists of two syllables each and the last triplet consists of three syllables each. This greatly assists in *remembering* the starting point for faithful living. The fruits are:

love	pa-tience	faith-ful-ness
joy	kind-ness	gen-tle-ness
peace	good-ness	self-con-trol

This list is not intended to be exhaustive. It does not include

several other Christian virtues mentioned in other places, for example in Colossians 3:12 (as listed above). Nor does it include such basic Christian virtues as honesty, hope, forgiveness and mercy. This list is part of a larger family of virtues which together make those who practice them good. Or, to say it slightly differently, they are qualities which concretize goodness as given to us by creator-God.

In previous chapters reference has been made to the Christian view of human nature. We now see in these virtues the core definition of what it means to be human under the lordship of Christ. These qualities make us what we essentially are created by God to be. As such they merit further individual attention.

Love. It cannot be mere coincidence that this list begins with "love." According to the New Testament writers, love is the ontological source of all that is—God is love—and therefore functions as the base virtue which unites God with us and us with each other.

> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us . . . So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them (1 John 4:7-16).

This identification of God with love and in turn our love for each other and for God is emphasized throughout the Epistles and the Gospels.[11]

Love is not only the ontological source of divine goodness; it is also the foundation of human existence. At bottom, love defines us as human beings. The Bible is absolutely clear about this. Therefore it should not be surprising that our empirical knowledge of human psychology confirms the same thing. Love is essential for the normal development of children, even of adults. Without love life in its fullness simply cannot be lived.

---

[11] Examples of further references are: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12); "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:44, 45); "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35, 36); "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet;' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8-10).

Paul Tillich saw this with exceptional clarity in his book, *Love, Power and Justice.* He speaks of love as "the moving power of life. . . . Love is the drive towards the unity of the separated. . . . Love manifests its greatest power there where it overcomes the greatest separation."[12]

Such a view of love can never be commanded. It always presents itself as invitation. It holds out the possibility of overcoming estrangement. This is why the Christian life is best understood as gift rather than as command. This is perhaps also why Jesus told stories which summoned people to a way of life rather than presented them with rules for how to live.

For us to put on the love of God in Christ Jesus is to accept the invitation to break the fundamental estrangement which has developed between us and God, within ourselves and among each other. God extends love to us so that we might live in the reality of that same giftedness both in relation to ourselves and others. We can love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Joy. According to Eckart Otto and Tim Schramm, "Early Christian tradition termed Jesus the messenger of joy and maintained that he had brought the long-awaited eschatological message of joy."[13] Jesus was the ambassador of joy because he brought "good news." The good news was that the warfare is ended, the enmity is no more, the blind will see again, the lame will walk, and the hungry will receive food (Luke 4:18). Something new has come which is cause for celebration and praise. This celebration is a way of claiming the good news and giving our consent to its shaping power over us. This good news of God comes to us as it always has: as a gift from outside us. The reception and acceptance of a gift spills over into joy and celebration. As the father in the parable says to the older son when the younger son returns, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:32).

Christian joy is the natural human response to the love of God in Christ. Since in Christ the destructive powers of sin and darkness have been disarmed and conquered (Colossians 2:15), since in Christ the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Greek concretely has been broken so that we can now be united as one human family in one covenant under the same living God (Ephesians 2:14), since in

---

[12] Paul Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 25.

[13] Eckart Otto and Tim Schramm, *Festival and Joy*, trans. James L. Blevins (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980), 113.

Christ the new rule of God's unending love has come to redeem the ones caught in sin's destructive grasp, since in Christ the transforming power of the Spirit of God's love has been made real in concrete historical existence—how can we help but participate in the exultation of Isaiah: "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones" (Isaiah 49:13)?

It is interesting to ask why joy is a Christian virtue. Normally one considers joy as a natural response to goodness having taken place. Yet the biblical material encourages, invites and almost commands the people to be joyful.[14] This is no accident. The biblical writers seemed to know that whether or not one is joyful does not only depend on the situation; it also depends on how one views one's place in the situation. For example, although difficult, it was possible for the Israelites to be joyful in Exile, not because they were confident in their own ability to escape, but because of the greatness of God. The biblical story is filled with encouragement to be joyful because of what God has done and continues to do. Hence it is important to be trained in the virtue of joy. It is important to put on a particular way of thinking or disposition in order to be joyful.

Peace. The theme, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father," which is quoted as a greeting in several of the Epistles (for example, 1 Corinthians 1:3 and Ephesians 1:2), and "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:6), as well as many other references to peace, permeate Scripture from beginning to end. Peace is the form that love takes in relation to others, particularly to neighbours and enemies. It is also a state of general well-being which extends into all aspects of life and hence is appropriate as a Christian greeting.

Peace is the virtue that knows something of the power of evil. Evil is nourished and fuelled by unpeace; it is consumed and smothered by peace. Evil's destructive power meets its greatest challenge in the steadfastness of love and peace. Even when it costs peaceful people their lives, peace remains the victory of God over death.

This means that the virtue of peace is inseparably connected to the other virtues. In addition to love, forgiveness is another important

---

[14] Just a few examples: "Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength'" (Nehemiah 8:10); "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise" (Psalm 66:1); "For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy" (Ecclesiates 2:26a); "Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem" (Isaiah 52:9).

companion virtue of peace. Where there is no forgiveness, perpetual violence and enmity are bound to prevail. Forgiveness undermines the power of evil and violence.

Church history is often read as though one small group within the larger church has claimed the virtue of peace. This group has earned the name, "Historic Peace Church." In fact, it has been suggested that it is appropriate for a small church group to specialize in this virtue, implying that it is okay for some Christians to refuse to relate unpeacefully to enemies, provided they do not all do it.[15] If they all did it, the argument goes, evil would go unchecked and eventually would devour the world. But this interpretation has no basis in the early church's understanding of the Christian life, neither in the biblical literature nor in non-canonical sources.[16] The Christian virtues were seen as a package because it is impossible to be peaceful without also being loving, patient and forgiving. Accepting this package made it impossible for the early church to be anything but pacifist. Moreover, originally the so-called "Historic Peace Churches" did not, at least to my knowledge, think of themselves as "peace churches." They merely thought of themselves as faithfully Christian. Living at peace with all was simply part of being disciples of Christ.

Yet it should be emphasized that, insofar as the "peace churches" have succeeded in remaining peace churches, they have had to work very hard to withstand the temptations that tried to make them unpeaceful. The only way they could do this was to systematically "put on the armour" of peace. (Excuse the mixed imagery!) This has required ongoing conscientious training in the life of peace. Without understanding peace as a basic Christian virtue, the "peace churches" could never have remained pacifist even to the limited extent that they have.

Patience. It may surprise some readers to find patience among the listed Christian virtues. But it should not. Impatience ranks up there with forgetting as the main cause of unfaithfulness. Why were the Israelites unfaithful in the wilderness where they had little control over their destiny? Because of *impatience* to gain control over their lives. Why were they unfaithful when they had plenty in the promised land? Because of *impatience* to gain more than they already had.

---

[15] For example, Reinhold Niebuhr gives this explanation of the Historic Peace Churches in "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist," chap. in *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

[16] For a helpful summary of the language of the early Christian life, see William R. Durland, *No King but Caesar? A Catholic Lawyer Looks at Christian Violence* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975), 69-88.

There is no greater challenge in modern society than to live by patience. Our current way of life is characterized by impatience. We are children of an instant generation: from instant food to instant gratification to instant information. Anything that takes time does not fit neatly into our modern lifestyles.

Patience is an essential partner virtue to all the other virtues. You cannot live peacefully with others if you are impatient. Joy is possible only if we can get through the periods of unjoy. And all rely on another virtue: hope. Hope is what makes patience humanly possible. Otherwise it would be a vice. One may, in fact, never see any tangible results from living peacefully in relation to others. Yet without the hope that such results will eventually come, one cannot live peacefully. Being patient is the way that, even though we do not see God's redemption now, we can hope that it will come through love and peace. We know the God who has promised it to us. So we can be patient because we already have seen the salvation of the Lord. We know the stuff of which this salvation consists.

Stanley Hauerwas states the relationship of patience and hope as follows:

> Patience is training in how to wait when there seems no way to resolve our moral conflicts or even when we see no clear way to go on. Patience is able to wait because it is fuelled by the conviction that our moral projects, and in particular our central moral project we call the self, will prevail. Yet patience equally requires hope, for without hope patience too easily accepts the world and the self for what it is rather than what it can or should be.[17]

Kindness. The Christian life is characterized by kindness (also called loving kindness and steadfast love) because the way of God is illustrated with this language. The biblical story repeatedly emphasizes God's steadfast love.[18]

Love cannot be imposed. Not even God's love is imposed on us; it is offered to us. God allows people to reject life and to choose death. God allows people to kill God, even if only temporarily. The way of God is loving kindness.

---

[17] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Christian Character*, 127-8.

[18] For example: "Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples! For great is his steadfast love towards us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord" (Psalm 117:1-2); "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing" (Joel 2:13); "but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:24).

Kindness, like other virtues, is a way of living when one is willing to sacrifice outcome for character. Kindness, for example, keeps us from resorting to evil powers like lying and stealing. Listen to Hosea.

> Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty [kindness], and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing, and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed (Hosea 4:1-2).

Kindness assures sexual fidelity and humility. Kindness is the acknowledgement that the lives of others are of ultimate worth. And since love is stronger than death, and gift more fundamental than force, to be kind is what Christians should and can be.

Goodness. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates this virtue as "generosity." Although it has five syllables and thus messes up the double-syllable triplet pattern, it has some substantive advantages.[19] "Goodness" is not, properly speaking, a virtue because it is the end in relation to which a specific excellence is said to be a virtue. "Generosity" is clearly a Christian virtue.

Training ourselves in the art of generosity is no easy task for moderns because we tend to see our moral being much more in relation to what we bring about than in relation to what we give or indeed have generously received. Hence, whether something is good or not gets measured by what it accomplishes. But the Christian life requires a commitment to an understanding of life based upon the notion that Christian self-understanding is rooted in gift because God is a gracious and generous giver.

Both David Schroeder and I have argued in earlier chapters that God's generosity is central for making sense of the entire biblical narrative. God gives life via creation; God gives freedom via the Exodus. God gives food, the law, promise and even judgement.[20] To

---

[19] The Greek word here is αγαθωσύυη which comes from the root word αγαθός meaning good. William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 2-3, suggest that in the Galatians context "generosity" is the better translation.

[20] It may be difficult to see how judgement can be seen as a gift from God, but if we think about it we see that we experience this in many areas in life. Athletes know very well that if it were not for the coach who pointed out when they were doing something wrong, they would not get it right. Such judgement is a gift from the coach to the athlete, just as God's judgement is. There can be no authority without judgement. Truth carries with its own judgement. The only way to get rid of judgement is to anchor the standard of goodness within self.

come to know the self-sacrificial, self-giving nature of God is to come to know the goodness of God. Notice how this notion shatters the traditional dichotomy between grace and works which has been so detrimental for a proper moral understanding of the church. The work of the church is the embodiment of the graciousness—the generosity—of God, just like the work of Jesus Christ was the embodiment of the grace of God. Jesus generously spread the Gospel—good news—to us. Our work is the embodiment of grace.

Faithfulness. The Christian life is characterized by faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Just as God is faithful to us, so we are called to be faithful to the way of God. Because of what they believed about who Jesus was, the early church understood faithfulness as the steadfast following of the life-model left by Jesus Christ.

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). How can anyone obey this incredibly demanding call without believing that this call comes from God? In other words, if we are unable to accept that this is the call to be fully human, it cannot be one we will embrace. On the other hand, since the life of Jesus is really "abundant life," how can it be ignored? Faithfulness first of all recognizes that God was in Jesus Christ; therefore he can be our Saviour and Lord. After that we bind ourselves in faithfulness to a life of discipleship.

To be faithful means that we are able to say "yes" to another's moral authority over us. That is, the life of another shapes our own life. Consider, for example, what we mean when this word is used in another context. To be faithful to one's spouse is to give the life of one's spouse moral power over how one lives. To be unfaithful is to ignore the binding power of that relationship. Similarly, to be faithful to Jesus means that we allow the life of Jesus to determine our own life. Therefore, faithfulness characterizes the committed person as the one who is bound to another because of the belief that in this bondage there can be life in all its fullness.

Gentleness. It is not easy to be gentle in our society. Gentleness flows naturally from "denial of self," but it is in strict tension with arrogance and the preoccupation with the importance of self. In our society we tend to teach our children at a very young age to become independent and self-assertive.

Gentleness is not based on a weak concept of self, but on a view of self that is shaped by love, sacrifice and submission rather than defence of self. This is possible because life grounded in the God of Jesus Christ needs no defence. In fact, defence of life destroys its very ground. Therefore its truest expression is through gentleness.

The Scriptures can talk freely about submission to others. "Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians

5:21). "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution" (1 Peter 2:13). Submission is the form which gentleness takes in human relationships. Submission is not the same as obedience, that is, doing what others require of you, especially when it may be in conflict with faithfulness otherwise understood. Submission is the gentle expression of love to others with the full knowledge that it may be rejected and rebound in violence and anger. To be gentle is to live in the knowledge that love's power is ultimately greater than any coercive imposition of will.

Another form of gentleness is simplicity. It is no accident that this virtue has been the focus for only some small Christian groups. While simplicity represents a profound insight into the meaning of the Christian life, it is also one which is almost impossible for us to accept today because of the forces in our society which compel us to wealth. Without a countervailing force of "gentleness training" or "simplicity training" we will eventually succumb to the destructive forces of materialism.

Self-control. Obviously the life of Christian virtues cannot be lived without careful training and self-control. But let us be careful not to misunderstand this quality. In our society control of self is seen negatively. It is reminiscent of Stoicism which entailed a denial of the passions. We like to live by our passions. On the other hand, we are people who by no means have given up a desire for control. Our focus of control is not the self, but others or the outcome of situations or even history itself. We are very nervous when we don't know where things are headed. We want desperately to be in control to ensure that things turn out right.

The biblical moral view is exactly the opposite of this. It suggests that we control or, better said, train the self to live by the virtues, then be open to the unexpected turn that God's transforming love will take. In this way it becomes the life that volunteers to live out of control. To control the outcome of events is to prevent God's redemption from taking place; to not train the self to live in accordance with the virtues opens up the possibility of sin's power to destroy Christian character.

The difference between Stoics and early Christians regarding the notion of self-control was not that Stoics defended it and Christians did not; rather they had different answers to the question of how it can be achieved. Stoics argued the philosophical position that this could happen only via the intellect's control over the passions—the mind over the body. Christians, while not denying the power of the intellect, went considerably further than this. The kind of training required to live by Christian virtues could be provided only in the community of believers where the practice of conscientious open-

ness to God's transforming love kept them from succumbing to the power of sin. The commitment of Christians to walk the life of discipleship could not possibly be sustained without constant participation in the shaping power of God through worship.

The early Christians had powerful insight into how moral virtues are shaped and appropriated. They knew that without the community virtues die. Certainly there is no greater testimony to this truth than our own society. The loss of virtues today is directly proportional to the collapse of community in our society.[21]

BEING A COMMUNITY OF VIRTUES

To view the Christian moral enterprise from the standpoint of an analysis of the virtues can dramatically change the central agenda for the church. It can provoke an entirely new set of questions. How can we become and remain patient in an impatient world? What can we as a community do in order to encourage each other to be gentle, loving and forgiving people? How do we keep or receive the strength to not act out of character? These questions are important because Christians believe that the life of virtues is the saving life, the life God wills for all people of this earth. They recognize that, unless the envisioned life and the real life meet in practical daily existence, the promises of the Christian life are mere lies. There is very little good in saying that we are peacemakers and continue to live by the impulse of coercion and power. There is little point in speaking of compassion, love and gentleness without concrete training in the skills that can make us compassionate, gentle and loving. There is no value in saying that we are saved by the grace of God if this does not become concrete in our lives. As we have argued throughout these chapters, the church is the training base for the community of virtues. The question remains: What concrete discipline structures does the church provide to help us become the kind of people capable of living this kind of life? Let me suggest three answers.

First, in a community of virtues worship is the act of remembering who we are. There are many aspects to the process of training Christian character, but none more basic than worship. No act is more profound than a people's pledge of obedience and loyalty to a transforming omnipotent and gracious God. Through this act the people can become the "body of Christ." When we read the story of Jesus Christ we soon realize that he could not possibly have done what he did if he had not lived in total obedience and openness to

---

[21] For the sociological argument that makes this case for American society, see especially, Robert N. Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

the Father. In order to do this he needed to fast and pray regularly. Given his openness to God, Jesus received the power of the spirit even through the most trying and torturous times. (Recall the temptation prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.)

Yet this model of openness and obedience is not new with Jesus. Throughout the biblical story, prophets, priests, kings and sages raised their voices in united calls to faithfulness. And through the function of each of these "offices" the destructive as well as the redemptive forces were identified.[22] Via this identification process, which was followed by repentance and renewal, the community could become cleansed. The biggest threat to this community was that it might forget the nature of this regeneration process. In forgetting it is easy to become allied with false gods whether this be through military alliances with foreign nations, foreign ideologies, or whatever. When the Israelites forgot who God was and what God had done for them, they themselves became a foreign community. When they remembered God as the shaper of their lives and bound themselves to God in worship and praise, they remained faithful.

In worshipping together we ask God to lead us and mould us into a particular kind of people. We do this in prayer, where we invite the presence of God's transforming love to do that which only love's power can do: comfort, heal and unite. We do this by reading and studying the Bible, recognizing that a tradition exists through which the character of God is especially clearly seen, a tradition which we give shaping power over our own lives. We do this through singing hymns of praise and adoration to the One who wills to give us abundant life. And we do this by preaching and hearing the power of the word in the context of our own struggles. And finally, we do this by living peacefully and justly with all people of the world.

These acts of worship are done in the context of careful analysis and study of the things that are happening around us. We must remember that wisdom is a Christian virtue. Hence, education is important. We constantly need to be engaged in the cognitive clarification process so that we not only live the Christian life but also know why. To be a particular community requires that we listen and re-listen to the stories of our lives and ask how they fit into the story of God's people. We must work hard at the art of theological clarification so that the process of defining and shaping our identity under God is not reduced merely to a process of reflection on self.

Corporate worship entails re-enactment of the acts of God through

---

[22] For a helpful study of the function of these offices in shaping the faithful church see, Douglas Gwyn, et. al., *A Declaration on Peace: In God's People the World's Renewal Has Begun* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991).

symbols. This makes it possible for worship and life to become one. Especially one worship act-symbol functioned this way in the tradition of the Mennonite church in which I grew up: the act of communion.

From my youth I recall vividly how solemn and important the time before communion was for the church of my parents. This was a time of commitment, renewal and purification which was practised only two or three times a year. During this time of preparation, members were asked to "make things right" with one another, a precondition for participating in the communion service. In this way we were taught that it was mockery to ask God to shape our lives while simultaneously closing off the possibility of restored relationships. The practice of moral right-making and community renewal went even further. Unity within the community was symbolized concretely by each person giving consent to the person beside him/her as the cup was passed down the row. This was a way of saying, "All is well between us; therefore we are one in the Lord. Together we are open to the shaping power of God's healing love." This act-symbol of communion regenerated the moral nature of that community.

Without worship there can be no Christian moral community and without being a moral community we cannot be Christians. Worship is as basic to moral community as food is to life. Worship is the first act; Christian living is the second act.

Second, a moral community takes responsibility for its members. The assumption of the Christian community is that all its members have committed themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ. To say it differently, in this community we all believe that the way of Jesus is the way of life. Therefore, when we join a community of Christian virtues we are in effect asking that we be held to this conviction. In the event that we accidentally stumble or lose sight of our central conviction, we would expect to be helped back into the fellowship. This is called church discipline.

Another word for church discipline is training. As we have said, in order for the church to be a community of virtues, its members need to train themselves to live by the Christian virtues. They can do this through practice. In the same way as a violinist acquires the skills of making beautiful music, so Christians can master the art of practising forgiveness, humility and mercy. As all good students know, to learn difficult skills one must engage in disciplined practice, especially at those times when one does not feel like it. Virtues do not come naturally; otherwise they would not be virtues.

Christian virtues-training is focused in two directions, inward and outward. We must train ourselves daily to embody the virtues we confessed when we became members of the Christian community.

This means that we must be held accountable by the community of virtues. When there is transgression, then there must be forgiveness and restoration of fellowship. When there is disagreement or confusion about what the Christian virtues are or how they are to be applied in a specific case, then that must be sorted out in honest and open discussion according to Matthew 18.[23] In this way we bind ourselves to the community of faith in order to be set free (loosed) by that same community.

There is another way in which the community of virtues takes responsibility for its members. The Christian community must take account of the entire life spectrum of its members: birth/life/death, children/youth/adults, and all the good and bad times associated with the many events of the human life cycle. When people are hurting, the community, which is founded on love and gentleness, must be present in a spirit of healing. The community of virtues builds its members up in all that they do.

So far we have not been very clear about who the members of the community of virtues are. Are we speaking about the local congregation, a particular denomination or the universal church? The short answer to this question is: we are speaking about all of them. The church is the fellowship of believers and we need each other at every level.

The tendency in our day is to isolate ourselves in local congregations apart from other Christians because of our unique situations. This is very dangerous. The local community of virtues itself can be led astray. Excessive congregationalism is dangerous precisely at the point of the temptation to idolatry. Isolated groups can easily find themselves with a truncated gospel. We need to welcome the challenge from other Christians that comes with hearing their faith struggles. We need to work hard at developing church structures that have built-in protections against isolationist Christianity. Above all, we need to accept members of other churches as our Christian brothers and sisters. One of the greatest temptations is to equate our own personal stories with the story of the Christian faith.

Third, a moral community wills salvation for all the people of the

---

[23] "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:15-20).

world. In the end we need to realize that the community of Christian virtues does not exist for itself. The God whom we worship and follow has given all there is to give for the salvation of the world (John 3:16). Our call is to be present in the world like Jesus was. To do so requires that we train ourselves in the virtues.

The community of love, patience and faithfulness offers forgiveness to all sinners in the world. It actively declares the brokenness of all oppressive powers. It continuously reminds those in authority that love, not coercion; patience, not violence; faithfulness to God, not surrender to the majority of revengeful voters are needed to rule truthfully. This community also actively seeks alternate models of justice and peace for people caught in this world's violence. The community of virtues always relates to structures of the world on its own terms. No evil in the world is too great for this community to shrink from, but its way of becoming present must be determined by the virtues it embraces. Such a community really believes that love conquers all.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the primary moral task of the church is to concentrate on not being seduced by those forces that can undermine its character as a community of Christian virtues. When the church makes decisions about how to minister to its members, it does so on the basis of who it is. When it makes decisions about what to say to the world in which it exists, it does so on the basis of its essential being. There is not one way of dealing with sin in the fellowship and another way of dealing with it in the world. The central moral question for the church, wherever it is, always is: "What does the church as church—that body characterized by the virtues which Christ espoused—have to say to the matter at hand?" When we understand ourselves morally in this way, then we will find that who we are as Christians will determine what we will be and do. Then we will be a community of Christian virtues.

~~~~~
~~~~~

PART V

BEING IN THIS WORLD

When Christians confess God as creator-Father they acknowledge all humans on earth as their brothers and sisters. This assertion has significance for how we live with pain, our own and others'. Nicholas Wolterstorff says in his moving book, Lament for a Son, *"The tears of God are the meaning of history. But mystery remains" (90). Christians cannot avoid dealing with human suffering. Their compelling love draws them deep into the evil of this world. Hence, the true test of faithful living is how, in the final analysis, Christian life gets lived in the presence of a sinful world. Many voices today suggest that, at most, the story of Christ's own suffering reminds us of the finitude and imperfections of this life; that when the love of God meets the sin of this world the agent of love gets hurt. The stories of the cross and resurrection certainly do pull every Christian into the anguish of the suffering ones, yet we want to contend more than this.* How *we respond to suffering, sin and evil, how we get involved in the complex ambiguities of life, are as important as* that *we do.*

Hence, this study would not be complete if we did not apply the body of our thinking about theology and ethics to specific matters of life. We have chosen two issues: abortion and war. The rationale for these particular choices is that these are the issues in which we personally have been involved during the past few years. At the same time, they are as old as the Christian church itself. Already in the second century Athenagoras emphasized that Christians could condone neither war nor abortions. Certainly both these issues will recur in the future for Christians to contend with again and again.

We cannot promise the reader final answers to these complex matters, but we seek honest accounts of the difference it makes when Christians think about them from the standpoint of the church as a parable of God's incarnate love which opens itself to the power of the biblical narrative. This approach does not make these matters any simpler to resolve, but it does make answers possible which otherwise are ruled out. It reminds us that, long before we get to the place of suffering, God's redemptive activity is already at work there. It also reminds us that, while life is often broken, ultimately evil and death cannot destroy it. Even though good and evil exist together in this world, the stories of the cross and resurrection remind us that God can transform even the most dreadful death into life. Ours is the honour to bear witness to the mercies of God through whom someday "righteousness and peace will kiss each other" (Psalm 85:10b).

9

THE CHURCH AND ABORTION

David Schroeder

How does the church's appeal to the character of God in Christian ethics relate to the issue of abortion? This is the question which I will consider in this chapter. An approach to ethics which focuses on the character of God as revealed in history and in Christ is very different than the positions usually taken. The heat of the public debate about abortion and the vilification of opponents makes it seem as if there are only two views: one pro, the other against abortion. But this is not the case. When the supportive arguments for each position are considered more closely, they represent different ethical perspectives, each with its own base and rationale. Neither the pro-choice nor the pro-life arguments represent a single unified ethical approach.[1]

To indicate more clearly the ethic which is being proposed in this volume, it will be helpful to consider which ethical positions are being rejected. In the process I will point out how the present debate is unsatisfactory and deceiving. Only then will I be able to speak about a more appropriate response of the church to the question of abortion.

---

[1] This is evident especially in readers on ethics. See Raziel Abelson and Marie-Louise Friquegnon, *Ethics for Modern Life* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1975); James Rachels, ed., *Moral Problems: A Collection of Philosophical Essays* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1971); Thomas W. Hilgers and Dennis J. Horan, eds., *Abortion and Social Justice* (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1972); Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel and Thomas Scanlon, eds., *The Rights and Wrongs of Abortion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974); R. F. R. Gardner, *Abortion: The Personal Dilemma* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1972).

POSITIONS REJECTED

Individualism. Individualistic ethics is the preferred option of present-day society but because it is incompatible with the Christian faith, this position must be rejected. In this approach the *person* decides what is right or wrong and what is to be done. The individual has the right to make whatever choice is considered to be in her or his best interest as long the laws of the land are not violated. For example, an expectant mother is deemed to have full powers of decision over her own body, including having an abortion. It is her individual decision. No one else needs to be consulted or asked to participate in the decision, not even the father of the child.

It should be clear immediately that such an approach to ethics runs into practical difficulties. Those affected by our choices may limit the exercise of our own wills. When a mother and father of an unborn child disagree about what is the right thing to do, they cannot both do what they think would be right. Thus an individualistic ethic becomes an impossible ethic.

More importantly, the Christian faith knows no such standard of ethics. God has established the moral order which applies equally to all people, whether they honour it or not. Therefore, it is of great importance that people help each other know what is right and what leads to life, not only for themselves but for all people.

Salvation includes not simply liberation of the individual in his or her relation to God but the establishment of a redeemed, responsible community. In this community of faith and commitment the will of God becomes known, is treasured and transmitted. There persons are nurtured and encouraged to become Christ-like in character. People who accept Christ are called into a new relationship to God and to others with whom they share life in Christ within the body of believers.

Many evangelical Christians, as well as proponents of liberalism, have tended to adopt moral individualism. In doing so they are conforming not to the teaching of Scripture or to the Christian faith but to the mores of society. The assumptions of our culture have been assimilated into our faith to such an extent that often we are not aware that our practice is totally at variance with the Christian faith and against the will of God.

Act-choice ethics. Also to be rejected is the approach which emphasizes that the act in question determines ethics (see chapter 4 above). If one could determine which acts are right and wrong one might know what to do. But the matter is not that simple. No two acts are ever precisely the same. Killing is not considered murder if the act was unintentional. The motive, intention and context of the act need to be considered.

An act-centred approach to ethics requires that the rightness and wrongness of every act within every conceivable situation and in relation to every possible motive be established.[2] The whole system breaks down under its own weight. This approach necessitates endless rationalizations about the act and its many possible contexts.

An absolutist position in the abortion debate, whether pro or con, soon becomes untenable. As soon as one moves away from an absolutist position on either side, one is involved in endless possibilities. When one seeks to establish the rightness or wrongness of an act, one is forced to choose some criterion of judgement, some principle of ethics that is agreeable to all. But in a pluralistic society such a common base is not available. Hence, the whole approach to ethics on the basis of act-choice must be rejected.

Legalism in ethics. Also inadequate is any position which establishes a new legalism that is to govern all ethical choices. Some try to overcome the problem of individualism in ethics and provide a base for act-choice ethics by setting up guiding principles. They maintain that a full set of principles regarding ethics would allow us to make proper distinctions and right choices. But invariably this leads to legalism and does not really solve the ethical dilemmas.

This approach presents several problems. First, how are these principles established? They need to be based on some kind of faith or worldview. However, a worldview may be acceptable to one person but unacceptable to another. Second, the introduction of principles does not overcome the problem of casuistry. That is, lengthy and detailed application of the principles to every conceivable act, situation and motive are called for.

Both pro-abortionists and anti-abortionists introduce principles into the discussion. Pro-abortionists introduce the principle of freedom of choice. Each person is deemed free to make the choices she or he wishes to make. Legalism is introduced into the pro-choice position via the principle of individual freedom. It receives credence because it is considered to be in harmony with present-day emphases on individual freedom and responsibility.[3]

Anti-abortionists introduce the principle of the sacredness of life

---

[2] Duane K. Friesen, *Moral Issues in the Control of Birth* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1974) shows various factors and principles to be considered when deliberating about abortions.

[3] The principle of freedom can be argued by proponents on both sides, as Susanne Scorsone shows in "Freedom: Choice or Life?" chap. in *The Issue Is Life: A Christian Response to Abortion in Canada*, ed., Denyse O'Leary (Burlington, ON: Welsh Publishing Company, 1988), 44-49.

as a legalistic principle.[4] Life begins at conception, they maintain. Therefore the fetus, like all other human life, is to be protected from harm. This principle is held to be in harmony with biblical revelation.

Each position sets up a legalism on the basis of principles which are considered binding on all. In a legalistic ethic, whether in favour or against abortion, a law or principle is invoked that determines the rightness or wrongness of having an abortion. If the "sanctity of life" principle is invoked, then the next debate must determine whether life begins at conception, at birth or somewhere in between. This debate involves highly legal, technical and scientific questions about which there is little agreement.[5] These are no longer personal questions. A legalistic approach is a direct invitation to enter a legal and scientific casuistic maze from which there is no escape. Legalism in ethics has a way of disregarding the person, the situation, the community and the realities of the world. Ethics cannot be divorced from the character of the persons making choices about important issues.

Time and again pharisaic Judaism and the Christian church have resorted to some form of legalism in ethics. The constant temptation is to interpret Scripture in such a way that binding laws or principles determine appropriate action. To do so is less than Christian. Jesus clearly rejected this kind of legalism. For example, he did not allow the principle or law of not working on the Sabbath to prevent him from healing the man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-6).

Even setting up love as the basic principle falsifies what is called for in Christ.[6] The Christian ethic must be determined by who we are in our being and how we respond to others in the spirit of Christ and not by how well or how poorly we keep the law.

Situation ethics. Situation ethics must also be rejected.[7] If the act is

---

[4] See Clifford E. Bajema, *Abortion and the Meaning of Personhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 1-3. For Bajema the real issue is whether the fetus is to be considered a human being. He then argues that the principle of the sacredness of life rules out any possible abortion.

[5] This is evident in Robert E. Hall, ed., *Abortion in a Changing World: The Proceedings of an International Conference Convened in Hot Springs, Virginia, November 17-20, 1968 by the Association for the Study of Abortion,* 2 vols. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1970).

[6] See Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1966). He entitles his book *Situation Ethics*, but introduces the principle of love which is derived not from the situation but from the Christian faith.

[7] Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* and *Moral Responsibility: Situation Ethics at Work* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967); Harvey Cox, ed., *The Situation Ethics Debate* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1968); Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw, *Beyond the New Morality: The Responsibilities of Freedom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974).

evaluated differently in each situation, does the situation then not become the controlling element? Certainly the situation is important in making moral judgements. But the ethical norm must come from some other source: one's faith or worldview. Christians claim that their ethic is supplied by the God-given moral order which needs to be described and made known. The act and the situation are to be evaluated and our lives are to be lived in relation to this order.

It is tempting to evaluate the rightness and wrongness of an abortion on the basis of the situation. For example, abortion might be an option or an encouraged action in cases of rape. But would it also apply to rape in marriage? This would be an understandable response to, but certainly not a redemption of, the wrong. Such an approach focuses too much on the situation and not sufficiently on the victimized person, the welfare of the victim, the character of the person(s) and the resources of the community to deal with the wrong. The ethic cannot come directly from the situation itself.

Civil religion. We also must reject any attempt at establishing a new Constantinian Christian order. Since the time of Constantine, church and state often have been in lock-step so that the Christian church could suggest or decide what the ethic of the state should be and *vice versa*, then regulate how this ethic should be enforced. However, the church can impossibly be the church if it is aligned with the state in this way.[8] In any case, the base for such a common ethic does not exist in Western pluralistic societies and the church is in no position to dictate such an ethic to the total society.

Nations with a plurality of faiths and worldviews have established what could be called a civil religion on the basis of which to promulgate and enforce its laws.[9] A network of beliefs and assumptions from various faiths and worldviews—but only aspects of each—constitute the beliefs or values of the nation. These include such categories as freedom of choice, freedom of religion and free speech. Such a civil religion, or system of values, is not necessarily Christian. Furthermore, agreements between the various faiths are often superficial. The differences surface when significant issues of life and death are considered, as in the current abortion debate.

Every society is interested in doing what is best for its people, but

---

[8] John Howard Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," chap. in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 135-147.

[9] Donald B. Kraybill, *Our Star-Spangled Faith* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976); Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1974); John Howard Yoder, "Civil Religion in America," chap. in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 172-195.

there may be little agreement about what constitutes welfare for all. Some judge that in certain cases abortion could be of benefit to society. Others make exactly the opposite claim. It is highly unlikely that the civil religion of present pluralistic cultures will be able to solve the moral questions related to abortion. We are left to speak about the rightness and wrongness of abortion on the basis of a specific belief system.

Many groups in society, including Christian churches, still operate on the model of the Corpus Christianum, that is, of trying to force their view of Christian ethics on the populace through the medium of the nation-state. In the case of abortion particularly, both pro-life and pro-choice people seek to have their view chosen and enforced by the state.[10] However, there seems to be no common ground on which to base a set of laws. It comes down to deciding which group is most astute or successful in winning public support for its position. The debate is more about politics than about ethics.

Dualistic ethics. A dualistic ethic is never far from the church door. It is tempting to suggest one right way for the state and another for the individual, one for the church and another for the rest of society. It is tempting to think of God as working in one way through the church and in a totally different way through the state. But then God would not be God! Then God would be divided against God and that cannot be. What God offers to one, God offers to all people. What is right for one set of people is right for all people.

God is God over all people. The moral order is given by God for the welfare of the people. Obedience to this order brings life. Therefore, it is important for all people to know what is ordained of God and what will contribute to life for us and all future generations. The church as the people of God seeks to represent an ethic based on the will of God for all people. It invites all people to recognize what will lead to life and what will lead to death.

Relativism. My comments thus far might suggest that the only possible remaining approach to ethics is relativism. But this is not so. In fact, relativism makes Christian ethics impossible. If no standard of ethics is invoked and none is possible, then the differences in society are accentuated as groups and nations multiply. This approach is a ticket to anarchy and a license for violence. Then, if order is to be achieved at all, it will be imposed by might and may have very little to do with what is right.

---

[10] See Ronald Sider, *Completely Pro-Choice: Building a Consistent Stance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987). Sider's main thrust is how to influence the public debate about abortion toward its prohibition by law.

Clearly we need an ethic that will hold out greater promise for humankind than one which sets the stage for constant fighting and violence. We cannot solve ethical problems by force, by legalistic principles or by letting the individual or the situation decide what is to be done. We need an ethic which holds out the promise of life for society, a promise for life that will inspire people to offer their lives for others in the spirit of love.

THE PRESENT IMPASSE

The public debate about abortion is at an impasse. It has polarized into two camps, forcing participants to join one or the other positions. The pro-life movement opposes abortion for any and all reasons; the pro-choice group seeks to justify abortion on the basis of freedom of choice. Both sides advance cogent arguments for their position and are perplexed at the non-acceptance of those arguments by their opponents.[11] Let us consider why this may be the case.

The pro-choice option. The pro-choice option in the abortion debate seeks to honour the mother as the sole moral agent. It claims that the expectant mother has the right to make moral decisions which affect her own body and life. The position is directed against people making decisions—decisions that do not affect them directly—for someone else. Often even the wishes of the father of the unborn child are not considered because he does not have to suffer the bodily consequences of the decision. The pro-choice option is an attempt to speak for those whose lives will be most crucially affected and seeks to give them power to act on their own behalf.

What is not spoken to in the pro-choice movement is the possibility of persons making the wrong choice. Simply to be free to make a choice does not guarantee that the person will make the right choice. Freedom of choice can mean freedom to do evil as well as good. The assumption seems to be that the choice which the individual makes for herself automatically is right. But this cannot be. It totally disregards the Christian story. It is an individualistic, relativistic ethic which leads to ethical nihilism. To act on the basis of such an ethic may well lead the person to greater misery rather than to life.[12]

What has given pro-choice proponents the power to convince

---

[11] Stanley Hauerwas, "Abortion: Why the Arguments Fail," chap. in *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 287-292. See also his "Abortion and Normative Ethics" and "Abortion: The Agent's Perspective," chaps. in *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1974), 127-165.

[12] See Harry Huebner in chapter 4 above.

others of the rightness of their position? Perhaps a combination of events and circumstances have converged to undergird their arguments. Certainly the emphasis on freedom of choice is a corrective on a long-standing wrong of the past when women had little choice and often were not considered to be morally responsible persons. Furthermore, focusing on freedom of choice counters the legalistic approach which calls for obedience to the laws of the land but hardly inquires about the morality of these laws. What helps the pro-choice position even more is that the emphasis on freedom of choice touches on the truth of the Gospel that all persons are to be morally responsible and accountable persons. The way in which women have been treated and how decisions were made for them over many centuries contributes to the ready acceptance of a position which honours women as responsible persons. Yet simply understanding why the pro-choice position has gained force and acceptance does not make it ethically right.

The emphasis on freedom of choice is a way of affirming and realizing freedom from external compulsions of all kinds. Such freedom is not in tension with the Christian faith. God came to set people free so that they could bind themselves to what is good and right. Being free to act without the restriction of external forces is a necessary requirement for responsible moral choice. Hence the emphasis on moral responsibility for choices we make is not entirely misplaced.[13] But God set people free from external determination and slavery so they could bind themselves to that which would be life to them. What that was had to be revealed to them in the Torah of God and confirmed in their history. This is what is missing in the pro-choice position.

The pro-life option. The pro-life option seeks to speak for the life of the unborn child. It advocates that the pregnancy, no matter how it came about, is to be carried to term. It bases its position on the sacredness of human life and on life being a gift from God. Life is assumed to begin at conception. Therefore, to abort the fetus is murder; it is a deliberate ending of a human life.

The emphases on choosing life and on life being a sacred gift from God are correct. The problem is that the pro-life position has become a legalistic one. The person is evaluated morally on whether or not she keeps the law—the law of the land or the law of Scripture—and not on the basis of a morally justifiable response to a pregnancy. This

---

[13] See my "In the Image of God," chap. in *Celebrating Differences*, ed. Aldred Neufeldt (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1984), 1-14. Here I argue that God has given humans very clear responsibilities as co-workers with God in the world.

approach demonstrates the spirit of the elder son in Jesus' parable about the two sons. He totally misunderstood the nature of his obedience to the father (Luke 15:11-32). If our response to abortion is advanced on the basis of legalism, a significant debate with the pro-choice people on what actually constitutes life in a given situation is not possible. It already has been decided by law or principle. A legalistic position does not consider sufficiently the basis and implication of choosing life. It cannot escape the charge of arbitrary reasoning and lack of deliberation in ethics. It resorts to demand rather than to invitation.

One could argue that the pro-choice movement may actually have been inspired by the legalism of the Christian community. In Judaism and in Christianity, ethics often turns to a legalism that short-circuits ethical deliberation and choice. A law or principle is held to be beyond debate and requires simple blind obedience. Such an approach focuses all the attention on the act and tries to determine the rightness and wrongness of the act rather than the rightness and the wrongness of the person in relation to the will of God. In such a setting it is not hard to understand that an alternate pro-choice position has developed where the person whose life is most directly affected is called to make a choice.

Both pro-choice and pro-life. A proper Christian position would embrace neither the pro-choice nor the pro-life option. Rather, it would adopt, at least in part, both of these options. The Christian position is at one and the same time pro-choice *and* pro-life.

As Christians we take choice for granted. God never forces but invites people to choose what its right and good and true. We are called to choose responsibly, but the choices we make are not necessarily right just because we make them ourselves. The rightness of our choices is governed by who we have become in Christ, by whom we have chosen to serve and by whom we worship. Rightness is judged in relation to the God-given story of life.

The Christian approach to ethics does not support the present pro-choice emphasis on freedom of choice without spelling out what it means to choose responsibly. Choice does not give licence for abortion. God invites us always to choose life rather than death. God wills that we have life, covenants with us toward life, and even goes to great lengths to instruct us and to help us understand what is good and what will lead to life. But a truly Christian approach to abortion rejects the pro-life position in the way it is commonly stated. Too often it is without understanding or mercy, without care and concern for the persons involved. It easily becomes judgemental, condemning, impatient and unwilling to enter into the situation in a sacrificial way. However, insofar as the position calls for the choice of life over

against death it should be honoured.

In the next section I will spell out more fully how the church—that body which shares the spirit of Christ and models God's way of relating to others—can respond to the abortion question.

ABORTION AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Any action or response to abortion by the church should be based on its view of human sexuality and the place of marriage and family in the Christian community.[14] In the process of loosing and binding, as it hears and appropriates the story of God's people as its story, the church separates itself from the cultures of the day with respect to human sexuality, marriage and the family. Because it recognizes the depth of human sin and how humanity is always in danger of being taken captive by the powers of evil in the world, its response to abortion takes a different direction than that of the present society.

The ethic I propose is based on an appeal to the character of God as revealed in history and in the person of Jesus Christ. It is a specifically Christian ethic in that it maintains that the nature and character of God was revealed most fully in the life and ministry of Jesus. At the same time it affirms that the Jesus event is in harmony with the revelation of God to Israel. I will speak to the question of abortion based on how God comes to us through revelation (see chapter 5 above). This approach is also an illustration of how the church appropriates the process of loosing and binding (see chapter 7 above).

That to which we are bound. Before considering the abortion question, the church first must spell out what has been revealed to be the will of God with respect to human sexuality, marriage and family. It is guided by the narrative of who the people of God have become through the process of loosing and binding. What it means to be the church is affirmed through the things to which it binds itself.

The church binds itself to monogamy as God's provision for marriage and family. It does so knowing full well that the institution of marriage is coming under increasing criticism in today's world.[15]

---

[14] See Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1990). He deals with abortion in the context of a much wider treatment of human sexuality. See also, Stanley Grenz, "Abortion: A Christian Response," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 2 (Winter 1984): 21-30; Donald Demarco, "Contemporary Biotechnology in the Context of Conflicting Theological Perspectives," ibid.: 11-19; and my response to Grenz and Demarco, ibid. (Spring 1984): 155-158.

[15] Roger W. Libby and Robert N. Whitehurst, *Marriage and Alternatives: Exploring Intimate Relationships* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1977); Bernard L. Murstein, ed., *Exploring Intimate Life-styles* (New York, NY:

Yet it believes that marriage is God's gift of life to humankind which was instituted when God created us male and female in such a way that a man would leave father and mother and cling to his wife (Genesis 2:24). This reading of the Genesis account was confirmed by Jesus who added: "What God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:6b).

Furthermore, the church binds itself to marriage as a lifelong union of husband and wife. It affirms that the institution of marriage, far from having run its course, is really the promise of life for humankind. It believes that the way to life for the individual, for the family and for society is by honouring more highly the marriage bond and the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood. Marriage and family are a basic institution of society. It simply is not possible to disregard the covenant of marriage and expect that all will be well with society as a whole.

In marriage the promise of God is seen as an exclusive sexual union in which each partner pledges fidelity to the other as long as both shall live. This implies that sexual intercourse is reserved for the marriage union. All premarital and extramarital sexual relations are contrary to the will of God and the welfare of the marriage bond. Fulfilment of the sexual relationship within marriage can be realized only in a relationship of trust and fidelity. To become one in marriage requires this exclusive relationship of total commitment to the marriage partner.[16]

After describing the creation of male and female, the biblical story continues, "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth,'" (Genesis 1:28). Husband and wife become one flesh in the child. Marriage is not an end in itself. The continuance of human life on earth through the family is related to sexuality and marriage. The blessing of God attends the couple which opens itself to welcoming the child into the union. The church sees this as the promise of life in marriage.

That to which the church binds itself is not thought of as a law or the imposition of a standard of conduct. Rather, it is a description of who the people of God are in their being and character. That to which the church binds itself is but the expression of the church's under-

---

Springer Publishing Co., 1978). Among the alternative lifestyles proposed are cohabitation, extramarital and comarital sex as well as creative singleness in which sexual liaisons are assumed. For a critique, see Ross T. Bender, *Christians in Families* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982), 46-76.

[16] Marriage is a relationship of mutual subjection between husband and wife. The one-sided subordination of the wife to the husband is of sin (Genesis 3:16). In mutual subjection each is subject to the other under the love that comes from Christ (1 Corinthians 7:4; Ephesians 5:21-33).

standing of life lived under God.[17]

That from which we are freed. That to which the church binds itself has a counterpart in that from which it has been freed. As the people of God bind themselves to the will of God, they are freed from enslavement to the powers of darkness operative in the culture of the day. Abraham was freed from practising child sacrifice (Genesis 22), Israel was saved from a society of revenge through the law that one could never exact more than an eye for an eye (Exodus 21:24), and kingship was saved from totalitarianism by placing the king under the covenant (1 Samuel 8-12). This saving work of God is evidenced not only in the Exodus but throughout the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ. Jesus came to set people free from the principalities and powers of darkness of their day. In the same way we can be separated from the dominant culture of our day by binding ourselves to the will of God.

The church knows and proclaims the liberating power of God over the actions and assumptions in society that lead to the increased number of abortions. It names the spirit of our time and the beliefs that lead people to a way of life that threatens their own welfare and that of the total society. The high incidence of abortions is the result of a way of thinking and living that disregards the moral order as given of God. Abortion is one way people use to cope with some of the undesired results of a lifestyle based on false assumptions about human sexuality.

The church is delivered from the belief that being created as sexual humans implies we have a right to sexual relations within or outside the marriage bond. Sexual relations are not a right. They do not automatically lead to happiness and are not in and of themselves fulfilling. They are a gift from creator-God and lead to fulfilment only if those relations are in accordance with the order God has established and blesses.

The church is liberated from the misperception that sexual drives must be satisfied if we are to be fully mature or fulfilled persons. In much of society today celibacy is not considered an option. The impression is given that the person who is not married and therefore has not had sexual relations is not a full person. Human sexual drives

---

[17] This emphasizes the importance for churches to be clear about their views on human sexuality. For examples of statements worked out by church denominations, see *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1985); Phyllis Creighton, ed., *Abortion: An Issue for Conscience* (N.p.: The Anglican Church of Canada, 1974); Anthony Kosnick, et. al., eds., *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought: A Study Commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1977).

are viewed as functioning like those of animals,[18] as moving us directly to fulfilment without encumbrances. But human sexuality is not like that.[19] It is related to our being, our person and is an expression of who we are. Sexual expression is related to the persons we are in Christ; it is related to what is considered proper for us to do under God; it is related to who we are as a Christian community.

The church is freed from the notion that what consenting adults agree to do together is right for them and is no one else's concern. Such an individualistic ethic will betray the persons who act on it. All a person is in his or her interactions with parents, siblings and friends is brought into any relationship, even one between two persons. The whole community of faith enters into forming and establishing the norms that become binding on our lives and on the basis of which decisions are made between people. To disregard this context of making decisions is at best foolhardy, at worst deadly. It betrays who we are in Christ.

The church is saved from the view that we are free persons and are not beholden to others in what we do. Total freedom is an illusion and leads not to life but only to conflict and loss. Freedom without responsibility leads to bondage and loss of freedom. The church knows freedom in Christ which is tied to the person and character of Christ and ultimately related to the nature of God. Freedom in Christ is freedom precisely because it expresses itself in harmony with the character of Christ and the will of God.

The church is freed from the fallacy that premarital relations are necessary to assess whether two people are sexually compatible. This approach represents a misunderstanding about human sexuality. Since human sexuality is an expression of who we are as persons, sexual compatibility will be decided on the basis of how we covenant to relate to each other in life and is not dependent on experiences of the early acts of intercourse. Who we are as persons and what commitments we are willing to make to each other can better be decided if we are free from the complicating factors of experimentation with pre-marital intercourse—experiences that may not be all that fulfilling. Many courtships that could have resulted in strong and stable marriages never got started because of the betrayal of each other's personhood as a result of engaging in premarital sex. Many

---

[18] Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape: A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967).

[19] Arthur Koestler, "Ethical Issues Involved in Influencing the Mind," chap. in *The Ethics of Change: A Symposium* (Toronto, ON: CBC Publications, 1969), 1-12. Koestler refers to the philosophy of "ratomorphism" which he describes as the fallacy of projecting our view of the rat (or animals) on humans, 4.

couples who had premarital intercourse have established committed, lasting marriages despite the experience and only because they learned to forgive each other and to build on that forgiveness.

The church is delivered from the notion that once one has made a commitment and is engaged to be married, one is at liberty to engage in sexual intercourse. Marriage is a binding commitment for life but, in our Christian communities, engagement does not yet represent such a full pledge. The commitment to marriage takes place in the context of the supporting family and the Christian community.

The church is liberated from the way in which children are seen as burdens and become unwanted in a relationship. Human sexuality is viewed more and more as being separated from the responsibilities of family. Sexual intercourse is not restricted to, but also not separated from, procreation in marriage. To reject a child is to view human sexuality as less than the fullness of life which God intended.

The church is freed from the preponderance of sexual stimulation displayed in society. Advertising, media attention, pornographic videos and literature, focus in most movies, beauty myths, emphasis on indulgence as happiness—all use sexually oriented content as means to economic ends.

The church is proactive when it is liberated from the principalities and powers of evil which are operative in society. It tries to avoid any situations that could lead a person to contemplate having an abortion. People still are tempted and experience unwanted pregnancies within marriage or outside of the marriage bond or as a result of being raped. What then?

Discipling in the church.[20] Through preaching, teaching and worship, the church seeks to have everyone personally bind him or herself to the church and to what the church considers to be the will of God for all people. It encourages and nurtures all to become what they are in Christ. It strives for growth in the fellowship to reach maturity in Christ. The church does everything in its power to underline the sacredness of life so that every conception is received as a gift of life. Therefore, it does not anticipate that any member would contemplate having an abortion.

However, the church as a discipling body is not and never will be perfect. Hence, sometimes people do find themselves in situations

---

[20] The term discipling as used here is best presented by Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church: Recovering a Ministry of the Gospel*, 3d ed. (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988). See also my "Discerning What Is Bound in Heaven: Loosing and Binding," chap. in *The Bible and the Church: Essays in Honour of Dr. David Ewert*, ed. A. J. Dueck, H. J. Giesbrecht and V. G. Shillington (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1988), 63-74.

of unwanted pregnancies and even, on occasion, resort to an abortion as a solution. When this happens a process of discipling takes place. The church considers whether what has happened is in harmony with God's will and the character of God's people. It reviews what kind of people we ought to be in welcoming new life into the world. If the church then judges that the act is out of keeping with who we are as a church, this is made known to the person who has sinned. If she sees the error of her way, the person is reconciled to the community of faith through repentance, confession and forgiveness.

Where there is deemed to be a transgression but the person who has sinned does not see it as sin, then the same process of establishing what originally is bound takes place. This is done through the "rule of faith"[21] given in Matthew 18:15-20. First, the person is approached by the one who is aware of the transgression. If this does not lead to acknowledgment of sin, the person is approached again in the presence of one or more witnesses. If this still does not lead to repentance, it becomes a matter for the whole church. If, after a fair hearing of all the issues involved, the person still insists that she cannot be bound to the church, then that person effectively has distanced herself from the church. They part ways. Where that person convinces the church that the action is right and justified, a new binding occurs.

Frequently the situation is not very straightforward. In many instances there is not yet a clear indication of the will of God and thus no firm binding has occurred. Sometimes we are not sure what the response of love to a person or situation should be. In such cases the church is called upon to engage in an extended process of coming to a firm conviction about what the promise of God would be. The teaching of the church on abortion may be clear enough, but someone could pose a question within the parameters acknowledged by the church as appropriate action. For example, "Can abortion be chosen as an option to save the life of the mother if the lives of both are threatened?" In this case the church could assist the persons involved determine what choosing life in that context would imply.

Discipling in the church is done not legalistically or arbitrarily but as the normal process of encouraging each other to love and to do good works (Hebrews 10:19-25). It acknowledges that we are the people of God and carry responsibility for one another. We are called to be holy as God is holy and to become God-like and Christ-like in character.

The church recognizes that we become who we are in Christ only

---

[21] This term was used by sixteenth-century Anabaptists to signify the process of binding and loosing when practised according to Matthew 18:15-20.

through the grace of God. Through the new birth we become a new people and begin to understand the will of God through the working of the Spirit of God in us and in the church. Through the power of the Spirit we manifest the spirit and character of Christ in our lives. In this spirit the church understands to what it binds itself and the powers from which it is liberated. In this spirit the church deals with nurture, growth, discipling and discipline.

WHEN CHURCH MEETS WORLD

Hope for the world. Working with ethical issues in the church is done through the process of binding and loosing (see chapter 7 above). Addressing issues outside the church follows the model in which God comes to us as humans (see chapter 5 above). I will illustrate how this process works by taking a specific case to show that we communicate with others and invite them to share life in God in the same way as we come to know God. The case I have chosen is only representative of other, similar situations and is used to present an approach which links the character of God to ethical conduct.

Consider the case of Mary. Mary is not a member of a church but is known to people in the church. She is a single person in the early stages of pregnancy. Her boyfriend deserted her the moment he found out she was pregnant. She is contemplating having an abortion because she has no family support. Mary cannot see her way through to caring for the child and making a living for both of them. She considers that it would be unjust to subject the child to the kind of life she could provide. Also, she is keenly aware how children of unwed mothers are treated, looked down upon and discriminated against in society. She feels that the pregnancy was simply a mistake.

The promise of life. The first thing that needs to happen is for the church or members of the church to share with Mary what God's promises of life are: a new life for her and the unborn child. That new life is related to acknowledging God and binding oneself to the will of God. God is present whether she perceives God's presence or not. The church extends to Mary God's promise of life in Christ. Eventually the church will share with her the church's understanding of sexuality, marriage and the family.

Mary needs to understand that not every situation is willed by God. As humans we may get ourselves into situations that are far from what we would wish for ourselves, situations that at times may be life threatening. These situations are not of God but of our own making. Yet, God does not abandon us. Even in the worst situations God is present and holds out a promise of life. Mary needs to know this.

At this point an objection could be raised about the involvement

of the church. The record of the church is such that most people who are contemplating an abortion would not come to the church for help. They would expect to be condemned and be told to suffer the consequences of their actions. Too often the church has taken a legalistic and condemning approach. It has been more concerned about the church than the person in need, about abstract theory rather than with redemption. If the church can put aside legalism and judgementalism and come with an attitude of love and concern such as God has for us, a new trust becomes possible. Then persons may once again find in the church the kind of help they need and can find nowhere else.

However, if the church shares its concern in word only, it very well may not be heard. Mary may be too preoccupied with what she needs and not be able to think straight or receive the invitation to life that seems to her like a "pie in the sky" answer to her dilemma. However, the importance of sharing the promise of life, both for her and the child, may take root once steps have been taken to offer more concrete help and a context has been created in which the promise of God can he heard.

The liberating power of God. Mary may best understand the liberating power of God through the help which the church can offer at this time. Practical help can come to persons like Mary when the church deliberates with her about whether or not to have an abortion. An unmarried, expectant mother is often left to face life on her own. Her options may seem very limited. She is fenced in by the realities of the day and the expectations of society. As a single mother she has limited earning possibilities and has to manage on her own. People stereotype single mothers. She fears what will happen to the child if she brings it into this cruel world. Her apprehension about the future makes abortion seem like her only option. How can she hear the promise of God for life in this situation when neither carrying the child to term nor terminating the pregnancy seem like movements in the direction of life? All the options seem to be negative. She feels she has no choice of true life but has to choose the least of several evils.

The church must set her free to make a responsible choice. It must speak in concrete ways to the captivities that she experiences and that are operative in her life. Mary must be set free from fear and the hopelessness of her predicament. She must be given a new possibility to make an honest decision towards life. But how can this be done?

The church cannot speak a word of liberation without sacrifice and suffering. Only by sharing her lot can the church speak a realistic word of liberation. This the church can do! It can promise her that if

she gives birth neither she nor the child will suffer loss because the church or a specific family of the church will be there to meet her needs. The church will see to it that she is able to earn a living, that the child will be cared for and that both of them will have a family of God via the church. The church can set her free from external pressures, fears and demands with which she is not able to cope alone. By introducing a caring community and family, she is freed from the constraints of her situation. Immediately she is more free to make a responsible choice.

Forgiveness is one of the most freeing and liberating experiences which persons who have sinned and have been sinned against can anticipate from the church. Forgiveness in Christ and the church is not a platitude but a reality. What has happened in the past no longer stands in the way of new life and is no longer a cause for rejection. The stigma is removed. People are treated on the basis of what they may be or become in Christ and not in terms of past failures.

Once a liberating word is spoken and implemented, it becomes possible that even the physical demands of rearing a child can be accommodated. If the person becomes part of the fellowship then she is free to make a decision that is not determined by the pressures of society and limited personal resources. Then it is possible for the person to make a choice in the direction of life. Through the proclamation of the Gospel in word and in deed the church extends an invitation to all people to accept the life that is offered in Christ, a life liberated from the powers of the darkness of this world.

Life-giving covenants. God covenants to be there for us and for our salvation. God's love toward us does not change even when we reject God. God allows but does not desire the debilitating consequences of the evil we choose. When this happens, God is there, waiting for our return and, through forgiveness, grants us life. When we return and covenant to do God's will we are rewarded with life.

God promises to be our God but also knows that as humans we do not know what leads to life and what leads to death. God gave us the law which represents the will of God for our lives and invites us to choose life by covenanting to keep the law.

Mary can know God as a covenanting God through the covenant which the church wants to make with her. The church seeks to be like God as it commits itself to be there for her welfare and interests. In a sense the church makes a unilateral covenant with her: it pledges to be there for her and the child. The concern for her and her child does not cease even when she spurns the church and any help that it might be willing to give. The church covenants to be God-like in character toward her regardless of what she chooses to do.

Service under God's rule. In the same way as the kings of the Old Testament were to do the will of God so that the people could experience the reign of God in their midst, we as individuals and as a church are called to be God's servants. We are to order things in such a way that the will of God is done in the Christian community and in the world. In Mary's case we have the responsibility of assisting her to manage things so that her needs and the needs of the child are met. This may take organizing and arranging things for their benefit even at the cost of sacrifice to members of the church.

It may be that, together with Mary, the church community decides that the best arrangement is to have the child adopted by a family in the community. It may be that together they decide that it is best for Mary to keep the child. The church will establish a support network so she can raise the child and continue working to provide income for both of them. It may be that both mother and child will be adopted by an extended family that will treat them as part of their family.

The point is that the commitment to Mary and the child will be concrete in terms of what is needed for her to take full responsibility for the child. It is not a decision imposed on her, but an invitation to accept the help of the community of faith so she can find it liberating and challenging for herself and the child.

CONCLUDING WORD

My response to the question of abortion takes its departure from a consideration of the character of God. Any biblical stories or passages which give insight into the character of God provide a clue to the kind of people we are to be in our relations to other people. The beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5) or Paul's fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) are two examples.

The approach I have outlined, first of all, asks who we are as God's people and what life which is lived in harmony with who we are in Christ would be like. It focuses more on being than on doing—on expressing who we are as Christ's body on earth. In this approach word and deed are one; both express our being in Christ.

The character of God is represented most clearly by Jesus and his love for those in need. Jesus did not condemn the sinner: the tax collector, the prostitute or the rich young ruler. Jesus came to them in love. They knew immediately that Jesus covenanted to be there for their welfare and that he would not betray them. They knew that, even if they chose what was wrong, he would not reject them but would grieve over them. At the same time Jesus did not force them to do what is right and good (Mark 10:17-22). He invited them to choose life, but he left them with the responsibility to decide whether they would do so.

This same love needs to shine through in our relations to people who are seeking life. We need to show our love and concern in every way we can. We must go out of our way to make sacrifices for others so that in the end they may choose what is right.

When we look to Jesus we see that he cared for people in need and offered them the love of God. He did not focus unduly on their sin but sought to awaken their faith in him and in the work of God. He gave them the promise of life in his call to follow him. The church presents the same promise to people when it invites them to honour God, to offer their lives to Christ and to do the will of God. It is a call to repentance and faith and to a new life in Christ.

To act on the basis of who we are in Christ will not be easy. In fact, following Jesus may well lead to rejection and suffering as it did for Jesus. But today, as in the time of Jesus, those who come to know Christ will find forgiveness and fullness of life.

~~~~~
~~~~~

10

THE CHURCH AND THE GULF WAR

Harry Huebner

Most of my chapters in this book were given their final form between 1990 and 1992. This was the time when the world focused much of its attention on preparations for and then the actual execution of the so-called Gulf War. Consequently I have found myself embroiled in the emotions, consternations and theological debates regarding the ethics of war.

I have viewed my "involvement" in this conflict from several vantage points. I am a human being and share my humanness with every other person who has been given life by creator-God. This includes those responsible for making war happen and those who are its victims if it does happen. I am a citizen of a country which, as a member of the United Nation (UN) Security Council at the time, sponsored or co-sponsored all but one of the UN resolutions leading up to the war. I am a Christian in spiritual union with many Christian brothers and sisters who support this war, even some who went to do battle, as well as with my Christian sisters and brothers in the region—Iraq—which was the target of this war. And I have had close emotional ties with many Arab people in the Middle East as a result of living in Jerusalem for two years and travelling in the region on several occasions.[1]

---

[1] In the early 1980s I was involved in Palestinian relief, development and peace/justice work in the West Bank under Mennonite Central Committee. Since then I have been back to the region on short trips several times. Agnes, my wife, and I

Living and working in the Middle East has made it impossible for me to view this conflict abstractly. I cannot help but see Iraqis and Kuwaitis as real people: mothers, fathers and children with dreams and aspirations of making an honest living in freedom and peace. In this respect they are exactly like we. Yet this insight alone, which came from personal friendship with the people, did not pack the most powerful punch in determining how I, who was defined as enemy for the Iraqis by their leaders, should respond to them, whom my leaders had defined as my enemies. The formative moral force which shaped my thinking came instead from an inescapable awareness that as Christians we must commit ourselves to being open to the call of the biblical God. Through the ongoing story of Israel and especially through Jesus, God asks us all to love our enemies and bear witness to the mercies of God. I was as appalled as anyone else at the actions of the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein against the people of Kuwait, let alone what he has done to some of his own Iraqi citizens. Yet as a Christian I knew the importance of trying to keep this outrage from forming the moral basis of my response.

In virtually every public reflection on the conflict, including those by many Christian ethicists, this war was the example *par excellence* of a just war. Many Christian analysts considered it a legitimate occasion for "stepping outside" of our characteristic forgiving, loving selves and violently stopping "the monster" before he could do too much damage. These were seen as extraordinary times for which extraordinary means were in order. Yet this was the very logic of involvement I had come to hold in deep suspicion, especially for those wanting to be disciples of Christ. Hence this conflict came as a specific challenge to test my convictions on what members of the church who open themselves to God's redemptive love say and do in times like these.

This chapter should be seen as an example of what this entire study has emphasized: that the church's task is to be what it has been called to be, that is, a concrete parable of the graciousness and loving kindness of God. In ordinary or extraordinary times the church's task always is to preach and be the good news of compassion and hope for those caught in sin's grasp. This is most difficult but also most

---

conducted a study tour which arrived at the Ben Gurion Airport (Tel Aviv) on August 4, 1990, two days after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Later that year in November-December, I, together with a group of 11 other North American Christians, went to Iraq on a "Peace Mission" under the auspices of Christian Peacemaker Teams. A month and a half later, January 16th, the bombing started. In May 1991, I was sent by Mennonite Central Committee to Iraq to assess the damage, administrate relief aid and visit church communities in the region. These invaluable experiences form the backdrop for my comments.

crucial during violence and war. In such times Christians are most prone to step outside of their roles as members of a worldwide *Christian* community and into the hypothetical role of commander-in-chief of the armed forces of a particular country. The power of pondering, "If I were the prime minister (president) . . ." is such that the humble conviction, "I am called to be a disciple of Jesus," too easily becomes a distant whisper. Yet, since bearing witness to the mercies of God is never optional for Christians, the test of faithfulness lies in whether we can be ordinary Christians in extraordinary times such as war.

Many highly nuanced analyses exist on why war generally and the Gulf War particularly are or are not just. This kind of conceptual clarification is indeed very important. Yet the best way I know of presenting my reflections on the Gulf War—especially in the context of this study which focuses on the role of the church as moral community—is by means of a sermon I have preached several times in the past year. It is entitled "Jonah, God, Iraq and Us" and is based on two biblical readings, Jonah 2:9b-4:11 and Romans 12:1-13. It is an attempt to say what I believe the church must say and do when the nations in which Christians worship go to war. I use this rather unorthodox approach of presenting an entire sermon within an essay to remind ourselves that we are people of the Book called into existence by the Word of God. After the sermon I will make some brief reflective comments.

JONAH, GOD, IRAQ AND US

I want to begin my meditation with two stories. Both have to do with my encounter with Christians in Iraq. During my one-month stay in Iraq this past summer [1991] I tried to spend a lot of time with local Iraqi Christians. My very first encounter happened quite by accident. At the Hotel Baghdad, where I checked in after a gruelling 36-hour trip from Amman, Jordan, the receptionist asked what I was doing in her country. I told her that I was there to help in the post-war humanitarian aid effort. She asked, "Are you Christian?" I said yes. This response brought tears of joy to her eyes as she reached for her partially hidden crucifix and said in a clearly audible, yet whispering voice, "Then we are one in Christ. It is not easy for us Christians in this country, you know. Just recently they killed my brother. Be careful. If you need anything, let me know. Christians are all one and we must stick together." Middle Eastern Christians are often stereotyped as somewhat robotic and formal in their expression of the faith, people not overly excited about being Christian. This has not been my experience generally with Christians in the Middle East and especially not with Iraqi Christians.

My second story comes from a very different setting. I had several visits with a Christian extended family which I met through their local church in Baghdad. They were all part of the same congregation. On one of my visits we had already discussed a variety of topics. All the young men in the room were soldiers. A number had fought in the Gulf War so it was not very hard to direct the subject of discussion to the war which was uppermost in the minds of most people anyway. They recounted some of their experiences: how they had come face to face with the enemy and had killed some of them. I thought we had enough confidence in each other by this time that I could become personal, so I asked, "Did you ever consciously think that the enemy you were killing was probably also Christian?"

The room fell deathly silent. The silence was long enough for me to realize that I had committed a terrible *faux pas*. How dare I, a foreigner—one who had come from an enemy country—raise an issue that appeared to judge them for defending their country when it was attacked by my "Christian nation." In fact, as I sat there in silence, I wondered: Did they perceive me as a North American first or a Christian first? Up to this point I thought I had been received as a Christian first and my nationality was secondary. With my question I had forced the issue. I feared the justified wrath which no doubt would follow. Strangely enough, the opposite happened. Everyone in the room became very serious. One of the soldiers started to weep—and for an Arab man to weep in public is rare. They told me: "You must understand that no one in this room wants to be part of the military. We won't even begin to justify what we are doing. We have absolutely no choice about whether we are soldiers or not." If they refused to be part of the military they would all be dead. "If this were not the case no Christian would be part of the military," they assured me. It was that simple. Then—and I knew I had it coming—they raised this penetrating issue for me to ponder: "We Christians in Iraq would simply be slaughtered if we refused to be part of the army, but you come from a Christian country where people have at least some choice about being in the military. Why then are there so many Christians in your country who willingly go and kill people, including Christians, in other countries? Do you in North America really believe in the universal church? Do you really consider us your brothers and sisters in Christ?" Now it was my turn to weep.

I will return to this theme of being Christian in Iraq and in the West later. First I invite you into a time of reflection and meditation on the story of Jonah and of God's invitation that we learn from this story by placing ourselves into it.

Iraq is a country extremely rich in biblical history. It has the city of Ur, from where Abraham came; it has Babylon, the place to which the children of Israel were exiled and where they tried to sing the

Lord's song in a foreign land; and it has the ruins of Nineveh. When I visited these ruins I became convinced that there are many aspects of the Jonah story which are repeating themselves in the struggle currently taking place between Iraq and us. The punch line of this story is still very true. We do well to take time to listen to it again.

We have already heard part of this story in the Scripture reading,[2] but let me remind you again how it goes, this time in my own words. God sends a messenger, Jonah, to Nineveh to proclaim the word of God. God does not have an easy time of it because Jonah does not cooperate. Jonah does not have an easy time of it because God does not take no for an answer. Finally Jonah gives in, goes to Nineveh and preaches the message of God. The people hear him and repent. God's grace delivers the people from destruction. God seems satisfied because things turned out about as well as could be expected, but Jonah gets mad.

And this is really the Shakespearean rub of the story, isn't it? Why does Jonah get angry when it is hard to imagine a better ending to the story? But that's precisely it. What bugs Jonah is that the ending is good for bad people. We can all identify with this: there is nothing worse than bad people getting away with bad things. Right? Well, God has something to say about that, so back to the story.

Jonah questions the whole point of the exercise through which God has put him. Jonah doesn't say much in the end, but in his silent protest his challenge to God cannot go unnoticed: "You sent me to this wicked place to proclaim judgement to an evil, godless people. When I finally do, you turn soft on me, God. These people are bad, bad people. They are following an evil leader. They deserve death and destruction; they do not deserve your mushy mercy. God, I'm angry! How is this world ever going to get straightened out if you don't start getting tough on evildoers? And why should I even have to remind you of this. You should know. You're God!"

Jonah is so upset he withdraws through the city gate and sits down beside its outer wall to pout. "I'm staying right here to see what is going to happen to this city. I need to know whether you, God, are going to come through for the righteous ones like me and against the evildoers like the Ninevites, or whether you're going to mess up. This just has to be sorted out. We are not the same kind of people. We are we—your chosen people, God—and they are they—bad people! If they were good people you would have chosen them, right? But they are not. And you didn't choose them. So there. Bad people deserve your wrath; good people deserve your mercy. Right?"

---

[2] Jonah 2:9b-4:11.

Jonah is pushing awfully hard! After all, God had to send him through the belly of a fish to get him to Nineveh in the first place and he *still* thinks he can call the shots? At this point in the story the reader is inclined to think that maybe it would be in order for God to teach Jonah a thing or two about who is really in charge. This is exactly what God is trying to do, only not in the usual way which comes to our minds. Perhaps that is because we are more like Jonah than we like to admit. God still does not give up on the gracious approach in having Jonah come to see that "Deliverance belongs to the Lord" (2:9).

The last part of the story—as does most of it, actually—focuses again on the drama between God and Jonah. "Do you do well to be angry?" God asks rhetorically. Jonah just sulks.

Now it's hot in Nineveh, very hot. Jonah begins to suffer from the heat of the sun as he sits there beside the city wall. And God, who would have been quite justified in letting Jonah suffer a little, continues to respond in amazing graciousness. God delivers Jonah from the heat by letting a plant grow beside him to give him shade. Maybe, just maybe, Jonah will start catching on that deliverance comes from the Lord; that life is rooted in God's mercy, not in his own strength and goodness or in his own superiority over other people. Jonah does not plant the seed, nor does he water it, nor does he till it. He doesn't even ask for it. God just gives it. Maybe Jonah will come to see that even though he does not deserve shade, he gets it anyway when he needs it most. "And Jonah was exceedingly glad for the plant," the text tells us. The plant was good for Jonah; it had positive instrumental value. Then the plant is destroyed by a worm. Again Jonah is very, very angry, "angry enough to die" (4:9b). "God, this plant was good for me. I had a right to it; I was hot." (Right, you say?) "What is going on, God. The very things I perceive as good, you destroy and what I perceive as bad, you save."

Maybe Jonah is catching it! But even if he doesn't, the reader by now sees the point clearly. If not, God makes one last speech to Jonah: "My grace was extended to you in your misery. Why should I not extend my grace to others in their misery? Are you so preoccupied with self to think that you alone deserve to live; or worse still, that you have it so good because you are good, and that the Ninevites should suffer because they are bad people? Of course the Ninevites are bad people, but so are you. Haven't you seen by now that life comes from God's mercy and grace? And God's grace is extended to all people, especially to bad people. Just one more thing: you cannot really claim to know me, or represent me very well, if you withhold your mercy from others."

"And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons

who do not know their right hand from their left . . .?" (4:11) Should we not pity Iraq, that great country, in which there are more than 18 million people suffering from a war fought by nations who invoked the name of Jesus Christ to justify their actions?

According to the Jonah story, whether Iraqis are good people or bad people is quite irrelevant as far as God's mercy and ours is concerned. If we understand the punch line of this story, then the question simply is whether we are capable of seeing the Iraqi people today together with us under God's mercy, or whether we insist on reserving God's mercy for ourselves and God's wrath for them, as Jonah wanted to do.

But how can we regard the Iraqi people today together with us under God's mercy? I want to suggest that one small step we can take is to begin with "the renewal of our minds," as Paul puts it in Romans 12.[3] What is Paul talking about? With respect to what are we to renew our minds? The answer is, the unity of the church. Paul is suggesting that when we think about the nature of the church we are able to conceive of a whole new world. "For as in one body we have many members, and all members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another" (12:4-5). Can we today see Iraqi Christians, or for that matter Middle Eastern Christians, and us as being "one body in Christ, and individually members of one another?" But why should we even want to see the church that way, you ask? Does it really matter? Yes, it matters a lot. We should want to because this just happens to be the way the church at Pentecost is perceived when many nations came together in the spirit of unity.

Let me introduce you to a Christian brother, Reverend Gabriel Habib. Currently he is General Secretary for the Middle East Council of Churches. Reverend Habib is from Lebanon and lives in Cyprus. Recently he was featured in an interview called, "Your Wars, and Your Peace Are at Our Expense."[4]

In the interview, Reverend Habib speaks about the very question before us: unity of the church and enmity between nations of the West and nations of the Middle East. He pleads that Western churches recognize the Middle Eastern church as part of one united body with them. His call to North American churches is clear. Churches in the West and churches in the East have the same basic task, he says: to act together in opposing war and in promoting peace, to speak up for humanity over against our nations' leaders' com-

---

[3] Romans 12:1-13.

[4] Gabriel Habib, "Your Wars, and Your Peace Are at Our Expense: An Interview with the MECC General Secretary," *MECC News Report* 4 (February 1991): 7-10.

mands that we kill one another. If we don't do so, we will end up having Christians kill Christians which is to blaspheme the church by making the nation our God. Think about it. When a Christian soldier goes to another country, this person's highest authority is no longer the head of the church, Jesus Christ, but the head of the nation, the commander-in-chief of the army.

The church is not like the nation; it knows no boundaries. The church rules not by armies but by invitation and by the power of the Word which it lives and preaches. The church believes that who we are and how we ought to live and die comes to us from the story of Jesus. This story invites people into a new society where sinners are forgiven, not killed; where enemies are loved, not destroyed in war; where servanthood, not dominion is the highest norm; where wealth is shared, not hoarded; and where people are transformed by the power of God's love, not by the power of love of weapons. This Jesus, who is the cornerstone of the church, has called a real community into existence, one without national boundaries, one in which all humankind—Jews and Gentiles—are called to participate together, one where all can come to see a godly peoplehood which truly knows no human boundaries. This real social community is structured to train its members to live peaceably by worshipping regularly in spirit and in truth. Only when together we open ourselves to the transforming power of God's spirit can we be the kind of people who can live at peace with one another, both locally and abroad.

There is hope in this biblical vision. Transformation of the mind encourages us to dare to dream. I invite you into this dream with the Christians of the Middle East. Let us dream that what the Scriptures suggest is really true; that in God's people the renewal of the world has begun. Hence, through this renewed body, the church, God wants to rule the world. In this dream we see that such a rule of God bears little resemblance to the rule of our nations. We do not need a new ruler of nations. We need a new people, a people transformed by the love of God in Christ Jesus. We need people so covenanted to God and to one another that not only can they not kill each another, they will not kill or harm anyone, no matter who or what commands them; people so driven by compassion that they are willing to give their lives for those who suffer; people who participate in the truth of God so profoundly and so concretely that nothing, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate [them] from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). This is the new reality that was begun at Pentecost and that we today are invited to be part of.

We bind ourselves to the Christians of Iraq not because they are somehow more important people in the sight of God than the non-

Christians there. We do so because Christians around the world are our brothers and sisters in Christ and together we are shaped by the same story. They and we know that the Jonah story and the Jesus story teach us that life without mercy ceases, that the word of God's grace is better news than the word of a strong military. The story that shapes us is one which compels us to include all people of this earth under the parenthood of God.

Right now there is suffering of horrendous proportion in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of helpless little children are dying of starvation and disease. Our tie with the Christians of Iraq reminds us that what is happening there is our business because it is really happening to us. And our tie with the God of mercy compels us to cry for mercy to those who can end their plight.

I know very well that Iraq is not the only place of violence and pain in this world. And for some of you this may all seem very far away. But I want to remind you that the same God who calls us to be merciful to the Iraqi children is also calling us to be merciful to all other peoples in our world, indeed to one another. The same God who can deliver them from their misery can deliver you from yours.

"Deliverance comes from the Lord." Our call is really not to save the Iraqi people or to save one another. This God will do. We will be judged not for how successful we were in delivering Iraqis from their suffering. We will be judged for whether we have been an honourable sign of God's redemptive grace. We will be judged on how well we have come to know the God of mercy. We will be judged on how generous we have been in sharing it with others caught in suffering as we find our place in the stories of Jonah, God, Iraq and Us.

Let us pray:

God of the suffering children,
of all the little ones who have died without knowing
the mercy of those called to be merciful;
Grant us peace—peace where there is none.
Forgive us our complicity with evil.
We know that, because violence flows from the hearts
of human beings, it is not limited to a particular place
in this world.
God, cleanse our hearts and our minds from all unrighteousness.
We also know that pain, loneliness and confusion touch
many lives every day in countries where there is no overt war.
God, be gracious unto all those who are hurting this day.
May your Holy Spirit save us.
May we find ways of being living parables of your mercy.
In the name of Jesus our Lord we offer our prayers to you, AMEN.

REFLECTIONS

I will address briefly two issues which this sermon raises. First, how can "showing mercy" and "advocating that mercy be shown" be reasonable and practical social strategies for peacemaking, or can they? To ask it another way: Is there real social power in this approach or must we abandon all interest in changing unjust structures and situations and simply concentrate on being faithful, albeit politically irrelevant? These questions raise the larger ethical/theological issue: How is the power of sin concretely undermined in real social/political situations? With specific reference to my experience in Iraq, I will present a practical illustration of the challenge of God's mercy.

The second response focuses on the church. The modern debate over ecclesiology has demonstrated that how we understand ethics is determined by how we understand the church. The argument is often made that those who embrace a sectarian understanding of church—one in which its members separate themselves from the difficult choices confronting society and say that theirs is a different task—can well afford to be radical in their view of Christianity. The view is that such Christians can adopt socially irresponsible positions like nonviolence and pacifism because they already have defined the truly difficult matters as falling outside of their jurisdiction. But if we are responsible citizens, the reasoning continues, and really care about concrete social justice, then our Christian faith must be more practical and we will need to compromise our professed ideals. This way of thinking about so-called sectarian churches has led mainline churches to reject pacifism in favour of Christian realism. Moreover, it must also be acknowledged that some so-called sectarian groups have embraced a pacifism which is irrelevant as a strategy of social change. In my response to this debate, I will rely on further insights from Reverend Gabriel Habib to present a different understanding of church, one which may well be called radical yet not sectarian; one whose radicality is rooted in the affirmation of the oneness of the church universal, not in the "practical compromises" necessary to accommodate the narrow visions that flow from an embrace of the interests of nations.

The challenge of mercy. The most frequent response to my two visits to Iraq during this conflict went something like this: "What good did your efforts in Iraq do? We still had the war, and, when all is said and done, there really is no other way to stop monsters like Saddam Hussein, is there?"

In responding to the question, "Is this form of peace witness socially significant," I want to draw specifically on my experiences

during the Christian Peacemaker Teams trip to Baghdad in November 1990. This trip was made during the time when the standoff between the UN forces and Iraq was most intense. The United Nations had issued a deadline for Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait. With this ultimatum came the threat of war. In response Iraq had taken all its foreigners hostage and the countdown to war had begun. As foreign peace/justice advocates in Baghdad two concerns were uppermost in our minds: What can be done to get the hostages released and what can be done to avert a major military conflict in the region?

Our group of 12 was fortunate enough to meet several of the hostages. We also met a number of government officials. Yet as we visited one office after another of the powerful elite in Baghdad, we could not help but wonder about the significance (or lack thereof) of our activities. As people who disavowed the use of violence, did we really have a place as peacemakers in this conflict? Had we perhaps forfeited our right to be involved in this high-stakes drama of international chicken?

Our preoccupation in this strange land was not only on current affairs. We also reflected on the ancient story of the God of Israel and Jesus. We could not help but think frequently about the biblical stories where Babylon is seen as the symbol of godlessness. It was easy to be confused about whether we were *in* Babylon or had come *from* Babylon or both. Part of our group went to the ruins of the old city of Babylon to pray. We prayed for the outpouring of God's spirit of peace. We prayed that the modern "kings of Babylon" might, in some miraculous way, come to experience the truth of Pentecost. We prayed that the political leaders, who were not able to communicate with each other at the time because they spoke utterly different languages, would come to respect each other even though their worldviews were miles apart.

In this rich historical setting we tried to take as seriously as possible our biblical mandate to be peacemakers, especially as we faced the task of speaking to the political leaders. We came to believe genuinely that as Christians we were instructed to confront fearlessly the powerful leaders of this world with the truth of God's mercy. We read Jeremiah and claimed this passage for our task at hand.

> Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, as you have been; do not be afraid of him, says the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and rescue you from his hand. I will grant you mercy, *and he will have mercy on you* . . . (Jeremiah 42:11-12; italics mine).

We found it significant that in the Bible not only the kings of Israel are called on to be merciful, but also the kings of pagan nations. Since

God's kingdom is conceived on the foundation of the politics of mercy, all rulers, indeed all people, must be held to this challenge. Therefore, the message of those who worship God must be: Mercy is not an optional practice, reserved for the kind and gentle people of this world; mercy is a command of God for all people. *Where there is no mercy, life ceases.* Christians must shout this message from the rooftops. They must say it to all the political leaders of this world. Someday they also will have to answer to the God who calls them to be merciful.

Being Christian meant that we could draw strength from Daniel and his confrontation of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. When Daniel was summoned to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream he made it very clear that, although the king had become powerful, nevertheless God is sovereign and the politics of God's mercy remains normative even for the strongest of kings. Daniel says to Nebuchadnezzar:

> Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you; atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with *mercy to the oppressed,* so that your prosperity may be prolonged (Daniel 4:27; italics mine).

Our arguments to the political leaders of Iraq were extremely simple. In fact, they were no arguments at all; they were proclamations. We told them that we had come to them as religious people. We were not Canadians or Americans first; we were Christians first. And as Christians we did not appeal to them with *quid pro quo* logic which says that, since we give you something, therefore you must give us something in return. That's politics. In any event, we had nothing to give them. We appealed to them to be merciful since our God—their God—has called us all to be merciful. That was our only "argument."

We then went on to spell out the implications of what it meant to show mercy. Merciful people neither take nor keep hostages. Nor do they invade neighbouring countries. Hence they ought to release all the hostages and leave Kuwait immediately. They found it interesting that we would speak for all the hostages and not just for those from Canada and United States, since our group carried passports from these two countries. We reminded them again that we were Christians and that what they did was wrong not only under Canadian or American laws, but under God. The truth toward which we were pointing knew no national boundaries.

We were very politely received and were assured of their full agreement with what we were saying. However, we were not naive enough to think that their polite reception was entirely without

political motivation or that they would immediately implement all our suggestions. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that we were given an honest hearing precisely because we spoke on behalf of the church and not the state. The very fact that we did not represent a vested national interest made us more credible than if we had.

An anecdote will illustrate the point. Our group flew out of Baghdad on the same plane as three Canadian members of parliament (MPs) who had been there negotiating the release of the Canadian hostages. I happened to sit beside Lloyd Axworthy who is the federal MP for my local constituency in Winnipeg. We talked about our respective failures and accomplishments. He shared, as he has done publicly since, that he felt their mission had not been very successful. The reason he gave was that they were stymied by the perceived anti-Iraqi policies of the Canadian government. So we brainstormed about who from Canada might be able to break the deadlock. I wondered whether senior statesmen like former Prime Ministers Pierre Trudeau and Robert Stanfield might be able to speak to the Baghdad leaders with greater political detachment, hence with more integrity. Axworthy disagreed and suggested that in his view the most effective group for this kind of work was the church. The church can represent morality and truth on these occasions in ways that nations simply cannot.

It is important to ponder the implications of this advice. It should remind us of what we already know on the basis of the biblical story but so easily forget: that brute force is not the only means of effecting radical social/political change. In fact, when it comes to bringing about justice, moral/truth force is often far superior. Yet this form of exercising power is best done through embodiment, or representation, rather than in the way that one ordinarily uses weapons. And this raises the issue of who can represent it. If a party in a dispute has already threatened to use brute force, then for that same party to appeal to moral/truth force will lack integrity. This power can best be exercised by those who believe and practice it. Therefore, the church as a moral community is an especially good candidate for such work.

Reinhold Niebuhr has done well to warn Christian pacifists of the inherent heresy of claiming a cause/effect linkage between our witness to peace and a tyrant's change of heart. Yet it is equally heretical to deny all linkage between our witness and peace. The reason the approach I am suggesting is potentially so powerful is precisely because it removes causal agency from human hands and places it in the hands of God. It assigns a different role to the church: of bearing witness to the power of God's redemption. The power of God is too great to be restricted to the devices of political and military

strategists, whether through peaceful or unpeaceful means.[5]

The three Canadian MPs encountered some interesting questions from Iraqi officials that would bear out the practical truth of the proposed analysis. For example, "Do you know that there are other Canadians in town? They call themselves peacemakers. Why should we release the hostages to you and not to them? Your country has not been a peacemaker to us."

There is little doubt that the dynamics were fraught with several layers of complicated political motivations from all sides. For example, one of the strong interests of the Iraqis was to embarrass the Canadian officials. We were the ones who afforded this opportunity for them. Nevertheless, it was not insignificant to have spoken the challenge of God's mercy to them. It was not insignificant for us because we were driven to do so by our identity as recipients of God's mercy. In effect, we could do no other. It was not insignificant for the Iraqi politicians because they also are children of God's grace and adherents of a religion (Islam) in which the role of God's mercy historically has been emphasized even more strongly than in Christianity. And it was not insignificant for the restoration of justice because of the omnipotence of God's mercy which refuses to be restricted to the procedure of a single route to peace and justice.

In the final analysis we do not know whether our presence had any real impact on the Iraqi leaders or on anyone else. Nor does this matter. We knew from the outset that our efforts could never be justified by the effects they produced. What matters is that the sign of God's mercy, however small it may have been, was presented in the midst of complicated minutia of mistrust and threats of violence. The very ordinary sign of God's desire to redeem presented in the extraordinary hype of massive war preparations may be small, but it is not insignificant. Sometimes very little can be done. But sometimes very little is a lot.

Radical catholicity. The early Christian creeds all confess the trinitarian unity of God. This means that, according to classical church doctrine, Jesus and God are one in being and character. Hence the ethics of the Son and the ethics of the Father cannot be separated. Yet church history has indeed separated them. The distinction is made between those churches who define themselves primarily in reference to christology and those who do not. The christologically oriented churches have been seen by the others as irresponsibly radical in their claim to love and forgive and have been charged with

[5] See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist," chap. in *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 1-32.

not paying sufficient attention to the "orders of creation" in dealing with sin. The mainline churches have been accused of aligning themselves with the efforts of the nation to preserve order in the only way states know how, hence of not following Jesus closely enough.

The most serious casualty of this dualistic theology has been the notion of universal church. Sectarian-type churches have been too congregationally oriented to give serious consideration to the larger church; mainline churches have been too influenced by nationalistic interests to give strong allegiance to churches in other nations. An important question for us to address is whether the universal church can be radical enough to be an effective embodiment of God's will for peace and justice throughout the world.

Reverend Gabriel Habib believes that this is possible and necessary. He has issued a call to radical catholicity. I refer again to the interview with Habib where he quickly identifies the tension between the church and nationalism as a basic issue for understanding the theology of church. And he cites the Western understanding of nationalism as a particular problem:

> Western secular nationalism brings with it a tendency going back to the Enlightenment to see the human being as independent from God and to separate human reason from the transcendental. More and more confidence has been invested in the human being as the controller of history. In Western secular thought, power has been given to the human being to the point of marginalizing God, even of killing God. The human being is seen as so powerful that he/she does not need God any more.[6]

This kind of thinking—elevating humanity to the point of excluding God—is foreign to the Semitic mind. Habib relates the familiar story of a Jew whose reply to the question of whether he believes in God is: "A Jew can be with God or against God but never without God."[7]

Habib laments the fact that in their Arab world Christians, especially those who want to separate their allegiance to the church from their relation to the state, are thoroughly misunderstood by Muslims and Jews. The assumption, that insofar as Christians are socially involved at all they are aligned with the interests of the state, is so strong that Jews and Muslims are completely unfamiliar with a different model. Jewish Zionism, for example, has its *raison d'être* in the memory of what Christianized secular nation-states have done

---

[6] Gabriel Habib, "Your Wars and Your Peace Are at Our Expense," 8.

[7] Ibid.

to its people. And Islamic revivalists believe that the spiritual/moral crisis of Western culture, which is undergirded by Christian values of freedom and individualism, so conclusively demonstrates the godlessness of Western style democracy—not to mention Christianity—that their quest for community must have its roots in a thoroughly different society, one structured from the standpoint of God's laws, not ours.

Middle Eastern Christians have been marginalized in their struggle to articulate a viable alternative understanding of church because of the strong worldwide association of Christianity with Western imperialism. The proper Christian model of the universal church as moral community is thoroughly undermined, says Habib, by the failure of the Western church to see how tainted its theology has become by its nationalism, consequently with how thoroughly compromised it is with the interests of the nation. For Christians to undergird the wars of their nations so utterly undermines the integrity of the Christian witness that to say anything at all about the notion of the universal community called church—let alone such notions as redemption, forgiveness and salvation—makes it sound like rubbish.

In the interview Habib is pushed to be more practical about how evil is controlled in this world. He is asked about the notion of a "just war." He responds:

> We [the Middle East churches] do not grasp the concept of the "just" war. This is more of a Western legalistic approach to an age-old problem. Here churches seem to think that war is the result of the weakness of human beings. It is to be understood as part of the historic reality and must be dealt with—pastorally and concretely—but it cannot be justified theologically. It is an offense against love and therefore can not be carried out in God's name. The churches don't have tanks and guns. The nature of our power is different. We don't know how it will work but we have confidence that God one day will make it work. He has his timing . . . and places.[8]

In rethinking where Christians have gone wrong Habib focuses particularly on two theological tenets: christology and ecclesiology. According to Habib, christology shows us how to live with one another and ecclesiology gives social expression to this way of life. He puts it as follows:

> I mentioned *Christology* in the sense that we believe the human

[8] Ibid., 9.

> being cannot assert itself at the expense of God, while God cannot assert himself at the expense of the human being. God and human beings are reconciled in Jesus Christ.[9]

Ecclesiology is inseparably tied up with the Christ event as a model of the life that can deal with strife and warfare because it embraces community. In this, says Habib, the Eastern Christians are more like Muslims and Jews than like the Western Christians. Why?

> . . . because we also have not been secularized and do not believe so much in individualism. We are saying (and we want the West to understand) that society and state may not need to be in the image of the West, nor do they need to be "theocratic" or "ethno-cratic." They need to be societies where religious and ethnic differences are recognized as legitimate, not eliminated as in the French Revolution or Marxism, and where at the same time equality between citizens or communities is guaranteed.[10]

For Habib the church is about people—all people—and their needs, not about nations and their self-serving interests.

Habib uses this context for making a clear call to North American churches. Churches of the West and churches of the East have the same basic task, he says, and that is to act in solidarity to oppose war and to promote peace, to work for justice and oppose injustice. To not act in solidarity and end up having Christians kill Christians is simply to blaspheme the church by making the nation more important than God and the church. The point here is not that killing Christians is more evil than killing non-Christians; the point is rather that to be willing to disregard this very important implication of modern wars demonstrates the total abrogation of the value of the universal church as moral community.

This vision of a universal Christian community living as a parable of God's peace and justice in every nation is, by the standards of modern theology, a radical concept. However, it is important to realize that this is not the proposal of a new idealistic modern liberalism. It is as ancient as theology itself. The early church creeds confess belief in the holy catholic church just as they confessed belief in the unity of the Father and Son. Hence churches which embrace both cannot be charged with heresy. The heresy—if there be one—does not lie with the so-called sectarian claim of the unity of the Father and Son, but with these churches' apparent, albeit

---

[9] Ibid., 8.

[10] Ibid.

historically highly dubious, theology of isolation. In any event, the true heresy lies with the mainline church's complicity with the war gods of the nations. This alliance between church and state is a fundamental denial of belief in the holy catholic church and its justification is a violation of trinitarian unity.

It is hard to imagine the global impact if the church universal in solidarity would refuse to participate in war and injustice. Certainly wars as we know them today would cease to be, where Christians of virtually every nation can, with relative ease, be mobilized to fight other nations without even a thought about whether Christians are present there. If a view of church as universal moral community could be embraced it would truly be a whole new reality where Christians of all nations would band together with one another in prayer, worship and in the efforts of justice and peace. The redemptive significance of such a world-wide community could not easily be exaggerated. It could well re-embody the original but long forgotten intent and self-definition of the early church as God's living parable:

> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:10).

~~~~~
~~~~~

AUTHOR INDEX

~~~~~
~~~~~

CHURCH AS PARABLE

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ETHICS?

Harry Huebner and David Schroeder

At the heart of this book is the conviction "that moderns have lost their ability to think morally and theologically." Moral language such as "right," "wrong" and "ought" is seen as meaningless. Modern society, and frequently the church, have adopted an emphasis on individual freedom and choice in which all is a matter of personal attitude or opinion. Then God plays little or no role.

In this important volume Harry Huebner and David Schroeder analyze our moral predicament and its implications. They build a case for an ethical approach based on Scripture and the centrality of God and Jesus Christ, an approach in which the church plays an integral role.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Harry Huebner, originally from Crystal City, Manitoba, worked for Mennonite Central Committee in the West Bank and Israel from 1981-83. His Ph.D. in Theology is from St. Michael's College in Toronto. Since 1971 he has been professor of Theology, Ethics and Peace Studies at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

David Schroeder, originally from Altona, Manitoba, is an ordained minister. He has preached and taught extensively within the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and the larger church. His Th.D. in New Testament is from the University of Hamburg. Since 1959 he has been professor in New Testament and Ethics at Canadian Mennonite Bible College.

CMBC Publications, Winnipeg, Manitoba *ISBN 0-920718-46-9*