

**Book One**

**Living Under God's Law: Christian Ethics**

## **Part One: Introductory Considerations**

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The Christian life is a rich journey, and it is not easy to describe. Without any pretense of comprehensiveness, I try to describe it in this volume as living under God's law, in God's world, in the presence of God himself. Those of you who have read other books of mine will recognize that triad as indicating normative, situational, and existential perspectives respectively. Those of you who haven't read other books of mine can learn about that triad in the present volume.

These three perspectives will provide the main structure of the book. The first part will be the longest—a treatise on Christian ethics. The second will deal with “Living in the World: Christ and Culture,” and the third will be “Living by God's Grace: Spiritual Maturity.”

We begin now with Part One, the treatise on ethics. After some introductory material defining terms and relating ethics to God's lordship, I shall discuss ethics itself under three perspectives: situational (the history of ethical thought), existential (a Christian ethical method), and normative (Biblical ethical principles, following the pattern of the Ten Commandments). But first a couple of important introductory questions:

### Why Study Ethics?

For the following reasons, at least:

1. *Servants of Jesus are people who have his commandments and keep them* (John 14:21).

Over and over again, Jesus tells us, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15; compare verses 21, 23, 15:10, 1 John 2:3-5, 3:21-24, 5:3).<sup>1</sup> Jesus' “new commandment... that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34) is to be the mark of the church, distinguishing it from the world: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (verse 35). This is not to say that we are saved by works, obedience, or keeping commandments. It is simply to say that if we want to be disciples of Jesus we must be devoted to good works (Tit. 3:8; compare Matt. 5:16, Eph. 2:10, 1 Tim. 2:10, 5:10, 6:18, 2 Tim. 3:17, Tit. 2:7, 14, Tit. 3:14, Heb. 10:24, 1 Pet. 2:12.) If we are to be devoted to good works, we must know what works are good and what ones bad. So we need to study ethics.

2. *The purpose of Scripture itself is ethical.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations in this volume are taken from the English Standard Version.

The familiar passage 2 Tim. 3:16-17 reads,

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Note the ethical focus here. God breathed out the words of Scripture so that we may be trained in righteousness, so that we may be equipped for every good work. Of course the purpose of Scripture can be stated in other ways as well. Many have emphasized that the purpose of Scripture is to bear witness to Christ, and that is entirely legitimate (Luke 24:27, John 5:39). But it is plain that Scripture presents Christ as one who equips us to be lights in the world (Matt. 5:14), and therefore a great amount of Scripture is devoted to defining and motivating our good works.

3. *In one sense, everything in the Bible is ethical.*

Even when Scripture expounds what we might call doctrinal propositions, it presents them as propositions that *ought* to be believed. That ought is an ethical ought. Indeed, all the content of Scripture is content that ought to be believed and acted upon. The whole Bible is ethics. Of course the Bible is not *only* ethics. The Bible is also narrative, for to understand the history of redemption we must have recourse to everything in Scripture. So the whole Bible is narrative as well as ethics. And similarly, the whole Bible is doctrinal truth, wisdom, evangelism, apologetic,<sup>2</sup> and so on. But clearly we have not understood the Bible until we have understood its ethic.

This is another way of saying, as I did in DKG, that theology is “the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life.”<sup>3</sup> Any study or teaching of the Bible is an attempt to answer human questions, to meet human needs. Those questions or needs may be relatively “theoretical” (e.g., “What is the meaning of *ratzah* in the sixth commandment?”) or relatively “practical” (e.g., “When should I remove life support from my dying father?”). But they are all practical in the sense that they deal with human questions and needs. In that sense, all theology is addressed to people, to help them think and live<sup>4</sup> to the glory of God. So all theology is ethical.

4. *The study of ethics has an enormous importance for our witness to the world.*

---

<sup>2</sup> So I call all of these *perspectives* on the nature of Scripture. See DKG, 191-94. On apologetics as a perspective on the whole Bible, see Ezra Hyun Kim, *Biblical Preaching is Apologia*, a D. Min. project submitted to Westminster Theological Seminary in California, Spring, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> DKG, 81.

<sup>4</sup> Thinking is part of life and so it too is ethical. It is under the authority of God’s Word. Thus epistemology can be understood as a subdivision of ethics. See DKG, 62-64.

We live in an age in which people are greatly concerned about ethics. Every day, the news media bring to mind issues of war and peace, preserving the environment, the powers of government, abortion and euthanasia, genetic research, and so on. Many people seem very sure of the answers to these ethical questions. But when you probe deeply into their positions, they admit that their conviction is based on nothing more than partisan consensus or individual feeling. But the Bible does give us a basis for ethical judgments: the revelation of the living God. So ethical discussions open a wide door for Christian witness.

People are far more open to discuss ethics than to discuss theistic proofs, or even “transcendental arguments.” Philosophy does not excite many people today, and many are not even open to the simple witness of personal testimony and the simple gospel. But they do care about right and wrong. Christians who can talk about ethics in a cogent way, therefore, have a great apologetic and evangelistic advantage.

It is true that many do not want to hear this witness today. They consider Christianity a “religious” position and therefore one that should not be discussed in the public square. But this view is utterly unreasonable, and that unreasonability should be pressed. Why should religious positions be excluded from the debate, especially when secular positions have been so helpless in presenting a convincing basis for ethical judgments? As I shall indicate in this volume, the main currents of twentieth and twenty-first century thought has become bankrupt, confessedly unable to provide any basis for distinguishing right from wrong. I believe that, despite the political incorrectness of the suggestion, many are hungering for answers and are willing to look even at religious positions to find them.

And I shall argue as well that all ethics is religious, even that ethics that tries hardest to be secular. In the end, all ethics presupposes ultimate values. It requires allegiance to someone or something that demands all devotion and governs all thinking. That kind of allegiance is indistinguishable from religious devotion, even if it doesn’t require liturgical practices. So the line between religious and secular ethics is a fuzzy one, and it is arbitrary to use such a line to determine who is entitled to join an ethical dialogue.

But more important than the ability to talk about ethics is the ability to live it. This is true even in our witness to the world. People see how we live. Even Christians who are not articulate or eloquent can make, through their actions, a great impact on others. Jesus comments on the importance of our works to our witness, when he says, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

### **What Should Be Our Ethical Bias?**

Before we begin our study, there is another question we need to ask. All of us are biased in favor of certain conclusions, even at the outset of our study. We cannot be neutral. But we ought to be self-conscious, even critical, about our biases.

There are those who enter the field of ethics with a goal of dispelling legalism. Perhaps they were raised in a church that imposed all sorts of rules on the kids: don't drink, don't smoke, don't play cards, and they have felt these as a big burden. So as ethicists they want to emphasize our freedom. Often that means taking the "liberal" side in ethical controversies.

Others enter the field disgusted by the moral decline in our society. These may also be impressed by the rigorousness of Scripture, the high cost of discipleship. They want to teach an ethic that does not compromise with worldliness, a radical ethic of discipline and self-control.

We tend to describe the first type of ethic as liberal, the second as conservative. Down through the years, ethicists have tended to divide into conservative and liberal parties: in ancient Judaism the schools of Shammai (conservative) and Hillel (liberal); in Catholicism the Jesuits (liberal) and the Jansenists (conservative). The liberal tendency to find loopholes in the moral law, to justify apparent sin, has given casuistry a bad name. The conservative tendency toward harshness and austerity has given moralism a bad name.

In this book I urge readers not to side with either tendency. The point of Christian ethics is not to be as liberal as we can be, or as conservative. It is, rather, to be as biblical as we can be. So this book will seem to be more liberal than the majority on some issues (e.g. worship, cloning, just war, gambling, deceiving) and more conservative on others (e.g. the Sabbath, roles of women, stem cell research). God's word has a way of surprising us, of not fitting into our prearranged categories. Jesus rebuked both the Pharisees and the Sadducees; Paul rebuked both legalists and libertines. Understanding God's will is rarely falling into lockstep with some popular ideology. We need to think as part of a community, listening to our brothers and sisters; but we also need the courage to step aside from the crowd when God's word directs us in that way.

So in this book I will be drawing some fine distinctions, as theologians are wont to do. I do this not to gain a reputation for subtlety and nuance, but simply to follow Scripture. My goal is to go as far as Scripture goes, and no farther, to follow its path without deviating to the left or the right. I trust God's Spirit to help us thread these needles, to help us find the biblical path, even when it is narrow and relatively untraveled. May he be with writer and reader as we seek to walk by the lamp of God's Word.

## Chapter 2: An Ethical Glossary

Definitions are never a matter of life and death. Scripture gives us no directions for defining English words. So it's possible for two people to use different definitions of a term, without differing in their actual views. One theologian, for example, may define faith as intellectual assent, while insisting that trust always accompanies it. Another may define it as trust, while insisting that intellectual assent always accompanies it. The differences between these two theologians should not be considered significant at this particular point. We may define terms as we like, as long as our definitions don't confuse people or mislead them on substantive issues.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I will define some important terms, indicating how I will use these terms in this particular book. These definitions are not necessarily best for all situations, even for all discussions of ethics.

### Ethics and Theology

The first group of definitions will relate ethics to other theological disciplines. The earlier ones review discussions in DKG.

#### *Knowledge of God*

I use this phrase to mean a personal, covenantal relationship with God, involving awareness of his self-revelation, an obedient or disobedient response to that revelation, and the divine blessing or curse upon that response.<sup>6</sup>

This definition connects our knowledge of God to his lordship (see chapter 3 of this volume) and to ethics, as I define it below.

#### *Doctrine*

Doctrine is the Word of God in use to create and deepen one's knowledge of God, and to encourage an obedient, rather than disobedient, response to his revelation. Or, more briefly, application of the Word of God to all areas of human life.

---

<sup>5</sup> Compare the discussions in DKG, 76-77, 215-241.

<sup>6</sup> DKG, 11-49.

This definition is built upon the use of the Greek terms *didasko*, *didache*, and *didaskalia*, especially as Paul uses them in the Pastoral Epistles.<sup>7</sup> I prefer to define doctrine, therefore, not as theological propositions, but as an active process of teaching that leads to spiritual health: as Paul puts it, “sound (*hygiainos*) doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10, 2 Tim. 4:3, Tit. 1:9, 2:1).

### *Theology*

I define *theology* as a synonym of *doctrine*.<sup>8</sup>

So theology, too, is an active process of teaching, not first of all a collection of propositions. I am not opposed to theological propositions; there are quite a few of them in my books. But theological propositions are useful only in the context of a kind of teaching that leads to spiritual health.

In that sense, theology is a practical discipline, not merely theoretical.<sup>9</sup> I do not disparage theory; indeed, my own books are more theoretical than practical. But in my definition, theory is not the only kind of theology there is, nor is it theology *par excellence*. Theology takes place, not only in technical books, but also in children’s Sunday school classes, evangelistic meetings, preaching, and discipleship seminars. Theology is the application of the Word to all areas of life. Academic or theoretical theology is one kind of theology, not the only kind. And I shall argue later that in Scripture theory is not more ultimate than practice, nor is it the basis of practice; rather, theory and practice are both applications of God’s word, and both enrich one another when they are biblical.

For that matter, the line between theory and practice is not sharp. Theory is one kind of practice, and “theoretical” and “practical” are relative terms that admit of degrees.

### *Ethics*

Ethics is theology, viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts, and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 81-85.

<sup>8</sup> For the “traditional theological programs” of exegetical, biblical, systematic, and practical theology, see DKG 206-214. For historical theology, see 304-314. All of these are different ways of applying the whole Bible. They do not differ in subject matter, but in the questions we ask of scripture in each program.

<sup>9</sup> See Ibid., 84-85 on the theory/practice relation.



This formulation defines ethics as Christian ethics. Many will find this objectionable. Given this definition, for example, Aristotle did not write about ethics! For, in his purportedly ethical writings, Aristotle was not trying to determine what persons, acts, and attitudes are blessed by the God of the Bible. The same could be said of any non-Christian thinker. It seems absurd to define ethics in such a way as to exclude all non-Christian writers from the discipline.

But, as I said earlier, I don't object to people using a different definition in a different context. If I were to discuss ethics with a disciple of Aristotle, for example, I would agree with him to define the topic as, say, the study of right and wrong.<sup>10</sup> But I mean my present book to be a distinctively Christian work, and I intend to show that non-Christian ethics is flawed, not only in its conclusions, but also in its initial understanding of its task. For that purpose, my theologically enhanced definition will be most serviceable.

Note also that on this definition, ethics is not a *branch* of theology, but theology itself, the whole of theology, viewed in a certain way. All theology answers ethical questions. Even the more theoretical kinds of theology, as we saw earlier, are explorations into what we *ought* to believe. That ought is an ethical ought. So, when we ask what we ought to believe about, say, the order of the divine decrees, we are asking an ethical question.<sup>11</sup>

All theology, then, is ethical. It is also true that the subjects we usually call ethical, like murder, stealing, and adultery, can be integrated with the rest of theology more thoroughly than in most theological systems. In a theological curriculum, it would be possible to deal with ethical issues (even those issues we normally think of as ethical) throughout, rather than postponing them to a special course. We could discuss the creation ordinances, the moral laws given to Adam and Eve before the Fall, in the course of describing the prefall condition of the human race. Then we could teach the Decalogue in connection with the Mosaic Covenant, ethical methodology in connection with theological prolegomena, and so on. But, in fact, theologians (including myself) have tended to avoid the more practical kinds of ethical questions in the main curriculum of systematic and biblical theology. So seminaries have come to offer courses in ethics as a supposedly separate discipline. In fact, however, ethics covers the whole range of human life and all the teaching of Scripture.

In this book, however, I will stick pretty much to the standard subject-matter that theologians have called ethical, that is the subject-matter of the Ten Commandments, together with the presuppositions and applications of those commandments.

---

<sup>10</sup> Of course, at some point I would have to show the Aristotelian inquirer also that his present method of ethics is flawed in concept. But I would not insist on making that point at the beginning of a conversation.

<sup>11</sup> Compare the argument in DKG that epistemology can be seen as a branch of ethics, 62-64, 73-75, 108-109, 149-151, 247-48.

Finally, in this definition, please take note of the triad “persons, acts, and attitudes.”<sup>12</sup> These are the three subjects of ethical predication in the Bible. Only these can be ethically good, bad, right, or wrong. A rock can be good in a non-ethical sense: e.g. good for use in construction. But a rock cannot make ethical choices; it cannot seek to bring itself, its actions, and its attitudes into conformity to God’s will. So a rock is not a subject of ethical predication. Only rational creatures (God, angels, human beings) are, persons, together with their actions and attitudes.

### *Metaethics*

Metaethics is a second-order discipline, a theological reflection on the nature of ethics. Ethics is about good and bad, right and wrong, blessing and curse. Metaethics is about ethics. Metaethics discusses the nature of right and wrong, ethical methods, the presuppositions of ethics, and so on. But as with Christian ethics, a Christian metaethic must be subject to Scripture and thus must be theological. In that way, metaethics is a part of theology, and therefore, according to my earlier definition, a part of ethics.

### *Morality*

I will use the terms *morality* and *ethics* synonymously in this book, though they are often distinguished. Johan Douma, for example, makes this distinction: “*morality* consists of the entirety of traditional and dominant customs, while *ethics* is reflection upon those customs.”<sup>13</sup> I think, however, that either term can refer (descriptively) to human customs<sup>14</sup> and (normatively) to the evaluation of those customs as right or wrong.

It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to reflect on the customs of human life, and I will be doing that in this book to some extent. But I believe that for Christians the work of ethics is essentially theological. Theology does, of course, reflect on human customs, as do many other disciplines. But theology reflects on those customs specifically for the sake of applying biblical standards to them. The

---

<sup>12</sup> I’m not sure whether this threefold distinction should be integrated with the other threefold distinctions of my *Theology of Lordship* books. And if it is to be so integrated, I’m not sure exactly how to do it. Both “persons” and “attitudes” are good candidates for the existential perspective. At the moment, I lean toward the following: person, normative; acts, situational; attitudes, existential. Of course, the beautiful thing about these triads is that they are perspectival, so that different arrangements are possible. For readers who are drawing a blank here, I will explain the perspectives in the following chapter.

<sup>13</sup> Douma, *Responsible Conduct* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003), 3.

<sup>14</sup> As in the related terms *mores* and *ethos*.

same is true of ethics and morality in the normative sense, as I shall use the terms.

The two terms, also, can equally refer *de facto* to people's moral standards, or *de jure* to the standards they *ought* to have. Joe's ethics (*de facto*) are Joe's moral standards and/or the ways he applies those standards in his decisions. But from a normative standpoint (*de jure*), Joe's ethics, may be wrong, unethical, immoral.

## Value Terms

### *Moral, Ethical*

In light of the above discussion, I will treat these adjectives, like the corresponding nouns, synonymously. Both of the terms, however, can be used either descriptively or normatively. Descriptively, they mean "pertaining to the discipline of ethics," as in the sentence, "this is an ethical, not an aesthetic question." Normatively, they mean "conforming to ethical norms," as in the sentence "Senator Ridenhour is an ethical politician."

### *Immoral, Amoral, Non-moral*

The word *moral* can be negated in three different ways. *Immoral* is usually a normative term, used to criticize a person, act, or attitude as ethically bad or wrong. An *amoral* person is someone who is unable or unwilling to bring ethical considerations to bear on his decisions. *Nonmoral* is the opposite of the descriptive meaning of *moral* above, by which we distinguish ethical from nonethical topics of discussion. So the question of whether clam chowder should contain tomatoes is usually considered to be a nonmoral question, except occasionally by partisans on either side.

### *Moralistic*

This term is very vague, and I will not be using it much, if at all, in this book. It can mean (a) trite or provincial in ethical attitude, (b) self-righteous, (c) putting too much *emphasis* on morality, (d) legalistic, putting works in the role that Scripture reserves for grace, or (e) (in preaching) failing to note or sufficiently

emphasize the redemptive-historical purpose of a biblical text.<sup>15</sup> Usually the word is used as a term of reproach, but rarely with any precision or clarity. The word has bad connotations, and people seem to use it mainly for the sake of those connotations, to make an opponent look bad, rather than to bring clarity to a discussion. We should generally avoid using words in this way.

### *Value*

A value is a quality of worth or merit. There are various kinds of value, including economic, aesthetic, medicinal, recreational, and ethical. So ethics may be regarded as a division of value-theory. It is important to make distinctions between ethical values and other kinds of values. Writing a great symphony may be an act of great aesthetic value, but, depending on the motive of the composer's heart, it may be of no ethical value, or even negative ethical value.

### *Fact*

Facts are states of affairs. Statements of fact ("propositions") claim to assert what is the case. Philosophers commonly distinguish, sometimes very sharply, between facts and values, and those distinctions can be important in ethical philosophy as we shall see. However, it is also important to see the closeness of the relation between fact and value. If a moral principle (e.g., "Stealing is wrong") is true, then it is a fact. Further, statements of fact presuppose moral values.<sup>16</sup> When someone says "the book is on the table," he is claiming that his hearers *ought* to believe that proposition. And that ought is an ethical ought.

### *Norm*

A norm is a rule or standard that determines the ethical rightness or wrongness, the goodness or badness, of any person, action, or attitude. In biblical ethics, the ultimate norm is God's revelation.

### *Virtue*

---

<sup>15</sup> I have discussed redemptive history (=biblical theology) in DKG, 207-212, and I will try later in this book to show its role in ethics.

<sup>16</sup> See DKG, 140-41. Also, 71-73, on the relation of facts to interpretations. Note also the texts in DKG cited in a previous footnote to show that epistemology is part of ethics.

Virtues are grounds of praise for someone or something. There are non-moral virtues, such as efficiency, skill, and talent. Moral virtues, like love, kindness, fidelity, and integrity, are elements of a good moral character. “Virtue ethics” is a kind of ethics that focuses on these inward character traits. This type of ethics is often contrasted with “command ethics” (focusing on moral rules) and “narrative ethics” (focusing on a history or story that provides a context for ethical decision-making). We shall see that as Christians we need not choose among these; Scripture provides us with divine commands, a narrative-basis of moral choice, and a list of virtues, together with God’s gracious means of conferring those virtues upon us.

### *Good*

*Good* is the most general adjective of commendation. We use the term to ascribe any sort of value to anything: aesthetic, economic, etc., as well as ethical. So we should distinguish between moral goodness and non-moral goodness. The most common form of non-moral goodness may be described as *teleological* goodness. To be good in the teleological sense is simply to be useful: good *for something*, producing a desirable state of affairs. A good hammer is a tool that is useful for pounding nails into surfaces. Pounding nails is its purpose, its telos, its end. The hammer is not *morally* good, for moral goodness (in accord with our earlier definition of ethics) describes a person, action, or attitude that receives God’s blessing. The hammer is not a person, so it does not receive God’s blessing for the jobs it performs.

We do sometimes describe human beings as good in a teleological sense. A good plumber, for example, is someone who is skilled at fixing pipes. To say that Sid is a good plumber is not the same as to say that he is a good person. He may be skilled at fixing pipes, but otherwise a scoundrel. In such a case, we usually say he is a good plumber, but a bad person. To be sure, there is some overlap between the concepts. If Sid is skilled at fixing pipes, but he overcharges, steals objects from the kitchen, makes an awful mess without cleaning it up, we probably would not call him a good plumber, for fear of being misunderstood. So there is a point where someone’s ethics disqualifies him even from teleological commendations.

And in some cases moral turpitude compromises a person’s skills. If skilled concert pianist Karl Konzertstück stays up partying all night and arrives at his recital with a hangover, behavior that leads him to make all sorts of mistakes, people will not recognize him that day as a good pianist. And if such behavior becomes a habit, he may entirely lose his reputation, even his skills themselves. So moral evil can imperil teleological goodness. Still, as a matter of definition, it is possible to speak of teleological goodness without reflecting on moral goodness.

Both teleological goodness and moral goodness are important to ethics. For morally good people seek in their actions to achieve goals that are teleologically good. For many ethical philosophers, the highest goal (*summum bonum*) is happiness, either individual or corporate. Morally good acts, on these views, are acts that seek the happiness of self and others. So morally good actions are those that promote teleological goodness.

Scripture describes the highest good theologically: it is the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). We shall see that these goals incorporate the happiness of people in various ways. But they are fundamentally theocentric, rather than anthropocentric. These provide the telos, the goal, of the believer's ethical actions: moral goodness seeking teleological goodness. So for Christians the teleological is theological, theistic, and theocentric.

### *Right*

*Right* is generally synonymous with moral goodness: a good act is a right act. Its nuances, however, are somewhat different. *Right* belongs to the legal vocabulary. So when it describes moral goodness, it describes it as conformity to norms, laws, or standards. The corresponding biblical terms *tzedek* and *dikaïos* have similar associations, and they can be translated *just* as well as *right*.

In the triad mentioned earlier of the subjects of ethical predication, *good* applies equally to persons, acts, and attitudes, while *right* applies to actions and attitudes, very rarely to persons. We often hear people described as “good guys,” but not “right guys,” though I often heard the latter phrase when I was growing up in the 1940s and 50s. Scripture and theology, however, refer often to *righteousness* as a virtue, conformity to God's standards.<sup>17</sup>

Another common meaning of *right* in ethics is “deserved privilege.” We have a right when we have ethical and/or legal permission to do something or to possess something. In this sense, right is correlative with obligation. If Joey has a right to life, society has an obligation to protect his life. If Susanne has the right to an education, someone must provide her with that education. If Jerome has the right to free health care, then someone else has the obligation to provide him with that. Of course, it is possible to give up one's rights, as Paul does in 1 Cor. 9:4-6, 12, 15. Rights in this sense are governed by moral and/or legal standards, and the emphasis on those standards is what connects this meaning with that of the previous paragraph.

---

<sup>17</sup> As an attribute of God, *righteousness* refers not only to God's character, his conformity to his own ethical standards, but also to God's actions to redeem his people, his “righteous deeds.” See DG, 451-458. But of course those actions are themselves righteous because they conform to his standards.

### *Obligation, Duty, Ought*

I shall use *obligation* and *duty* synonymously. These refer to actions we are required to do, commanded to do, by an ethical norm. *Ought* is a verbal form of *obligation*. What we *ought* to do is what the norm requires of us.

Some obligations are immediate, requiring us to carry them out right now, at the expense of anything else we may be doing or planning to do. So if we are in the midst of committing a sin, we are obligated to stop immediately. Other obligations are more general, things we must do at some time, or within some time-frame, but not necessarily right away. Later we shall discuss obligations that may legitimately be postponed in favor of other duties, such as the obligation to study the Scripture, to pray, to share the gospel with a neighbor, etc.

Some obligations are individual, some corporate. For example, in Gen. 1:28, God tells the human race, represented by Adam, to replenish the earth and subdue it. This is not a command Adam could have fulfilled by himself. He is to play a role, with others playing other roles, in the fulfillment of this command by the whole human race. Similarly the Great Commission in Matt. 28: Jesus there commands the church, represented by the apostles, to make disciples of all the nations of the earth. None of those eleven men, not even those eleven as a group, could carry out that command by themselves. The command is given to the whole church, and each individual is to fulfill a different role in the accomplishment of it.

Obligations include their applications. For example, if Sharon is obligated to go to a meeting on Wednesday, she is also obligated to find and utilize transportation that will get her to that meeting. So when God commands us to glorify him in all things (1 Cor. 10:31), everything we do ought to be an application of that command. So everything we do is either a fulfillment of, or a violation of, that obligation. In that sense, all our actions are ethical. All of our actions are either good or bad.

This is not to say that every choice is a choice between good and bad. We often make choices between two or more goods, as when choosing one cabbage out of many at the grocery store.<sup>18</sup> Even a choice of a cabbage involves a choice to glorify God or not to; in that sense it is an ethical choice. And of course in that choice as in all choices we have an obligation to choose the right rather than the wrong. But in this situation there are actually two choices taking place at the same time: (1) the choice to glorify God, and (2) the choice of one good cabbage over another. The first is a choice between good and evil, the second a choice between two goods.

---

<sup>18</sup> I shall argue later that we are never called to choose between two or more wrongs, without the opportunity to choose a right alternative.

### *Permission*

Ethical norms regularly *permit* actions that they do not prohibit.<sup>19</sup> Permission, however, is not the same as commandment (1 Cor. 7:6). In my earlier example, the ethical norm, God's word, does not *command* me explicitly to choose one cabbage over the other (assuming both are equal in relevant respects). But since that norm does not forbid me, explicitly or implicitly, to buy that cabbage, it thereby permits that action. Permitted actions are good actions, and so we are inclined to say that some good actions are not obligatory, that (1) obligated actions and (2) actions not obligated but only permitted form two separate classes of good actions.

In one sense, however, these classes of actions overlap. God does not command me to buy cabbage A rather than cabbage B. But he does command me to glorify him, and one way to apply that command is to supply nutritious food to my family. So my action is an application of a command, and as we saw earlier, commands include their applications. In that sense, when I buy the cabbage I am carrying out a divine command. But the purchase does not represent the only possible way to obey that command. I might equally well fulfill the command by buying a different cabbage, or by buying carrots or Brussels sprouts, or by buying nothing and getting food at another time.

### *General and Specific Obligations*

So we should distinguish between *general* and *specific* obligations. God's commands in Scripture are always to some extent general. For example, he says "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12). In that passage, he does not specify precisely how we are to honor them. Other divine commands supplement this general command by requiring more specific duties, such as providing for aged relatives (1 Tim. 5:3-8). But even those are not perfectly specific, for even those commands must be applied to our own experience. For example, say that Jim must find a way to take care of his mother, who is blind and deaf. At that specific level, there are usually several ways of carrying out the norm. Jim could take his mother into his own home. Or he could arrange for his sister to take the mother into her home, with Jim rendering financial assistance. Or he could raise money to provide nursing care for his mother in her own home. Or he could arrange for some sort of institutional care. Any of these options, and others, might be a godly response to the situation.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> A prohibition is, of course, a negative command.

<sup>20</sup> I don't, of course, have the space here to argue my ethical evaluation of these alternatives.



So there are different levels of generality and specificity in moral norms. As we apply the general norms, we usually find that there are a number of options, permissible ways of carrying out the norm. But an obligation must be carried out in some way, not neglected altogether. So although a specific application may be permitted rather than obligatory, we are obligated to choose one or more of those permitted alternatives.

### *Justice*

This word brings us back to the legal vocabulary, which I mentioned in connection with the word *right*. In general, *justice* is what is morally right. But the word tends to be used mostly in social contexts with the predominant meaning of fairness or equity. Still more specifically, justice is the integrity of society's legal system. That includes especially the fairness of the courts, as they render verdicts and determine penalties.

People disagree, of course, on what constitutes justice or fairness. In today's political dialogue about economics, conservatives argue that justice is equality of opportunity, while liberals argue that justice is not achieved until there is also some level of equality of wealth.

### Chapter 3: Ethics and Divine Lordship

I don't intend for this book to replace previous works of ethics written from a Reformed Christian viewpoint. John Murray's *Principles of Conduct*<sup>21</sup> and *Divorce*<sup>22</sup> still serve as a benchmark for exegetical depth in the field. John Jefferson Davis's *Evangelical Ethics*<sup>23</sup> continues to be an invaluable resource correlating biblical principles with historic and contemporary discussions of ethical problems. Readers will see that in this volume I have drawn freely from these books, as well as from Johan Douma's *The Ten Commandments*<sup>24</sup> and *Responsible Conduct*.<sup>25</sup> And my philosophical position is, in my judgment, only an elaboration of Cornelius Van Til's *Christian-Theistic Ethics*.<sup>26</sup>

The contribution I hope to make in this volume is to show the relationship of the Christian life, including ethics, to God's lordship. I have expounded the nature of lordship at length in DG, especially in chapters 1-7. In this chapter of the present volume, I will review that discussion and apply it to ethics in a general way, laying the foundation for what is to follow.

The name *Lord* (representing the Hebrew terms *Yahweh* and *Adon* and the Greek *kyrios*) is found over 7000 times in most English Bible translations, usually referring to God or specifically to Jesus Christ. God's revelation of the name *Yahweh* to Moses in Ex. 3:14-15 is foundational to the biblical doctrine of God, for *Yahweh* is the name by which he wants especially to be remembered. The name *Lord* is found in the main confessions of faith of both testaments (Deut. 6:4-5, Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 12:3, Phil. 2:11). God performs all his mighty works so that people "will know that I am the Lord" (Ex. 6:7, 7:5, 17, 8:22, 10:2, 14:4, and many other texts).

As Lord, God is, first of all, *personal*, for *Lord* is a proper name. Thus the Bible proclaims that the ultimate reality, the supreme being, is not an impersonal force like gravity or electromagnetism, or even a set of superstrings, but a person, who uses the impersonal realities for his own purposes and to his own glory. Modern secular thought is profoundly impersonalistic, holding that persons are ultimately reducible to things and forces, to matter, motion, time, and chance. Scripture denies this impersonalism, insisting that things and forces, indeed all reality, indeed all value, comes from a supreme personal being.

---

<sup>21</sup> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957.

<sup>22</sup> Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961.

<sup>23</sup> Philadelphia: P&R, 1985, 1993, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Philadelphia: Den Dulk Foundation, 1974.

Second, the Lord is a supremely *holy* person. His personality shows his kinship with us, but his holiness shows his transcendence, his separation from us. God is above us, beyond us—not in the sense that he is far away, for he is intimately close; not in the sense that he is unknown or unknowable, for he clearly reveals himself to us; not in the sense that human language cannot describe him, for he describes himself to us in the human language of Scripture.<sup>27</sup> God is beyond us, rather, as the supreme person, the universal King, the Lord of all, before whom we cannot help but bow in awe and wonder. And, since our fall into sin, God is also separate from us as perfect ethical purity must be separate from total ethical depravity (Isa. 6:5, Luke 5:8).

Third, God as Lord is head of a *covenant* relationship. In a covenant, God takes a people to be his, redeems them from death, demands certain behavior on their part, and declares his blessings and curses: blessings if they obey, curses if they disobey. Parallels to this biblical concept of covenant can be found in ancient near-eastern literature outside the Bible. A Great King (the “suzerain”) would impose a treaty (or covenant) upon a lesser king (or “vassal”) and would author a document setting forth its terms. The document, typically, followed a standard literary form:

1. The name of the suzerain.
2. Historical prologue: what the suzerain has done to benefit the vassal.
3. Stipulations: commands, specifying how the vassal king and his people must behave.
  - a. General: exclusive allegiance to the suzerain (sometimes called love)
  - b. Specific laws indicating how the suzerain wants the vassal to behave.
4. Sanctions
  - a. Blessings: rewards for obeying the stipulations.
  - b. Curses: punishments for disobedience.
5. Administration: dynastic succession, use of the treaty document, etc.

Except for section 5, this is the literary form of the Decalogue.<sup>28</sup> God comes to Israel and gives his name (“I am the Lord your God,” Ex. 20:2), identifying himself as the author of the covenant and of the covenant document. Then he tells Israel what he has done for them (“who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” verse 2b). Then come the commandments, with sanctions embedded in some of them (as in verses 5-6, 7, 12). The first commandment demands exclusive covenant loyalty, and the others show what forms that loyalty

---

<sup>27</sup> This book, like all books in this series, assumes that Scripture is the Word of God and therefore infallible and inerrant in its original form. I plan to argue the point in *The Doctrine of the Word of God*.

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this covenant structure and the literary form of the covenant document, see the very important book of Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972). Kline maintains that, not only the Decalogue, but also the Book of Deuteronomy, is in its literary form a covenant document.

is to take. *Lord*, therefore, names God as the suzerain, the head of the covenant relationship.

The heart of that relationship is “I will be your God, and you will be my people” (Jer. 7:23; cf. Ex. 6:7, Lev. 26:12, Rev. 21:3, echoed in many other passages). It is amazing that the same Lord whose holiness separates us from him also reaches out to draw us into the circle of his holiness, indeed to make us his holy people.

### **The Lordship Attributes**

My study of lordship also indicates that the word *Lord* in Scripture has certain important connotations. That is, *Lord* is not only a name of God (though it is that) but also a description. Among those connotations, three in particular stand out:

#### *1. Control*

The Lord announces to Moses that he will deliver Israel from Egypt by a mighty hand and a strong arm. He shows his strength in the plagues and in the deliverance of Israel through the sea on dry land, followed by the drowning of the Egyptian army. Thus God wins a decisive victory over Egypt, its ruler, and its gods, Ex. 12:12, 15:11, 18:11.

In his continuing relations with Israel, God regularly connects his lordship with his sovereign power, controlling all things. He is gracious to whom he will be gracious, and he shows mercy to whom he will show mercy (Ex. 33:19). What he intends to do, he accomplishes. Nothing is too hard for him (Jer. 32:7, Gen. 18:14). His word is never void of power (Isa. 55:11). His prophecies always come to pass. As I argued in DG, Chapter 4, God controls the forces of nature, human history, human free decisions (including sinful ones). It is he who gives faith to some and withholds it from others, so that he is completely sovereign over human salvation.<sup>29</sup> The following passages set forth the comprehensive reach of his sovereign power:

Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?  
<sup>38</sup> Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?  
 (Lam. 3:37-38)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

---

<sup>29</sup> For discussions of how this divine control affects human freedom and moral responsibility, see DG, Chapter 8. For a discussion of the problem of evil, see DG, Chapter 9, and AGG, Chapters 6 and 7.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will... (Eph. 1:11)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! <sup>34</sup> "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" <sup>35</sup> "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" <sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33-36)

## 2. Authority

God's authority is his *right to tell his creatures what they must do*. Control is about might; authority is about right. Control means that God makes everything happen; authority means that God has the right to be obeyed, and that therefore we have the obligation to obey him.

God's authority is part of his lordship. When God meets with Moses in Exodus 3, he gives him a message that has authority even over Pharaoh: Let my people go, that they may serve me. When God meets with Israel at Mt. Sinai, he identifies himself as Lord and then tells them to have no other God's before him. God's lordship means that we must obey his Ten Commandments and any other commandments he chooses to give to us. So Deut. 6:4-6 confesses the lordship of God, and then goes on to tell us to obey all his commandments. Jesus, too, says over and over again, in various ways, "if you love me, keep my commandments." "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,'" he asks, "and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46; compare Matt. 7:21-22).

God's authority is *absolute*. That means, first, that we shouldn't doubt or question it. Paul says that Abraham "wavered not" in his belief in God's promise (Rom. 4:16-22). Abraham was certainly tempted to waver. God had promised him the land of Canaan, but although he lived there he owned not one square inch. And God had promised him a son, who would in turn have more descendants than the sand of the sea. But Abraham's wife Sarah was beyond the age of childbearing, and Abraham was over 100 years old before the promise was fulfilled. But Abraham clung to God's authoritative Word; so should we.

Second, the absoluteness of God's authority means that his lordship transcends all our other loyalties. We are right to be loyal to our parents, our nation, our friends; but God calls us to love him with *all* our heart, that is, without any rival. Jesus told his disciples to honor their parents (Matt. 15:3-6), but he told them to honor him even more (Matt. 10:34-38).

Third, to say that God's authority is absolute means that it covers all areas of human life. Paul says, "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God," 1 Cor. 10:31. Everything we do is either to God's glory or it is not. God has the right to order every aspect of human life.

### 3. *Covenant Presence*

So God's lordship means that he controls everything, and that he speaks with absolute authority. But there is also a third element to God's lordship, and in some ways this is the deepest and most precious. That element is his commitment to us, and therefore his presence with us.

The essence of the covenant is God's word that "I will be your God, and you will be my people," Gen. 17:7. God said that to Abraham, but he also said it to Israel under Moses and to the New Testament people of God. He said this many times throughout Scripture. This means that the Covenant Lord is one who takes people to be his.

When God takes us to be his people, he fights our battles, blesses us, loves us, and sometimes gives us special judgments because of our sins (as in Amos 3:2). But most important, he is "with" us. He places his name upon us (Num. 6:27), to brand us as his. Since we are his children, then, he dwells with us (Gen. 26:3, 24, 28:15, 31:3, Ex. 3:12, 4:12, Deut. 31:8, 23, Josh. 1:5, etc.) and we with him. In the Old Testament, God literally dwelled with Israel, as he placed his theophany in the tabernacle and the temple. In the New Testament, Jesus is "Immanuel," God with us. He is God "tabernacling" among us (John 1:14). And after his Resurrection, he sends the Spirit to dwell in us, as in a temple.

Control, authority, presence. Those are the main biblical concepts that explain the meaning of God's lordship. We can see this triad in the literary form of the treaty document, mentioned a few pages ago. Recall that in the treaty the Great King begins by giving his name (in the Decalogue, *Lord*). Then in the historical prologue, he tells the vassal what he has done, how he has delivered them, emphasizing his might and power (*control*). Next he tells them how they should behave as a response to their deliverance (*authority*). Then he tells them the blessings for continued obedience and the curses for disobedience (*covenant presence*). God is not an absentee landlord. He will be present with Israel to bless, and, if necessary, to judge.

### **The Lordship Attributes and Christian Decision-Making**

The lordship attributes also help us to understand in more detail the structure of Christian ethics. In particular, they suggest a way for Christians to make ethical decisions.

### *How God Governs Our Ethical Life*

First, by his *control*, God plans and rules nature and history, so that certain human acts are conducive to his glory and others are not.

Second, by his *authority*, he speaks to us clearly, telling us what norms govern our behavior.

Third, by his *covenant presence* he commits himself to be with us in our ethical walk, blessing our obedience, punishing our disobedience. But his presence also provides us with two important means of ethical guidance. (1) Because he is present with us, he is able to serve as a moral example. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2, compare Matt. 5:48). And (2) he, and he alone, is able to provide, for sinners, the power to do good, to set us free from the power of sin (John 8:34-36).

### *The Lordship Attributes Demand Appropriate Response*

When we learn of God's *control*, we learn at the same time to *trust* in God's plan and his providence. God told Abraham that he would own the land of Canaan and have a huge number of descendants. But at the time he owned no land in Canaan, and he and his wife Sarah were far beyond the age of childbearing. Nevertheless, his overall attitude toward the promise was one of trust, or faith, as Paul says in Rom. 4:20-21,

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,<sup>21</sup> fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Faith in Christ is faith in what he has done and what he has promised to do in the future. It is trust in God's sovereign care for us.

Next, when we learn of God's *authority*, we learn at the same time to *obey* him. Says God through Moses,

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it,<sup>2</sup> that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long.<sup>3</sup> Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful

to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut. 6:1-3; compare verses 6-9, many similar verses in Deuteronomy.)

The Psalmist says,

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. <sup>5</sup> Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! <sup>6</sup> Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments (Psm. 119:4-6).

God's control motivates us to trust, his authority to obey. "Trust and Obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus,"<sup>30</sup> as the hymn puts it. David says, "Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness" (Psm. 37:3).

Finally, when we become aware of God's *covenant presence*, we are moved to *worship*. Whenever God meets with human beings in Scripture, the situation immediately becomes one of worship: when the King enters, we bow down. Think of Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3), or Isaiah meeting God in the temple:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" <sup>4</sup> And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:1-5).

When the glorified Jesus, appeared to John, the apostle says, "I fell at his feet as though dead" (Rev. 1:17).

Three lordship attributes, three mandatory responses: faith, obedience, worship. These responses are the foundation of our ethical life.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Words by John H. Sammis, 1887.

<sup>31</sup> Thanks to Mike Christ, who first suggested this triad to me. I've modified his formulation a bit, added exposition, and take full responsibility. Readers who are new to my triads will learn that they can be shuffled and rearranged without problem. Ultimately, as we shall see, each member of the triad includes the others. So different arrangements are possible and often edifying.



### *The Three Theological Virtues*

Faith, hope, and love are three virtues often brought together by New Testament writers (1 Cor. 13:13, Gal. 5:5-6, Col. 1:4-5, 1 Thess. 1:3, 5:8, Heb. 6:9-11). Christian writers after the New Testament sometimes presented these “theological virtues” as supplements to the four “cardinal virtues” of Greek philosophy, prudence, justice, temperance, and courage. That gave them a total of seven, which, of course, is a desirable number.

The idea that Christian morality is a supplement to pagan morality is, I think, an inadequate view, as I plan to argue in more detail at a later point. Scripture does affirm all seven of these virtues, but it does give some preeminence to faith, hope, and love. Love is the highest of these, according to 1 Cor., 13:13, John 13:34-35, and other passages, and occasionally Paul speaks of faith and love, without referring to hope (Eph. 1:15, 3:17, 6:23, 1 Tim. 1:14, 6:11, 2 Tim. 1:13, Philem. 1:5). Faith includes hope, for hope is faith directed to God’s promises for the future. And love, as the summation of Christian virtues, includes both faith and hope. But we can also look at this triad in terms of the lordship attributes: faith trusts in God’s revealed word. Hope looks to God’s controlling power, which will accomplish his purposes in the future as in the past. And love treasures the presence of God in the intimate recesses of the heart and the new family into which God has adopted us.

### *Necessary and Sufficient Criteria of Good Works*

What is a good work? Reformed theologians have addressed this question in response to the “problem of the virtuous pagan.” Reformed theology teaches that human beings by nature are “totally depraved.” This means, not that they are as bad as they can be, but that it is impossible for them to please God in any of their thoughts, words, or deeds (Rom. 8:8). So apart from grace none of us can do anything good in the sight of God. Yet all around us we see non-Christians who seem, at least, to be doing good works: they love their families, work hard at their jobs, contribute to the needs of the poor, show kindness to their neighbors. It seems that these pagans are virtuous by normal measures.

Reformed theology, however, questions these normal measures. It acknowledges that unbelievers often contribute to the betterment of society. These contributions are called “civic righteousness.” Their civic

righteousness does not please God, however, because it is altogether devoid of three characteristics:

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God. (WCF 16.7)

Note the three necessary ingredients: (1) a heart purified by faith, (2) obedience to God's word, and (3) the right end, the glory of God.

The first is a plainly biblical emphasis. The Confession cites Heb. 11:4 and some other texts. Rom. 14:23 also comes to mind, which says, "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." In Jesus' arguments with the Pharisees, too, it is evident that our righteousness must not be merely external (see especially Matt. 23:25-26). In describing the necessity of an internal motive of good works, Scripture refers not only to faith, but especially to love, as in 1 Cor. 13:1-3 and many other passages. We learn from these passages that love is not only necessary for good works, but also sufficient: that is, if our act is motivated by a true love of God and neighbor, we have fulfilled the law (Matt. 22:40, Rom. 13:8, Gal. 5:14).

The second element of good works, according to the Confession, is obedience to God's word, to his law. Note the references in the previous section to the importance of obeying God's word. Certainly obedience to God's word is a necessary condition of good works, for disobedience to God's law is the very definition of sin (1 John 3:4). It is also a sufficient condition: for if we have obeyed God perfectly, we have done everything necessary to be good in his sight. Of course, among God's commands are his command to love (see above paragraph) and to seek his glory (see the next paragraph).

The third element is the right end, the glory of God. Ethical literature has often discussed the *summum bonum* or highest good for human beings. What is it that we are trying to achieve in our ethical actions? Many secular writers have said this goal is pleasure or human happiness. But Scripture says that in everything we do we should be seeking the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Certainly, any act must glorify God if it is to be good, so seeking God's glory is a necessary condition of good works. And if the act does glorify God, then it is good; so it is a sufficient condition.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> There is a sense, of course, in which even wicked acts bring glory to God, for God uses the wickedness of people to bring about his good purposes (Rom. 8:28). But the wicked person does

So there are three necessary and sufficient conditions of good works: right motive, right standard, and right goal.<sup>33</sup> Right motive corresponds to the lordship attribute of covenant presence: for it is God's Spirit dwelling in us who places faith and love in our hearts. Right standard corresponds, obviously, to God's lordship attribute of authority. And right goal corresponds to the lordship attribute of control, for it is God's creation and providence that determines what acts will and will not lead to God's glory. God determines the consequences of our actions, and he determines which actions lead to our *summum bonum*.

### *Biblical Reasons to Do Good Works*

#### 1. The History of Redemption

Scripture uses basically three means to encourage believers to do good works. First, it appeals to the history of redemption. This is the chief motivation in the Decalogue itself: God has redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, therefore they should obey.

In the New Testament, the writers often urge us to do good works because of what Christ did to redeem us. Jesus himself urges that the disciples "love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). Jesus' love, ultimately displayed on the cross, commands our response of love to one another. Another well-known appeal is found in Col. 3:1-3:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.<sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

When Christ died, we died to sin; when he rose, we rose to righteousness. We are one with Christ in his death and resurrection. So those historic facts have moral implications. We should live in accord with the new life, given to us by God's grace when we rose with Christ. See also Rom. 6:1-23, 13:11-12, 1 Cor. 6:20, 10:11, 15:58, Eph. 4:1-5, 25, 32, 5:25-33, Phil. 2:1-11, Heb. 12:1-28, 1 Pet. 2:1-3, 4:1-6.

---

not *intend* to glorify God by his actions. So 1 Cor. 10:31 speaks of intent as well as action. Cf. Matt. 6:33.

<sup>33</sup> Cornelius Van Til, in his *Christian-Theistic Ethics* cited earlier, was the first to think through the significance of this confessional triad for ethical methodology. I gratefully acknowledge his influence upon my formulation here. In fact, Van Til's discussion was the seed thought behind all the triads of the *Theology of Lordship*.

So the Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes that our good works come from *gratitude*. They are not attempts to gain God's favor, but rather grateful responses to the favor he has already shown to us.<sup>34</sup>

But our focus on the history of redemption is not limited to the past. It is also an anticipation of what God will do for us in the future. God's promises of future blessing also motivate us to obey him. Jesus commands us, "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33).<sup>35</sup>

This motivation emphasizes God's *control*, for history is the sphere of God's control, the outworking of his eternal plan.

## 2. The Authority of God's Commands

Scripture also motivates our good works by calling attention to God's commands. Jesus said that he did not come to abrogate the law, but to fulfill it, so

<sup>19</sup> Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:19)

So in their preaching Jesus and the apostles often appeal to the commandments of the law, and to their own commandments, as in Matt. 7:12, 12:5, 19:18-19, 22:36-40, 23:23, Luke 10:26, John 8:17, 13:34-35, 14:15, 21, Rom. 8:4, 12:19, 13:8-10, 1 Cor. 5:13, 9:8-9, 14:34, 37, 2 Cor. 8:15, 9:9, Gal. 4:21-22, Eph. 4:20-24, 6:1-3, 1 Thess. 4:1, 2 Tim. 3:16-17, Tit. 2:1, James 1:22-25, 2:8-13, 1 Pet. 1:16, 1 John 2:3-5, 3:24, 5:2.

God's commandment is sufficient to place an obligation upon us. We should need no other incentive. But God gives us other motivations as well, because we are fallen, and because he loves us as his redeemed children.

This motivation reflects God's lordship attribute of authority. We should obey him, simply because he has the right to absolute obedience.

## 3. The Presence of the Spirit

---

<sup>34</sup> This motivation is not what John Piper calls the "debtors' ethic," in which we do good works in a vain attempt to pay God back for our redemption. We can, of course, never do that, and we should not try to do it. See Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1995), and the summary discussion on pp. 33-38 of *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002). But gratefulness, nonetheless, is the only legitimate response to the grace God has given us in Christ.

<sup>35</sup> This is what Piper calls "future grace" in the works cited in the previous note.

Thirdly, Scripture calls us to a godly life, based on the activity of the Spirit within us. This motivation is based on God's lordship attribute of presence. Paul says,

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.<sup>17</sup> For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Gal. 5:16-18)

God has placed his Spirit within us, to give us new life, and therefore new ethical inclinations. There is still conflict among our impulses, but we have the resources to follow the desires of the Spirit, rather than those of the flesh. So Paul appeals to the inner change God has worked in us by regeneration and sanctification. In Eph. 5:8-11, he puts it this way:

for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light<sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true),<sup>10</sup> and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.<sup>11</sup> Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

In the following verses, Paul continues to expound on the ethical results of this transformation. Compare also Rom. 8:1-17, Gal. 5:22-26.

So Scripture motivates us to do good works by the history of redemption, the commandments of God, and the work of the Spirit within us, corresponding to God's lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence, respectively.

### *Types of Christian Ethics*

These three motivations have led Christian thinkers to develop three main types of Christian ethics: command ethics, narrative ethics, and virtue ethics. Command ethics emphasizes the authority of God's moral law. Narrative ethics emphasizes the history of redemption. It teaches ethics by telling the story of salvation. Virtue ethics discusses the inner character of the regenerate person, focusing on virtues listed in passages like Rom. 5:1-5, Gal. 5:22-23, and Col. 3:12-17.

Sometimes a writer will pit these types of ethics against one another, designating one as superior to the others. I don't see any biblical justification for that kind of argument. As we saw, Scripture uses all of these methods to motivate righteous behavior. And it is hard to see how any of these could function without the others. It is God's commands that define the virtues and enable us to evaluate the behavior of characters in the narrative. It is the narrative that shows us how God saves us from sin and enables us to keep his law from the heart.

And the virtues are define what the redeemed person looks like when he obeys God from the heart.

### *What Really Matters*

We can see the same triadic structure in the actual content of biblical ethics. I shall expound this structure at length later in the book. For now, let us note sayings of the Apostle Paul that intend to show the highest priorities of the Christian life. In these passages, he is opposing Judaizers, who think that one must be circumcised to enter the kingdom of God. He replies that neither circumcision, nor uncircumcision, are important, but rather the following:

**1 Corinthians 7:19** For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.

**Galatians 5:6** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

**Galatians 6:15** For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

As in our previous discussion, there is a reference in 1 Cor. 7:19 to keeping the commandments of God. It corresponds to God's lordship attribute of authority. "Faith working through love" in Gal. 5:6 is the work of the Spirit within us, and refers to God's covenant presence. "New creation" in Gal. 6:15 is the great redemptive-historical change brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection, the powerful work of God's sovereign control over history.<sup>36</sup>

### *Factors in Ethical Judgment*

Now imagine that you are a pastor or counselor, and someone comes to your office with an ethical problem. Basically, there are three things you will need to discuss: the situation, the word of God, and the inquirer himself.

Normally, we ask first about the situation: "what's your problem? What brings you to see me?" This question is ultimately about God's lordship attribute of control, for God is the one who brings situations about.

Then we ask, "what does God's word say about the problem?" This discussion invokes God's lordship attribute of authority.

---

<sup>36</sup> Thanks to my colleague Prof. Reggie Kidd for bringing these texts to my attention.

Thirdly, we focus on the inquirer, asking how he or she needs to change in order to apply God's solution to the problem. At this point, we are thinking especially about God's presence within the individual. If the person is a non-Christian, then evidently he needs to be born again by God's Spirit before he can apply the word of God to his life. If the person is a believer, he may need to grow in certain ways before he will be able to deal with the issue before him.

We note in such conversations that each of these subjects influences the other two. We may start with a "presentation problem:" "My wife is angry all the time." But as we move to a focus on God's word, gaining a better understanding of Scripture, we may gain a better understanding of the problem as well. For example, Scripture tells us to remove the log from our own eye before trying to get the speck out of another's eye (Matt. 7:3). So the inquirer may come to see that his wife is angry because he has provoked her. So the problem now is not only in her, but in him as well. Reflection on God's word has changed our understanding of the problem.

But this new understanding of the problem pushes us to look at more and different Scripture texts than we considered in the beginning. As we understand the problem better, we understand better how Scripture relates to it. Scripture and the situation illumine one another.

Then when we move to the third question and ask the inquirer to look within, he may see even more things in himself that have provoked his wife's anger. So the problem, the word, and the inquirer have all illumined one another. Evidently you cannot understand your problem, or yourself, adequately until you have seen it through what Calvin called the "spectacles of Scripture." And you can't understand the problem until you see yourself as a part of it.

And you can't understand God's word rightly until you can use it, until you see how it applies to this situation and that. This is a more difficult point, but I think it is important. If someone says he understands "you shall not steal," but has no idea to what situations that commandment applies (such as embezzling, cheating on taxes, shoplifting) then he hasn't really understood the biblical command. Understanding Scripture, understanding its meaning, is *applying* it to situations. A person who understands the Bible is a person who is able to use the Bible to answer his questions, to guide his life. As I argued in Chapter 2, theology is application.

*Perspectives on the Discipline of Ethics*

In general, then, ethical judgment always involves the application of a *norm* to a *situation* by a *person*. These three factors can also be seen as overall perspectives on the study of ethics:

(a) The Situational Perspective

In this perspective, we examine situations, problems. This study focuses on God's actions in creation and providence that have made the situations what they are, hence God's lordship attribute of control. The situational perspective asks "what are the best means of accomplishing God's purposes?" That is, how can we take the present situation and change it so that more of God's purposes are achieved?

God's ultimate purpose is his own glory (1 Cor. 10:31). But God has more specific goals as well: the filling and subduing of the earth (Gen. 1:28); the evangelization and nurture of people of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20); the success of his Kingdom (Matt. 6:33).

The situational perspective explores the consequences of our actions. Under the situational perspective, we ask, "if we do x, will that enhance the glory of God and his blessing on his people?" So we seek the best means to the ends that please God. So we might describe ethics from this perspective as a Christian *teleological*, or *consequential* ethic.

(b) The Normative Perspective

Under the normative perspective, we focus on Scripture more directly. Our purpose is to determine our duty, our ethical norm, our obligation. So we bring our problem to the Bible and ask "What does Scripture say about this situation?" At this point we invoke God's lordship attribute of authority. Since we are focusing on duties and obligations, we might call this perspective a Christian *deontological* ethic.

(c) The Existential Perspective

The existential perspective focuses on the ethical agent, the person (or persons) who are trying to find out what to do. Under this perspective, the ethical question becomes, "How must I change if I am to do God's will?" Here the focus is inward, examining our heart-relation to God. It deals with our regeneration, our sanctification, our inner character. These are all the product of God's lordship-presence within us.

*Interdependence of the Perspectives*



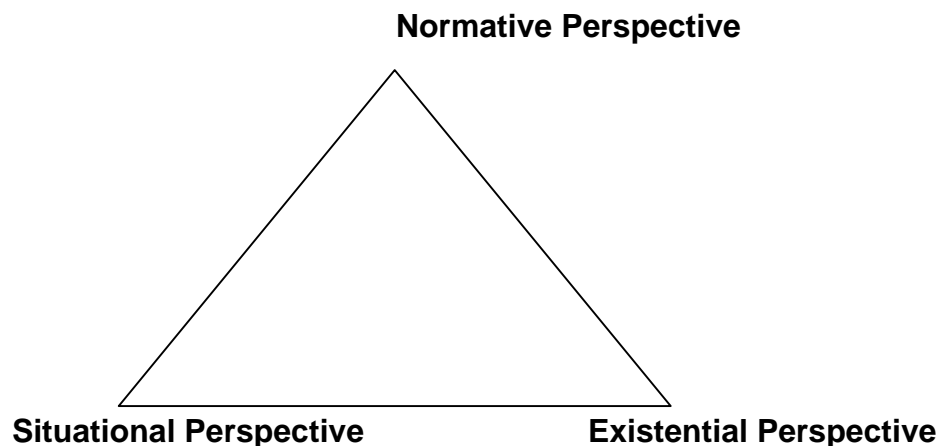
Now we saw in section 5 that knowledge of our situation, norm, and self are interdependent. You can't understand the situation fully until you know what Scripture says about it, and until you understand your own role in the situation. You can't understand yourself fully apart from Scripture, or apart from the situation which is your environment. And you can't understand Scripture unless you can apply it to situations and to yourself.

So the situational perspective includes the other two. When we understand the situation rightly, we see that Scripture and the self are elements of that situation, facts to be taken account of. So we can't rightly assess the situation unless we assess the other two factors.

Similarly the normative perspective: to understand Scripture is to understand its applications to the situation and the self.

And the existential perspective: as we ask questions about our inner life, we find that the situation and the God's revelation are both elements of our personal experience, apart from which we cannot make sense of ourselves.

So each perspective necessitates consideration of the others. Each includes the others. You can picture the content of ethics as a triangle:



Now, you can study the ethical triangle beginning at any of the three corners. But as you advance through the triangle, you will meet up with the other corners eventually. That is to say, if you start to study the situation, you will eventually find yourself studying the norm and the ethical agent. Same with the other corners.

That's why I describe these approaches as "perspectives." I don't think of them as "parts" of ethics, as though you could divide the triangle into three

distinct parts and then do one part first, another second, and another third. No, you can't really study the situation without the norm, and so on.

So the triangle represents the whole subject matter of ethics, and the corners represent different entrances to that subject matter, different emphases, different initial questions. But the goal is always to cover the whole triangle with regard to any ethical question.

In the end, then, the three perspectives coincide. A true understanding of the situation will not contradict a true understanding of the Word or the self. And a true understanding of each will include true understandings of the others.

But if the three are ultimately identical, why do we need three? Why not just one? The reason has to do with our finitude and sin. God knows all truth simultaneously, from every possible perspective. He knows what the whole universe looks like to the eye of the snail on my window ledge. But you and I are finite, not omniscient. We can only see a portion of reality at a time. That is to say, we can only see the world from one perspective at a time. For that reason it is good for us to move from one perspective to another. Just as the blind man had to move from the elephant's leg, to its trunk, to its torso, to its head and tail in order to get an adequate picture of the elephant, so we need to move from one perspective to another to get a full understanding of God's world.

And we are sinners in Adam. According to Rom. 1, that means that we have a tendency to suppress the truth, to exchange the truth for a lie, to try to push God out of our knowledge. Salvation turns us in a different direction, so that we are able to seek the truth. But the continued presence of sin in our minds and hearts means that we need to keep checking up on ourselves, and multiplying perspectives is one helpful way to do that.

In ethics, the three perspectives I have mentioned are especially helpful. The three perspectives serve as checks and balances on one another. The normative perspective can correct mistakes in my understanding of the situational. But the opposite is also true: my understanding of the norm can be improved when I better understand the situation to which the norm is to be applied. Same, *mutatis mutandis*, for the existential perspective.

Multi-perspectivalism is not relativism. I am not saying that any viewpoint is a legitimate perspective. There is in ethics and in other disciplines an absolute right and wrong. The procedure I have outlined above is a means for us to discover that absolute right and wrong.

Scripture itself is absolutely right: inspired, infallible, inerrant. But we are fallible in our study of Scripture. To understand it rightly we need information outside the Bible, including knowledge of Hebrew and Greek grammar,

knowledge of ancient history, and an understanding of those contemporary questions that people pose to Scripture.

### **Triperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith**

In the next chapter I shall apply this threefold scheme to debates between Christians and non-Christians on ethical matters. Here, briefly, I should like to speak about debates within the Christian fold.

I belong to the Reformed theological tradition, and I subscribe, with some exceptions, to the Reformed confessions. Many of my readers (though I hope not all of them) come from that tradition as well. In this book I shall often quote Reformed confessions and catechisms and Reformed theologians. I don't think that the Reformed tradition has said the final word in theology, and there are some topics on which I disagree with many Reformed people. Some of those discussions will appear in this book as well. But in general I think that among all the traditions of Christian theology the Reformed tradition is the closest to Scripture.

Some of my Reformed friends think that my triperspectival scheme is relativistic. I have responded to that criticism in the preceding section. Others think it is at best an innovation. I agree that the technical terms are new. But it seems to me that the basic ideas are an outworking of traditional Reformed theology.

The three categories first caught my interest when I read Cornelius Van Til's discussion of goal, motive, and standard.<sup>37</sup> As I mentioned earlier, Van Til got that triad from the Westminster Confession of Faith. Van Til also spoke much about the interdependence of revelation from God, nature, and man: we get revelation from God about nature, revelation from nature about God, etc.<sup>38</sup>

More fundamentally, it is important to understand that Reformed theology has always emphasized strongly God's revelation in the creation and in human persons (God's image) as well as his revelation in Scripture.

Other branches of the church have often criticized Reformed ethics for being merely an "ethics of law." Certainly Reformed theology has had a more positive view of God's law than some other theological traditions, such as Lutheranism, Dispensationalism, and Charismatic theology. And occasionally Reformed writers have emphasized law in such a way as to detract from other aspects of biblical ethics. But in the inter-tradition debate it is important to make clear that the

---

<sup>37</sup> See the above discussion of the necessary and sufficient criteria of good works.

<sup>38</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (N. P.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974), 62-109.

Reformed faith at its best has emphasized, not only law, but also a strong view of God's revelation in creation and in human beings. Calvin and the Reformed Confessions typically begin by invoking the teaching of Ps. 19 and Rom. 1, the clarity of God's revelation throughout the universe. And Calvin, on the first page of his *Institutes*,<sup>39</sup> notes that we cannot know God without knowing ourselves, or ourselves without knowing God. And he disclaims knowledge of which comes first.

So in the theological debate, Reformed ethicists can rightly insist that their ethical tradition is not just one-note. God's law is our ultimate and sufficient ethical standard. But we must understand that standard by relating it to the divine revelation in the world and in ourselves. Reformed ethics can account for the nuances and subtleties of ethical decision-making, without compromising the straightforward, simply unity of our obligation, namely obedience to God as he has revealed his will in Scripture.

---

<sup>39</sup> 1.1.1

## **Part Two: Non-Christian Ethics**

## Chapter 4: Lordship and Non-Christian Ethics

In Chapter 3 I examined the general structure of a biblical ethic, based on God's lordship, particularly his lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence. In this chapter, I will use that discussion to indicate the most important ways in which Christian ethics differs from non-Christian ethics.

In general, non-Christian ethics does not affirm the lordship of the God of the Bible.<sup>40</sup> So I will seek here to show how a denial of divine lordship affects ethics. I will begin, however, with comparisons between Christian and non-Christian thought in metaphysics and epistemology, before proceeding on specifically to ethics.

### Transcendence and Immanence<sup>41</sup>

The lordship attributes will help us to get a clear idea on the concepts of transcendence and immanence that theologians often use to describe the biblical God. These are not biblical terms, but the Bible does speak of God being "on high" as well as "with us." He is both "up there" and "down here." He is exalted, and he is near. When Scripture uses the "up there" language, theologians call it "transcendence." When Scripture speaks of God down here with us, the theologians speak of "immanence."

There are dangers, however, in the concepts of transcendence and immanence. We can understand those dangers more clearly through the diagram below.<sup>42</sup>

---

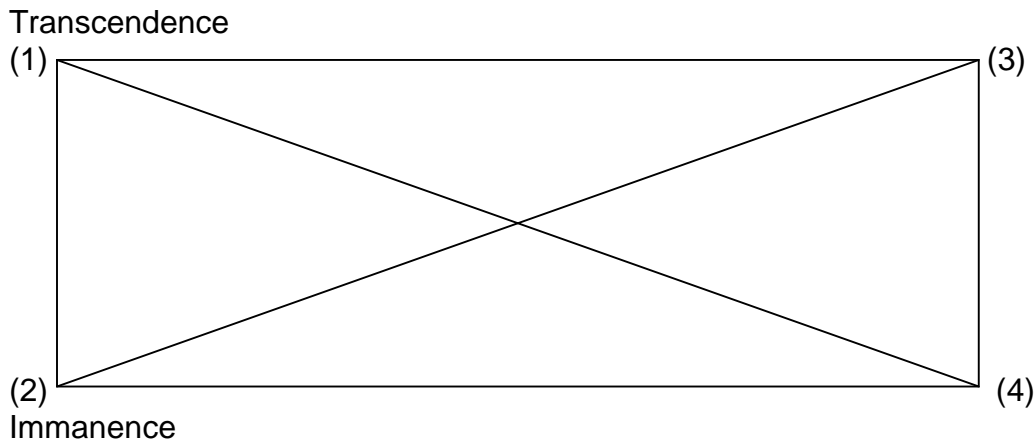
<sup>40</sup> I shall try to show that by specific examples in later chapters. I realize that there are religions like Judaism, Islam, the Jehovah's Witnesses and others who would claim to worship the God of the Bible while denying the full supremacy of Christ. So while opposing orthodox Christianity, they would claim to be serving the Lord. I will deal with that claim later on.

<sup>41</sup> This section summarizes Chapter 7 of DG.

<sup>42</sup> In the first printing of DG, p. 113, the diagram is misnumbered. It should be numbered as here. The diagram as presented p. 14 of DKG is correct.

*Biblical Views*  
*Views*

*Nonbiblical*



The left-hand corners, (1) and (2), represent a biblical understanding of transcendence and immanence, the right-hand corners, (3) and (4), common nonbiblical views.

In Scripture, God is transcendent (1) in that he is exalted as Lord, as King. We should associate transcendence with the lordship attributes of control and authority. He is immanent in the sense that he is covenantally present with us (2). So understood, there is no contradiction, not even a tension, between divine transcendence and immanence.

Some, however, have misunderstood God's transcendence. They think it means that God is so far away from us that we cannot really know him, so far that human language can't describe him accurately, so far that he's just a great heavenly blur, without any definite characteristics. I represent this view as (3) on the diagram, nonbiblical transcendence. If God is transcendent in *that way*, how can he also be near to us? That kind of transcendence is incompatible with biblical immanence (2). I've illustrated that incompatibility by a diagonal line.

Further, in the Bible we *can* know definite things about God. And despite the limitations of human language, God is able to use human language to tell us clearly and accurately who he is and what he has done. These are aspects of God's immanence in the biblical sense (2), aspects rejected by those who hold the nonbiblical concept of transcendence (3).

Similarly with the term *immanence*. Some theologians speak as though when God becomes immanent he becomes immersed in the world, hidden in the world, so that he can't be distinguished from creatures (4). Some people even

think that when you look deep down inside yourself, you discover that you are God and God is you. But that's not biblical. God is always distinct from the world, for he is the creator and we are the creature. But God does come to be *with us* (the meaning of *Immanuel*, the name of Jesus in Matt. 1:23), and that's something wonderful and precious.

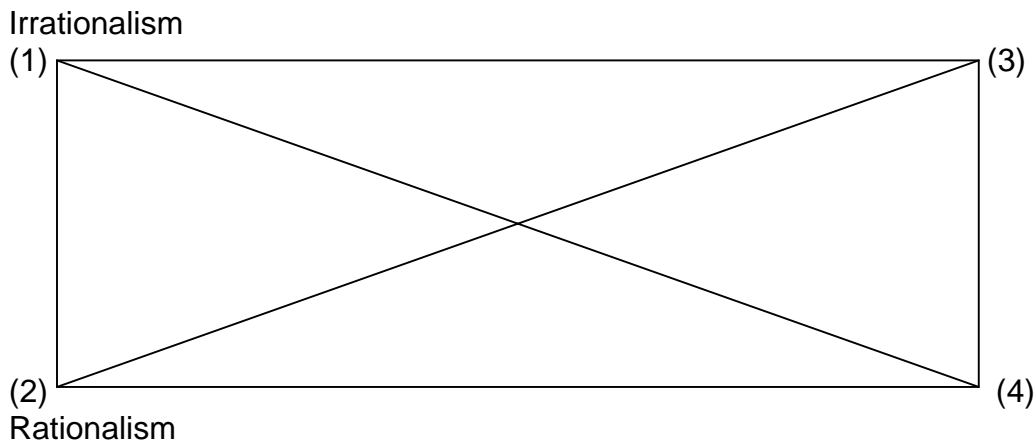
So the nonbiblical view of immanence (4) contradicts the biblical view of transcendence (1), confusing the creator with the creature, and giving God's sovereign control and authority over to the world. The diagonal line between (1) and (4) indicates this contradiction.

### Irrationalism and Rationalism

Let me now change the labels on the diagram, in order to present a similar argument about epistemology, or theory of knowledge. In this version, I am replacing "transcendence" and "immanence" with "irrationalism" and "rationalism," respectively.<sup>43</sup>

*Biblical Views*  
*Views*

*Nonbiblical*



Since Scripture teaches us that God is the ultimate controller and authority for human life, he is also the author of truth and the ultimate criterion of human knowledge. Therefore our knowing is not ultimate, or, as Van Til liked to put it, autonomous. Human knowledge is "thinking God's thoughts after him," in submission to his revelation of the truth, recognizing that revelation as the supreme and final standard of truth and falsity, right and wrong. Non-Christians (and Christians who compromise with secular ways of thinking) look at this principle as irrationalistic. They are appalled at the idea that we should renounce

<sup>43</sup> For this discussion, compare DKG, 360-363, and CVT, 231-38.



our intellectual autonomy and accept God's Word on his authority alone. To Christians, doing this is not irrational at all; rather, it is the way God designed our minds to think. But it does involve confessing that human reason is limited, subordinate to God's perfect reason. So we can interpret position (1) of the rectangle as Christian "irrationalism" (note the quotes).

But of course, we not only believe in the limitations of human reason; we also believe that that under God our reason has great power. For since God has come into our world (2) and has clearly revealed himself there, we are able to know many things with certainty. Non-Christians tend to see such claims of knowledge as rationalistic. How can anybody, they ask, be sure of anything in this confusing world? So I would attach to corner (2) the label, Christian "rationalism." Again, note the quotation marks. Christians plead not guilty to the charge of rationalism, because they recognize that God's mind is far greater than ours, and that therefore the realm of mystery (1) is far greater than the realm of our knowledge. But they also recognize that by God's revelation they have access to real truth.

In the current debate between "modernists" and "postmodernists," the modernists tend to accuse Christians of being irrationalistic—of believing biblical doctrines without sufficient reason. Postmodernists charge Christians with rationalism. They think Christians are arrogant to claim that that they can know anything for sure.

But when we turn the tables, allowing ourselves as Christians to comment directly on non-Christian epistemology, we find ourselves saying about them what they say about us. That is, we say that they are irrationalistic and rationalistic. The nonbiblical view of transcendence implies that God either does not exist or is too far away from us to play a role in our reasoning. But if that is true, we have no access to an ultimate standard of truth. Such a view is skeptical or irrationalist, as I would label corner (3) on the diagram. The diagonal line between (3) and (2) shows the contradiction between these two views: the Christian says that God has come near us and has given us a clear revelation of truth. The non-Christian denies that and prefers skepticism.

But there is another side to non-Christian reasoning. For everyone who rejects divine authority must accept some other authority. Reasoning cannot be reasoning without some standard of truth and falsity. The non-Christian either assumes the ultimate authority of his own reason (autonomy), or he accepts some authority other than that of the God of Scripture. In any case, he substitutes the authority of a creature for that of the creator. He assumes that we have access apart from God to an authority that will allow our reasoning to be successful. That position (4) is rationalism, and contradicts the limitations on reason asserted by position (1).

So Van Til argued that unregenerate human beings are rationalists and irrationalists at the same time: they claim that their own reason has ultimate authority (rationalism), but they acknowledge nothing that will connect human reason with objective truth (irrationalism).<sup>44</sup>

The rationalist-irrationalist dialectic of non-Christian thought bears on ethical reasoning specifically, as well as thinking about other matters. As we shall see, non-biblical ethicists often oppose absolutes in general, but they forget their opposition to absolutes when they propose their own fundamental ethical principles, such as love or justice. One egregious example is Joseph Fletcher, who says in his notorious *Situation Ethics* that “for the situationist there are no rules—none at all,” but who in the same paragraph proposes a “general’ proposition...namely, the commandment to love God through the neighbor.” Is there a contradiction here between “no rules” and the rule of love? Fletcher replies enigmatically that the love commandment “is, be it noted, a normative ideal; it is *not* an operational directive.”<sup>45</sup> Evidently he thinks that the love commandment is not a commandment, and therefore not a rule. But this distinction will have to go down as one of the most implausible distinctions of ethical literature.

### Specifically Ethical Interpretations of the Rectangle

I have used the rectangle diagram to illustrate the difference between those who accept, and those who reject, the lordship of the biblical God, in metaphysics (transcendence and immanence) and epistemology (irrationalism and rationalism). I will refer to these metaphysical and epistemological interpretations in my critical evaluation of non-Christian ethical systems. There are, however, still other interpretations of the rectangle that are more specifically ethical in their meaning:

#### 1. *Absoluteness and Relevance of the Moral Law*

Most ethical writers would like to discover principles of ethics that are absolute (and so obligatory) and are also relevant (with specific content bearing on practical ethical decisions). In a biblical worldview, the law of God, our ethical standard, is absolute (1 on the diagram) because of God’s absolute control and authority. Yet it is also relevant (2) because God reveals it to us in our experience through his covenant presence. He is with us in the ethical struggle. He knows the problems we must deal with, and indeed he has designed the moral law with our situation fully in view.

---

<sup>44</sup> For more discussion of the “rationalist-irrationalist dialectic” in non-Christian thought, see my CVT, Chapter 17, and DKG, 360-63.

<sup>45</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press: 1966), 55.

But those who reject the biblical theistic worldview find it difficult to achieve either absoluteness or relevance. The absoluteness of the moral law, for them, is the absoluteness of an opaque reality, which says nothing clearly (3). And relevance becomes the relevance of creatures talking to themselves (4). We shall see that among some non-Christian thinkers the authority of a moral principle is in proportion to its abstractness, that is, its irrelevance. The more specific, the more relevant an ethical principle has, the less authority it has. So that in Plato, for example, the highest ethical principle is abstract Goodness, a goodness without any specific content at all. Similarly with Fletcher's view of love.

There is a religious reason for this antithesis between absoluteness and content. The non-Christian ethicist would like to believe, and would like others to believe, that he has moral standards, and that it's possible to have moral standards without God. But he doesn't want to be bound by any rules. He wants to be autonomous. So he arrives at the paradoxical notion of absolutes without content: an appearance of moral principle without any real moral principle at all. The alternative, of course, which has the same motive, is a moral content without authority. So in non-Christian ethics there is an inverse proportion between the authority of a principle and its content, its relevance.

## *2. Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*

In the Christian understanding, God's sovereignty is his lordship. So it entails his control and authority over all things ((1) on the diagram).<sup>46</sup> But his authority also entails human responsibility: what God says, we must do. And his authority is not a bare command, for he enters our history in Christ to live our lives and to redeem us. So our responsibility is not only a response to God's authority (1), but also to his covenant presence (2). Seen in this way, there is no conflict between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Those rejecting this biblical worldview often argue that ethical responsibility presupposes total human autonomy, to perform actions that are not caused by God, our environment, or even our own desires—actions that are totally uncaused. This view of freedom is sometimes called "libertarianism." I have argued that libertarianism is incoherent and that it is not the ground of moral responsibility.<sup>47</sup> When a court examines whether Bill is responsible for committing murder, it cannot possibly use the libertarian criterion, for it would be impossible to prove that Bill's action is totally uncaused. Yet some such view is implicit in the idea that creatures are autonomous ((4) on the diagram).

---

<sup>46</sup> For discussion of divine sovereignty and human freedom and responsibility, see DG, Chapters 4, 8, and 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 8.

The only alternative on a nonbiblical worldview, as I see it, is that our actions are controlled by some unknown reality ((3) on the diagram). But a being of whom we are wholly ignorant cannot be the ground of our responsibility. Further, since we know nothing of such a force, we must regard it as impersonal. But an impersonal force cannot be the ground of ethical responsibility. We cannot incur ethical obligations to forces like gravity or electromagnetism. Ethical obligation is fundamentally personal, arising out of loyalty and love.<sup>48</sup>

### 3. *Objectivity and Inwardness*

The Bible teaches that the law of God is objective in the sense that its meaning does not depend on us. It comes from God's authoritative word (1). Yet God is not pleased with merely external obedience. He wants his word to be written on the human heart, where it motivates us from within. In the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), God writes his word, his moral law, on the hearts of his people. That is an aspect of his covenant presence (2). So in the Christian worldview, moral standards are both objective and inward.

Those who deny that worldview must seek objectivity in an unknowable realm (3), where the moral standard cannot be known at all, let alone objectively. They seek inwardness by making each person his own moral standard (4). But that dispenses with all objectivity and leaves us with nothing to internalize.

### 4. *Humility and Hope*

God's transcendence (1) shows us how small we are and promotes humility. But God has come into our history (2) to promise us, by grace, great blessings in Christ. We are indeed small; but we are God's people and therefore great. A non-Christian, however, is either driven to pride ((4)—because he is his own autonomous standard) or to despair ((3)—because he is lost in an unknown, uncaring universe).

### 5. *Freedom and Authority in Society*

We should also consider the implications of lordship in regard to social ethics. Most of those who write about the role of the state want to achieve a balance between law and order, on the one hand, and individual freedom on the other. In Scripture, God gives control and authority to civil rulers in his name (Rom. 13:1-6), providing a basis for civil law and order. This view of civil authority can be placed in position (1) on our diagram. But the authority of the civil ruler is not absolute; it is limited by God's higher authority. Furthermore, God sets standards for civil rulers as for all rulers: they are not to be tyrants, to "Lord it over" people, but they are

---

<sup>48</sup> Compare my "moral argument for the existence of God" in AGG, 93-102.

rather to serve those whom they rule, as Jesus himself came not to be served, but to serve (Matt. 20:25-28).<sup>49</sup> In this respect, they are to reflect God's own covenant presence, his covenant solidarity with his people. So they should seek what is best for their subjects. The ruler's power is also limited by the powers of other God-appointed authorities as in the family and the church. So Scripture gives us a charter for limited government and personal liberty. We may place this teaching at point (2) of the diagram.

Non-Christian social and political philosophy is also concerned about law and order on the one hand, and personal liberty on the other. But their arguments for law and order tend toward the extreme of totalitarianism (as in Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau). For they accept no revelation of God limiting the powers of government, and they have no other arguments sufficient to establish such limits. So government becomes an idol, a substitute for God himself. This teaching fits position (4) on our diagram.

But if the non-Christian thinker is more interested in personal liberty than in law and order, his argument for personal liberty leads naturally to anarchy. For, again, non-Christian thought has no recourse to divine revelation that would affirm personal liberty while establishing a limit upon it. For the non-Christian defender of liberty, liberty must become an absolute, so that government has no legitimate power at all. Thus political chaos adds to the conceptual chaos implicit in position (3).

Of course, many non-Christian ethicists have sought a balance between law and liberty. John Locke is well-known for his balanced approach in such matters. But although he was primarily a secular thinker, he may have been influenced by Christian writers, such as Samuel Rutherford, author of *Lex, Rex*. Rutherford worked out a balance between the state and the people, mainly through biblical exegesis. Locke tried to accomplish the same balance through an empiricist epistemology. But David Hume later argued that one cannot derive moral obligations from empirical observation, an argument that made Locke's political philosophy far less plausible. I shall argue later in this book that no line can be drawn between the powers and limits of government except by means of divine revelation. So the tension between irrationalism and rationalism in non-Christian thought can be seen also as a tension between anarchy and totalitarianism.

### Three Ethical Principles

---

<sup>49</sup> Jesus here speaks primarily of the apostles' role as leaders of the church. But since he compares their work to the work of Gentile civil authorities, he implicitly makes his own servanthood the model for Christian civil rulers as well. I shall consider the relation of church and state more fully under the Fifth Commandment.

In this section I will discuss another aspect of the ethical debate between Christians and non-Christians. This debate also concerns the lordship attributes.

Most people who think about ethics, Christian and non-Christian alike, are impressed by three principles:

1. *The Teleological Principle: A good act maximizes the happiness of living creatures.*

That is to say, a good act *does* good. Christians emphasize that it is good for God, bringing him glory. But Scripture tells us that what brings glory to God brings good to his people: “And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day” (Deut. 6:24; compare 10:13). Non-Christian ethical writers like Aristotle have also emphasized that doing good brings happiness, however that may be defined. The ethical life is the good life, the blessed life (Psm. 1, Matt. 5:1-11). And of course to live ethically is also to bring blessing to others.

In Christian ethics, this insight is based on God’s lordship attribute of *control*. For it is God who arranges nature and history so that good acts have beneficial consequences, to himself, to the ethical agent, and to other persons.

I call this principle the principle of *teleology*, for it declares that all our behavior should be goal-oriented, that it should seek the glory of God and the happiness of people.

2. *The Deontological Principle: A good act is a response to duty, even at the price of self-sacrifice.*

We admire people who follow their ethical principles, even at great cost. In the Bible, Abraham obeyed God’s word, even though it meant leaving his home country, moving to a place where he was a complete stranger to everybody, even though it meant taking his son Isaac up to a mountain to serve as a human sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-19). To do his Father’s will, the Lord Jesus gave his very life.

So God defines duties for us, absolute norms that take precedence over any other consideration. Our duty is what we *must* do, what we *ought* to do. So they are *necessary*. And they are *universal*, for they apply to everyone. If it is wrong for me to steal, then it is wrong for you to steal in the same situation. Ethics is no respecter of persons.

This insight is based on God’s lordship attribute of *authority*. For the ultimate source of human duties is God’s authoritative word. Some secular

thinkers, such as Plato and Kant, also acknowledged the important of duty. But as we shall see, they had a difficult time determining where our duties are to be found, and what our duties actually are.

I call this principle the principle of *deontology*, from the Greek verb translated “owe, ought, or must.” It states that ethics is a matter of duty, of obligation.

3. *The Existential Principle: A good act comes from a good inner character.*

A good person is not a hypocrite. He does good works because he loves to do them, because his heart is good. Scripture emphasizes that the only righteousness that is worth anything is a righteousness of the heart. The Pharisees cleansed the outside of their cup, their outward acts, but not the inside, their heart-motives (Matt. 23:25). Non-Christian writers, such as Aristotle, have also frequently emphasized the importance of character, of virtue, of inner righteousness. But as we shall see they have not succeeded in showing what constitutes virtue or how such virtue may be attained.

This insight is based on God’s lordship attribute of *presence*, for it is God “who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12). Without inward regeneration and sanctification, our best works are hypocritical.

I call this the *existential* principle, for it says that morality is personal, inward, a matter of the heart.

### **Are the Three Principles Consistent?**

Christians can gladly accept all three of the principles, insights or intuitions listed above. The God of Scripture is the author of the situation, the Word, and the moral self, so that the three are fully consistent with one another. He ordains history so that people will find their ultimate blessing in doing their duty. He has made us in his image, so that our greatest personal fulfillment occurs in seeking his glory in history, as his word declares.

Now many writers appreciate the three principles, or some of them, although they reject the God of the Bible. But in the absence of the biblical God, these principles are in tension with one another.

The teleological principle says that ethical action leads to happiness. Yet the deontological principle says that in order to do our duty, we must sometimes sacrifice our happiness.

The teleological and deontological principles say that our ethical responsibility is objective, grounded outside ourselves. But the existential suggests that our goodness is inward, and therefore subjective.

The deontological principle says that we are subject to a moral law that declares our duty, apart from inclination or the consequences of our acts. But the teleological and existential principles measure our goodness by the consequences of our actions and our inner life, respectively.

The existential principle says that it's wrong to measure a person's goodness by anything external to himself. But the teleological and deontological principles say that one may measure goodness by the consequences and norms of actions, respectively.

Non-Christian thinkers who appreciate the teleological principle tend to be empiricists in their epistemology (as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill), basing human knowledge on sense-experience. But philosophers have generally recognized that sense-experience does not reveal to us universal or necessary principles. It cannot reveal universal principles, because we cannot have sense-experience of the whole universe. And it cannot reveal necessary principles, because necessity is not something available to the senses. At most, the senses tell us what happens, not what *must* happen, and certainly not what *ought* to happen. But the deontological principle says that ethics is based on principles that are universal, necessary, and obligatory.

So if one tries to hold these principles without God, they inevitably appear to be in tension with one another. With God, they cohere, for the same God who controls the consequences of our acts also declares our duties and also gives us a new inner life. But without God it seems likely that in some ethical situations one principle will contradict another. We may, then, have to abandon our duty in order to maximize happiness in a situation, or to be as loving as possible (Joseph Fletcher). Of course, we must then decide what principle will prevail. Non-Christian ethicists differ among themselves on that question, so among them there are three schools of thought.

### Three Schools of Non-Christian Ethics

## Teleological Ethics

For some non-Christian ethicists, it is the teleological principle that prevails. For them, what is important is the goal we are pursuing, usually defined as happiness or pleasure. That happiness can be individual (as in Epicurean hedonism) or both individual and corporate (as in Mill's Utilitarianism). We



measure the ethical value of our actions by the consequences of those actions—to what extent they maximize happiness and minimize unhappiness.

Teleological ethicists tend to be hostile to the idea that we are bound by absolute rules that take precedence over our happiness, as in deontological ethics. They also dislike the notion that ethics is subjective, as in existential ethics. Rather, they think it is something public—even subject to calculation. For they believe we can determine what to do merely by calculating the consequences of our actions: the quantity and/or quality of pains and pleasures that action will produce.

### *Deontological Ethics*

For other non-Christian ethicists, it is the deontological principle that prevails. For them it is important above all to have access to authoritative norms that govern all human conduct. The teleological principle that we should seek happiness is insufficient, even anti-ethical. We admire, not those who seek their own happiness, but those who sacrifice that happiness for a higher principle. And to a deontologist, the existential idea that ethics is essentially subjective is destructive of ethics itself.

So the deontologist goes in search of absolute ethical principles. For him, a moral principle must be external to ourselves, universal, necessary, transcendent, indeed god-like. Opponents of this approach believe that deontologists have failed to prove that such principles exist. But deontologists believe that without such principles there can be no ethics.

### *Existential Ethics*

I use the term “existential ethics” to refer to a broad movement, of which the twentieth-century school of writers like Jean-Paul Sartre is only a part. As I use the phrase, existential ethicists are those who are impressed most of all with the existential principle discussed in the last two sections. The most important thing about ethics is its inwardness. Goodness is of the heart, of the motive. A good act is an act that actualizes the true self (our essence, in Aristotle and Idealism; our freedom, according to Sartre). If there are moral laws or principles they must be affirmed from within. If we seek happiness, it is our own happiness, not a happiness defined by someone else. So it is wrong to judge anyone on the basis of external conduct alone.

In the chapters that follow, I will be discussing specific examples of these types of ethics, as well as some thinkers who attempt to combine them in various ways. Then I will discuss the general structure of Christian ethics as an ethic acknowledging all three principles as “perspectives,” an ethic in which the three principles are reconciled through divine lordship.

## Chapter 5: Ethics and the Religions

In the first four chapters, I have introduced the subject of ethics, relating it to the lordship of God. I suggested that we can fruitfully investigate ethics under three perspectives related to God's lordship attributes: the situational, the normative, and the existential. I also used the lordship attributes to distinguish in general between biblical and nonbiblical approaches to ethics.

### Outline of the Treatise on Ethics

In the rest of my discussion of ethics, I seek to do three things that roughly correlate with the triads previously expounded. First, I intend to discuss non-Christian ethics, to show briefly, but in more detail than was possible in Chapters 3 and 4, why nonbiblical approaches are insufficient to guide our ethical decisions. In this section, I will be discussing mainly non-Christian metaethical systems, rather than their specific ethical prescriptions, because that will enable me to focus more precisely on their presuppositions and methods.

Since most discussion of ethical issues today is based on these nonbiblical views, these chapters will indicate the context of current debate, the intellectual situation that Christian ethicists must address. So I associate the discussion of non-Christian ethics with the situational perspective.

Second, I would like to set forth a biblical philosophy of ethics, a Christian metaethic, responding to the non-Christian metaethics discussed in the preceding section. We can think of this section as a Christian method for making ethical decisions. That method is, of course, tri-perspectival. So in these chapters I will be looking in more detail at the three perspectives, trying to understand how each, with the others, helps us to analyze and resolve ethical issues. Since this method describes the actual subjective process by which we wrestle with ethical matters, I identify it with the existential perspective.<sup>50</sup>

Third, I will try to formulate in general the actual content of a Christian ethic: the biblical norms that govern our lives. Here, following the traditions of many churches, I shall expound these norms under the headings of the Ten Commandments, relating them to ethical teachings throughout Scripture. In line with my general view of theology as application, this discussion will include, not only exegesis of the commandments in the usual sense, but also formulations of

---

<sup>50</sup> DKG was organized according to the objects of knowledge (situational), the justification of knowledge (normative) and the methods of knowledge (existential). So here again I identify methodology with the existential perspective. But in this case I use a different order of presentation: the existential second, and the normative third.

their applications to contemporary ethical issues. This discussion will represent the normative perspective on ethics.

The reader will note that the tri-perspectival system involves triads within triads within triads. This whole book is tri-perspectival. The ethics section provides the normative perspective to the whole book, but that section itself is also divided into perspectives, as are some of the subsections and sub-subsections. This phenomenon reminds us that the perspectives are not sharply distinct from one another, each including an utterly unique subject matter. Rather, each perspective includes the other two and therefore draws on the other two for its content and methodology. At times it is difficult to say what topic should fall under which perspective. Indeed, most of the time it really doesn't matter, except for purposes of pedagogical organization. For example, you can think of a tree in the front yard as an element of your environment (situational), as a fact that demands your belief (normative), or as an element of your experience (existential). Each perspective brings out something important about the tree. None of them can adequately deal with the tree's reality without the help of the other two.

### **Ethics and Religion**

So first on our agenda is to discuss non-Christian approaches to ethics. Among these non-Christian approaches are some that are connected with the great religions of the world, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism. Others purport to be secular, non-religious, such as the predominant schools of western ethical philosophy: Aristotelianism, utilitarianism, deontologism, and so on.

Secular philosophies, of course, do not demand church attendance or participation in religious ceremonies. But in other respects, they are religious. Roy Clouser, in his *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*,<sup>51</sup> discusses the difficulty of defining *religion*. What, he asks, do the great religions of the world have in common? That question is more difficult than it might seem, Clouser argues.<sup>52</sup> We might think that all religions include ethical codes, but Shinto does not. We might think that all religions acknowledge a personal supreme being; but Buddhism and Hinduism do not. Or we might propose that all religions demand worship. But Epicureanism and some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism do not. Clouser concludes, however, that it is nevertheless possible to define religious belief, and he suggests the following:

A religious belief is any belief in something or other as divine.

---

<sup>51</sup> Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991.

<sup>52</sup> See his discussion in *ibid.*, 10-12.

'Divine' means having the status of not depending on anything else.<sup>53</sup>

Clouser's definition of *divine* does not suffice to define fully the biblical God, or, for that matter, the gods of other religions. But it does define an attribute of the biblical God,<sup>54</sup> an attribute also ascribed to absolutes of other religious traditions. All systems of thought include belief in something that is self-sufficient, not dependent on anything else. In Christianity, the self-sufficient being is the biblical God. In Islam, it is Allah; in Hinduism, Brahman. Clouser points out that in Greek polytheism the gods are not divine according to his definition, because they depend on realities other than themselves. The flux from which all things come, called Chaos or Okeanos, is the true deity of the ancient Greek religion.<sup>55</sup> Even purportedly atheistic religions like Theravada Buddhism have deities in Clouser's sense. Theravada holds that the Void, the ultimate Nothingness, sometimes called Nirvana, is not dependent on anything else.<sup>56</sup>

But such a definition of religion makes it impossible for us to distinguish sharply between religion and philosophy, or indeed between religion and any other area of human thought and life.<sup>57</sup> Philosophies also, however secular they may claim to be, always acknowledge something that is divine in the sense of "not depending on anything else." Examples would be Thales' water, Plato's Form of the Good, Aristotle's Prime Mover, Spinoza's "God or Nature," Kant's Noumenal, Hegel's Absolute, the Mystical of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. In the epistemological sphere, also, philosophers typically acknowledge human reason as self-sufficient in the sense that it requires no justification from anything more ultimate than itself. When they appear to deny autonomous reason (as with the Sophists, Duns Scotus, Hume, existentialism, and postmodernism), they typically exalt autonomous will or feeling, as we shall see in the next chapters, so that will or feeling become divine.

The biblical point to be made here is that nobody is really an atheist, in the most serious sense of that term. When people turn away from worship of the true God, they don't reject absolutes in general. Rather, instead of the true God, they worship idols, as Paul teaches in Rom. 1:18-32. The great division in mankind is not that some worship a god and others do not. Rather it is between those who worship the true God and those who worship false gods, idols. False worship may not involve rites or ceremonies, but it always involves acknowledgement of aseity, honoring some being as not dependent on anything else.

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>54</sup> Called *aseity* in DG, Chapter 26.

<sup>55</sup> Clouser, *Myth*, 25.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>57</sup> The same result follows from some other recent attempts to define religion, such as Paul Tillich's definition of religion as "ultimate concern," and William Tremmel's "affirmation of unrestricted value." Clouser opposes these definitions in Ibid., 12-16, but they also imply that all human thought is religious.

Now in this chapter I will discuss the ethics of what we usually call the world's religions, and then in the following chapters I will focus on what are usually called the traditions of secular ethics. As we've seen there can be no sharp distinctions between these. The systems discussed in this chapter might be called "more explicitly religious" and those in the next chapters "less explicitly religious," but the difference is in the trappings, not the essence. It is a difference of degree, not a radical difference. The more explicitly religious systems typically advocate worship, observe religious holidays, promote prayer and ceremony. The less explicitly religious systems do not. But the two are agreed in basing their thinking and living on something that is not dependent on anything else.

### **Ethics Based on Fate**

It should not surprise readers too much that I divide the ethical approaches of the world's religions into three types: ethics based on fate (situational), ethics as self-realization (existential), and ethics as law without gospel (normative). These are perspectives, for each of the world's religions can be characterized in all three of these ways. But some religions emphasize one, some the other. The first type is impressed most by what we called in Chapter 4 the teleological principle. The second type stresses the existential principle, and the third the normative principle. In this section we will look at the first emphasis.

In polytheism, as Clouser points out, the gods themselves are not ultimate. They are not a *se*; they do not exist independently. Nor do they serve as ultimate ethical authorities. Indeed, they are frequently guilty of ethical transgressions. They are jealous, angry, mischievous, rebellious, adulterous, and so on. What is actually divine in Clouser's sense is something impersonal. As we saw earlier, Clouser says that the true self-existent being in Greek religion is that primal flux called Chaos or Okeanos. Greek literature also speaks of "fate" (*moira*, *ate*) as the ultimate determiner of life and death.

Is fate another name for Chaos, or is it something even more ultimate? Hard to say. The literature uses the language of fate to indicate what directs nature and history, the language of chaos to indicate the unpredictable movement that is nature itself. But if there is no personal supreme being, what does it mean to say that fate "directs" history? Rather, it seems that fate is a synonym for "whatever happens," as in "whatever will be, will be." And Chaos, or Chance, is another name for whatever happens. Fate is whatever happens, conceived as a rational process; change is whatever happens, conceived as an irrational process. Fate and chance are the same, but they represent a rationalistic and an irrationalistic vocabulary, respectively.

Reference to impersonal fate as an ultimate can be found also in Egyptian (*maat*), Babylonian (*me*) and Confucian (*tien*=heaven) texts. In Confucian (and some expressions of Greek) religion, fate is powerful in its own right, working vengeance against those who defy it. In Egypt, Babylon, and some other Greek sources, there is more of an emphasis on the enforcement of this impersonal law by gods and human rulers. That notion encourages hierarchicalism in society: the Egyptian Pharaoh, for example, is the link between heaven and earth, the absolute arbiter of right and wrong. Some Chinese texts regard the emperor similarly.

So these systems tend to require an epistemology strongly based in human authority. How do we know what is right and wrong? By the word of Pharaoh, the emperor, or perhaps the priests, scribes, or Confucian scholars. How do they know it? Either by revelation from a god or by their own observation of the processes of nature. If revelation comes from a god, it is based on the god's observations of these processes. For fate itself does not speak, since it is impersonal. It does not reveal anything. It just makes things happen, or, perhaps, again, fate itself is simply the sum-total of what does happen.

So the epistemology of ethics in fatalistic systems is essentially empirical, based on experience of what happens in the world. When people do right, fate rewards them; when they do wrong, it punishes them. But then we must define right behavior as what gets rewarded by fate, and wrong behavior as what gets punished. This is the way that the teleological principle is taken by those who hold a fatalistic view of ethics. Right behavior brings happiness, and wrong behavior brings pain, because fate ensures it. Therefore, we should do right and avoid doing wrong. There are several serious problems with this view:

1. One problem with this epistemology, of course, is that fate, so far as anyone can observe it, is inconsistent. Sometimes people who seem to live moral lives are rewarded, sometimes not. Sometimes the wicked are punished, sometimes rewarded. These religions do sometimes posit afterlives in which such injustices are eliminated. But the afterlife is not an element of empirical knowledge for human beings. The gods, of course, may have some empirical knowledge of what happens to human beings in the afterlife. But until the gods themselves receive proper recompense for their own good and bad deeds, injustice continues. And as long as there is injustice, there is empirical uncertainty as to what fate decrees to be good and bad. So it is unclear how a god, or Pharaoh, or a priest, actually knows what fate has determined to be right or wrong.

2. But the problem is even worse than that. I would argue that it is not only hard for people to learn right and wrong on this basis; it is impossible. For many have observed that ethical principles must be *universal, necessary, and obligatory*. Universal means that the principle must apply to everyone without respect of persons. If it is wrong for me to covet, it is also wrong for you (in the

same situation) to covet. But empirical knowledge is never universal. Our experience is never omniscient; it never exhausts the universe.

Necessary means that the principle *must* be obeyed. It is not optional. And it does not just happen to be mandatory. But empirical knowledge cannot discern necessity. As David Hume said, from sense experience you can discern that one billiard ball moves when another one does. But sense experience does not tell you that the second ball *had* to move.

Obligatory means that those who violate the ethical principle are ethically wrong, morally guilty. But this quality, no more than the others can be discerned through mere sense experience.

3. But the problem is not just a weakness in our sense experience, as if our moral perception could be improved by better vision or hearing, perhaps by super vision and super hearing, the vision and hearing of a god, perhaps. For the attempt to derive moral principles from impersonal realities is even a violation of logic. Impersonalist views of ethics fall prey what G. E. Moore called “the naturalistic fallacy.”<sup>58</sup> Moore’s discussion builds on an argument in David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*<sup>59</sup> to the effect that one cannot deduce *ought* from *is*. That is to say, from premises about what is, about factual observations, you cannot deduce conclusions about what you ought to do. For example, you cannot reason from “Ice cream tastes good” to “you ought to eat ice cream,” or even from “immunizations prevent disease” to “you ought to be immunized.” According to Hume and Moore, facts of nature do not carry with them moral obligations.

Facts can be learned through observation and scientific method. But moral obligations cannot be seen and heard. They cannot be observed. No scientific experiment can identify them. “Oughtness,” right, and wrong are mysterious, invisible. You can see a thief walk into a bank, put on a ski mask, take out his gun, demand money, put it in his bag, and walk out. When you see that, you say, “that was wrong.” But you don’t actually see the wrongness of it. So, although you may believe strongly that what the thief did was wrong, you cannot deduce the wrongness of his action from a mere description of the visible events.

Some have directed this argument also against Christian ethics. Some have claimed that to reason from “God says x is wrong” to “x is wrong” is an example of the naturalistic fallacy, for God’s speaking is a fact, “x is wrong” a moral obligation, and we may never deduce obligations from mere facts.

That objection calls for more analysis. Why is the naturalistic fallacy a fallacy? Why is it that *is* does not imply *ought*? Evidently because there is no *ought* in the premise, but there is an *ought* in the conclusion, as in:

---

<sup>58</sup> Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

<sup>59</sup> 3.1.1.

**Argument 1**

Premise: x is pleasurable.  
 Conclusion: We ought to do x.

But the following is not a fallacy:

**Argument 2**

Premise: x is morally right.  
 Conclusion: we ought to do x.

The reason argument 2 is not a fallacy is that in effect there are *oughts* both in the premise and in the conclusion. The term “morally right” is equivalent to the phrase “what we ought to do.” Now argument 2, like argument 1, can be described as “deducing a value from a fact,” but in the two types of argument the factual premises are very different. In argument 2, the fact in the premise is, we might say, a moral fact. So we should formulate the naturalistic fallacy more precisely as follows: one may deduce moral conclusions from moral facts, but not from nonmoral facts.

Now consider this argument:

**Argument 3**

Premise: God says stealing is wrong.  
 Conclusion: Stealing is wrong.

The Christian claims that this argument is not a naturalistic fallacy, because the premise is a moral fact, not a nonmoral fact. There is an *ought* implicit in the premise. For what God says is never a mere fact; it is also a norm. God’s word bears his lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence, and his authority makes whatever he says normative for us. So whatever he says, we are obligated to believe, and whatever he commands, we are obligated to do. Whatever God says is normative. That is, to whatever he says, there is an *ought* attached. Argument 3 is not a naturalistic fallacy, then, because it is an argument from moral fact to moral conclusion, from one ought to another.

But what about religious fatalism, the type of ethical system we are discussing in this section? For a religious fatalist, we learn morality from this kind of argument:

**Argument 4**

Premise: Fate rewards people who do x.  
 Conclusion: People ought to do x.



Thus appears the teleological principle, as it fits into a fatalistic system. “A good act maximizes happiness” means that we determine the good by deciding what sorts of acts bring about a happy fate.

Is this a naturalistic fallacy, or does it reason from *ought* to *ought*? Well, is there an *ought* in the premise? Not in any obvious way. The fact that an impersonal process prospers people who behave in a certain way doesn’t make that behavior obligatory, or even right.

That is even true of personal processes of a similar kind. Think of persons who give rewards to people who serve them. Josef Stalin, for example, gave handsome rewards to many of those who murdered his enemies. Does that make their conduct morally right? Obviously not. Even less should we allow the apparent preferences of an impersonal fate (but how can an impersonal principle even have preferences?) to dictate our moral obligations.

Some writers, ancient and modern, have praised the courage of those who have defied what seemed to be their fate, however hopeless their defiance may have been. For these writers it is opposition to fate, the struggle against it, that is morally praiseworthy. Prometheus became a hero by defying Zeus, and we admire Antigone for her hubris in opposing fate. So it seems to be at least an open question as to whether following fate, even if we could follow it, is a morally admirable course of action. But if fate, unlike the biblical God, is not fit to be a moral standard, then argument 4 is a naturalistic fallacy.

The fundamental question is whether any impersonal principle provides a sufficient basis for morality. In my judgment, the answer is no. Even if the universe were governed by an impersonal principle, and even if it were possible for people to discern what kinds of behavior that principle rewarded or punished, it would remain an open question of whether we *ought* to practice the rewarded behavior. And I cannot imagine any reason why we should feel morally bound by the dictates of any impersonal principle at all. Impersonal principles, like gravity, electromagnetism, and the like, have the power to push us around, but they don’t have the power to tell us what we *ought* to do. To claim they do is a naturalistic fallacy.

If morality cannot be based on anything impersonal, where can we find a basis for it? In the realm of the personal, of course. We learn our moral principles in a personal context: at mother’s knee, in school, in church, in national celebrations. By their very nature, moral principles presuppose an interpersonal context. Virtues like loyalty, love, courage, and kindness presuppose a society. Typically, people come to believe in loyalty, for example, as a moral virtue, because they have grown up in a home in which parents were loyal to one another and to their children, and in which it therefore did not seem unreasonable for parents to expect the same from their children. Similarly obedience and love.

It should not be hard to understand how the modern breakdown of the family has led to uncertainty about obligations.

So children learn morality from their parents, not by appealing to some impersonal principle. But of course parents are morally as well as intellectually fallible. So, as they mature, children often find themselves looking for a higher standard. If children learn morality from their parents, where did their parents learn it? How did our first parents learn it? And who makes the rules, ultimately, that govern all parents and all children? Evidently someone who is not fallible, for he or she must stand as the very criterion of right and wrong. But that criterion must be someone, not something, if it is to commend our ultimate loyalty, obedience, and love.<sup>60</sup>

The absolute moral standard must be an absolute person. And the only absolute person anybody knows about is the God of the Bible. The Bible is unique in teaching that the supreme moral authority is an absolute person. Other religions and philosophies proclaim absolutes, but those absolutes are not personal. Still other worldviews, like polytheism, teach the existence of supernatural persons, but these are not absolute. But if morality must be based on one who is both personal and absolute, then the God of the Bible is the only viable candidate.<sup>61</sup>

I conclude, then, that fatalist religions cannot supply an adequate basis for morality. It is not clear why anyone should think that the workings of fate are morally consistent, how one can know the dictates of fate, or, even if we could know those dictates, why they would have any moral authority at all.

To claim a knowledge of morality from observing fate is a rationalist claim, for it exalts the powers of the human mind far beyond anything we can legitimately claim to know. It is also irrationalist, because if the universe is ultimately impersonal (review Chapter 3), then it is impossible to know anything about our moral responsibilities. So in this kind of ethic, we have a good illustration of Van Til's rationalist/irrationalist dialectic (review Chapter 4).

### **Ethics as Self-Realization**

Another type of "more explicitly religious" ethics can be found in the monist religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Monism is the view that all

---

<sup>60</sup> Note here an important triad indicating the nature of ethical obligation.

<sup>61</sup> This paragraph summarizes the moral argument for the existence of God given in AGG, 89-118. Of course, in addition to Christianity, Islam and Judaism also worship gods that are absolute and, in some respects, personal. But that is because they are influenced by the Bible. In this respect, Islam and Judaism are "Christian heresies," like Sabellianism, Arianism, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. See subsection "Ethics as Law Without Gospel," below.

things are ultimately one. In the west, ancient Gnosticism was essentially monistic, and that worldview is echoed in neoplatonism and medieval mysticism. Peter R. Jones has also identified modern movements, known as “New Age” thinking in the 1980s and ‘90s, which he now refers to as “neo-paganism,” as essentially monistic. Jones is a student of Gnostic texts, and he argues that these modern movements are virtually equivalent to Gnosticism.<sup>62</sup>

Since on their view everything is essentially one, monists believe that if God exists he is essentially one with the universe, not a being distinct from it. In Scripture, there is a sharp distinction between creator and creature. But monism denies that fundamental distinction. Indeed, for many monists, God is a name for our true inner self. When we gain a really deep insight into ourselves, we discover that we are God and he is us. This idea is what I described in Chapter 4 as “nonbiblical immanence” (4 on the rectangular diagram). Popularly this view is called “pantheism.”

But monism also expresses itself in terms that suggest nonbiblical transcendence (3 on the rectangle), somewhat like the deism of the Enlightenment period. For the Gnostics, the supreme being was so far from the world that he could not be named or known by human beings. He, or it,<sup>63</sup> is such a vast mystery that we can have nothing like a personal relationship with him. Indeed, he can have nothing at all to do with the material world, because any relationship with matter would compromise his perfect spirituality.

Clearly such monism presents the sharpest possible contrast with biblical Christianity. (See positions 1 and 2 on the rectangle.) Yet Elaine Pagels and other recent theologians have tried to influence the church to accept ancient Gnostic texts as equal in authority to the canonical Scriptures.<sup>64</sup> The church should not accept such advice.

These twin emphases on transcendence and immanence formally contradict one another, and critics of Gnosticism from the Church Father

---

<sup>62</sup> See Peter R. Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992), *Spirit Wars* (Escondido: Main Entry, 1997), and *Capturing the Pagan Mind* (Escondido: Main Entry, 2003). Following the *Star Wars* theme, Jones originally considered calling the third book *The Return of the Rabbi*. He has also written various popular summaries of his thought which are available at <http://www.spirit-wars.com/index.html>. I am greatly indebted to Jones for the ideas presented in this section, though I take full responsibility for their formulation.

<sup>63</sup> Although monism sometimes describes its supreme being in personal terms, its basic view is that the supreme being is too transcendent for any human characterization to apply. So that supreme being should not be considered either personal or impersonal. But since that supreme being is not clearly personal, monism involves all the same difficulties I ascribed to fatalism in the previous section. A basis for ethics must reside in a being who is not only personal, but who reveals himself as personal by, among other things, declaring to us his ethical standards. Or put it this way: like fatalism, monism basically tells us that the standard of ethics is “all of reality.” But an examination of reality-in-general does not lead to conclusions about what we ought to do.

<sup>64</sup> See Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

Irenaeus to the present have pointed that out.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, there is at another level a coherence between these two themes. For if God is not distinct from the world (nonbiblical immanence), then of course we are unable to specify any distinctive characteristics that may belong to him (nonbiblical transcendence).

These forms of immanence and transcendence collaborate to destroy any biblical notion of ethical responsibility. If we are God (nonbiblical immanence), then we are responsible to nobody except ourselves. If we cannot know God (nonbiblical transcendence), then, again, we cannot be responsible to him. Thus monistic systems erase all three perspectives of ethics: (1) The normative, because in monism there is no ultimate distinction between right and wrong. (2) The situational, because the world as we experience it is an illusion. So one seeks detachment from things rather than a God-glorifying use of them. (3) The existential, because the self, and other selves, are also illusory. In this area too, monism emphasizes detachment rather than, as in Scripture, love. Thus personal and social ethics become meaningless.

Nevertheless, Eastern religions and western Gnosticisms do emphasize ethics. As with religious fatalism, they teach many ethical precepts that are not too different from those in Scripture. We should not be embarrassed on this account, for Scripture itself tells us in Rom. 1 and elsewhere that God has revealed the knowledge of his moral law to everyone in the world. Though people repress and disobey this law, they cannot escape it entirely.

But it is important for us to understand the role that ethics plays in monistic worldviews. Essentially for these systems ethics is a discipline by which we can escape from the illusion of plurality and can become conscious of our oneness with God and with the whole world. By ethical and other disciplines, we ascend on a ladder of knowledge to a realm above ethics. It is therefore a tool of self-realization, a means by which we can be aware of the real nature of the world.

Of the three principles we discussed in Chapter 4, therefore, monists are most impressed with the existential principle, the principle that ethics is primarily a matter of the inner life of the self, a means of self-enhancement.

The trouble is, that these ethical disciplines, if successful, carry each person to a realm in which ethical distinctions, like right and wrong, good and evil, have no meaning. If the world is one, then good and evil are one, and right and wrong are one. And without such contrasts, there is no such thing as good,

---

<sup>65</sup> In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus also criticized the Gnostic system in epistemological terms. If God is so mysterious that nobody can know him, then where do the Gnostics get their secret knowledge? But if the Gnostics are themselves divine, and we are all divine, then why do we need the knowledge the Gnostics claim to provide? Thus he exposes the Gnostics as both rationalists and irrationalists at the same time. As we saw in chapter 4, rationalism and irrationalism emerge from unbiblical immanence and transcendence, respectively.

or evil, or right, or wrong. On these views, ethics is part of our quest for the trans-ethical.

Buddhism, for example, puts much emphasis on right living. But the goal of right living is to achieve Nirvana, a kind of Nothingness, in which there is no more suffering. Nirvana takes away the curse of perpetual reincarnation, in which souls are born and reborn in different forms according to the *karma* gained from their good or bad deeds. We might be inclined to charge Buddhism with being egoistic in that it makes ethics a tool of personal salvation. We must remember, however, that the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism encourages altruism, referring to the image of Buddha, about to enter Nirvana, who instead turns around to offer assistance to others. But we should ask, nevertheless, why the Buddha should have made such a decision. If the whole point of ethics is to achieve Nirvana, why should any altruistic purpose deter one from that goal? We should commend the altruism of Mahayana. But Buddhism, in the final analysis, has no basis for altruism, or for any other moral principle.

As another example: the ancient Gnostics were divided into two ethical camps. Some were ascetic, denying to themselves pleasures and possessions, because they sought escape from the material world into the spiritual oneness of the supreme being. Others, however, were libertine, denying themselves no pleasures at all, because they believed that ultimately the material world was an illusion and unimportant. Doubtless some tried to find a happy medium between these extremes. But what principle could guide such a decision? Again, we see how monism makes it impossible to specify moral distinctions.

The root problem may be stated thus: in monism, ethics is subordinate to metaphysics and epistemology. For the monist, our problem is epistemological deception as to the metaphysical nature of the world and ourselves. The remedy is to overcome that deception and to recognize that we are essentially one with everything that is. For the Christian, the problem is very different: God made human beings different from himself, but reflecting his glory. But they disobeyed him, creating an enmity with God that must be relieved through sacrifice. In Christianity, the problem is a problem with an interpersonal relationship, a relationship between finite persons and the infinite person. It is about ethics: love, obedience, sin, redemption. In monism, the issue is fundamentally impersonal: dispelling illusions about metaphysical separations.

So, as with the religious fatalist, the monist has no personal basis of ethics. His sense of obligation must come from the impersonal nature of the universe itself. In the previous section of this chapter, however, we saw how an impersonal reality can provide no basis for ethical standards.

### **Ethics as Law Without Gospel**

My critique of fatalism and monism has centered on the impersonalism of those positions. A worldview in which the highest reality is impersonal is incapable of providing a basis for ethical decisions. But what of religions other than Christianity that do base their ethics on the revelation of a personal absolute? This would include traditional Judaism, Islam, and Christian heresies such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and theological liberalism.<sup>66</sup>

We should note that the reason why these religions affirm an absolute personal God is because they are influenced by the Bible. As I mentioned earlier, it is a remarkable fact that belief in a personal absolute is not found in any religion or philosophy except those influenced by the Bible. Traditional Judaism, of course, adheres to what Christians call the Old Testament. Christians and Jews deeply disagree as to how that book should be interpreted, but they do share the belief that that book is the authoritative word of God.

From a Christian point of view, Judaism is a Christian heresy. Christian heretics (like Sabellians, Arians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many in the tradition of theological liberalism) claim to believe the Bible, but they interpret it in ways that deny the essence of the Gospel, or they pick and choose what to believe in Scripture, ending up with a deeply unbiblical theology. The dispute between Christians and Jews is in this respect the same.

Islam, too, may be understood as a Christian heresy. Its founder, Mohammed, initially respected the "peoples of the book," the Jews and Christians. He sought to promulgate the monotheism of Scripture among his own people. But eventually he produced another book, the Qu'ran, which denied many fundamental teachings of Scripture, such as Jesus' deity and his atoning death. Even then, Muslims regarded Scripture as a divine revelation, but argued that it had been corrupted during the centuries of its transmission.<sup>67</sup> They respected Jesus as a prophet, believed in his Virgin Birth, his miracles, and his return at the final judgment.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, they turned to the Bible for their own apologetic purposes, for they argued that biblical prophecy predicts the coming of Mohammed.

So, as with Judaism, the debate between Christianity and Islam is to some extent exegetical, to show that (1) the Bible does not, in fact, predict the coming of Mohammed, for the passages at issue fit only Jesus, and that (2) it is

---

<sup>66</sup> For an account of liberal Christianity as a heresy, indeed as a religion radically contrary to Christianity, see J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923). Although liberalism since Machen's time has taken on a much more orthodox sound, it still, in my judgment, falls prey to Machen's brilliant critique. I expect to develop an elaborate critique of theological liberalism in my forthcoming *Doctrine of the Word of God*.

<sup>67</sup> This claim, of course, is not easily defended. For example, it is unlikely in the extreme that *all* the NT references to Jesus' atoning death are the result of textual corruption.

<sup>68</sup> So it has been rightly said that Muslims believe more about Jesus than many liberal Protestants.

impossible to argue that the biblical text was corrupted to the extent that Muslims believe.

But both Islam and Judaism do claim to base their ethics on the revelation of a personal absolute, indeed on the revelation of the God of Scripture. So we cannot argue against Judaism and Islam in quite the same way we argue against fatalism and monism. Theological liberals sometimes do and sometimes do not claim to believe in such a basis for ethics. When they do not, their positions amount to religious fatalism or monism. When they do, however, we must deal with them differently.

I say that we cannot argue against these positions in “quite” the same way as we argue against fatalism and monism. Nevertheless, there are significant parallels between fatalism and monism on the one hand, and Judaism, Islam, and liberalism, on the other. For the defections of these religions from Scripture affect their doctrine of God to some extent. Most obviously, these religions are Unitarian, not Trinitarian. They deny the full deity of Christ and therefore see God as a oneness without plurality.<sup>69</sup>

Without a doctrine of plurality in God, these religions have less ability to regard God as the ultimate ethical standard and exemplar. In discussing fatalism, I pointed out that virtues like loyalty, mutual submission, and love, require a society for their exhibition. They are interpersonal virtues, not merely personal ones. A Unitarian god cannot exemplify these until he creates finite persons to relate to. But when he does that, his loyalty, submission, and love are relative to, dependent on, the creation. With regard to these virtues, the Unitarian god is not the ultimate standard, not even divine, in Clouser’s sense.

Further, a Unitarian concept of God easily slips into an impersonal concept: (1) Theologies based on Judaism, Islam, and liberal Christianity, commonly view God’s transcendence in the nonbiblical way shown in (3) of the rectangular diagram of Chapter 4. On this view, human concepts of God are, strictly speaking, impossible. We cannot regard God as personal or as impersonal. But we have seen that ethics requires a clearly personal concept of God.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> In practice, of course, Unitarian religions almost always treat their god as impersonal. An unrevealed personal god is functionally equivalent to an unrevealed impersonal god. Why do Unitarian religions veer toward impersonalism? Because to think of God as personal requires some detailed revelation expressing his attributes and actions. We can’t know that God is personal unless he speaks to us and shows us that he is. But Unitarianism’s view of transcendence denies that such a revelation is possible.

<sup>70</sup> According to Islam, we cannot know God, only his will. But as I have argued, the ethical authority of revelation is based on a personal relationship with its author. Islam does not offer such a personal relationship.

(2) In Islam, the biblical doctrine of predestination becomes a form of fatalism, in which free human choices have no ultimate effect on the course of events.<sup>71</sup> But such fatalism is mechanical, not personal.

(3) In some Jewish and liberal theologies, the opposite problem occurs, in which God himself is so limited by human free will that he cannot even know the future in an exhaustive way. In those theologies, God is not the sole origin of what occurs (contrary to Eph. 1:11 and Rom. 11:36). He is himself subject to the created world. Given such assumptions, it is gratuitous to posit God as the sole source of ethical standards.<sup>72</sup>

So Judaism, Islam, and the Christian heresies are not immune to the charge of impersonalism that I have brought against fatalism and monism. But even if we assume that these religions do believe (as they sometimes claim) in a personal God, there is yet more to be said.

These religions, indeed all religions except biblical Christianity, are religions of works-righteousness. That is, they are religions in which the members try to seek moral status by doing good works. This principle is directly opposed to the biblical gospel, which says that even our best works are insufficient to gain favor with God. Isaiah 64:6 reads,

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

In Rom. 8:8, the apostle Paul says that they that those who are “in the flesh,” that is, those who have not had their sins forgiven through the atonement of Christ, “cannot please God.” In Scripture, our only hope, therefore, is in Christ. Paul says,

<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Rom. 3:23-25a).

So salvation is entirely by God’s grace, his free gift, not by our works:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good

---

<sup>71</sup> For my own account of the relationship between divine foreordination and human freedom, see DG, Chapters 4, 8, 9, and 16.

<sup>72</sup> I am, here, of course, referring to the theological movement called open theism, which I have criticized extensively in *No Other God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001).



works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).

In Judaism, Islam, and the Christian heresies (and the same may be said also of fatalism and monism) there is no doctrine of salvation by divine grace. Rather, people are expected to lead good lives, hoping that God will accept them. But this doctrine of works righteousness leads either to pride or despair. It leads to pride on the part of those who think they can meet God's requirements on their own. This is, of course, a pride based on self-deception. People with this ambition are quite ignorant of God's standards, and they flatter themselves beyond measure to think they have measured up even to a minimal understanding of God's requirements. They have suppressed (Rom. 1:18) their very knowledge of themselves, of the vast number of ways in which they have fallen short of God's perfection.

The doctrine of works righteousness also leads to despair, among those with better spiritual perception. They see the huge discrepancy between what God requires and what they have done, and they lose all hope of attaining fellowship with God.

It is only the cross of Christ that can put to rest that pride and despair. God's grace brings us fellowship with God that is not based on our works, so we may not boast (Eph. 2:8). And it brings us into deep fellowship with God as he sees us in his beloved Son, so we may not despair.

When Christians discuss ethics with Jews, Muslims, liberals, indeed with fatalists and monists, they should try hard to direct the conversation to the cross. For that is the most important issue, in the final analysis, and the most urgent for any inquirer. We should be willing to discuss metaphysics and epistemology as above, to question whether non-Christian religions have a basis for ethical claims. As Francis Schaeffer used to say, we should be ready to give honest answers to honest questions. But in the end the Gospel is by far the most important thing.

All three types of non-Christian religions offer us, at most, law without gospel. Religions of the third type have a special focus on law, their application of the normative principle. As we shall see in later chapters, I don't believe that law and gospel are separated in Scripture itself, in the manner presented, for example, in Lutheran theology. In Scripture, the law is the law of the God who saves, the law of the kingdom of God. The gospel is the message that that kingdom is coming and that therefore God will save his people. But there is something of a law/gospel distinction between general and special revelation. Rom. 1 teach us that God makes his moral standards, his law, known to all people through natural revelation. It does not teach that he also reveals therein the way of salvation. Rather, "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). And of course our salvation comes, not through

keeping the law, but by receiving the grace of Christ, known only through special revelation.<sup>73</sup>

Grace is only possible in a universe governed by an absolute person. Impersonal forces, like gravity and electromagnetism, treat everybody equally, according to the sheer force of whatever laws they obey. If you place your hand on a live wire, you will receive a shock, whether you are righteous or wicked. The live wire does not make a loving decision to give some people a free gift of electrical-shock immunity. So impersonalist systems tend to be universalistic—to say that everyone will be saved in some way or other, or, as in secular impersonalisms, that we shall all be equally destroyed by natural forces. Christianity is not universalistic, for according to Scripture human beings are ultimately in the hands of a thoroughly personal God. He decides, for his own reasons and personal affections, who will be saved and who will be lost.<sup>74</sup>

So those apparently personalist religions that promulgate law without gospel have a view of ethics that is not much different from that of impersonalist religions. For all three forms of non-Christian religion, ethics is obedience to law without hope of forgiveness for sin. And in all three forms, even the law is questionable, because we cannot specify its content in an impersonalist universe.

---

<sup>73</sup> I shall have more to say about the distinction between general and special revelation when we consider more fully the normative perspective of Christian ethics. Of course special revelation presents the gospel, but it also presents law, integrated with gospel. We do not understand the full force and depth of the law except through the gospel, and we do not understand how good the good news is, apart from law.

<sup>74</sup> I have addressed objections to predestination and reprobation in DG, Chapters 9 and 16.

## Chapter 6: The Existential Tradition

Having looked at three forms of “more explicitly religious” approaches to ethics, I now turn to “less explicitly religious” approaches, usually called secular ethics. I shall deal with these at somewhat greater length, since they dominate the ethical discussions of our own time.

### Philosophy and Ethics<sup>75</sup>

Around 600 BC, an intellectual movement appeared in Miletus, in Asia Minor, that was eventually called philosophy. That movement spread widely throughout the Greek-speaking world, and then to other nations. Philosophy means “love of wisdom,” and in one sense it is the Greek heir to the genre of wisdom teaching that was common in the ancient near east. The Bible contains wisdom literature, in the books of Job, Proverbs, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes.

But there is a great difference between Greek philosophy and wisdom literature, particularly the wisdom literature of Scripture. The traditional wisdom teachers sought to gather and catalogue the wise sayings of respected people. Biblical wisdom does this too, but emphasizes that there is an authority higher than any human teacher: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!” (Psm. 111:10; cf. Prov. 1:7, 9:10, 15:33.)

In contrast, the Greek philosophers sought to understand the world without reference to religion or tradition, and certainly without reference to the God of Scripture. Their chief authority was human reason, acting independently from revelation and tradition. That view of reason I describe by the phrase *rational autonomy*. Although the Greek philosophers differed on a great many things, they all agreed on the principle of rational autonomy. For them, reason was the ultimate standard of all truth, and the good life is the rational life. Except during the medieval period, this principle of rational or intellectual autonomy has dominated the history of philosophy down to the present day.

Nevertheless, the Greeks also understood to some extent the limitations of human reason. They were concerned about the nature of error and deception. If human reason is the ultimate standard of truth, why isn't it omniscient? Why,

---

<sup>75</sup> In Chapters 6-8 I have drawn on my essay, “Greeks Bearing Gifts,” which will appear in Andrew Hofferger, ed., *Revolutions in Worldview* (Phillipsburg: P&R, forthcoming). That essay deals with the metaphysical and epistemological views of the Greek philosophers as well as their ethical teaching, so readers might find it useful as a context for what I say here. I also recommend the other essays in the Hofferger book, which deal in a similar way with other periods in the history of western thought.

indeed, is it so often mistaken? Their most common answer was this: if reason itself is our ultimate guide, then its failures must be failures, not of reason itself, but of the universe. The problem is not in the knower, but in what he seeks to know; not in the subject, but in the object of knowledge.<sup>76</sup> We fall into error, because the world in which we live is in some measure unknowable.

Here we see the rationalist and irrationalist motifs that we discussed in Chapter 4, as they appear in Greek philosophy. Suppressing the revelation of God in the creation (Rom. 1), the Greeks give to human reason a divine authority. But when it fails, they attribute that failure to the nature of the world. But then the philosophical task proves impossibly difficult: the attempt to give a rational account of an irrational universe. Thus appears the rationalist-irrationalist dialectic that I discussed in Chapter 4.

The Greeks differed among themselves as to the balance between rationalism and irrationalism. Parmenides was a kind of textbook rationalist. He was so confident about human reason that he denied the existence of anything that reason couldn't handle, such as, in his view, change. The Sophists were textbook irrationalists, holding that there is no objective truth at all, but only truth "for me" and "for you." But the Sophists were nevertheless good Greeks, seeking to live according to reason, at least according to each person's individual reason. "Man is the measure of all things," said the Sophist Protagoras.<sup>77</sup>

### **The Existential Focus**

In the next few chapters, I will focus on the views of ethics that have emerged in the history of philosophy. These chapters will discuss three traditions in philosophical ethics that correspond more or less to the three perspectives we have been discussing. They also represent emphases respectively on the existential, teleological, and deontological principles as I discussed them in Chapter 4.

This chapter discusses the existential tradition, which focuses on ethics as a phenomenon of the inner life. Of the three principles mentioned in Chapter 4, existential ethics values most the principle that "a good act comes from a good inner character." This principle is a biblical one. A good ethical character implies that we should affirm our ethical principles from within. Hypocritical obedience is not the obedience God honors. He wants his word to be written on our heart. If it is written there, then our behavior will be a kind of self-realization. Our behavior will display what we are, deep inside. As we saw in Chapter 3, God motivates our behavior by asking us to become what we are: regenerate sons and daughters of

---

<sup>76</sup> See the discussion of subject and object in DKG, 9-10, 69-71.

<sup>77</sup> For a fuller discussion of the Greek philosophers, see my essay "Greeks Bearing Gifts," in Andrew Hofferger, ed., *Revolutions in Worldview* (Phillipsburg: P&R, forthcoming).

God, dead to sin and alive in Christ. So he wants our behavior to display what we are at the most fundamental level.

Secular forms of existential ethics honor these principles to some ways, parody them in others. But in secular forms of existential ethics the existential principle tends to become an absolute, opposed to the teleological and deontological principles. Human subjectivity becomes the test of all moral truth, if such truth even exists.

No thinker is an absolutely pure example of any of these three tendencies. The reason is that ethics by its very nature requires all three perspectives. One can try to reject a perspective, but it always shows up somewhere. So, in secular existential ethics, our inner subjectivity is made to play all three roles: motive, goal, and standard. Existential ethicists make this move at the price of incoherence, of course.

I shall discuss some secular thinkers like Aristotle who actually try to provide a balance between the three perspectives. Without God, Aristotle fails to bring the perspectives into a coherent mutual relationship. And his example shows us why lesser thinkers have tried to eliminate one or two of the perspectives in favor of the third, even though in the end they have not been able to escape the threeness of the ethical enterprise.

But for now we must look at the existential tradition, which focuses on the inner life, and which tends in various ways to see the inner life as the whole of ethics.

### **The Sophists**

The earliest Greek philosophers were not much interested in ethics, at least as far as we can tell from the texts available to us. They focused on metaphysics, and, especially with Parmenides, Heraclitus, and the atomists, epistemology. But in the time of the Sophists, ethics became a subject of much interest.

The Sophists were educators in fifth and fourth century Greece who went from one city to another teaching young men the skills needed for success in public life: rhetoric, grammar, history, science, art, and the virtues of character that lead to public admiration. These teachers had many clients, for the traditional aristocracy was losing ground to the mercantile class, creating opportunities for upwardly mobile sons of wealthy families. Also, there was much

political upheaval, raising philosophical questions about the ground and legitimacy of political rule.<sup>78</sup>

Thus philosophy took a new turn. No longer were philosophers mainly concerned with the structure of the natural world. Now human nature and the problems of human society became prominent.

If one's main concern is getting along with various political factions, then relativism will have a strong appeal, as we know from contemporary politics. If there is no absolute or objective truth, no truth that everyone must acknowledge, then one's convictions are free to move here and there, with every wave of political opinion. So it is not surprising that the Sophists were relativists.

We learn about them mainly through the dialogues of Plato, an unsympathetic witness, to be sure, but most likely a fair one. According to Plato, the Sophist Protagoras, for example, advocated acceptance of traditional ways of thinking, not because they were true, but because we need to use them to gain power and acceptance. Gorgias denied the existence of objective truth and so wanted to substitute rhetoric for philosophy. Thrasymachus taught that "justice is the interest of the stronger," so that laws are (and should be) means by which the strong keep the masses subordinate. Calicles held, on the contrary, that laws are the means used by the masses to check the power of the strong. Critias, later described as the cruelest of the thirty tyrants, said that a ruler must control his subjects by encouraging fear of nonexistent gods.

Socrates, as Plato presents him in the same dialogues, replies that indifference or hostility to objective truth is unacceptable. For one thing, the Sophists themselves are making assertions of fact. If there is no objective truth, then the Sophists' positions are not objectively true, and there is no reason for anyone to listen to them. This argument has been a standard answer to relativism ever since, and we still hear it used over against, for example, contemporary postmodernism.

Further, Socrates argues, justice cannot merely be the interest of the stronger. For the interest of the stronger is not what makes it *just*, as opposed to unjust. There must be some other quality that *defines* justice, that serves as a criterion to evaluate the conduct of rulers.

Thus Socrates refutes the irrationalism of the Sophists, or rather shows that such irrationalism is self-refuting. But the Sophists were also rationalists in the typical Greek way. Consider Protagoras's statement that "man is the measure of all things." This statement expresses the Sophists' irrationalism: reality is what any man thinks it is. But it is also rationalistic, for it makes human reason the ultimate criterion of truth and falsity, right and wrong. One asks, how

---

<sup>78</sup> For more extensive discussion of the political and social background of Sophism, see Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 46-48.

could Protagoras *know* this, especially given his overall relativism? He asserts rational autonomy arbitrarily. That is, he asserts rationalism irrationalistically, as he asserts irrationalism rationalistically—by the measure of his own mind.

No other course was open to the Sophists, for they were skeptical about the traditional gods and would not consider the God of biblical theism.

I describe the Sophists as representatives of the existential tradition of ethics. The existential principle links ethics with character and in general with human inwardness. But when non-Christian philosophers use this principle, they tend to absolutize human subjectivity and make it, not only essential to ethics, but the ultimate source of ethical norms. So the secular existential ethicist seeks to avoid any suggestion that ethical decisions must be based on an external, objective norm. The Sophists had no appreciation of the normative principle (“ethics seeks objective duties”) or the situational principle (“ethics maximizes the happiness of human beings”). As I argued in Chapter 4, the three principles are in tension with one another, unless the biblical God holds them together. So non-Christian ethicists tend to deny one or two of these principles. The Sophists essentially denied all but the existential principle.

There is much that is attractive about the existential type of ethics. Indeed, if I weren’t a Christian, I would probably be an existentialist, a kind of relativist or skeptic. In Dostoevsky’s terms, if God doesn’t exist, isn’t everything permitted? Yet, because of Socrates’ and Plato’s arguments, the existential tradition has been the least popular among professional philosophers through the discipline’s history, though in modern times it seems to have become a favorite of the man on the street. The more predominant schools of philosophical thought have believed that a objective knowledge is indeed possible, though they have found it very difficult to agree on how it is possible. But we shall look at those arguments in the next two chapters.

In the centuries following the Sophists, schools of Skepticism emerged. Pyrrho (365-270 BC) argued a kind of epistemological agnosticism, and the Skeptics of the Academy (the school founded by Plato!) went even farther, arguing that truth could not be found. After that, skepticism virtually died as an option for respectable philosophers.

### **Hume and Rousseau**

But in the modern period, relativism and skepticism came again into their own. David Hume (1711-1776), who was skeptical of many things, including the is-ought inference (see Chapter 5), could find no basis for ethics except in “a moral sense” that generates feelings of approval and disapproval.<sup>79</sup> As with the

---

<sup>79</sup> See Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751).

Sophists, for Hume ethical standards are wholly inward, subjective rather than objective. Similarly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), father of Romanticism, thought that everything good in the world is the outworking of good feelings.

### **Karl Marx**

Karl Marx (1818-1883) has had, perhaps, the greatest influence on politics and world history of any philosopher in the last two hundred years. Most people become Marxists, in my view, for ethical reasons. They find in Marx a thinker who cares about the poor and actually has a plan to do something for them.

But it is important to keep in mind that Marx is a thoroughgoing ethical subjectivist. He thinks that ethical standards are relative to one's class. In his view, ethical systems are tools of political movements, aiming to promote the interest of one class against another. There is one ethic for the bourgeois (the owners of the means of production), another for the proletariat (the workers in the industrial plants). When the proletariat initiates revolution, good is what promotes that revolution and evil is what hinders it. And once the proletarian revolution is victorious, good is what promotes progress to the classless society (the Marxist eschaton) and evil is what retards it.

Specific ethical standards may change as the interests of one's class change. What is good today may be evil tomorrow. American Communists praised Hitler when he made a pact with Stalin. When Hitler broke that pact, everything he did was evil.

Which ethic is right? To Marx, there is no such thing as objective rightness in ethics, though he makes much of scientific objectivity in formulating his economic determinism. When idealistic young people are attracted to Marxism for ethical reasons, it is pastorally important to remind them that for a Marxist ethics is ultimately negotiable. Class interest is supreme, and ethics is a tool of class interest. When we look at Marxism from that perspective, it appears less than noble.

Nevertheless, Marx often speaks as though his ethical judgments were objective. For example, he famously condemns Christianity as "the opiate of the people." He regards it as an ideology concocted by the rich to keep the workers in their place, to make them satisfied with their present lot and heavenly reward, so that they do not resort to revolution. Christians may protest that the gospel has contributed much over the centuries to the welfare of the poor and of society in general. But Marx replies that even such "prophetic" Christianity should be opposed, for it does more harm than good. It kindles false hopes of reform,



pacifies the masses, and therefore retards revolution, the only approach that can bring about real change.

That sounds like an ethical critique of Christianity. Essentially he is saying that Christianity is the religious ethic of a particular class, used to oppress another class. But we must remember that Marx's own alternative ethic is just an ethic of another particular class, designed, once that class comes to power, to oppress any rival class. Marx gives no reason except class allegiance to prefer Marxist ethics to Christian.

We can see in Marx the rationalist-irrationalist dialectic. Marx denies objective ethics (irrationalism), but he preaches a moralistic alternative, together with critiques of opponents, with a dogmatic assurance (rationalism).<sup>80</sup>

### Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche (1844-1900) has had a huge influence on twentieth-century thought, especially the postmodern movement. Like them, he is rather skeptical about the existence of ultimate truth (though he admits the importance of the particular truths of ordinary life) and of the power of language to communicate it.<sup>81</sup> Like Marx, he believes that there is no disinterested search for truth. Intellectual inquiry is inevitably self-serving. We seek knowledge for its utility; but we cannot be sure even about the utility of knowledge. We must reconcile ourselves, therefore, to irresolvable disagreement.<sup>82</sup>

So in the field of ethics Nietzsche is well-known for his view that traditional morality is not objectively true, but is only a vehicle of the "will to power," by which some people oppress others. His position in this regard is identical to that of Marx, though Nietzsche does not share Marx's emphasis on class warfare. Nietzsche's own moral stance is, in his words, "Beyond Good and Evil."<sup>83</sup> He urges a "transvaluation of all values." In his view, since God is "dead" as a factor in the lives of modern people, it is wrong for us to bind ourselves with moral traditions from the past. We should recognize that God is dead and be honest and joyful about the will to power.

It is interesting to compare Nietzsche with Marx on the subject of Christianity. Marx thought that Christianity was a religion of the rich, aiming to suppress the poor. Nietzsche, however, saw it as a "slave religion," arising from

---

<sup>80</sup> See Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx, *Das Kapital* (1887).

<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, ed., trans. By David Breazeale (New Jersey: Humanities Library, 1990), 79-97.

<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* (New York: Ungar, 1960).

<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990).

the self-interest of the weak and oppressed, expressing their secret hatred and envy of those more favored. Nietzsche's view is nearly the precise opposite of that of Marx, which suggests that the moral relativism of both men may be unsuited to making any cogent moral observations.

The difference between Marx and Nietzsche on Christianity is like the difference between the Sophists Thrasymachus and Callicles on the subject of justice and law. As Thrasymachus taught that justice is the interest of the stronger, so Marx taught that Christianity was the attempt of strong classes of people to impose their bondage on the workers. And as Callicles thought that laws are a device by which the masses could check the power of the strong, so Nietzsche thought that Christianity was a slave-religion, bent on frustrating the ambitions of superior people. Both wanted Christianity to be abolished. But with what could Christianity be replaced, in their view, except by another ideology supporting class warfare (Marx) or the superman (Nietzsche)?<sup>84</sup>

### Ludwig Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was born in Austria, but taught at Cambridge in England. The only book he published during his lifetime was the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.<sup>85</sup> In that book he argued that a language that was truly perfect, purified by the logical innovations of Bertrand Russell, could serve as a perfect picture of the world.

In the history of western philosophy, the twentieth century is the century of language. Both in Anglo-American and in European schools of thought (which were very different), language was the central item of discussion. The attention of philosophers shifted from the nature of the world as such to the language in which the world was discussed. They hoped, perhaps, that this shift of attention would enable them to make progress on issues where there had been a notable lack of progress since the time of the Greeks. Nietzsche had already made the study of language central to philosophy and Wittgenstein pioneered this approach in the English-speaking world.

In Wittgenstein's approach, every sentence in a truly perfect language should refer to a fact in the universe, and he thought that we could identify facts only by sense experience. Our knowledge of facts, he thought, was built up, bit

---

<sup>84</sup> The name of Kierkegaard also comes up in discussions of an existential approach to philosophy. Certainly Kierkegaard put a major emphasis on the importance of human subjectivity in the making of decisions. I am convinced, however, that Kierkegaard is first of all a Christian. Relating the existential to the Christian elements of Kierkegaard's thought is an interesting, but difficult process. So reluctantly I leave him out of this discussion, since my main purpose here is to mention thinkers who seem to be more or less pure examples of the existential tradition.

<sup>85</sup> London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1921, 1963. Cf. his "Lecture on Ethics" (1929), available at <http://www.kolumbus.fi/m.sipola/ethics.htm> and other web sites.

by bit, by simple (“atomic”) sensations leading to more complex ones, etc. So in the perfect language all complex sentences would be reducible to simple ones reporting simple facts, based on simple sensations.

This fundamentally empirical approach, of course, rendered ethics problematic (to say nothing of metaphysics and religion). For, as Hume and Moore had pointed out, the attempt to deduce ethical principles from empirical facts is a fallacy. So for Wittgenstein, ethical principles fell outside the competence of the perfect language. And what cannot be said in the perfect language, Wittgenstein thought, cannot be said at all.

Wittgenstein was not, however, willing to throw out ethics altogether. He was himself an ethically sensitive person. So he described ethics (together with God, the self, the world) as among those things that “can only be shown, not said.” We feel, in other words, that ethical, religious, and metaphysical language are about something important, but we cannot really put that into words. These unsayable realities, for Wittgenstein, belong to the “mystical” realm.

Such is the place of ethics in the system of the *Tractatus*. It is hard to imagine that from this system we could receive any assurance as to what is right or wrong. Essentially it is a form of what I have described as secular existential ethics, beset by the same problems as the ethics of the Sophists, Hume, Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche.

But Wittgenstein himself saw the weaknesses in this approach. For technical reasons I won’t enter into here, Wittgenstein, even as he was writing the book, came to see that his system was essentially contradictory. He had been trying to show the relation between language and the world; but on the criteria he had developed for the perfect language, the relationship between language and the world was one of those things that could not be spoken. It was unsayable, mystical. So Wittgenstein recognized that the whole *Tractatus* was basically an attempt to say something unsayable. Hence the famous closing lines,

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak, throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.<sup>86</sup>

Thus ethics, with metaphysics, religion, and the whole of philosophy, passes into silence.

---

<sup>86</sup> *Tractatus*, sections 6.54, 7.0.

The *Tractatus* is a remarkable example of how rationalism passes into irrationalism. Wittgenstein begins by trying to accommodate all reality into the form of a perfect language (rationalism); but he discovers that in this system nothing can be known or communicated (irrationalism).

But Wittgenstein eventually departed from this way of thinking and entered a new phase, sometimes called “the later Wittgenstein.”<sup>87</sup> In his later thought, Wittgenstein abandons the attempt to reduce all reality to the confines of a perfect language. Rather he adopts a much more liberal view of language, noting that language has many functions, not only the function of stating facts. In most of the cases where we speak of “meaning,” he says, we refer to the *use* of words in the activities of human life. So religion and ethics are no longer in the sphere of the unsayable. They can certainly be said. But Wittgenstein is rather dogmatic sometimes about the *proper* use of these words, insisting, for example, that religious language should never be used in critique of scientific language, or vice versa. His irrationalism continues in his new liberality, his rationalism in his often dogmatic insistence on propriety. In neither his earlier nor his later phases does Wittgenstein give us any help in determining standards of right and wrong. In the end, for him such standards are merely a component of our subjectivity.

### Emotivism

From around 1920-1950, the dominant philosophical movement in the English-speaking world was logical positivism. Logical positivism, first formulated by a group of scientists and philosophers centered in Vienna (the “Vienna circle”) and Berlin (“the Berlin circle”) sought to limit knowledge to what could be learned through scientific method. Many of these thinkers fled from the Nazis to the United States, among them Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, Carl Hempel, Moritz Schlick. The English philosopher A. J. Ayer popularized their work in his *Language, Truth, and Logic*.<sup>88</sup>

The logical positivists had read Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* with appreciation, but they were repelled by its mysticism and wanted instead to establish human knowledge on a scientific basis.

This group emphasized the “verification principle,” namely that a sentence has no “cognitive meaning” unless it can be verified by observations or scientific

---

<sup>87</sup> Many posthumously published texts of Wittgenstein reflect this later approach. The standard exposition is the *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953, 1968), which Wittgenstein was actually preparing for publication at the time of his death. An easier introduction is *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), student transcripts of lectures that Wittgenstein dictated to his classes in the early 1930s.

<sup>88</sup> New York: Dover, 1946.

method. “Cognitive meaning” is the ability of a sentence to state a fact, truly or falsely. So, the positivists reasoned, much language we normally take to be factual, including the language of metaphysics, religion, and ethics, is “cognitively meaningless.” That is to say, such language is incapable of stating any fact, either truly or falsely. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* had said that such language is mystical; the logical positivists thought that it was without cognitive meaning. In the end, the two positions were not far apart.

Logical positivism appeared to be a radical challenge to Christian faith, and it instilled some fear in believers who were aware of this movement. The positivists were not just saying that Christianity was false. They were saying it was neither true nor false, that it neither asserted nor denied any factual content.

What, then, happened to ethics in this philosophy? Like Wittgenstein, the logical positivists were not ready to dismiss ethics altogether, especially given the devastating evils of Naziism. But they could not admit that ethics was cognitively meaningful, that it was capable of stating facts. There could be no moral facts, because there was no observational or scientific way of verifying them. (Thus the logical positivists echoed the teaching of Hume and Moore that we cannot reason from “is” to “ought.”)

Rather, they sought to reinterpret ethical language as something other than factual. Rudolf Carnap argued that ethical statements were disguised imperatives. Moritz Schlick said that ethical statements were rules for behavior, analogous to rules of procedure in science. But the most prevalent view in the movement came to be that of C. L. Stevenson’s *Ethics and Language*.<sup>89</sup> Stevenson argued that ethical statements may be characterized by two distinctive elements: (1) They are expressions of emotion. When I say that stealing is wrong, for example, I am saying that I don’t like stealing. (2) They recommend to others the feelings expressed. So “stealing is wrong” means “I don’t like stealing, and you shouldn’t like it either.” This view is not much different from Hume’s attempt to base ethical judgments on “feelings of approbation.”

So the predominant logical positivist view of ethics came to be called “emotivism.” But it never gained many followers, even in the philosophical community, for reasons such as these:

1. It became evident to most philosophers, secular as well as Christian, that the verification principle was deeply flawed. The positivists were not able to agree on one formulation of it. Some formulations seemed too narrow, for they ended up excluding some scientific language; other formulations seemed too broad, for they included some language of religion and metaphysics. Eventually it became obvious that the main goal of the positivists was, not to understand how the term “meaning” is used in human life, but rather to come up with a “principle” that would glorify science but disparage metaphysics and religion. Philosophers

---

<sup>89</sup> New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

came to see the verification principle as an ideological tool, rather than an accurate reflection of what really constitutes meaning.

2. Further, like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, logical positivism fell into contradiction. For the verification principle itself could not be verified by any kind of observation or scientific method. What observation or experiment could possibly verify the principle that cognitive meaning is limited to verifiable statements? The conclusion, then, is that the verification principle itself is cognitively meaningless, perhaps, like ethical language on this view, an expression of the positivists' emotions. As the *Tractatus* proved to be "unsayable," so logical positivism proved to be "emotive."

3. Emotivism itself, as a view of ethics, ran into many problems, chiefly that it abolishes any kind of serious ethical discussion. In an ethical dispute one may, of course, on an emotivist view, debate the facts concerning which the feelings are expressed. And the disputants may draw one another's attention to features of those facts that might change attitudes. But in the end, once the facts are known and agreed to, if I like stealing and you don't, there is nothing more to be said. And why, on this view, should anybody ever agonize over a moral decision? If you know how you feel, but you are still uncertain of what is right, then you are simply confused. But this is a most implausible account of the moral life.

## Existentialism

During the twentieth century, language analysis was the dominant approach to philosophy in the English-speaking world. Wittgenstein and logical positivism were early examples. In the later part of the century, this emphasis continued, but with less extravagant claims. Anglo-American language analysts tend now to work in a more piecemeal way, trying to clarify this or that specific problem, without relying on big, global theories of the universe, of meaning, or of ethics.

Across the English channel, a different type of philosophy emerged, also concerned with language, but with different emphases and preoccupations. Existentialism<sup>90</sup> is an approach with roots in the thought of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, developed by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and

---

<sup>90</sup> Up to now, I have been using the term "existential" to designate a long tradition of philosophical ethics, a tradition in which the "existential principle" is valued over the other two. Twentieth-century existentialism is a specific development in this tradition, but a development significant enough that I have given its name to the whole tradition of which it is a part.

Jean-Paul Sartre. There are significant differences between these thinkers, but I will confine myself to Sartre, who is by far the clearest writer of the group.<sup>91</sup>

Aristotle taught that in our ethical choices we seek to realize our essence. In his view, the essence of a human being is to be a rational animal. So in every decision and action (that is, in our “existence”) we should seek to express our rational nature. So in our ethical life we seek to realize our essence. Essence determines, or should determine, our existence. Essence comes first, then existence.

I shall discuss Aristotle’s view more thoroughly in Chapter 7. I mention him here only by way of contrast with Sartre. Sartre defines existentialism as the view that, contrary to Aristotle, existence precedes essence. In his view, mankind has no essence, because there is no God. We have no defined purpose or nature. Therefore, we are thrown into existence without any manual to direct our lives. We simply act.

As the Greeks said “count no man happy until he is dead,” Sartre envisions that after a person has lived his life it will then be possible to describe him, indeed evaluate him. Only then can he be said to have an “essence” or “nature.” We can speak similarly about the whole human race: only after the last human being has died will it be possible (presumably, for another race) to describe the essence of humanity, what we really were.

So as essence precedes existence for Aristotle, existence precedes essence for Sartre. That, to Sartre, is the view that results when we take atheism (Nietzsche’s death of God) with proper seriousness. Sartre strives in his philosophy to develop a consistently atheistic view of things.

On this basis, he thinks, we are radically free. We are not determined by anything within us or outside of us. Nor are we subject to any authority from outside ourselves. Even if an angel tells us what to do, says Sartre, we must decide whether to obey or not, and we must decide to interpret his words in one way rather than another. So our thinking is autonomous, as with the rational autonomy of the ancient Greeks.

Nevertheless, Sartre wants to make some general statements about how human beings are unique. What unique quality can we have, if we have no essence? Sartre answers, human beings are unique, in that we incorporate nonbeing within ourselves. Not being (that would be an essence) but nonbeing. We are unique in what we are not, and in our relation to other things that are not.

---

<sup>91</sup> See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956). A good introduction to the movement is Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (New York: New American Library, 1975).

The relation between being and nonbeing has been a perplexing problem through the history of philosophy. Parmenides thought the very idea of nonbeing was irrational: how can there *be* anything that *is not*? It seems that whenever you try to imagine, or conceptualize, or define nonbeing, you always turn it into something, into being. The title of Sartre's main philosophical work *Being and Nothingness* indicates that he intends to deal with this problem in a fresh way.

For Sartre, nonbeing is a unique property of human beings. Among all beings, we alone are able to represent to ourselves things that "are not." We can conceive of the past, even the distant past, which, of course, no longer is. We can conceptualize and make plans for the future, which as of now is not.<sup>92</sup> We can also think about things that are possible but not actual and may never be. Thus we employ our faculty of imagination creatively in art, science, and personal life. Through our interaction with nonbeing, we rise far above animals and plants in what we can accomplish.

Most significantly for Sartre's ethics, we are able to distinguish ourselves from what we are not, from our environment. The world exists *en soi*, in itself. It is "solid," definable. Rocks and trees can be defined and described. Of course, since God does not exist, they no more have predefined essences than human beings have. But they lack the human consciousness of nonbeing, so they play definable, predictable roles in the human universe. Only a human being exists *pour soi*, for himself—self-conscious and conscious of his uniqueness. So our relation to nonbeing reinforces our lack of essence.

So our decisions are radically free. We are never forced, by our essence or by our past, by our heredity, environment, or past experience, to choose in a certain way. At every moment, we freely choose to be what we are. There are limits, of course, but those limits themselves are chosen. If I choose to go to medical school and the admission requirements are too high, then I face a limit. But it is a limit, because it frustrates a desire that I have freely chosen. If I hadn't freely decided to seek medical training, my failure to be admitted would not be a limit to me.

Death is, of course, usually thought to be the ultimate limit. But, Sartre says, it is a limit only insofar as I freely choose to value life.

We usually think that an existential type of ethic will deny the notion of responsibility, since responsibility seems to presuppose an objective, external norm. Indeed, we wonder how there can be such a thing as responsibility with no God to be responsible to. But Sartre surprises us. Though he denies the objective norm, and though he denies God, he places a great emphasis on responsibility.

---

<sup>92</sup> And what then, indeed, is the present? If we think of it as a knife-edge moment between past and present, we cannot really think about it until it is past. That thought would suggest that past, present, and future, are all nonbeing. We live in a universe of nonbeing, rather than being.



He says that since all our limits are freely chosen, we have no excuses for the things we do. We freely choose what we do, indeed what we are. If someone grows up in a poor family and enters a life of crime, his poverty is no excuse. He has freely chosen to violate the law. Although I disagree with his overall position, his discussion of responsibility is often illuminating.

Not only are we responsible for particular decisions and actions, but we are responsible also in a more general sense, according to Sartre. For in every choice we make, we choose a certain image of mankind. Our choices, too, affect the choices of other people, which can lead to large consequences for the whole human race. Since the “essence” of mankind comes at the end of its history, rather than the beginning, each of us thus contributes to that essence, in every choice we make. So we are responsible, not only for our own actions, but for the ultimate value of mankind.

Yet few people recognize their vast responsibility, or the extent of their freedom. Indeed, when we do glimpse our freedom, we sometimes recoil from it in fear. In some ways, we would rather be *en soi* than *pour soi*. We would rather be solid, definable, predictable, than to be radically free. We like our excuses. We would prefer to think of ourselves as beings who are determined and defined by their past. That *en soi* kind of status gives us status, a kind of dignity, a kind of power, and plenty of excuses. We would rather be beings than nonbeings.

It would be nice, of course, to be both *pour soi* and *en soi*, to have both pure being and pure nonbeing, both being and freedom, both essence and existence. But Sartre says this is impossible. In Christian theology, God has both essence and existence, and his essence is identical to his existence. But Sartre thinks this concept of God is self-contradictory and therefore this God cannot exist. No one can have both a perfectly defined nature (essence) and perfect freedom (existence).

But human beings try to be godlike, seeking essence along with their existence. In Sartre’s view, this is *mauvaise foi* (bad faith, sometimes translated “self-deception”). In bad faith, we deny our freedom. We pretend that we are mere objects, determined by our past or by our station in life.<sup>93</sup> We deceive ourselves into thinking that we are not responsible for our actions in Sartre’s sense. To live like that is “inauthentic existence.”

Rather, Sartre would have us live in a way that expresses our freedom, our nonbeing.<sup>94</sup> In his novels, lead characters often act out-of-character, violating

---

<sup>93</sup> The Idealist school of philosophy, which Sartre opposes, thought that our ethical responsibilities could be deduced from our station in life. If you are a butler, you are bound to behave as a butler; if a waiter, a waiter, and so on.

<sup>94</sup> Sartre again opposes Aristotle, but their principles are very similar. Aristotle calls on us to realize our essence. Sartre calls us to realize our freedom. Sartre has, in effect, replaced

the expectations of society. We need, he thinks, to overturn the conventions, to do things, occasionally at least, that the world will consider bizarre, even morally repugnant.

Some observations:

1. Sartre, no less than Gnosticism (Chapter 5), reduces ethics to metaphysics. For the Gnostics, our task is to rise to a higher level of being. For Sartre, it is to express our nonbeing. But both are equally impersonal characterizations of ethics. I have argued that ethics is essentially a matter of personal relationships: relationships between people and other people, and between people and God. Sartre's attempt at a consistently atheistic ethic destroys any legitimate basis for ethical behavior. The notion that ethical behavior is acting out-of-character is ludicrous.

2. Contrary to Sartre's claim, his position is devastating to human responsibility. He is helpful in emphasizing the central role of free choice in our ethical decisions.<sup>95</sup> But why should we value one free choice above another? Contrary to Sartre, responsibility is necessarily answerability—a personal relationship.

3. Sartre claims to set us free from all moral rules (irrationalism); yet, he stigmatizes a certain kind of behavior as inauthentic, thus claiming for himself the authority to legislate in the field of morals (rationalism).

## Postmodernism

The postmodern school (including such thinkers as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty) has not focused much attention on ethics, but in the late twentieth century it became famous for its skepticism about “grand narratives” or worldview-based thinking. Certainly its influence on ethics, as on many other disciplines, is to commend what I have called the existential perspective above any notion of historical goals (situational) or transcendent norms (normative).

These thinkers come largely from backgrounds in linguistics, reacting against the structuralist linguistics of the 1960s and '70s. In their view, there is no master-structure common to human minds that generates all language. Nor does language refer to reality in any direct way. When we ask for the meaning of a

---

Aristotle's “essence” with “freedom,” namely, a lack of essence, a nonbeing. But is this freedom really something different from an essence? Has not Sartre made the old philosophical mistake of trying to define nonbeing (as freedom in this case) and thus turning it into a kind of being?

<sup>95</sup> However, his concept of libertarian freedom is unbiblical and incoherent. See DG, Chapter 8.

word, we get, as a definition, other words. So words refer to other words, not to any objective reality.

So the task of the philosopher is “deconstruction:” to break down the connections people think they are making between language and reality. Indeed, nobody can serve as an authority as to the meaning of a piece of language. Even the author is incompetent to tell what his language means. For once he writes or speaks it, it enters into a community, and the meaning of his words is determined by the hearers. To people in that community, the text may convey much that is contrary to the author's intention, such as racial prejudice, gender oppression, etc. It may thus refute its own ostensible purpose, once deconstructed. Thus it is hopeless to try to find objective truth in language.

Like Nietzsche, postmodernist writers tend to see language as an expression of the will to power. Like Marx, they tend to read everything in the context of class warfare. Once deconstructed, language tends to be almost entirely about oppressors trying to dominate their victims and victims trying to fight back. So the discussion quickly turns to racism, feminism, species-ism, and so on.

These are, of course, ethical topics. But the views of postmodernists on these topics are rarely argued, only presupposed. The postmodern conception of language rules out patient and careful argumentation about such topics, for every argument is a piece of language demanding deconstruction. Such arguments are dismissed as mere exercises of power.

The problem is not that postmodernists are skeptics in a general way. They oppose “grand narratives,” but not “little narratives.” They debunk large worldviews, but they claim to accept the simple facts of everyday experience. But ethics requires a worldview, a grand narrative. It is not just about simple facts of everyday experience. Rather, as we have seen, it claims to deal with principles that are universal, necessary, and obligatory. If we reject worldview thinking, as postmodernism does, then we reject ethics in any meaningful sense of the word.

I do not deny that language expresses the will to power. Scripture often speaks of the power of God's word, not only its meaningful content (Isa. 55:11, Rom. 1:16). Human beings as God's image use the power of their language for both good (Rom. 1:16) and evil (Gen. 11:5-7), and they certainly have used it to oppress other people. It is also true that often when people think they are simply stating objective facts, they are stating them in such a way as to increase their power over others.

But language is not only power. It is also meaning.<sup>96</sup> It not only makes things happen, but it communicates truth or falsehood from one person to

---

<sup>96</sup> In *Doctrine of the Word of God* I plan to explore the triad power, meaning, and presence as it describes God's word and also as it describes human language generally. God's word is the

another.<sup>97</sup> The first does not in any way exclude the second. So we must not only observe what language does to people, as postmodernists do; we must also discuss in meaningful words what language ought to do.

Furthermore, postmodernism, like many other ideologies, tends to exempt itself from its own critique. If arguments against postmodernism must be deconstructed as attempts to gain power, why shouldn't arguments in favor of postmodernism be deconstructed the same way? But if all such arguments are to be deconstructed, then truth about such issues (even the "little" ones, if postmodernists are willing to discuss them) will permanently elude us.

### Conclusion

The existential tradition in secular ethics focuses on the inner life. That focus is legitimate in itself. Much of ethical importance takes place within us, in the heart, as Scripture says. But secular ethics misuses the existential perspective by absolutizing the authority of the human mind, will, and feelings. It affirms rational autonomy, and, when it sees the limitations of reason, it replaces or supplements it with autonomous human will or feeling. It is rationalistic when it claims authority for autonomous reason, irrationalistic when it denies the knowability of the world and the inaccessibility of moral standards. Thus this tradition is unable to provide any meaningful standards for ethics.

---

power that creates and controls the world (Psm. 33:6), the communication of his truth (John 17:17), and the place of his dwelling with us (John 1:1-14).

<sup>97</sup> To put it in technical philosophical terms, language is illocutionary as well as perlocutionary.

## Chapter 7: The Teleological Tradition

The second major tradition in secular ethics is often called teleological. This term is from the Greek *telos*, which means goal or purpose. This tradition understands ethics as a selection of goals, and of means to reach those goals. In the secular version, the goal is usually human happiness or, more narrowly, pleasure.

Secular teleological ethics values what I called in Chapter 4 the teleological principle: “a good act maximizes the happiness of living creatures,” but it is less impressed with the existential and deontological principles. Teleological thinkers are dissatisfied with the subjectivism of the existential approach. They are not content to rely on subjective feelings of approval and disapproval for ethical guidance; they seek something more objective, a basis for those feelings. But they are not impressed either by the abstruse reasonings or religious revelations that lead to the norms of deontological ethics, which we shall consider in the next chapter. Rather, they want a basis for ethics that is simple and practical, one that is easily explained and intuitively persuasive.

In their view, the ultimate basis of ethics is, simply, human happiness. That is the goal of ethics, what an ethical decision should seek to achieve, hence the term teleological. An act is right if it maximizes happiness and minimizes suffering. So to determine what to do, we only need to anticipate the consequences of our proposed actions. Thus teleological ethics is often called *consequentialist*. This seems to be a simple, practical, and persuasive method of evaluating decisions.

It is important here to review the distinction I made in Chapter 2, between moral and non-moral uses of *good*. In teleological ethics, the goal is a good in the non-moral sense. It is a state of affairs that is desirable, i.e. happiness. Happiness is not a moral good, because it is a quality, not a person. Moral goods are persons, actions, and attitudes that receive God’s blessing. They are always persons, or the acts and attitudes of persons. Happiness is not a person, but a quality of a state of affairs. So happiness is not a moral good, but it is a good. It is a valuable state of affairs. In teleological ethics, it is often called the *summum bonum*, or highest good.

In a teleological ethic, morally good decisions are means of achieving happiness. So moral goods are instruments to achieve nonmoral goods.

As we shall see, the Bible affirms the importance of considering the goals or purposes of our action. The utmost goal, the *summum bonum*, is the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Scripture also teaches us to consider the consequences of our choices (Luke 13:3, 5, for example). And it affirms the importance of maximizing the happiness of others (as Luke 10:27). But unlike secular

teleological ethics, Scripture also affirms the authority of God's moral norms and the importance of the character of the heart.

### **Cyrenaicism**

Aristippus (b. 435 BC), founder of the Cyrenaic school, is one of the earliest teleological ethicists in ancient Greece. We don't know very much about his specific formulations, but the views developed in the Cyrenaic school represent a fairly crude teleologism, compared to the more nuanced versions of Epicurus and Aristotle. The very simplicity of Cyrenaicism, however, makes it useful as an introduction to students of the teleological approach.

For the Cyrenaics, the highest good is the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain. This view is called hedonism, after the Greek word for pleasure. Now in teleological ethics, the most difficult question is how different kinds of pleasures should be evaluated. How does one compare the pleasure of eating ice cream with the pleasure of listening to Beethoven, or mastering golf, or raising a child?

The Cyrenaics faced this problem and answered it squarely: The best pleasures are the most intense. They saw pleasures as immediate sensations, like food, massage, sex, or drugs. Further, the Cyrenaics refused to engage in delayed gratification. For them, short-term pleasures should not be sacrificed to long-term. So, naturally, rumors spread about immorality running rampant among the Cyrenaics.

### **Epicurus**

Epicurus (341-270) presents a somewhat more sophisticated version of teleological ethics. Metaphysically, he is an atomist, following Democritus (460-370) who taught that reality is reducible to tiny bits of matter in motion. Democritus thought that the atoms moved in vertical tracks parallel to one another. But if that is so, how do they ever collide to form objects? Epicurus answered this problem by saying that occasionally the atoms "swerve" from the vertical. This swerve is unpredictable, random. In Epicurus' view, it not only accounts for the formation of objects, but also for human free will.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> This appears to be the origin of the concept of libertarian freedom, which I criticized extensively in DG, Chapter 8. Many have argued that this kind of freedom is the ground of moral responsibility. But is that at all likely? Imagine that an atom swerved randomly somewhere in your head and made you steal \$500. Would you feel guilty? More likely you would feel like a victim of a random event—like being struck by lightning. You didn't do anything to make the atom swerve. Rather, the swerve is something that happened to you, like being struck by lightning. How can a

What place is there in such a materialistic system for ethics?<sup>99</sup> Essentially, Epicurus's ethic is that we should avoid pain and seek pleasure (which he defines as the absence of pain). Unlike the Cyrenaics and some later Epicureans, Epicurus prefers long-term to short-term pleasures, mental to physical pleasures, pleasures of rest to pleasures of movement. He valued especially *ataraxia*, calmness without disturbance from outside the self.

There are several problems with this view: (1) In the normal sense of "pleasure," there are many things that human beings value more. One example is sacrificing one's life to save the life of another. Epicurus gives us no good reason to pursue pleasure rather than some other value. (2) If we define *pleasure* so broadly as to include all other values, including self-sacrifice, then it loses its meaning. It doesn't distinguish pleasurable from non-pleasurable activities. (3) Even if it is true that people value pleasure in some sense above all else, it is a logical jump to say that we *ought* to value pleasure above all else.<sup>100</sup> But the *ought* is what ethics is all about. I doubt that anyone can derive an ethical ought from a materialistic philosophy. Matter in motion simply cannot tell us what we ought to do. It cannot motivate that loyalty, obedience, and love that are the ground of obligation.

Epicurus believed in the existence of the Olympian gods, but he held that they have achieved such bliss that they have no interest in getting involved in human history. So we need not fear them, nor expect any benefit from serving them.

## Aristotle

Aristotle (384-322) is such a great thinker that he almost deserves a chapter to himself. It seems inappropriate to discuss him in a chapter along with Aristippus, Epicurus, and Mill, for his thought is far more sophisticated than theirs and immensely more influential. Certainly too, Aristotle's ethics is more than merely teleological. But I do believe it is *essentially* teleological. Aristotle makes the best case that can be made for a secular teleological ethic.

The greatest philosophers (among whom I include Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant—honorable mention to Augustine and Hegel)<sup>101</sup> are thinkers

---

human being be blamed for a mental accident? If libertarian freedom exists, it is not the ground of moral responsibility. Rather, it destroys responsibility.

<sup>99</sup> You should not believe the rumors that the Greeks hated matter. Some of them did, among them the Platonists and Gnostics. But the Epicureans and Stoics were materialists.

<sup>100</sup> Recall the discussion of the naturalistic fallacy in Chapter 5.

<sup>101</sup> I am inclined to add Socrates to this list, but he wrote no books, and therefore his thoughts are difficult to disentangle from those of his student Plato, who is our main source of information about him.

who do not align themselves with one school of thought, but who creatively bring together ideas from many schools into impressive worldviews. That was certainly true both of Aristotle and his teacher Plato.<sup>102</sup>

Aristotle accepts Plato's distinction between form and matter. Matter is the stuff of the world; form is what gives to that stuff its qualities: shape, color, truth, beauty, moral virtue, and, especially purpose (*telos*). Plato separated form and matter into two worlds. Aristotle demythologizes Plato, teaching that form and matter are aspects of everything in this world, except for the Prime Mover, Aristotle's godlike first principle, which is pure form, without matter.

The forms in each thing define its essence, nature and purpose. The nature of a human being is to be a rational animal. Now the highest good (*summum bonum*) for any being is the realization or actualization of its particular nature. Aristotle, therefore, is a philosopher of self-realization, which we generally associate with the existential tradition. He is, as I said earlier, a complex thinker, rather than a follower of any single tradition. But I think that for him the teleological principle is more fundamental than the existential.

Since man's nature is to be a "rational animal," Aristotle held the view of all the Greek philosophers, that man's highest good is the life of reason. Complete, habitual exercise of our rational nature constitutes "happiness" (*eudaimonia*). Happiness is complete well-being.<sup>103</sup> Unlike the Cyrenaics and Epicureans, Aristotle says that happiness is not pleasure, though pleasure accompanies it as a secondary effect.

Aristotle, like Plato, distinguishes three aspects of the soul, the vegetative, the sensitive (perhaps roughly equivalent to Plato's "spirited"), and the rational. We share the first with plants, the second with animals; the third is unique to human beings. Moral virtues are qualities of the rational soul.

Aristotle distinguishes moral from intellectual virtues. Moral virtues pertain to the will, intellectual to reason. We learn the moral virtues, courage, temperance, and justice, from imitating others who exemplify these qualities. Such imitation leads us in time to form good habits, and those habits form a good character. The intellectual virtue is prudence,<sup>104</sup> and that comes from teaching. Aristotle distinguishes philosophic wisdom (disinterested, contemplative) from

---

<sup>102</sup> Of Plato and Aristotle it has been said that no teacher ever had a greater student and no student a greater teacher.

<sup>103</sup> The Greek *eudaimonia* is perhaps more like our term "blessedness" than like the usual English use of "happiness." We usually think of happiness as an emotional state. But the Greeks took it more objectively: those benefits that *entitle* one to pleasant emotions.

<sup>104</sup> Prudence, courage, temperance and justice are often called the "four cardinal virtues" of classical philosophy. Some Christians added to these faith, hope, and love, the "theological virtues," to make seven.



practical wisdom (wisdom to make decisions leading to happiness). One who has wisdom, he thinks, will seek moderation in all things.

So it is often possible to determine our specific duties by calculating the mean between two extremes. For example, a buffoon makes a joke out of everything; a boor takes everything too seriously. But wit is the “golden mean” between these extremes. Aristotle didn’t offer any precise formula for defining the extremes or locating the mean. Doubtless he knew that with a bit of cleverness any act could be justified as being between two extremes (e.g. robbing one bank as the mean between robbing many and robbing none). And he did see that sometimes a right decision might be on one extreme, such as the very decision to do right rather than wrong. But he assumed that the wise man would be able to furnish a proper context for these judgments.

There is a question as to how we can begin to acquire moral virtues. Aristotle teaches that we need to have virtuous dispositions to perform virtuous acts; but we need to perform moral acts in order to form the habits that produce virtuous dispositions.<sup>105</sup> Aristotle is aware of this circularity and counsels readers to begin the process by doing things that “resemble” virtuous acts. But how one gets from resemblance to actuality is a mystery.

The Christian revelation has an answer: God’s grace creates moral dispositions in sinners and enables them to follow those dispositions. And it also answers another major problem in Aristotle’s ethics. For Aristotle assumes that we can learn our moral obligations simply by observing our own natures and what makes us happy. This is the root of the “natural law” tradition in ethics. But as David Hume pointed out, one cannot derive moral obligations from natural facts. One can’t infer what we *ought* to do from statements of what is the case; we cannot derive “ought” from “is.” The fact that we are rational does not prove that we ought to live according to reason; the fact that we seek happiness does not imply that we ought to seek it. Scripture points to God’s revelation as the source of our knowledge of ethical obligation. For God is both fact and value. To know him is to know at the same time the ultimate source of reality and the ultimate source of ethical obligation.

Typical of the Greek philosophers, Aristotle thinks that human reason is sufficient to derive moral obligations from natural facts. That is the extent of his normative perspective. His emphasis on disposition and character is an element of existential ethics, within an overall teleological emphasis: For him ethics is seeking happiness by rational cultivation of virtues. Aristotle’s thought has a better balance between the three perspectives than most secular thinkers. But the balance is precarious. He has no adequate way to derive moral principles (normative), so he has no sufficient justification for choosing happiness as a moral goal (situational) or for identifying those dispositions (existential) that the ethical agent should cultivate.

---

<sup>105</sup> The emphasis on disposition is another existential element in Aristotle’s thought.

## Utilitarianism

The most influential modern version of teleological ethics is utilitarianism, the system developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)<sup>106</sup> and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).<sup>107</sup> Utilitarianism differs from Epicureanism chiefly in its view that the goal of ethics is not only the pleasure of the individual, but the “greatest pleasure for the greatest number.” That is called the “principle of utility.” For Bentham, this broader goal is a consequence of individual self-interest. For Mill, it is based on a social instinct common to mankind.

Bentham measures pleasures in mainly quantitative ways, as did the ancient Cyrenaics. Mill distinguishes qualities of pleasure, as did Epicurus.

In theory, utilitarianism is a simple, practical system. There is one principle, one goal to be sought, namely the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. A good act furthers that principle; an evil act impedes it. A good act will maximize pleasure and minimize pain. And evil act will do the reverse.

It would seem, then, that (perhaps with computers unavailable to Bentham and Mill) we could simply “calculate” the goodness or badness of an act by calculating the pleasures and pains produced by it. Indeed, Bentham spoke of the “hedonistic calculus.” This emphasis is typically modern. It fits especially well into the political culture of democracy, in which the pleasures and pains of an electorate can be quantified by polls and votes.

For that reason, perhaps, along with others, utilitarianism seems to be almost routinely assumed in contemporary discussion of ethical issues. And we may, perhaps, blame utilitarianism somewhat for the tendency of politicians to see their work as providing more pleasures for this or that group in their constituency. “What have you done for \_\_\_\_\_?” (fill in the blank with the middle class, the poor, small business, women, minorities, families, conservatives, liberals, Christians, non-Christians, etc., etc.) seems to be the main question politicians strive to answer.

One theoretical question discussed by recent utilitarians is whether the principle of utility should be applied to each of our individual actions, or to the rules used to govern those actions. Does the principle ask us to judge what pains and pleasures each act brings about, or does it ask us merely to determine what general ethical rules will lead to the greatest predominance of pleasure over

---

<sup>106</sup> Bentham's most accessible work is *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970).

<sup>107</sup> See especially his essay, “Utilitarianism,” anthologized in many volumes, such as Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1987).

pain? Those who choose the first alternative are called “act-utilitarians,” and those who choose the second are called “rule-utilitarians.”<sup>108</sup>

Some evaluations follow, which, of course, will overlap the comments I made earlier about Epicurus:

1. Both Bentham and Mill assume that everyone by nature seeks pleasure and flees from pain. But is that true? People do sometimes sacrifice themselves for others, by an instinct that may be more fundamental than the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Recall, too, Nietzsche’s contention that people really seek power more than they seek pleasure.

2. Now in the face of such objections as those in (1), utilitarians are sometimes inclined to stretch the definition of pleasure to include such things as self-sacrifice and the exercise of power. But if that definition is stretched too far, everything we do becomes pleasure, even choices that lead to great suffering. If everything is pleasure, then nothing is. And it becomes unclear just what we are trying to calculate when we seek to calculate pleasures.

3. The naturalistic fallacy argument applies more obviously to teleological ethics than to any other approach. For even if it is obvious that human beings *do* seek pleasure in all their choices, it by no means follows that they *ought* to do so.

4. Further, the move from an individualistic approach (Epicurus) to a corporate one (Bentham, Mill) requires justification. It certainly is not obvious, as Bentham thought, that maximization of everyone’s pleasure is needed for individual pleasure. Nor is it obvious, as Mill thought (reverting to the existential perspective), that we have some natural instinct to promote the collective pleasure of mankind. And even if we do seek the welfare of society, it is not thereby evident that we *ought* to.

5. Is it always right to maximize the happiness of a community? What if the majority in a country take great pleasure in murdering a minority—not merely a theoretical possibility in the twentieth century and beyond? Most ethically reflective people would answer no, but utilitarianism, taken consistently, would answer yes. For utilitarianism, in the final analysis, the end justifies the means. This is sometimes called the “swine trough” objection to utilitarianism, that it justifies behavior that any civilized person would deplore. Now the later utilitarian Henry Sidgwick responded to this objection by adding to the principle of utility a principle of justice, or fairness.<sup>109</sup> This principle tells us to seek not only a maximum amount of pleasure, but also an equal distribution of it. But (a) this principle has no basis in the overall utilitarian scheme. It is a deontological principle, not a teleological one. But why should we seek fairness or equality? If

<sup>108</sup> Richard B. Brandt introduced this distinction. See his *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1959).

<sup>109</sup> See Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1901).

not on a utilitarian basis, then on what basis? (b) It certainly is not intuitively obvious. The argument between maximizing pleasures for the whole society and equally distributing them to all members of society continues today, notably in economic contexts: is it best to maximize opportunity, or to insure equality of wealth? It is hard to see how this argument could ever be resolved apart from a religious revelation. (c) Sidgwick does not produce an adequate method of resolving conflicts between his two principles, those conflicts that produced the very problem that the principle of justice was designed to resolve.

6. Utilitarians greatly underestimate the difficulty of calculating the pleasures and pains likely to result from an action. (a) There are so many kinds of pleasure and pain. Among pleasures, consider listening to Brahms, eating a cherry pie, running a marathon, falling in love, having your local baseball team win the world series, solving a philosophical problem. It is inconceivable that any method could compare these in a way sufficiently quantitative as to permit calculation. We can measure a feeling of cold or hot, by wind chill calculations and such, but even that is precarious. (People often feel differently when they experience the same wind chill.) But how can we measure the pleasure of watching a sunset, or looking at the Grand Canyon? (b) To measure the consequences of an action, we would need to trace its effects into the indefinite future and throughout the universe. One action, after all, can have enormous effects, years later and miles away. Imagine Columbus trying to calculate the effects of his decision to sail west.

It turns out, then, that utilitarianism, advertised as a simple and practical method for evaluating courses of action, in fact requires divine omniscience. Only God can make the calculation required. As with secular existential ethics, the utilitarian ethicist must put himself in the place of God. We can now understand why many utilitarians retreat from act-utilitarianism to rule-utilitarianism: it seems so much easier to evaluate the consequences of rules than the consequences of individual acts. But unless the rules come from God, we have no reason to think that any rule will, throughout all history and throughout the entire universe, lead to more pleasure than pain.

### John Dewey

Dewey (1859-1952)<sup>110</sup> is essentially a teleological ethicist, but he introduces much more flexibility into the traditional teleological concepts of means and ends. In doing so, he reveals some of the complications that in my view make impossible any hedonistic calculus.

---

<sup>110</sup> See Dewey, *Ethics* (New York: Holt, 1932), also his *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: New American Library, 1950).

Dewey accepts the basic utilitarian model of ethics: choosing a goal and then the means to achieve it. But he rejects the idea that the goal is something fixed: pleasure or happiness. Dewey insists that pleasure is only one of many goals we seek, including health, wealth, power, learning, justice, entertainment, friendship. Further, our goals change from time to time. As our goals change, of course the means also change.

Our ethical life is not, according to Dewey, a matter of choosing a goal and then enduring any means to achieve it. Some goals are highly desirable, but the means are so difficult or unpleasant that we decide the goal is not worth the effort and we shift to another goal. Means and goals influence one another in a dialectical way. No goal is absolutely fixed.

So in Dewey's view, ethics is not an orderly, simple process, such as that envisioned by Bentham and Mill. He sees goodness as the meaning experienced when a person wrestles with conflicting impulses, but somehow reaches a point of action.

I am tempted to describe Dewey's ethic as existential, because, as with Aristotle and Idealism, self-realization plays a major role. Self-realization describes the process of bringing together all the incompatible impulses into what he calls an "orderly release in action." But Dewey insists that even self-realization itself should not be considered a fixed goal, only a criterion for evaluating other goals. Since he sees the decision-making process in terms of means and goals, I regard him as primarily teleological.

But in a way his approach also serves as a refutation of teleological ethics, even a *reductio ad absurdum*. With ever-changing goals and ever-changing means leading to a flux of incompatible impulses that somehow leads to action (perhaps an axe murder), it is impossible to imagine what an ethical discussion could ever be about. Dewey is right to say that in fact our goals change and that with no revelation to guide us we cannot define happiness or pleasure as an absolute the way utilitarianism does. But if he is right, his point serves as a deconstruction of teleological ethics and leaves little distance between teleological ethics and existential ethics. All of this leaves us hungry for an ethical norm. The philosophers to be considered in the next chapter earnestly try to supply one.

## Chapter 8: The Deontological Tradition

In our survey of “less explicitly religious” non-Christian ethics, we now come to the last of the three major traditions. *Deontological* comes from the Greek *deō*, translated owe, ought, or must. So a deontological ethicist is concerned above all with the normative perspective of ethics, ethics as obligation. He is impressed with what I called in Chapter 4 the “deontological principle,” namely, “a good act is a response to duty, even at the price of self-sacrifice.” He is less impressed with the teleological and existential principles. Deontologists tend to be contemptuous of people who do good in order to gain pleasure or happiness (teleological) or to express their inner inclinations (existential). In the deontologist view, seeking happiness is never morally virtuous; indeed it detracts from the moral quality of any action. So when a writer despises pleasure and exalts principle or self-sacrifice, he is probably a deontologist.

Scripture also calls us to self-sacrifice (Matt. 16:24-26) and warns us against the deceits of pleasure (2 Tim. 3:4, Titus 3:3). But Scripture distinguishes between godly and ungodly pleasures. Godly pleasures are not only good, they are motivations to pursuing holiness. Often in the same passages where Scripture warns us against ungodly pleasures, it promises the rewards of the kingdom of God to those who obey (Matt. 6:28-33). So Scripture does not agree with secular deontologism. For Scripture, duty and happiness are not opposed, but in the long run reinforce one another.

Deontologists seek to find ethical norms that are universal, necessary, and obligatory. They usually accept the argument of Hume, Moore,<sup>111</sup> and others, that such norms cannot be found through sense experience (as in teleological ethics) or introspection (as in existential ethics). The problem set before the deontologist, therefore, is to find some other source of ethical knowledge. Christians have such a source in the revelation of God. But secular deontologists reject that possibility as well. Of course, they fail to find what they are seeking, and that failure is a main reason for the popularity of teleological and existential alternatives. Then the deontologist criticizes the other positions for their lack of any ethical norm at all, and the argument continues back and forth.

But there is more. The deontologist must not only find an absolute ethical standard. He must also show how that standard can be used to tell us in specific terms what is right and wrong. In other words, he must show how his standard contains ethical content. One major problem for the deontological movement is that once the philosopher identifies the source of ethical norms, that source turns out to be so abstract and vague that nothing specific can be derived from it. A norm that says nothing is, of course, no norm at all. But for deontologism,

---

<sup>111</sup> Indeed, I will be discussing Moore's position later in this chapter.

anything less than the ultimate source of norms lacks authority. So the more authority, the less content, and vice versa.

The problem is that, denying the authority of God's revelation, secular deontologists cannot locate the ethical norm in a personal absolute. So they try in various ways to find impersonal sources of ethical authority. As I argued earlier and will continue to argue, that cannot be done. So the secular search for an absolute norm must inevitably fail. Either there will be no norm at all (existential ethics), or an inadequate one (teleological ethics), or an authoritative norm with no content (deontologism).

In the final analysis, this is a religious difficulty. Deontologists, like all those who lack the saving grace of God, do not really want to hear God's voice. With the pagans of Rom. 1, they suppress divine revelation. You can suppress revelation either by denying that there is an ultimate norm, by embracing an inadequate norm, or by embracing an "ultimate" norm that turns out to have no content. In either case, you are left alone, to do what you want to do. Thus deontological and teleological ethics revert to existential. Rationalism reverts to irrationalism. Ethics reverts to human autonomy.

### **Plato**

In my view, the deontological tradition begins with Plato (427-347 BC), but, like his pupil Aristotle, he is much more than a member of a particular ethical tradition. Plato is one of the greatest thinkers in the history of philosophy, with interests in many questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. And he deals with many aspects of ethics other than the deontological. I shall indicate teleological and existential themes in my account of his ethical thought. If the reader would like to begin with simpler versions of deontologism, I suggest that he move on to the next sections, on Cynicism and Stoicism, and come back to Plato later on.

For all his complexity nevertheless, Plato's thinking about ethics may be summarized as the search for an adequate ethical norm, a deontological quest. With his mentor Socrates, he was stimulated to ethical reflection by the relativism of the Sophists, whom I discussed in Chapter 6. It cannot be true, he thought, that ethical virtue is whatever the individual wants it to be. But then what is it?

If we are to attain moral knowledge, we must be able, contrary to the Sophists, to attain knowledge. That knowledge must be objective, not relative to every knower.

Plato's epistemology begins with the observation that we can learn very little from our sense organs. So far, he agrees with the Sophists. Our eyes and

ears easily deceive us. But the remarkable thing is that we have the rational ability to correct these deceptions and thus to find truth. It is by our reason also that we form concepts of things. We have never, for example, seen a perfect square. But somehow we know what a perfect square would be like, for we know the mathematical formula that generates one. Since we don't learn the concept of squareness by sense experience; we must learn it from reason. Similarly concepts of treeness, horseness, humanity, justice, virtue, goodness, etc. We don't see these, but somehow we know them.

These concepts Plato calls *Forms* or *Ideas*. Since we cannot find these Forms on earth, he says, they must exist in another realm, a world of Forms, as opposed to the world of sense. But what are Forms, exactly? In reading Plato we sometimes find ourselves thinking of the form of treeness as a perfect, gigantic tree somewhere, which serves as a model for all trees on earth. But that can't be right. Given the many different kinds of trees, how could one tree serve as a perfect model for all of them? And even if there were a gigantic tree somewhere, how could there be a gigantic justice, or virtue, or goodness? Further, Plato says that the Forms are not objects of sensation (as a gigantic tree would be). Rather they are known through intelligence alone, through reason. Perhaps Plato is following the Pythagoreans here, conceiving the Forms as quasi-mathematical formulae, recipes that can be used to construct trees, horses, virtue, and justice as the Pythagorean theorem can be used to construct a triangle. I say "quasi," because Plato in the *Republic* said that "mathematicals are a class of entities *between* the sensibles and the Forms."<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, he does believe that Forms are real things and are the models of which things on earth are copies.

The Forms, then, are perfect, immaterial, changeless, invisible, intangible objects. Though abstract, they more real than the objects of our sense experience, for only a perfect triangle, e.g., is a real triangle. And the Forms are also more knowable than things on earth. We may be uncertain as to whether a particular judge is just, but we cannot be uncertain as to the justice of the Form Justice. As such, the Forms serve as models, exemplars, indeed criteria for earthly things. It is the Forms that enable us to know the earthly things that imitate them. We can know that someone is virtuous only by comparing him with the norm of Ideal Virtue.

The Forms exist in a hierarchy, the highest being the Form of the Good. For we learn what triangles, trees, human beings, and justice are when we learn what each is "good for," its purpose.<sup>113</sup> Everything is good for something, so everything that exists participates in the Form of the Good to some extent. The world of Forms, therefore, contains not only formulae for making objects, but also norms defining the *purposes* of objects. This is a teleological element in Plato's

---

<sup>112</sup> Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 20. Allen's further comments on this issue are helpful.

<sup>113</sup> As with Aristotle, Plato's *Good* is what I called in Chapter 2 a non-moral good. Yet, for Plato, moral goods like virtue are exemplifications of this non-moral goodness.



ethics, and it is not hard to see how it influenced his student Aristotle, who we discussed in the previous chapter.

In *Euthyphro*, Socrates argues that piety cannot be defined as what the gods desire. For why should they desire it? They must desire it because it is good. So piety is a form of goodness, and goodness must exist independently of what gods or men may think or say about it. So it must be a Form. We should note, however, that if courage, virtue, goodness, etc. are abstract forms, then they have no specific content. To know what is good, for Plato, is to know the Form of Goodness. But Goodness is what all individual examples of goodness have in common. How, then, does it help us to know specifically what is good and what is bad?

Any time we try to define Goodness in terms of specific qualities (justice, prudence, temperance, etc.) we have descended to something less than the Form of Goodness. The Form of Goodness serves as a norm for human goodness, because it is utterly general and abstract. Any principle that is more specific is less normative, less authoritative. Such is the consequence of trying to understand goodness as an abstract Form rather than, as in biblical theism, the will of a personal absolute.<sup>114</sup>

How do we know the Forms, located as we are in this defective, changing world? Here Plato reflects the subjectivism of the Sophists and Socrates: we look within. Here, Plato's ethic takes on an existential cast. We find within ourselves recollections of the Forms. Recollections? Then at one time we must have had experience of the Forms. When? Not in this life, where our experiences are limited to imperfect and changing things, but in another life before this one. So Plato embraces the Pythagorean-Orphic doctrine of reincarnation. We lived once in a world in which the Forms were directly accessible to us. Then we "fell" from that existence into the sense-world, into bodies. Our knowledge of the Forms remains in memory, but sometimes it has to be coaxed out of us by Socratic questioning. One famous example is in Plato's *Meno*, where Socrates asks questions of an uneducated slave boy, leading him to display a knowledge of geometry nobody expected him to have.

But Plato's major interest, like that of Socrates, was to tell us how to live. His metaphysics and epistemology are all a prelude to his ethics and political theory. But it is in these areas that he is most disappointing. His Socrates discusses at length the nature of justice and courage, but comes to no firm conclusion. He does conclude that the definition of virtue is knowledge. One never does wrong except out of ignorance. If one knows what is right, he will

---

<sup>114</sup> And if anyone asks the relation of goodness to the God of the Bible, the answer is as follows: (1) Goodness is not something above him, that he must submit to; (2) nor is it something below him, that he could alter at will, but (3) it is his own nature: his actions and attributes, given to human beings for imitation. "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48).

necessarily do it. But most of Plato's readers through the centuries (including his pupil Aristotle) have dismissed this statement as naïve, and Christians have found it superficial in comparison with the Bible's view of human depravity.

And if virtue is knowledge, knowledge of what? Knowledge of the Good? But *good* is more difficult to define than virtue is. Like all Forms, it is abstract. So how can it settle concrete ethical disputes, such as whether abortion is right or wrong? For Plato, to live right is to know the Good. But to say that is to leave all specific ethical questions unanswered.

Plato did come to some specific recommendations in the area of politics. But these recommendations have been almost universally rejected by later thinkers. In the *Republic*, he divides the body politic into groups corresponding to the divisions of the soul. In his ideal state, the peasants are governed by the appetitive soul, the military by the spirited, and the rulers by the rational. So the rulers of the state must be philosophers, those who understand the Forms. Such a state will be totalitarian, claiming authority over all areas of life. The upper classes will share their women communally, and children would be raised by the rulers. Art will be severely restricted, because it is a kind of shadow of reality. It does not convey knowledge of the world, only conjecture, the lowest form of opinion. Images detract from knowledge of Beauty itself (the Form) and they can incite to anarchy. Donald Palmer says that Plato's *Republic* "can be viewed as a plea that philosophy take over the role which art had hitherto played in Greek culture."<sup>115</sup>

Most all modern readers look at these ideas with distaste. Where did Plato get them? It would not be credible for him to claim that he got them by contemplating the Good. Rather, the whole business sounds like special pleading. Plato the philosopher thinks that philosophers should rule. He is rather like a Sophist here, claiming to be the expert in the means of governance. But he certainly has not shown that philosophers in general have any of the special qualities needed to govern. And the Sophists denied what Plato claims: access to absolute truth. We may applaud Plato's rejection of relativism. But his absolutism is what makes him a totalitarian. He thinks the philosophers have Knowledge, so they must rule everything.

Plato engages in special pleading, because he has no non-arbitrary way of determining what is right and wrong. But as we've seen, once one identifies Goodness as an abstract form, one cannot derive from it any specific content. So Plato's ideas about ethics and politics lack any firm basis or credibility.

The picture should be clear by now. Though Plato is far more sophisticated than most secular thinkers, his position, like theirs, incorporates rationalism and irrationalism. He is rationalistic about the Forms, irrationalistic about the sense world. For him, reason is totally competent to understand the

---

<sup>115</sup> Palmer, *Looking at Philosophy* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1988), 73.

Forms, incompetent to make sense of the changing world of experience. Yet he tries to analyze the changing world by means of changeless forms, an irrational world by a rationalistic principle. Eventually, in *Parmenides*, he has the integrity to admit that his fundamental questions remain unanswered.

With Plato, as with other philosophers we have considered, the tension between rationalism and irrationalism has a religious root. If Plato had known the God of Scripture, he would have known in what fundamental ways our reason is competent, yet limited. And he would have understood that the world of change is knowable, but not exhaustively, because God made it that way. He would also have been able to consult God's revelation for ethical guidance, rather than teaching his students to rely on the abstract form of the Good, which has nothing specific to say to them. The deficiencies of Plato's system reinforce my main thesis about ethics, that an adequate ethical norm can come only from an absolute person.

### Cynicism

As I described in the last chapter a fairly crude version of teleological ethics, Cyrenaicism, so I will mention here a fairly crude version of deontological ethics. The relative simplicity of Cynicism may help some readers better to understand the deontological approach.

Antisthenes (435-365 BC) is said to have founded this school of thought. The Cynics, like Plato, held that virtue is knowledge, and so they emphasized that it is worthwhile for its own sake, apart from any pleasure that may attend it. Doing good to achieve pleasure, they said, is morally worthless. So our task in life is to free ourselves from any desire for pleasure. The Cynics practiced self-discipline, renounced their possessions, and in some cases fled from civilization altogether, living out in the countryside. They seemed to insist on lives of nonconformity to the point of principle.<sup>116</sup> Others charged that they were living like dogs. Hence the name Cynic, from the Greek word for dog.

I call this school deontological, because it rejected pleasure (contrary to teleological ethics) and insisted on objective knowledge (contrary to existential ethics). But it is not clear from the rather fragmentary accounts we have of this movement where it was that they sought to find the knowledge of virtue. Perhaps they attempted to derive their ethical norms from the mere negative proposition that pleasure is not a worthy goal of life.

Obviously, this is not a sufficient source of ethical norms, but in a way it provides a capsule view of the deontological movement. Lacking God's word, deontologists have sought ethical truth largely by negation. Plato sought it by

---

<sup>116</sup> Is this, after all, the "authentic existence" of Jean-Paul Sartre?

negating the specificities of this changing world to posit an unchanging abstraction, the Form of Goodness. Kant, as we shall see, tried to derive moral norms from the very idea of universality in contrast with non-universality.

### Stoicism

Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Cyprus (334-262 BC). Like the Epicureans, but unlike most other Greek philosophers, the Stoics were materialists, teaching that only physical objects were real. But they acknowledged many differences within the broad category “matter.” The soul was made of very fine matter, rocks and dirt out of coarser matter. Even virtues are material, but they can exist in the same place as other matter, so virtues can be in the soul. Gordon Clark suggests that the Stoics’ “matter” is more like a field of force than like a hard stuff.<sup>117</sup> Or perhaps: for the Stoics, to say that something is material is simply to say that it really is, that it has being. Perhaps for them (whether or not they were aware of it), the proposition “reality is material” was tautological.

For the Stoics, knowledge begins in self-authenticating sensations. General skepticism about sense-experience defeats itself, they thought, for it can be based only on the experiences it presumes to doubt. The combination of empirical epistemology and deontological ethics is unusual in the history of philosophy. But the Stoics also seek to do justice to the importance of reason. They teach that the mind must conceptualize its sense-data, and, as it does, it reflects the rational order of the world itself (the *logos*).

The world is a single reality, governed by its own world-soul. This pantheistic God rules all by natural law. As Plato’s Republic was ruled by a philosopher king, so the world of the Stoics is ruled by a divine philosopher king.

Everything happens by law, so the Stoics took a fatalistic attitude toward life. Aristotle, like present-day open theists, had said that propositions about the future were neither true nor false, because the future was not an object of knowledge. The Stoics held, on the contrary, that if I say “the sun will rise tomorrow” and it does, that proposition was already true when I uttered it. Therefore, the rising of the sun *had* to happen. Furthermore, everything that has happened will happen again and again, ad infinitum, for, given infinite time, everything possible must take place, again and again. This doctrine is known as the eternal recurrence.

So the Stoics sought to act in accord with nature. That is, they sought to be resigned to their fate. Their ethic was one of learning to want what one gets, rather than of getting what one wants. As the Cynics had emphasized, pleasure,

---

<sup>117</sup> Clark, *Thales to Dewey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 158-160.

health, and life are good only insofar as they contribute to virtuous character. In themselves they are worthless.

Despite the fatalism of the Stoics, they did not advocate passivity. Contrary to Epicurus, they sought involvement in public life (the emperor Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic). They taught, as did all Greek thinkers, that one should live according to reason, which is also according to nature and according to the universal structure of society. They considered human society to be a universal brotherhood, although we are told that the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius did not treat his Christian subjects with much brotherly love.

Stoicism is one major source, after Aristotle, of natural law thinking in ethics. Again, I ask David Hume's question: how does one reason from the facts of nature to conclusions about ethical obligation? The lack of a true theistic position made the answer to this question, for the Stoics as for Aristotle, impossible.

Some observations:

1. The Stoics, like all of the Greeks, urge us to live according to reason, but they don't show us why we *ought* to do so. If we are not to follow reason for pleasure's sake, why should we follow it?

2. What does reason actually tell us to do? As with Plato, I fear that Stoicism offers us an ethical norm (reason) with no specific content.

3. As a materialist, fatalistic system, Stoicism is not capable of finding any adequate moral norm. As I have often argued, the ultimate moral norm must be personal.

### Immanuel Kant

Kant (1724-1804)<sup>118</sup> represents the most famous and influential modern form of deontology, just as Bentham and Mill represent the most famous and influential modern forms of teleology. Kant is, however, a great philosopher (like Plato and Aristotle) in a way that Bentham and Mill are not. Kant is important, not only for his ethical theory, but also for his metaphysics, his epistemology, and his theology.<sup>119</sup> It is not too much to say that Kant

---

<sup>118</sup> Kant's ethical thought is found mainly in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. These have appeared in many editions. For his metaphysical and epistemological thought, the standard works are the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*.

<sup>119</sup> His book *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* is a landmark of liberal theology.

revolutionized all these disciplines, and that his work has become the starting point of all modern discussions of these subjects.

Kant might seem to be an unlikely deontologist. Deontologists tend to favor rationalism over irrationalism, as with Plato, Cynicism, and Stoicism. But Kant, at one level of his thought, is a skeptic. He holds that the world as it really is, apart from our experience, is unknowable. This real world he calls the “noumenal,” or the “thing in itself” (*ding an sich*).

His early training in philosophy was in the circles of European rationalism, specifically under Christian Wolff, a disciple of Leibniz. The goal of the rationalistic tradition at the time was to reduce human knowledge to a deductive system following the model of mathematics. But Kant did something unusual for a continental European: he read the writings of a British philosopher, specifically David Hume.<sup>120</sup> Kant says that Hume roused him from his dogmatic slumbers. It seemed to Kant that Hume’s skepticism threatened mathematics and science. From then on his goal was to develop a philosophy that would rescue those disciplines.

He concedes to Hume that the world as such, the noumenal, cannot be known. But he insists that it is possible to know the world as it appears to us, the “phenomenal.” So as Plato divided the world into Form and Matter, Kant divided it into Noumenal and Phenomenal. As Plato sought to do justice to both the rationalism and the irrationalism of his own time by distinguishing radically different realms, so did Kant. Kant’s distinction, however, is almost opposite to Plato’s. For Plato, the unknowable world is the world of our experience, but for Kant the world of experience is the knowable world. For Plato, the world beyond our experience is the world that is supremely knowable. For Kant, that world is not knowable at all.

How is it possible to know the world of our experience? Kant offers here a very complicated discussion that would draw us far from ethics. Essentially, though, Kant argues that the basic structures of experience (essentially what Plato called the Forms) are the work of the human mind, the mind imposing its categories on the raw data of experience. Causality, identity, unity and plurality, even space and time, are the work of the mind. The mind does not discover these in the real world, but it contributes them to its experience.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>120</sup> Since the 1600s, the English Channel has proven to be a major dividing point among philosophical schools.

<sup>121</sup> I forget where I heard or read this illustration, but it is a good one. A row of intelligent jelly jars are debating the philosophical question of why the jelly inside them always has a cylindrical shape. It seems that there are no physical or chemical properties in the jelly that necessitate that shape. But one jelly jar, more intelligent than the others, suggests that the jelly is cylindrical, not because of any property of the jelly, but because of the properties of the jars. So Immanuel Kant says that our experience is what it is, not because of something in it, but because of something in us.

In a sense, then, for Kant, the human mind replaces God as the creator of the world. Of course, what the mind creates is structure, not raw material; form, not matter. But nothing can be said about the raw material apart from its structure. Similarly, the Greeks found it difficult to distinguish between matter and nothingness. So for Kant the mind creates everything that can be spoken of. The rest is unknowable.<sup>122</sup>

Kant is a remarkably clear example of the rationalist-irrationalist dialectic. He is rationalist about the phenomena, irrationalist about the noumena. We know nothing about the real world, he says in effect, but we know perfectly the world of our experience, because we have created it. But if we have no knowledge of noumena, how is it that we can know what the phenomena “really” are? And does not Kant claim at least some knowledge of the noumenal world, namely that it exists, that it serves as a limit to knowledge, and that it is that of which the phenomena are appearances? All the traditional arguments against skepticism can be brought against Kant’s view of the noumena, and all the traditional arguments against rationalism against his view of the phenomena.

At any rate, we might expect from his epistemology and metaphysics that Kant would favor an extreme version of existential ethics, in which no knowledge is possible, but we may freely live by our subjective preferences. And there is an existential element in Kant’s thought, as there was in Plato’s. But Kant surprises us: the chief theme in his ethics is deontological.

For Kant, the important thing about ethics is *duty*. But how do we learn what our duties are, without a personal God to tell us?<sup>123</sup> The challenge for Kant is to find an impersonal source of ethical norms that contains specific content—what Plato’s Idea of the Good could not provide. And how can we find such a norm, given the rationalist-irrationalist thrust of Kant’s epistemology?

Kant’s argument is ingenious, if nothing else. He begins by asking an old philosophical question: is there anything that is good at all times, in all circumstances? The Greeks had noticed that boldness, for example, is sometimes good and sometimes bad. When it is good, we call it courage; when it is bad (as when a soldier elects to fight 500 enemy soldiers singlehanded) we call it foolishness. Pleasure, too, can be a good or bad thing, given the circumstances. But is there anything that is always good, that can never be bad? Plato thought the only reality in that category was the abstract Form of the Good. But we saw that this answer proved ethically unfruitful. Kant wants to do better.

Kant’s answer is that the only thing that is unequivocally good is a good will. Nobody ever criticizes anybody for having a good will (except perhaps ironically: “I’m so tired of Mrs. Brown; she has such a good will!”).

<sup>122</sup> Kant’s noumenal is very much like Wittgenstein’s *mystical*, which I discussed in chapter 6.

<sup>123</sup> Kant explicitly rejects the idea of authoritative divine revelation in his *Religion*. Indeed, that is the main point he makes in that particular book.

The emphasis on the good will is the existential element in Kant's ethics. Note that he seeks to improve on Plato by invoking a more personalistic concept. A good will must be the will of a person, not of an abstract reality.

But what is a good will? Kant says it is a will that does its duties, moreover that does its duties for duty's sake. That is, a good will doesn't do its duty to gain pleasure or happiness (as the teleological tradition imagined), nor out of its own inclination (as the existential tradition thinks), but simply because it is duty. Here Kant's deontology comes to the fore.

But then it becomes important to know what our duties are, again, without God to tell us. Kant, like the Greeks, thinks that we can find our duties by a rational process. For Kant it goes like this. There are two kinds of imperatives, *hypothetical* and *categorical*. Hypothetical or conditional imperatives contain "if... then," for example, "if you want to paint the wall, you must put newspapers on the carpet." The imperative "you must put newspapers on the carpet" is not for everyone, in all situations. Rather, it is only for people to whom the condition applies. If you don't want to paint the wall, you have no obligation to spread the newspapers.

In ethical discussion, we sometimes make use of hypothetical imperatives, such as, "if you want to prevent war, you should negotiate." Kant sees teleological ethics as relying on hypothetical imperatives, as: "if you want happiness, you should avoid murder." But in Kant's view, such hypothetical imperatives are not fundamental to ethics. They are, if valid at all, applications of our basic duties, not the basic duties themselves.

The basic duties, the fundamental responsibilities from which all others are derived, are categorical, not hypothetical. That is, they are not based on any conditions or any particular life-situation. They are always binding, in every situation, under all conditions. That is to say that ethical principles must be universally and necessarily binding. If it is wrong for me to steal, then it is also wrong for you, or for any rational agent anywhere in the universe.

But if ethical duties are unconditional and universally binding, then we cannot discover them through sense experience, which only discerns part of the universe and which cannot distinguish conditional from unconditional.

So how does Kant propose to discover categorical imperatives? He says that an ethical principle is categorical if someone can consistently will its universal application. As we saw above, Kant believes that ethical principles must be universally binding. Now we see that he wants to derive the content of those principles from the very idea of universality. Or, as your mother probably taught you, when you are considering a course of action, ask yourself "what if everybody did it?"



Kant's clearest example concerns promises. Consider the principle, that we may break promises whenever it is in our interest. Can that principle be applied universally? Kant says no, because if everybody is free to break their promises, the very word "promise" would have no meaning. By definition, a promise is a pledge that we are obligated to keep. A pledge we are not obligated to keep is not a promise. So if everybody thinks they can break their promises whenever they want, there is no difference between promises and non-promises, and the concept of a promise becomes meaningless. So, Kant concludes, we may not break our promises when that is in our interest, and that implies the positive norm, that we must keep our promises. That positive norm is a categorical imperative.

Another example concerns cruelty. Consider the principle that we may be cruel to others whenever we like. If that principle is universal, then it implies that not only may I be cruel to someone else when so inclined, but also that anyone else has the right to be cruel to me. That principle is intolerable: nobody desires to be treated cruelly, Kant thinks (in the days before Sado-masochism became a staple of culture). So the prohibition of cruelty is a categorical imperative.

These two examples are somewhat different. In the first, Kant's critique concerns the destruction of a concept, namely promise, rendering it meaningless. Someone might object that such a result is not a bad thing, that the idea of promises should indeed be banished from the world. A Nietzsche might chafe at the very idea that we should be expected to bind ourselves with words; away with it! We may disagree with Nietzsche, but such a view is not contradictory or meaningless in any obvious way, as Kant seems to think it is. Of course it would be contradictory to bind oneself with a promise and to think oneself unbound by it. But it is not contradictory to oppose the very idea of promising, or to prefer to use "promise" in a lesser sense, for a relative, not absolute commitment.

The strength of Kant's argument, paradoxically, is really an appeal to inclination. Kant would, evidently, not like to live in a world without promises. I wouldn't either. But that inclination is emotional, not based on a Kant's logical argument.

The cruelty example is even more obviously an appeal to inclination. Of course I would not like to live in a world in which someone had the right to be cruel to me. Such a world would be unpleasant in the extreme. But I don't think it would be contradictory for someone else to prefer a world like that. Indeed, that seems to be precisely the sort of universe preferred by Mafia dons and drug lords: I have the right to torture and kill you, and if it turns out that you will torture and kill me, well, that's just business.

Kant also wants to avoid any appeal to the consequences of actions. But his arguments ask "what would the world be like if this maxim is universalized?"

To ask that is to ask, precisely, the consequences of universalizing the maxim in question.

Kant also provides broader examples of categorical imperatives, which he considers summaries of all the others. I paraphrase them as follows:

1. Act according to ethical principles that you can will to be universally followed.
2. Act according to principles that you could will to be universal laws of nature.
3. Act so as to treat human beings always as ends, never as mere means.

I shall not try to explain the distinction between the first two. Essentially they indicate the principle described earlier, by which Kant tests ethical maxims. It is interesting, however, to see these principles laid out in this form. For it becomes clear that Kant is really asking us, in our moral judgments, to think like God. In traditional theology, it is God who wills principles to be universal, even to be laws of nature. In Kant's thought, man replaces God. We saw that earlier in his metaphysics, in which man's mind in effect creates the world. We see that here in his ethics as well.

The third principle is based on an argument like the argument against cruelty I discussed above. Kant would like to live in a world in which human beings are always treated as ends. But Vito Corleone and Tony Soprano (to say nothing of Hitler, Stalin, Osama Bin Laden, and Pol Pot) might prefer a different kind of world. Kant's argument, again, is more existential than deontological. It doesn't constitute a rigorous demonstration of any moral principle.

In the end, Kant's moral norm is as empty as Plato's Good. It cannot prove anything to be morally obligatory. Nor, argues Alasdair MacIntyre, is Kant's approach capable of establishing moral restrictions on anyone's conduct:

In fact, ...with sufficient ingenuity almost every precept can be consistently universalized. For all that I need to do is to characterize the proposed action in such a way that the maxim will permit me to do what I want while prohibiting others from doing what would nullify the maxim if universalized. Kant asks if I can consistently universalize the maxim that I may break my promises whenever it suits me. Suppose, however, he had inquired whether I can consistently universalize the maxim, "I may break my promises only when..." The gap is filled by a description devised so that it will apply to my present circumstances but to very few others, and to none such that if someone else obeyed the maxim, it would inconvenience me, let alone show the maxim incapable of consistent universality. It follows that in practice the test of the categorical imperative imposes

restrictions only on those insufficiently equipped with ingenuity. And this surely is scarcely what Kant intended.<sup>124</sup>

For example, let us test the maxim, “I may break my promises only when I promise my son Johnny to buy him a car for his birthday.” Is that universally applicable? Sure. It’s fine for absolutely anyone to break that particular promise to Johnny. Just kidding, son. But there is nothing logically contradictory in such a universalization.

Others have observed that Kant’s method can be used to justify trivial duties. What about the maxim that everyone should wear red socks? There seems to be no contradiction in universalizing this principle. Does that mean that we have a duty to wear red socks? But we could also argue similarly that we have a duty to wear blue socks. These principles together create a contradiction; but individually each one passes Kant’s test.

So Kant’s ingenious and strenuous effort to derive ethical norms from the principle of universality must be judged a failure. In the end, he gives us no more assurance of what is right or wrong than any other secular thinker. He tries to provide an absolute norm without God, which is to say, from impersonal principles. But again impersonalism fails to provide universal, necessary, categorical imperatives.

There is a place for God in Kant’s philosophy, but Kant’s God is not the source of moral norms. If God exists, for Kant, he exists in the noumenal realm, so nobody can know whether he exists or not. Nevertheless, Kant says, it is best for us to act as *if* God exists, for a number of reasons. One of these is that there is a connection between moral behavior and happiness. He rejects the notion that we should follow moral principles in order to achieve happiness. Rather we should do our duty simply for duty’s sake. But if we do our duty for duty’s sake, then, objectively, we deserve happiness. However, in this world, the righteous are often unhappy, while the wicked flourish. So Kant thinks we should assume the existence of an afterlife, in which a personal God rewards good and punishes evil. Again, he doesn’t say that such a thing can be proved, only that we should carry on our moral life as if it were true. Otherwise, he seems to think, morality itself is incoherent. This is sometimes called Kant’s “moral argument for the existence of God.” But, unlike other traditional theistic arguments, it does not purport to be a demonstration, only a piece of practical advice.

Some evaluative comments, by way of summary:

1. Kant pushes human rational autonomy to new heights, in effect identifying the mind of man with the mind of God, both in his metaphysics, his epistemology, and his ethics.

---

<sup>124</sup> MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 197-98.

2. The rationalism and irrationalism of Kant's phenomena/noumena distinction affect his ethics. If we cannot know the real world, how can we be sure of what our duties are? If our experience is virtually created by the mind, how can ethical norms be anything more than the human mind proclaiming duties to itself?

3. Kant's principle that a good will does its duty for duty's sake, not for happiness or out of inclination, may sound pious, but it is not biblical. Scripture, as we saw in Chapter 3 and earlier in this chapter, often motivates our ethical behavior by referring to its consequences (God's glory, human rewards and punishments), and by invoking the new inclinations given us in regeneration.

4. Although Kant is right to say that moral principles must be universal, I have shown that we cannot discover those principles merely by testing each maxim for universal applicability.

5. The universality argument cannot justify any concrete moral norms. So Kant's deontology is as empty as those of the Greeks.

6. Kant claims to avoid any appeal to consequences (teleological) or inclination (existential). But he tests the universality of maxims by showing precisely the consequences of their universal affirmation. And in the end he judges these consequences according to his inclinations: his desire to live in a world in which such things as promises exist, cruelty does not, and everyone treats everyone else as an end.

### **Idealism**

Idealism is the name usually given for the school of philosophy that followed Kant and had a large influence<sup>125</sup> into the early twentieth century. G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) is usually regarded as the leading figure in the movement, but in Germany Fichte and Schelling were also prominent names, and in Britain later on, T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and Bernard Bosanquet.<sup>126</sup>

As with Aristotle, Plato, and Kant, Idealist philosophy is difficult to fit into any of our defined schools of ethics. It is a very impressive blend of ideas, with

---

<sup>125</sup> Even on both sides of the English channel! As I mentioned in an earlier note, it has been rare in the last few centuries for a philosophical movement to be prominent both on the continent and in Britain.

<sup>126</sup> It is interesting to note how many modern philosophical movements have three prominent members: Continental rationalists Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz; British empiricists Locke, Berkeley, Hume; German Idealists Fichte, Schelling, Hegel; British Idealists Green, Bradley, Bosanquet; American Idealists Royce, Bowman, Blanshard; Pragmatists Peirce, James, Dewey; Existentialists Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre; Process philosophers Alexander, Whitehead, Hartshorne; Boston personalists Bowne, Brightman, Bertocci. I haven't aligned these triads with my three perspectives, but I will not promise not to.

affinities to many previous philosophical movements. For a secular system, it provides a remarkable balance between teleological, existential, and deontological themes. But I think the ethical appeal of Idealism is its doctrine of the absolute. This is an impersonal absolute, to be sure, but nevertheless a kind of absolute. And the idea of an absolute fits into deontological ethics far better than any other kind of ethics. Also, as we shall see, the notion of duty is important to idealist ethicists.

Idealism rejects the Kantian noumenal. Kant, as we saw, was inconsistent in his denial that we know the noumenal. But if the noumenal really is unknowable, then we cannot make any use of it in our philosophy. Consistently, we cannot even affirm that it exists. So the idealists dropped that concept. But once you drop the noumenal, what is left? The phenomenal, of course. But then the phenomenal is not merely an “appearance” of something else. Rather, it is reality. It is the “thing in itself.” So the idealist rejects Kant’s skepticism and adopts Hegel’s affirmation of rationalism: the real is the rational and the rational is the real.

Nevertheless, Hegel is chastened by Kant’s critiques of reason. Reason discovers the truth, he tells us, not by simple observation (Hume) or by logical deduction of a mathematical-linear type (Leibniz), but by a method he calls dialectical. “Dialectic” is related to the concept “dialogue.” Plato’s dialogues seek to approach the truth by putting two or more viewpoints up against one another. As the deficiencies of each become evident, the truth begins to shine through. Similarly, Hegel’s method seeks to find truth by self-criticism.

Here’s how it works. You start with one idea, then you begin to see defects in that idea, so that the opposite seems more adequate. But then you begin to see defects in the second idea as well, and more virtues in the first, and that meditation propels you to a third view that incorporates the truth of the first two ideas, but also rises above them to show you more than you knew before.<sup>127</sup>

In other words, Hegel admits with Hume and Kant that our rational ideas have their inadequacies, that they are mixed with error. But he proposes that instead of falling into skepticism, we use these inadequacies to help us move on to greater levels of knowledge. Error, therefore, is a bad thing, but it also has its positive aspects.

Hegel develops a philosophy of vast complexity by using this method. He believes that he has discovered, not only a useful way to learn things, but the very mind of the universe itself. The dialectic, he thinks, is the road to absolute truth, so it reflects perfectly the movements of nature and history. Or, to put it better, the movements of nature and history reflect dialectical thought. (Historical events also proceed through conflict to resolution, making progress to greater

---

<sup>127</sup> Hegel’s disciples and interpreters labeled these three steps “thesis, antithesis, synthesis.” Hegel himself used this language occasionally, but did not stress it.

and greater levels of civilization.) Indeed, the dialectic is the very mind of God, the mind of the absolute. Hegel's absolute is a pantheistic sort of deity, coming to self-consciousness through human thought. So the eventual outcome of the dialectic is that we will be identical with the divine mind.

One problem with this epistemology is that any idea we have today will be negated by another idea, suggested that today we do not have any ideas we can call true. Hegel thought that the process of dialectical negation had ended in his philosophy, and that therefore his philosophy would never be transcended by another. Similarly, he thought that the Prussian state had reached the pinnacle of historical development and would never be replaced by a superior order. But most readers have not accepted Hegel's claims in these regards. So we face the question, if nobody has reached the pinnacle, how do we know that our present ideas are anywhere near the truth? And how do we choose between one idea and another, if they are all subject to negation and synthesis? For idealism, there is a sense in which we will not have any truth until the end of the process (a kind of eschaton) when we achieve omniscience and our thought becomes fully identical to that of the absolute. In other words, you can't know anything until you know everything. Thus Hegel's rationalism devolves into irrationalism.

The specifically ethical teachings of idealism are presented more clearly among the British idealists than among the German ones. The following discussion is based on F. H. Bradley's *Ethical Studies*.<sup>128</sup> There is a large dose of existential ethics in Bradley, who emphasizes that morality is something irreducibly personal. Only persons have obligations; only persons can be obedient or disobedient to ethical norms. The reader will understand from earlier discussions that on this point I emphatically agree.

Bradley teaches that in ethics one is concerned primarily with developing inner character. How one changes the world or responds to moral principles are secondary considerations. When I paint a fence, my ultimate goal is not to have a painted fence, but rather my own inward satisfaction at completing my task. So, as Aristotle taught, ethical behavior is essentially self-realization. The point of ethics is not to change the world, but to change ourselves. As with Kant, the only unequivocal good is the good will. Ethical reflection and action can direct the will in a better direction.

But unlike Kant, the idealists see the good will, not as a will that looks to its duty in the abstract, but that also looks to its inclinations and environment. Self-realization involves all of these, which should not be set against one another as in Kant. For example: Should we not admire a person who enjoys doing right, who does it out of inclination, as much or more than we admire someone who does his duty merely for duty's sake?

---

<sup>128</sup> Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1927.

So for idealism, self-realization involved relating oneself to a context: to our own inclinations and happiness, to the needs of other people, to the physical environment (which can enable or prevent us from doing good), ultimately to the whole universe. So, as in Hegel's metaphysics, in which you don't know one thing until you know how it is related to everything, so in ethics, you cannot attain your highest level of self-realization until you take into account your relation to the whole universe.

Bradley, however, narrows the context a bit, in his chapter "My Station and Its Duties." For him the point of ethics is to find your station and to perform the duties associated with that station. Your station may be your nationality, your occupation, your social class, your place in a family or organization. Fathers have duties different from their children. Kings have duties different from those of railroad engineers, and so on. In Bradley's view, you do have some choice as to what station you occupy, though those choices are limited by birth, education, economic status. But if you are a lieutenant in the navy, you must perform the duties prescribed for a lieutenant. If you are a butler, you must do the things butlers are supposed to do, and so on.

So idealism, like Kant, focuses on duties, and on that account I call it deontological, though idealists also speak positively about self-realization (existential) and achieving happiness (teleological). But it offers us no more reliable means of discovering our duties than did Kant. We may evaluate idealist ethics as a global epistemology (Hegel's dialectic) or as a view of individual vocation (Bradley). Hegel's dialectic seeks to bring about an identity between ourselves and the absolute, and it devolves into rationalism and irrationalism. Hegel's absolute is impersonal, so it is no more suited as an ethical authority than Plato's Good.

Bradley's theory of individual vocation appears to give us specific norms for conduct. But Bradley's view is too obviously a reflection of his time. He wrote in England, at a time when social classes were rigidly defined and distinguished. Everyone knew how a king, or a prime minister, or a general, or a butler, or a street cleaner was supposed to behave. And if one stepped out of bounds, people shuddered over the impropriety. But in a time like ours, where people move rapidly upward and downward on the social scale, in a multiethnic and multicultural society, in an age where new vocations are being created every day, where even gender roles are disputed, it is not evident that the "duties" of particular "stations" have moral weight. Nor is it clear how Bradley's view helps us in trying to come to grips with the moral debates of our time, on abortion, preemptive war, women's rights, and so on. A follower of Bradley would probably take conservative positions on social issues generally. But if he wished to make a persuasive case, he would have to do more than to say that his position is dictated by his station in life. Conservative as its conclusions may be, that kind of argument is essentially relativistic, like Marx's view that morality is relative to one's social class.

## Moore and Prichard

I have mentioned several times G. E. Moore (1873-1958) as the one who coined the term “naturalistic fallacy.” Moore used the naturalistic fallacy argument mainly against utilitarianism. In its place, he adopted a kind of deontology known as Intuitionism.

In *Principia Ethica*,<sup>129</sup> Moore wrestles with the definition of goodness.<sup>130</sup> We cannot define goodness as pleasure, as the utilitarians do, he says, because it always makes sense to ask if a particular pleasure is in fact good. He says the same about all other definitions that have been proposed. Again and again he reiterates that we cannot define goodness as x, because it is always an open question whether x is in fact good. This is Moore’s famous “open question argument.” So Moore concludes that goodness is indefinable.

I suspect that the problems in defining goodness arise, not because goodness is indefinable, but because there are so many different sets of values in our society. If everyone agreed that goodness was pleasure, then it would not be an open question as to whether a pleasure was in fact good, though there would probably be open questions as to what was actually (or most) pleasurable. Similarly, if everybody agreed that goodness is “what God approves,” then it would not be an open question whether something approved by God was good.<sup>131</sup>

But let us follow Moore’s argument further. Not only is goodness indefinable, according to Moore, but it is impossible to derive such goodness from any “natural” state of affairs. “Naturalistic fallacy” is his name for the mistake of trying to do this. Moore never quite defines what he means by “natural” in this context. Evidently, pleasure would be an example of such a natural state. But I have given reason to doubt whether a definition of goodness in terms of pleasure is necessarily wrong. In the end, for Moore, the ground for the distinction

---

<sup>129</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, originally published in 1903.

<sup>130</sup> At this point, non-moral goodness.

<sup>131</sup> Some have suggested that if we define goodness as what God approves, then it is meaningless to say that what God approves is good. It would be as if I defined “world’s greatest shortstop” as “RTS theologian,” and then claimed to be the world’s greatest shortstop. My statement would be true, given that definition, but it would also be silly and misleading. I think the problem is simply that in the shortstop/RTS case there is a blatant misuse of language. That is not evidently so in the first case. If we define goodness as what God approves, then of course all goodness, including God’s own, will be judged according to his standards. I fail to see any problem in that. Someone might object that if God’s acts are to be evaluated by his own standards, he could do something that to us would be monstrously wrong. In reply: Scripture tells us that God’s goodness is similar to the goodness he requires of us, because we are made in his image. ‘You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matt. 5:48).



between natural and nonnatural is intuition. But there are problems with his view of intuition, as we shall see below.

Still, as I've indicated often in the last few chapters, I do think that the phrase "naturalistic fallacy" does name a real problem in the secular ethical literature. Perhaps it can better be described more simply as a failure to justify the use of *ought*.

But Moore goes on: If goodness may not be derived from any natural state of affairs, what is it? Moore answers, it is a simple and unanalyzable (because indefinable) property of various states of affairs. And how do we discover goodness? By intuition, hence the label "intuitionism" for his position.

Moore isn't very clear on how this is done. He speaks of holding something before the mind, contemplating it, and thereby identifying it as good or bad. The picture is something analogous to sense-experience. But of course Moore rejected the idea that goodness could be derived from sense experience. So his concept of intuition is mysterious.<sup>132</sup>

It is hard to imagine on this view how people could actually debate whether something is good. Once the parties "hold those facts before their minds," they can only report to one another what they intuit. Perhaps, as with emotivism, they can argue about the facts to which the intuitions are directed. But once everyone agrees about those facts, there can really be no argument about their goodness or badness, even though intuitions may disagree. Rather, each party can only appeal to his own intuition as a supreme authority.

As with Bradley, intuitionism flourished in Britain at a time of strong moral consensus within the society. It was a post-Christian age, but an age in which traditional Christian morality ("borrowed capital" in Van Til's terms) continued to carry weight. So it is not surprising that when people discussed moral issues, holding the facts before their minds, their intuitions led to conclusions more or less in accord with the Bible. But when society became more pluralistic, leading to the hyper-pluralism of today, that consensus broke down, and intuitionism became implausible.<sup>133</sup>

But the situation was even worse than that. Moore himself appealed to intuition mainly to establish the goal of behavior, that is the good. He agrees with the utilitarians that ethics is a matter of choosing a goal and then the means to

---

<sup>132</sup> I'm inclined to think that philosophers speak of intuition when they think they know something, but don't know how. Nevertheless, the concept of intuition is not entirely useless. See DKG, 345-46.

<sup>133</sup> I heard a story once, but have forgotten the source, about the chaos that ensued when D. H. Lawrence, advocate of sexual liberation, visited a genteel ethical discussion group of Moore's time. Maybe the story is apocryphal, but imagining the clash of values helps us to see what the loss of consensus must have been like. After Lawrence and others like him, it was no longer possible to gain ethical assurance simply by holding a state of affairs before the mind.

attain it, but he disagrees with them as to the manner of choosing the goal. So regarding the goal, Moore is deontologist. But in choosing the means to achieve that goal, Moore follows the usual teleological-utilitarian pattern.

But a student of Moore, H. A. Prichard,<sup>134</sup> argued that on this construction the end justifies the means. But (intuitively!) we know that cannot be right. A good end does not justify using wicked means to achieve it. So Prichard adopted a view even more consistently intuitionist: we need intuition, not only to evaluate the end, but also to evaluate the means. We need intuition all across the board, in any evaluation of any decision, action, or goal.

This view implies, of course, that we must invoke intuition countless times each day.

We should commend Moore and Prichard for understanding the importance of authoritative ethical norms. But their intuition is really an asylum of ignorance. In one sense, what they call intuition is really conscience, the faculty God has given us for determining good and evil. But conscience must be informed by God's revelation, lest it be ignorant, immature, or even "seared" (1 Tim. 4:2). In secular intuitionism, there is no objective source of ethical truth. Intuition becomes virtually a synonym for personal inclination, and this form of deontologism becomes indistinguishable from existential ethics.

It is not surprising, then, that the philosophy of language analysis, of which Moore was a founder, led next to Wittgenstein's mystical understanding of ethics and the positivists' emotivism, which we discussed in Chapter 6.

Deontologism continues to show up in ethical philosophy from time to time. An example is John Rawls' (1921--) *A Theory of Justice*<sup>135</sup> which opposes utilitarianism and emphasizes the importance of "fairness." Rawls argues that each person is entitled to the most extensive liberty compatible with the same liberty for others, and that inequalities are justified only to the extent that they are necessary to help the disadvantaged. Yet the foundation for these moral norms is unclear and unpersuasive. Deontologism is right to say that we need to have moral norms beyond our subjectivity and the happiness of mankind. But it has no clear idea of how such knowledge can be gained.

### **Conclusions on Non-Christian Ethical Philosophy**

We have investigated three types of non-Christian ethical philosophy, existential, teleological, and deontological. Permit me to summarize this material in the following comments:

---

<sup>134</sup> See his *Moral Obligation* (London: Oxford, 1949).

<sup>135</sup> Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

1. We have seen that the better thinkers, like Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, combine emphases from more than one of these perspectives. But even they tend to favor one and disparage the other two, and that tendency is even more pronounced among the lesser ethicists. This is understandable, because only God can guarantee the coherence of the three perspectives. The biblical God declares the moral law (deontological), and he creates human beings to find their happiness (teleological) in obeying that law. He also makes us so that at our best we will find God's law our chief delight (existential). So God made all three perspectives, and he made them to cohere. But if a thinker seeks to formulate ethics without God, he has no guarantee that the three perspectives will cohere. For all he knows, human happiness may require a life contrary to all moral rules, or to keep the moral law we must sacrifice all our happiness and inclination. So he must choose which perspective to follow in case of conflict, which will almost certainly take place. Thus non-Christian thinkers tend to lose the unity and balance of the three perspectives.

2. Nevertheless, we have seen that each ethical thinker must deal with the three perspectives, even if he prefers one to another. Kant, for example, seeks to avoid any teleological considerations. Yet to establish his categorical imperatives he must consider the consequences of denying them, and consequential reasoning is the essence of teleological ethics. Teleological thinkers, in turn, must give some consideration to moral norms, even though they tend to reduce these norms to happiness or pleasure, and though they give no adequate account of why their norms are obligatory. Every ethicist must give some consideration to norms, goals, and feelings, whatever he may choose to emphasize. So there is a tension in each system between its focus on a particular perspective and its need to do justice to all of them.

3. No non-Christian ethicist does justice even to his own favorite perspective. Deontologists advocate an empty norm, one without definable content. That norm gives no clear guidance, and it prevents the lesser principles from giving us clear guidance, since they are relativized by the ultimate norm. Thus there really is no norm at all, and we are no better off than we would be with a teleological or existential ethic.

Teleological ethics tries to be empirical, concrete, practical. It wants to avoid any reference to mysterious, transcendent principles. But the basis for applying their principles, like the principle of utility, is ultimately mysterious. And the calculation involved in making ethical choices requires superhuman insight.

Existential ethics tries to do justice to the inner life, but it gives no guidance adequate for our self-realization.

4. All non-Christian systems involve rationalism and irrationalism: rationalism in the claim that the human mind can determine what to do without

God's help, irrationalism in claiming that ethics is ultimately based on unknowable chance or fate. Rationalism leads to dogmatic certainty about an absolute, but that absolute is empty, and hence irrational. Irrationalism, however, is asserted by a would-be autonomous claim, and is therefore rationalistic. If irrationalism is true, then there is such a thing as truth, and irrationalism cannot be true.

5. This epistemological confusion leads to a proliferation of different viewpoints as to the norms and goals of ethics. What is the goal of human life? Pleasure? Power? Self-realization? Contentment?

6. The non-Christian approach leads to the abandonment of ethics itself. The story of twentieth-century ethics is that philosophers have abandoned their traditional role (since Plato) of teaching us how to live. The main ethical thinkers of the twentieth century (with the exception of existentialism, which is inconsistent in this regard) don't try to tell us how to live, but rather they examine the language and reasoning of the discipline of ethics. In other words, they have given up ethics for metaethics. Their concern is not to defend ethical principles, but rather to show us what an ethical principle is. Their message to us is, "if you happen to hold any such things as ethical principles, here's what they are."

The reason for this development is not hard to see. If there is no norm or duty available to human beings by the revelation of a personal God, then there is no way that any ethical philosopher, or anyone else, can tell us what to do.

7. Since non-Christian ethics is helpless to do justice to its own concerns, it is wholly unable to bring objections against Christianity. Traditionally, non-Christians have often objected to the morality of Scripture, even to God's actions (such as commanding Joshua to destroy the Canaanites). They have objected on ethical grounds to the imputation of Adam's sin, to election and reprobation, to the substitutionary atonement, to Hell. And they have argued vigorously the "problem of evil," that a holy God should not have permitted evil in his universe.<sup>136</sup> But the non-Christian has no basis for raising these objections, since he cannot himself make a meaningful distinction between good and evil.

8. Yet there are elements in non-Christian ethical thought that can be useful for Christians. (a) Because of God's general revelation, the non-Christian has considerable knowledge of God's precepts (Rom. 1:32, 2:14f) and sometimes sets forth that knowledge in spite of himself. (b) Non-Christian thought shows, as we have seen, the importance of doing justice to the three perspectives. (c) Non-Christian thought is often more sensitive than Christian thought to the complexities of the ethical life and of human decision-making.

But in the end, nobody has the right to argue an ethical principle unless they are willing to listen to the God of Scripture. As we have seen, moral norms

---

<sup>136</sup> For my response to the problem of evil, see DG, Chapter 9.

can come only from a personal absolute, and the Bible is the only written revelation that presents such a God to us. So we must now turn to Scripture to hear the word of the Lord.

**Part Three: Christian Ethical Methodology**

## **Section 1: The Normative Perspective**

### **Chapter 9: The Organism of Revelation**

The main point of Part Two, Chapters 4-8, is that non-Christian ethics is incapable of providing a basis for moral decision. Nevertheless, we live in a world dominated by non-Christian views of ethics. This world is our situation, our ethical environment. So I considered Part Two in terms of the situational perspective, though we also discussed other perspectives in that connection.

In this and the following chapters, Part Three of the treatise on ethics, I shall attempt to show how a Christian ethic provides the basis for ethical decisions that was lacking in non-Christian approaches.

Christian ethics, as I have indicated, is triperspectival. It seeks to honor all three perspectives, not just one or two as is usually the case in non-Christian ethics. For the three perspectives represent God's Lordship. They are God's Lordship attributes, his control, authority, and presence, manifest to us as his revelation. In Part Three, I shall indicate how these perspectives function in our ethical decisions, particularly how they relate to one another in grounding these decisions. This discussion can be called methodology, or simply a Christian decision-making procedure. Since it describes a subjective process by which we make decisions, Part Three represents as a whole the existential perspective. But of course the decision-making procedure involves all three perspectives.

In general, a Christian ethical decision is the application of God's revelation (normative) to a problem (situational) by a person (existential). Recall the "three factors in ethical judgment" in Chapter 3. There we considered as an example a counseling situation: the counselor must ask about the problem, God's word, and the personal needs of the counselee. But we also saw there that the counselor cannot fully understand one of these factors without the others. So each includes the other two. That is to say, they are perspectives.

In this chapter I will begin with the normative perspective. Under the normative perspective, the ethical question is, what does God's word tell me to do? To answer that question, as we shall see, we will need to understand the situation about which the question is asked, and the person who is asking it. But the focus will be on God's revelation, the source of the norms that will govern our decision.

This discussion could be called a Christian deontological ethic or command ethic. But unlike secular versions of deontologism, our standard comes, not from an abstraction, an impersonal fate, or chance, but from the word of the living God.

What is God's revelation? We evangelicals answer, almost involuntarily, Scripture. Certainly Scripture is God's word, his revelation, infallible and inerrant.<sup>137</sup> And Scripture has a special place of prominence among other kinds of revelation, as we shall see. But Scripture is not all there is of revelation. There are words of God that are not in the Bible, such as (1) the words God speaks to all the forces of nature to direct their ways (Ps. 147:14-18, 148:7-8), (2) the living word, Jesus, who is not contained within the Bible, though the Bible contains some of his words (John 1:1-14), (3) the words Jesus spoke in the flesh that were not recorded in Scripture, and (4) the words of prophets and apostles that were not recorded in Scripture.<sup>138</sup>

I believe that the unique importance of Scripture can best be seen, not by denying the existence of other forms of revelation, but rather by showing the precise relationships between Scripture and those other forms. As we look at those other forms, we shall see that we can make no use of them apart from Scripture. So by mentioning other forms, we do not detract from the uniqueness of Scripture, but we enhance it.

So God's revelation forms an organism, a unity of many self-manifestations, many norms. Ultimately, revelation includes everything, for all reality manifests God. So the normative perspective, like the other perspectives, is a perspective on everything. Yet we shall see that within that universal organism of revelation, Scripture plays a leading role. Let us now look at some aspects of that organism.

### **God Himself as Ethical Norm**

In our discussion of the naturalistic fallacy in Chapter 5 and later, I indicated that it is not a naturalistic fallacy to argue, "God commands x, therefore we must do x." This argument might seem like a forbidden argument from is to ought, from fact to obligation. But that is not so, for God is not only a fact, but a norm. That is the case because anything God says is normative, obligatory. His word is authority as well as power and presence.

God's very nature is normative. That is to say, authority is an aspect of the lordship that defines him. This is evident from our previous discussions of the nature of lordship.

---

<sup>137</sup> I cannot in this book discuss in detail the reasons for holding this fundamental article of faith. I hope to enter that discussion in *Doctrine of the Word of God*, forthcoming. It should be evident, however, that if ethics is to be based on the will of a personal-absolute God, it must be possible for human beings to have access to his words. He must *speak* to us. And, as Cornelius Van Til pointed out, such a God can speak to us only with supreme authority.

<sup>138</sup> The slogan of the Trinity Foundation ([www.trinityfoundation.org](http://www.trinityfoundation.org)) is "The Bible alone is the Word of God." This slogan is unbiblical.



Scripture also teaches this fact by its identification of God as light: “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Note also the many applications to Jesus of the metaphor of light (Matt. 4:16, Luke 1:79, 2:32, John 1:4-9, 3:19-21, 8:12, 9:5, 12:46, 1 John 2:8, Rev. 21:23). When people see God, they see a great light, often described as the glory. That glory also radiates from Jesus on the mount of transfiguration (Matt. 17:2). 1 John 1:5 associates that physical light with God’s moral purity.

But light does not only refer to God’s moral excellence, but also to the communication of that excellence, the revelation of it, to human beings. The light of God’s essence is a light that we are to walk in: “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). The light is our ethical guide: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). The light reveals good and evil (John 3:19-21). So we should not walk in darkness (Matt. 6:22-23, John 8:12, 12:46, Rom. 13:12, 1 Cor. 4:5, 2 Cor. 6:14). To dwell in the light is to dwell with God; to dwell in darkness is to be apart from him. Indeed, we are to *be* the light (Matt. 5:14, Eph. 5:8).

So, by his very nature, God is not only ethically pure, but he inevitably reveals that moral purity to human beings, calling them to live in accord with it. When sinners see God in Scripture, they are often filled with a sense of moral guilt (Isa. 6:5, Luke 5:8). God’s very being is ethically normative.

In every form of revelation, God reveals himself. All revelation bears the lordship attribute of presence. So in every form of revelation, God reveals his ethically normative being. In DG, 470-475, I argued that God’s word is always one with God himself.<sup>139</sup> All revelations of God manifest his presence, as well as his authority and controlling power. The speech of God, his word, has divine attributes, attributes of righteousness (Ps. 119:7), faithfulness (verse 86), wonderfulness (verse 142), truth (same verse, and John 17:17), eternity (Ps. 119:89, 160), omnipotence (Gen. 18:14, Luke 1:37, Isa. 55:11), and perfection (Ps. 19:7-11). It is an object of worship (Ps. 56:4, 10, 119:120, 161-62, Isa. 66:5). And indeed, God’s word is God (John 1:1).

So human ethical responsibility is essentially this: the imitation of God. We are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). That image is a fact. It is our nature, the fact that distinguishes us from all other creatures and gives us a special relationship to God. Rather than to be “rational animals,” as in Aristotle, our essence is to be like God. But just as God is both a fact and a norm, so our nature as his image is both a fact and a norm. Because God has dominion over all things, we are to have an analogous dominion, under him (Gen. 1:28). Even after the fall, we are to be holy as he is holy (Lev. 11:44, 1 Pet. 1:15-16), perfect

<sup>139</sup> And I will argue this in more detail in *Doctrine of the Word of God*.

as he is perfect (Matt. 5:48). We are to work six days and rest the seventh, for that is what God did (Ex. 20:11). We are to reflect the light of God's moral purity (above).

The imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) is also a major theme in biblical ethics. We are to love one another, as Jesus first loved us (John 13:34-35, 1 John 4:9-11). We are to follow Jesus (Matt. 16:24, 19:21). We are to wash one another's feet, according to his example (John 13:14-15). We are to be sent into the world as he was sent (John 17:18, 20:21). We are to value one another above ourselves, as Jesus did (Phil. 2:5-11). Even Jesus' sufferings and death are exemplary (1 Pet. 2:21, 1 John 3:16). So Paul speaks of himself as an imitator of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

We should carefully distinguish biblical imitation of God from coveting God's prerogatives. Recall that Satan tempted Eve by telling her, "you will be like God" (Gen. 3:5). In one sense, as we have seen above, being like God is the heart of godliness. But Satan was suggesting that Eve could be like God in another way, by rebelling against him and placing herself on the throne. There are some attributes and acts of God that we can never imitate. We are not omniscient or omnipotent; we cannot create a universe; we cannot redeem a race of sinners. None of us can ever be an ultimate ethical authority.<sup>140</sup>

At the most basic level, then, God himself is our source of ethical obligation. Our ultimate norm is personal, not impersonal. We have ethical duties, because God is intrinsically worthy of obedience and imitation, and because all creatures are inevitably confronted with the revelation of his standards.

### **The Word of God as Norm**

How, then, does God reveal his ethical norms to us? God's revelation, his word, comes to us in a number of specific forms that we can summarize under three categories: the word that comes through nature and history, the word that comes through persons, and the word written, which correspond to the three perspectives, situational, existential, and normative, respectively.

#### *1. The Word Through Nature and History*

---

<sup>140</sup> Cf. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 176-77).

First, God's word is revealed through nature and history.<sup>141</sup> Scripture teaches that the heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1). Paul in Rom. 1:18-21 says,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God...

So the creation clearly conveys some significant truths: God's existence, his nature, his wrath against sin. Later (verse 32) Paul indicates that pagans know from God's revelation that those who do certain things are worthy of death. So this revelation has ethical content.

Is it a naturalistic fallacy for them to derive ethical content from the created world? No, because the derivation is not from valueless facts, but from the authoritative revelation of the true God that comes to them through the creation. However, when non-Christians try to argue from the data of natural revelation to reach ethical conclusions, they typically omit any reference to God as the source of the data. And when the argument is presented simply as an argument from the facts and not from God, it is a naturalistic fallacy and should be dismissed on that account.

One thing is lacking in God's revelation through nature. Scripture never indicates that it teaches people the way of salvation. That knowledge comes from the gospel, and the gospel comes through preaching (Rom. 10:13-17). So we might say that nature teaches only law, not gospel.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, the gospel is revealed through history, specifically through redemptive history, those events by which God saves his people from sin. Those events form the content of gospel preaching. So history as a whole does convey the gospel. But only those in proximity to redemptive events can learn from them the way of salvation.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> The "through" is important. We should not make the mistake of thinking that nature and history *are* the word of God. The word of God is God himself, not something in the creation. But the word makes itself known through creaturely means, including nature and history.

<sup>142</sup> I shall discuss this topic at greater length later on.

<sup>143</sup> On the whole, my category of "revelation given through nature and history" is identical to the traditional category of "general revelation." But there is a difference. Revelation given through nature and history, taken as a whole, includes both law and gospel, for the gospel is a segment of history, that segment we call redemptive history. But general revelation, understood in the traditional way, is that portion of God's revelation in nature and history that does not include the gospel. Redemptive history is hard to classify, either on the traditional general/special scheme or on my general/special/existential scheme. Since God's revelation in redemptive history is a revelation in event, rather than word, we are inclined to want to call it general. But since it has redemptive content, we are inclined to call it special. To some extent these are artificial

Another limitation in natural revelation is this: Unregenerate people view it with hostility. So they suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18), exchange it for a lie (verse 25), and God gives them up to their depravity (verses 24, 26, 28). So without grace, general revelation does not help them. But natural revelation is sufficient to make them guilty, to take away all excuses (verse 20).

But for the believer, natural revelation is important also in other ways: (1) It gives us information useful in interpreting Scripture, such as ancient culture and languages. (2) It shows us the contemporary situation to which we must apply the Scriptures. (3) It gives us regular occasion to glorify God for his creation (Ps. 19) and providence (Ps. 104, 146, 147).

Note here the overlap between the normative and situational perspectives. When we ask where we go to find God's norms, one biblical answer is, go to the situation, namely nature and history. As I said earlier, there is a sense in which everything is normative.

If the created world did not reveal God, Scripture itself would be useless. For we cannot interpret Scripture unless we can understand the situations from which Scripture arose and the situations to which we seek to apply it. If the created world did not reveal God clearly, it would thereby cast doubt on the ethical conclusions we seek to derive from Scripture. So general revelation, as Scripture, is necessary, authoritative, clear, and sufficient for its own purposes.<sup>144</sup>

## 2. *Revelation Through Persons*

Since revelation is thoroughly personal, persons are fully appropriate media of God's revelation. As revelation through nature and history is sometimes called "general revelation,"<sup>145</sup> so I often describe revelation through persons as "existential revelation."

Some revelation comes to human beings through personal appearances of the divine persons of the Trinity. When God appears in visible form, that revelation is called theophany. When the Son of God took on flesh and dwelled among us (John 1:14), that revelation is called incarnation. When God the Holy Spirit comes to reveal God in and to us, that revelation is called by various names, depending on its function: inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16), illumination (1 Cor. 2:9-12), demonstration (1 Thess. 1:5), revelation (Eph. 1:17).

---

categories, and it doesn't matter much which we use to describe redemptive history. But we should be aware of the ambiguity of this category of revelation.

<sup>144</sup> An important article emphasizing this point is Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," in N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., *The Infallible Word* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946, 1967), 263-301.

<sup>145</sup> But see an earlier note for a difference between revelation through nature and history and the traditional concept of general revelation.

Existential revelation, however, also includes revelation through human persons. Human beings are in God's image, so we *are* revelation. That image is not lost, but marred or defaced by the fall. But God's grace renews that image in the image of Christ. In this renewal, God writes his word on our heart (Jer. 31:33-34; cf. Deut. 6:6, Prov. 3:3). This means that there is a change in our most fundamental dispositions, so that our deepest desire is to serve God.

As the Spirit illumines the Scriptures and writes God's word on our heart, he truly reveals God to us. The term *reveal* in Scripture does sometimes refer, not to special revelation, nor to general, but to the enlightenment of individuals, so that they actually come to know and appropriate God's truth (Matt. 11:25-27, Eph. 1:17).<sup>146</sup> This is an important form of existential revelation.

Because of redemption, human beings can serve as revelation in still another way: as examples for imitation. We saw earlier the importance of imitating God and Christ in our ethical lives. But one major means of growth to Christians is other Christians who serve as godly examples. Because he imitates Christ, Paul sets himself before us as someone we should imitate: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1; cf. 4:16, Phil. 3:17, 1 Thess. 1:6). He tells Timothy, in turn, to be an example for his congregation to follow (1 Tim. 4:12). The main requirements for elders and deacons in 1 Tim. 3:1-13 and Tit. 1:5-9 are qualities of character, doubtless because these men are expected to serve as examples to the other members of the church. And Scripture mentions many Bible characters as positive or negative examples (1 Cor. 4:16, 10:1-12, Phil. 3:17, 1 Thess. 1:6, 2 Thess. 3:7-9, Heb. 6:11-12, 11:1-12:2, 13:7, James 5:17-18).

So imitation appears to be an important means of sanctification according to Scripture: imitating God, Jesus, Paul and other Bible characters, one's own church officers. Of course some discernment is needed. Human role models, even Bible characters apart from Christ, sometimes stray from God's path. Not everything they do is worth imitating. And some things they do are appropriate in their own situation, but should not be imitated in our own time, such as Joshua's ferocity in slaughtering Canaanites. But those facts do not discourage biblical writers from emphasizing the importance of imitation.

This is one reason why I dissent from the views of some who oppose "exemplarism." These<sup>147</sup> have argued that we should preach Scripture exclusively as a redemptive-historical narrative and never, ever point to a Bible character as a moral example. On the contrary, I think that biblical writers often

---

<sup>146</sup> Evangelicals usually prefer the word *illumination* to the word *revelation* in describing this work of the Spirit. Thus they set themselves over against certain kinds of dialectic and charismatic theology. But the texts I have cited warrant the term *revelation* in this connection.

<sup>147</sup> See Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979). See also many articles and sermons in the publication *Kerux*.

present the characters in their narratives as positive or negative examples. Saul, for instance, is largely a negative example, David a positive one. God has given us these examples as an important means to our ethical and spiritual growth.

### 3. *The Word as Spoken and Written Language*

God's word also comes to us as human words and sentences. This is sometimes called "special revelation."<sup>148</sup> This revelation includes, first, the divine voice, spoken directly to human beings, as to Adam and Eve, to patriarchs such as Noah and Abraham, to all the people of Israel gathered around Mt. Sinai in Ex. 19-20, to Moses, and to other prophets and apostles.

Clearly the revelation spoken directly from God's own mouth is of supreme authority. No one has a right to find fault with it. So it must be regarded as infallible and inerrant. Who would dare to stand before God at Mt. Sinai and criticize his words?

Second, verbal revelation includes the words God speaks to us *through* the prophets and apostles. Theologians sometimes say that when God speaks through a human being his words have less authority than when spoken directly. But according to Deut. 18:18-19, God's word in the mouth of a prophet is truly God's word, with the full authority of God's word:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you [like Moses, JF] from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.<sup>19</sup> And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.

According to Jer. 1:9-10, the word in the mouth of the prophet has authority even over "nations and kingdoms:"

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.<sup>10</sup> See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Third, verbal revelation includes the words God speaks to us through the *written* words of prophets and apostles. Written revelation is part of the covenant

---

<sup>148</sup> Again, the triad I am using doesn't quite match the triad general/existential/special. "Special revelation" can mean (1) any revelation in human words and sentences, or (2) revelation with redemptive content, whether in words or events. In sense (2) there was no special revelation before the Fall; in sense (1) there was. In sense (2), the events of redemptive history (as distinguished from the written account of redemptive history) are part of special revelation; in sense (1) they are not. I hope to sort out these issues a bit in *Doctrine of the Word of God*. In this book, however, I will treat the two triads as roughly synonymous.

God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai in Ex. 19-20. In chapter 3, I mentioned the documents that had constitutional authority in ancient middle eastern covenant arrangements. To violate the terms of the document was to violate the covenant. Similarly, the covenant between God and Israel under Moses included a document that served as Israel's fundamental law, namely the Ten Commandments. When Moses returned from speaking with God, he brought with him two stone tablets containing those. The Ten Commandments are, in literary form, an ancient near eastern suzerainty treaty.<sup>149</sup>

In this document, God speaks to Israel in the first person. He calls the document "the law and the commandments which I have written for their instruction" (Ex. 24:12). Later we read,

And he [God, JF] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God (Ex. 31:18).

Moses destroys the tablets to show God's anger over Israel's false worship in Ex. 32. But God replaces them, again emphasizing his authorship of them:

The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke (Ex. 34:1; cf. Deut. 4:13).

God ordered Moses put this second edition of the Decalogue into the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:16, 40:20), the holiest place in Israel. In the ancient near east, covenant documents were traditionally placed in sanctuaries. So from the beginning, God's revelation was "holy" Scripture.

As theologians sometimes discount God's indirect revelation through prophets, they even more disparage written revelation, thinking that it has much less authority than the direct utterance of the divine voice or the oral voice of the prophet. But Scripture itself draws no distinction between the authority of oral and written revelation. The praises given to God's law, statutes, testimonies, words, commandments, etc. in the Old Testament are directed to God's written word, the laws of Moses (Ps. 19:7, Ps. 119). Paul tells the Corinthians, "If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37), and so he places his written words on the highest level of authority. The famous New Testament passages on biblical authority only summarize this theme that goes back to Moses:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

---

<sup>149</sup> For the elements of that literary form, see Chapter 3.

And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, <sup>20</sup> knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. <sup>21</sup> For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:19-21).

So Scripture, God's written word, is no less authoritative than the divine voice heard directly from God's lips. As such, it has a unique role in the organism of revelation. The point is not that the Bible is more authoritative than God's word in nature or through persons. Everything God says has the same authority, namely supreme authority. But the Bible has a unique role within the organism of revelation, in the following ways:

1. It is the document of the covenant and therefore the court of final appeal for God's people. Like the United States of America, and unlike Great Britain, the church has a written document as its fundamental law, its constitution.

2. Since Jesus ascended to heaven and the prophets and apostles have passed away, the Bible remains as our sole means of access to their words. And we need their words to find eternal life (John 6:68) and to live lives useful to God (Matt. 7:24-27).

3. Without God's grace, we inevitably suppress and distort the truths of natural revelation (Rom. 1:18-32). We can interpret nature rightly, therefore, only when we hear and believe the message of the gospel. But that is available only in Scripture. So we need Scripture if we are rightly to interpret any other form of revelation. As Calvin says, we need Scripture as our "spectacles" to see the natural world correctly.<sup>150</sup>

### **The Unity of the Word**

The same God speaks in all forms of the word, and his message is consistent in all of them. In Ps. 19:1-11, we see the unity between natural revelation and the written word:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. <sup>2</sup> Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. <sup>3</sup> There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. <sup>4</sup> Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, <sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> *Institutes*, 1.6.1.



which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.<sup>6</sup> Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

<sup>7</sup> The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; <sup>8</sup> the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; <sup>9</sup> the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. <sup>10</sup> More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. <sup>11</sup> Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

I think the point here is that Israel should keep the written law, because it is just as firmly established as God's revelation in the heavens and the earth. The two forms of revelation come from the same creator, from the one who controls the whole world, from east to west. Note also Ps. 147:15-20:

He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. <sup>16</sup> He gives snow like wool; he scatters hoarfrost like ashes. <sup>17</sup> He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs; who can stand before his cold? <sup>18</sup> He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow. <sup>19</sup> He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. <sup>20</sup> He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the LORD!

Again, God tells Israel that his word to Jacob has the same majesty and power as the workings of nature. Indeed, the written word, God's statutes and rules, are a great gift to Israel that God has not given to any other nation. All nations know of God's natural revelation, but only Israel has the privilege of knowing his written word.

Scripture also serves as the content of existential revelation. The "law" written on the heart is not something different from the law of Scripture. It is the content of Scripture itself, transferred to a new medium. So the example that godly people provide for us is the content of Scripture, translated into their decisions and actions, applied to their situations.

So the written word displays its prominence as the document of the covenant. But in other ways, the three forms of revelation are dependent on one another. Natural and personal revelation are dependent on Scripture, as explained above. But Scripture is also dependent on them in a way. We cannot understand Scripture without natural revelation, for to interpret the Bible we need to have a knowledge of ancient history, language, and of the contemporary situations to which Scripture must be applied. And we cannot understand

Scripture unless our minds and hearts are made ready for it, by natural ability and by the supernatural work of the Spirit.

## Chapter 10: Attributes of Scripture

In Chapter 9 I began to discuss the normative perspective of Christian ethics. I first discussed God himself as the fundamental norm. Then I discussed more specifically the word of God as norm and distinguished various forms of the word. We saw then that within the organism of revelation Scripture, the written constitution of God's covenant, plays a focal role.

In this chapter, then, I will look at Scripture more specifically,<sup>151</sup> making ethical applications of various attributes or qualities of Scripture. In the Reformed tradition, writers have sometimes spoken of four of these attributes: necessity, authority, clarity,<sup>152</sup> and sufficiency.<sup>153</sup> Four is not a good number for me, since it is not evenly divisible by three. Of course, Scripture has a great many attributes, and if we need more, some are readily at hand. The point is to choose some that illumine important theological and ethical issues.

So I have settled on six, two triads,<sup>154</sup> adding power and comprehensiveness to the traditional list. The first triad is power, authority, and clarity, three qualities of Scripture as God's speech. The second, showing the importance of Scripture to our decisions in life, is comprehensiveness, necessity, and sufficiency. In each triad, we may regard the first member as situational, the second normative, and the third existential, though I confess that the scheme gets stretched a bit in the second triad.

In what follows, I shall discuss these qualities one by one, particularly as they bear on ethics.

### Power

God's word, according to Scripture, not only says things, but also does things. God's word brought the universe into being (Gen. 1, Psm. 33:3-6, John 1:3). It directs the course of nature (Ps. 147:15-18, 148:5-8, Heb. 1:3). No word of God will ever be void of power (Gen. 18:14, Luke 1:37).<sup>155</sup>

---

<sup>151</sup> Note the pattern of discussion, from general to particular: God as norm, the word of God as norm, Scripture as norm, and (later) various parts and aspects of Scripture as norms.

<sup>152</sup> Or, if you prefer a ten-dollar word, perspicuity.

<sup>153</sup> See again Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," in N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., *The Infallible Word* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946, 1967), 263-301. Van Til also makes use of this foursome in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (N. P.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 133-136, and in *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (N. P., Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 41-71.

<sup>154</sup> I should get some credit for resisting the temptation to make three.

<sup>155</sup> This is the literal translation of these two texts.

We see the power of the word also in the preaching of the prophets and apostles. So Isaiah ascribes divine omnipotence to the word of prophecy (Isa. 55:11). Paul says that the word of the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:17). Elsewhere too, the New Testament speaks of the preached word as something living and growing (Acts 6:7, 12:24, 19:20, Heb. 4:12-13), accomplishing God’s saving purpose (Acts 20:32, 1 Thess. 1:5, 2:13). But the word is also powerful sometimes to harden hearts, (Isa. 6:9-13, Matt. 13:14-15, Acts 28:26-27).

Scripture is the place where we can find that preaching today. It is no less powerful in written form than it was on the lips of the apostles. The message of Scripture still sanctifies, and sometimes it still hardens. The written word restores the soul and makes wise the simple (Ps. 19:7).

When we go to Scripture for ethical guidance, it is important for us to remember that it is not only a text, an object of academic study. As we saw in Chapter 9, it is the presence of God among us and therefore a book that cannot be tamed. It will never leave us the same. If God’s grace has gripped us, and we are ready to respond in faith and obedience, then God’s word will be powerful to sanctify our hearts. But if we come to Scripture with skepticism or indifference, or if we regard it as a mere object of academic inquiry, that experience will affect us for the worse.

So when we bring an ethical question to Scripture, we should not only exegete its passages carefully, but we should also be open to change. We should say to God in our hearts, “speak, Lord, for your servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:9-10). We should go to Scripture for the power of the word, not only for its instruction.

### **Authority**

Since Scripture is God’s word, it has supreme authority, for God cannot speak otherwise than with supreme authority.

The story of redemptive history is the story of the authoritative word of God and man’s response to it. In Gen. 1:28, Adam’s first recorded experience is the experience of hearing the word of God, that word defining his nature and task. In Gen. 2:17, God’s word utters the specific prohibition that will determine whether Adam and Eve are faithful children of God. They fall by their disobedient response to that word, and the rest of the biblical story shows how God deals with that fall.

All of God’s redemptive promises and covenants come by word: to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles. When God delivers Israel from slavery in Egypt, he gives to them a written word, placed in the holiest part of the sanctuary. That written word stands as the ultimate

standard of their covenant faithfulness. As we saw in Chapter 9, it has no less authority than God's own voice, spoken directly from heaven.

But God's people sin again against God's law and reject his loving promises. So prophets bring more words of God to condemn their sin, but also, amazingly, to reiterate the promises. In the death of Christ, God both judges sin and fulfills his promise. Jesus dies in the place of sinners and gains for them God's forgiveness and eternal life. The story of Jesus' redemption is the gospel, and that too is a word that comes with the supreme authority of God. Those who believe are saved; those who do not believe are condemned (John 3:18). Jesus' words are the words of eternal life (John 6:68).

Jesus' words are the supreme test of discipleship (John 12:47-48). If we love him, we will keep his commandments (John 14:15, 21, 23, 15:10, cf. 1 John 2:3, 5:3, 2 John 6).

Jesus wrote no books, but by sending the Holy Spirit he empowered his apostles to remember what he said (John 14:26), to learn all the truth, and to know what will happen in the future (John 16:13). The apostles proclaim the authoritative message of the gospel, demanding repentance and faith in God's name (Acts 2:38). The authority of their word is not limited to their oral preaching, but also attaches to their written words (1 Cor. 14:37, 2 Thess. 3:14).

The written word, therefore, is the word of God himself, breathed out of his mouth (2 Tim. 3:16). As such, it cannot be anything less than supremely authoritative. Such supreme authority certainly includes infallibility and inerrancy. It places upon us an ethical obligation to believe everything Scripture says and to obey everything Scripture commands.<sup>156</sup>

## Clarity

Since Scripture is God's word, it is his communication to us. In Scripture, God speaks, not primarily to himself or to the angels, even to the winds and waves, but to us human beings. God cannot fail to accomplish his purpose, so his communication cannot be anything less than successful. If words are unclear, they fail to communicate; they are not communication. So Scripture must be clear.

Scripture represents that clarity by describing how near God is to us in his word. So the clarity of Scripture represents the existential perspective, the lordship attribute of divine presence. God says to Israel,

---

<sup>156</sup> I shall, of course, have much more to say about the authority of Scripture in *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (forthcoming). So I have intentionally kept this section short, even though the matter is extremely important.

For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. <sup>12</sup> It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' <sup>13</sup> Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' <sup>14</sup> But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it (Deut. 30:11-14).

Paul paraphrases this passage to speak of the presence of Christ in the gospel:

But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'"(that is, to bring Christ down) <sup>7</sup> or "'Who will descend into the abyss?'"(that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup> But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim) (Rom. 10:4-8).

In these passages, the clarity of God's word engages our responsibility. If we disobey or disbelieve, we cannot complain that God hasn't spoken clearly. Like God's word in nature (Rom. 1:20), the clarity of his word in the gospel implies that we are without excuse. So the clarity of God's word has an ethical thrust.

To speak this way, however, raises problems. For it seems that in some respects Scripture is obviously unclear. Many people claim that Scripture is too hard for them to understand, and that therefore it is unclear to them. And Scripture itself notes certain kinds of unclarity:

1. Scripture is unclear to the unregenerate. As I indicated earlier, the word hardens them, until the Spirit changes their heart (Isa. 6:9-10, 28:9-13, 1 Cor. 2:6, 14-16, 14:21, 2 Cor. 3:14-16, 2 Pet. 3:16).

2. Some doctrines of the faith are mysterious (Job 38-42, Rom. 11:33-36). Although we can speak of them, even regenerate people cannot understand them in depth. This is the limitation of our finitude.

3. All parts of Scripture are not equally clear. Peter says of Paul's letters that "There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:16). Of course, the ignorant and unstable are themselves responsible for twisting the teaching of Paul's letters. But Peter also says that the inherent difficulty of Paul's writing is a factor in the misunderstanding. So the Westminster Confession of Faith says, "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all" (1.7).

How can we reconcile our confession of the clarity of Scripture with these senses in which Scripture is unclear? The Confession answers this way:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (1.7)

So the Confession makes a distinction between those things “necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation” and those that are not. The former must be clear; the latter are not. And the Confession adds another limitation on the clarity of Scripture: Many things in Scripture, even among those necessary for salvation, cannot be understood by everybody without help. Understanding in those cases comes through “a due use of the ordinary means.” Those means presumably include the normal educational resources by which we learn to interpret language, and the special resources of the church such as preaching, teaching, and prayer. So if you are a regenerate person, and there is something in Scripture you don’t understand, that is either because (1) the matter is not necessary to salvation, or (2) you haven’t made a due use of the ordinary means.

As to (1), I hesitate to try to distinguish in Scripture between what is necessary to salvation and what is not.<sup>157</sup> Certainly the atonement is necessary to salvation in a way that the number of David’s troops is not. It seems that God could have redeemed us as easily if David had 100 fewer troops, but he could not have redeemed us without the atonement. But there are certainly some gray areas here, such as the sacraments.

And there is another ambiguity. Does “necessary to salvation” mean that the event is necessary to the accomplishment of salvation, or that our knowledge of the event is necessary for our own personal salvation? People often speak of things necessary to salvation in the latter sense. But if infants can be regenerate (Luke 1:41, 44, WCF 10.3; cf. 2 Sam. 12:23), then a person can be saved without having any conscious propositional beliefs at all. So in this second sense, the necessity for salvation, even of the doctrine of the atonement, is not an absolute necessity.<sup>158</sup>

---

<sup>157</sup> Theologians have tried to make such distinctions also in regard to biblical inerrancy (teaching that the Bible is inerrant only in matters necessary to salvation) and, as we shall see, to biblical sufficiency. But since salvation in Scripture is a historical process, and most of the Bible narrates that history, it is very hard to draw lines in Scripture between what is necessary and not necessary for salvation.

<sup>158</sup> I do believe, however, that an adult of normal intelligence should not be admitted to church membership unless he has some knowledge of the atonement, knowledge sufficient to make a credible profession of trust in the finished work of Christ alone for salvation.

The Confession has a legitimate point, however, that is not affected by these perplexities. Possibly, it could be better stated this way: that those doctrines of Scripture most necessary to salvation (in the first sense) tend to be the most clearly taught.

(2) of course reflects the polemics of the Reformation period. The Roman Catholic Church withheld the Scriptures from the laity, thinking that the laity could not possibly understand them without the guidance of the teaching magisterium of the church. The Confession does not deny the importance of teaching. It does presuppose that in its reference to ordinary means. But it says that our need of teaching does not justify withholding the Scriptures from ordinary people. For any adult of normal intelligence can understand the basics of the atonement, for example, if he is willing to undergo some simple instruction.

But I would add a third reason why believers sometimes find Scripture to be unclear. That is (3) that believers differ greatly from one another in their callings and responsibilities. When a child is four years old, there is not much of the Bible that he understands, even if he makes maximum use of the ordinary means of grace available to him. Even those doctrines like the atonement which are most easily described as necessary to salvation may be obscure to our four-year-old believer.<sup>159</sup> How can it be that such a believer is baffled by the clear word of God? The answer should be obvious: A four-year-old child is not able to master the doctrine of the atonement, and he is not responsible to do that. He is not called to that kind of reflection. He is called to obey his parents, a biblical command that he can understand well enough, and with their guidance to grow in his knowledge of the Bible.

I noted earlier that the clarity of Scripture has an ethical application. It takes away excuses and establishes our responsibility to grasp what God's word says. But a four-year-old child has much less responsibility of this sort, than, say, a twenty-year-old with normal mental gifts.

That reflection suggests a principle: the clarity of Scripture is relative to one's responsibilities. A fourteen-year-old has more responsibility than he did ten years before. And he will find that Scripture is clear enough (with "a due use of the ordinary means") to advise him of those additional responsibilities. As he increases in age, he will increase in responsibility. And if he listens diligently to God's word, he will find that Scripture becomes proportionately clearer to him.

Of course, responsibility changes, not only with age, but also with vocation. Ordinarily, a pastor is responsible to understand Scripture at a deeper level than the steelworker in his congregation. The pastor has been given greater opportunities to study Scripture, and to whom much is given, from him much is

---

<sup>159</sup> He may well be able to sing, "Jesus loves me, he who died, heaven's gates to open wide." But the imputation of Christ's active righteousness, as distinguished from an infusion of righteousness, will probably escape his understanding.



required (Luke 12:48). The steelworker is responsible to know Scripture well enough to carry out his responsibilities; the pastor for his. Neither can claim as an excuse for dereliction that Scripture is unclear.

*Scripture, then, is clear enough to make us responsible for carrying out our present duties to God.* That principle seems to me to summarize what the Bible implies about its own clarity.

## Comprehensiveness

Now let us move on to the second triad of attributes: comprehensiveness (situational), necessity (normative), and sufficiency (existential). As I indicated, these express various kinds of importance that Scripture has for our lives, particularly for our ethical decisions. The first triad focuses more on the actual content of Scripture. So the second triad shows how the first triad is important to us. In brief, then, the second triad asserts that the first triad is comprehensive, necessary, and sufficient. The power of the word is comprehensive, necessary, and sufficient; the same is true of the authority and clarity of the word.

The first attribute in the second triad is comprehensiveness,<sup>160</sup> which I define as the relevance of all Scripture to all of life. That is, God's truth is given to us in the whole Bible, not just parts of it, and that truth spreads out to cover all of human life. Since the focus is on the breadth of human life in all its contexts and environments, I link comprehensiveness with the situational perspective.

The first part of this definition is that *all* Scripture is our standard, not just parts of it. So, when tempted by Satan, Jesus quotes Deut. 8:3, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). And Paul says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). All of it.

This concept is sometimes called *tota scriptura*, "by all of Scripture," which correlates nicely with *sola scriptura*, "by Scripture alone," which we will consider under sufficiency.

If Scripture were a merely human book, then, of course, we could pick and choose what we find ethically useful. But since Scripture is the word of God, we may not do that. Rather, we must hunger for every word that falls from God's lips, as Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of

---

<sup>160</sup> Thanks to Noy Sparks, a student of mine, who suggested that I add comprehensiveness to necessity and sufficiency.

eternal life” (John 6:68). As with the writer of Psalm 1, the word should be our chief delight, so that we hate to see any part of it fall to the ground.

Does this mean that we are to treasure the genealogies, descriptions of rituals, mélanges of apocalyptic symbols? Yes. This does not mean that we need to pore over Leviticus, hunting for some kind of deep edification in each individual verse. Some texts do produce profound edification in a single verse, like John 3:16. Others edify chiefly by our consideration of the larger context. Lev. 3:3-4 may not mean much to us today (though it meant a great deal to Aaron). But the Old Testament sacrificial system as a whole, of which Lev. 3:3-4 is a part, is immensely important. For it tells us what kind of death our savior died.

So 2 Tim. 3:16-17 tells us that all Scripture is useful, and, specifically, that it is ethically useful. It is useful that we may be competent, equipped for every good work. We shall later discuss various parts and aspects of Scripture that have special importance for ethics: law, wisdom, and so on. But in that discussion we must be careful of losing the forest for the trees. Every particular statute or ethical maxim in Scripture must be related to the whole. To cite an obvious example, in Joshua 5:2, God calls Joshua to circumcise all the males in Israel. Does he call the church to do that today? No, because in 1 Cor. 7:19, Gal. 5:6, and Gal. 6:15, Paul says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matter. Evidently there has been a change in God’s requirements between Josh. 5:2 and 1 Cor. 7:19. The question before us, then, in making our own decisions, is not ultimately what Joshua 5:2 says, but what the whole Bible says. All ethical questions, in the final analysis, are questions about what the whole Bible says—to people about a situation.

The second part of the comprehensiveness of Scripture is that the Bible refers to all aspects of human life. In 1 Cor. 10:31, Paul says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” That “whatever” includes everything. Compare Rom. 14:23, “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin,” marking the “whatever,” and Col. 3:17, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him,” similarly. Another “whatever” occurs in Col. 3:24.

This second aspect of comprehensiveness is related to the first in this way: If only some passages or themes of Scripture were ethically useful, then Scripture would apply only to those parts of human life treated in those passages or themes. Conversely, if Scripture only addressed some aspects of human life, we would have to dismiss as irrelevant what it appears to say about other matters. But in Scripture’s view of its own mission, the whole word applies to the whole world.

God’s Lordship is comprehensive. God demands that every aspect of life be under his authority. Scripture also puts the same issue in terms of love: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with

all your might” (Deut. 6:4-5; cf. Mark 12:30). God demands our complete allegiance, obedience, and passion. So everything we do should be done to his glory.

God’s salvation is also comprehensive. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Regeneration is radical, affecting our thinking, will, emotions, actions. And redemption even stretches out to the cosmos:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.<sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.<sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope<sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:18-21).

For in him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,<sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:19-20).

Christians sometimes say that the Bible is silent on this or that matter: diet, exercise, tax increases, nuclear proliferation, auto repair, the need for stoplights, etc. But although there are many subjects that Scripture does not explicitly mention, it speaks of everything implicitly. It does that by providing principles for every ethical decision. Scripture doesn’t mention abortion, for example, but it forbids murder and treats unborn children as human persons. So pro-life Christians rightly argue that the Bible prohibits abortion.

Often those principles are very general, of course. Scripture does not tell me, even implicitly, what brand of soap to buy. But it tells me that when I buy soap I should buy it to the glory of God. And by not prescribing a brand, it gives me the freedom to buy any of several brands. So even in this case, Scripture prescribes the difference between good and bad, defining the moral quality of my action.

Certainly the comprehensiveness of Scripture rules out attempts to limit the scope of biblical revelation. As I mentioned in the previous section, many theologians have tried to limit the content or authority of Scripture to narrowly religious matters (“matters necessary to salvation”). That would allow us to think autonomously in matters other than religion. So some have concluded that Scripture is not inerrant, clear, or sufficient, in matters other than salvation, narrowly conceived.

But Scripture will not be so confined. God is Lord over all, and salvation renews all areas of thought and life. So God’s authority extends to anything he

chooses to speak to us about. Scripture, as his word, also has comprehensive authority. If God wants to tell us in his word some things about the history of Israel that contradict a scholarly consensus, he has the right to do so, and we should stand with him against the scholars. Changing our thinking about such matters may well be part of the comprehensive renewal that God brings to us in Christ. In any case, it is the word of our Lord, and he must be true, though every man a liar (Rom. 3:4). So if God wants to tell us in Scripture that evolution is false, we should stand with him and against the consensus of scientists.<sup>161</sup> If God wants to tell us that abortion is wrong, we should stand with him and not with contemporary opinion makers.

So to say that Scripture is comprehensive is to say that *the whole word applies to the whole world*. We need to take a broad view of ethics which encompasses the whole Bible and the whole creation.

### **Necessity**

The second member of our second triad is the necessity of Scripture. The third will be the sufficiency of Scripture. Students of logic are familiar with the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions. If A is a necessary condition of B, then B can't exist without A. If A is a sufficient condition of B, then A can't exist without B. To say that Scripture is necessary to the Christian life is to say that we can't live without it. To say that Scripture is sufficient is to say that Scripture provides all the ultimate norms we need, so that if we don't have sufficient norms, it can only be because Scripture doesn't exist.

At this point we shall look at the necessity of Scripture. The WCF presents the necessity of Scripture in the first section of its first chapter:

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those

---

<sup>161</sup> This is not to say that Scripture is a "textbook of science." For the most part, Scripture does not focus on the usual subject matter of the sciences. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, we need both scriptural and extra-scriptural data to do the work of science. But Scripture does say a number of things that are relevant to science, and what it says must be heeded.

former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased. (1.1).

The Confession bases the necessity of Scripture on the inadequacies of natural revelation and the insecurities of other forms of word-revelation. But I believe that the necessity of Scripture may also be derived from the very lordship of God in covenant with us.

What does “necessity of Scripture” mean? Simply that without Scripture we have nothing: no Lord or Savior, no faith, hope, or love. Remember that the term *Lord* refers to an absolute personal being who makes a covenant with a people. That covenant takes the form of a written document. There is no such a thing as a wordless covenant, or a wordless Lord. The Lord is a person who issues commands to other persons called servants. Immediately after the confession of God’s Lordship in Deut. 6:4-5, God demands that the people of Israel study and obey his words:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. <sup>6</sup> And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. <sup>7</sup> You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. <sup>8</sup> You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. <sup>9</sup> You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Similarly, Jesus in Luke 6:46 asks, “Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?”

Many would like to confess Jesus as Lord, without confessing the Bible as his word. But that is to empty the very idea of lordship. Because the Lord is personal, he speaks to his creatures. Because he is supremely authoritative, he speaks to them with supreme authority. Because he is the covenant lord, he speaks to us in a written document. Without that document, without Scripture, we cannot meaningfully say that God is our Lord.

As the Confession’s statement indicates, God has also spoken directly to human beings, and he has spoken through the mouths of prophets and apostles. But written revelation has been since Moses the primary means of covenant governance. And today, our only access to God’s direct speech and his words through the prophets is through Scripture. So without Scripture we have no Lord.

Similarly, without Scripture we have no salvation. For “salvation belongs to the Lord” (Jonah 2:9). Salvation in all its dimensions is the sovereign work of the Lord. Our access to it is by the gospel, and the gospel is part of Scripture. Paul says, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”

(Rom. 10:17). Without that word, then, we are without hope. Consider again Peter's cry, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

The Lord's promise of salvation to those who believe is a promise of Scripture. If Scripture is not God's word, we have no reason to believe it. For a promise of salvation must necessarily come from God himself. If God doesn't warrant it, there is no reason to believe it. The promise is warranted only if it is a word from God. If the Bible is not the word of God, then there is no word of God, and there is no promise or gospel.

Since Scripture is necessary to the lordship relation itself (the covenant), and since it is necessary for salvation, it is necessary for the Christian life. In Part 2 I argued that unless an absolute-personal God has spoken to us, there is no basis for ethics. The Bible is the only transcript of God's words, and hence it is the only source of absolute ethical norms.

As the Confession says, it is the case that natural revelation is also a source of God's norms, of ethical content. But, as Paul says in Rom. 1, apart from grace, sinners repress and distort that revelation, fleeing its implications. So again we must heed Calvin who said that we need the spectacles of Scripture to see natural revelation aright.

The remaining attribute of Scripture that I wish to discuss is its sufficiency. But I have so much to say on that subject that I will have to give sufficiency a chapter to itself.

## Chapter 11: The Sufficiency of Scripture

The last of the six attributes of Scripture is sufficiency, sometimes called *sola Scriptura*, “by Scripture alone.” The sufficiency of Scripture, particularly as applied to ethics, is a doctrine of immense importance and a doctrine frequently misunderstood. So I will discuss it at greater length than the other attributes. My basic definition: Scripture contains all the divine words needed for any aspect of human life.

### Confessional Formulation

The WCF formulates the doctrine thus:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (1.6)

Below a commentary on this statement, phrase by phrase:

1. *The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life.* The sufficiency of Scripture is comprehensive, in the way that I presented the doctrine of comprehensiveness in Chapter 10. Everything we need to know for God's glory is in the Bible. The same is true for our own “salvation, faith and life.” The Confession does not understand these terms in the narrow ways that I argued against in Chapter 10. It sees salvation as comprehensive, as we can tell from the rest of the document. Similarly, “faith and life” is a comprehensive pair of concepts. The WSC<sup>162</sup> says, “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” So it is reasonable to think that “faith and life” in WCF 1.6 refers to everything we are to believe and do, the whole content of Scripture applied to the whole content of the Christian life.

---

<sup>162</sup> Q and A 3.

Christians sometimes say that Scripture is sufficient for religion, or preaching, or theology, but not for auto-repairs, plumbing, animal husbandry dentistry, etc. And of course many argue that it is not sufficient for science, philosophy, or even ethics. That is to miss an important point. Certainly Scripture contains more specific information relevant to theology than to dentistry. But sufficiency in the present context is not sufficiency of specific information but sufficiency of divine words. Scripture contains divine words sufficient for all of life. It has all the divine words that the plumber needs, and all the divine words that the theologian needs. So it is just as sufficient for plumbing as it is for theology. And in that sense it is sufficient for science and ethics as well.

2. *is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.* The sufficient content of Scripture includes, not only its explicit teaching, but also what may be logically deduced from it. To be sure, logical deduction is a human activity, and it is fallible, as are all human activities. So when someone tries to deduce something from Scripture, he may err.<sup>163</sup> But the WCF speaks of not just any attempt to deduce conclusions from Scripture, but of “good and necessary consequence.” That phrase refers to logic done right, ideal logic. When deductive logic is done right, the conclusion of a syllogism does not add to its premises. It rather brings out content already there. In the classic syllogism, “All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore Socrates is mortal,” the conclusion doesn’t tell you anything you couldn’t find out from the premises themselves. What the syllogism does is to make the implicit content explicit. Logic is a hermeneutical tool,<sup>164</sup> a device for bringing out meaning that is already there in the text. So (a) the “content of Scripture” includes all the logical implications of Scripture, (b) The logical implications of Scripture have the same authority as Scripture, and (c) logical deductions from Scripture do not add anything to Scripture.

3. *unto which nothing at any time is to be added.* Covenant documents in the ancient near east often contained an “inscriptional curse,” a prohibition against adding to or subtracting from the document. Scripture, our covenant document, also contains such language, in Deut. 4:2, 12:32, Prov. 30:6, Rev. 22:18-19; cf. Josh. 1:7. These passages do not forbid seeking information outside of Scripture. Rather, they insist that we will never need any *divine words* in addition to God’s written words, words that are available to us only in the Bible.

---

<sup>163</sup> This liability to error should caution us to be careful in the work of logical deduction. Certainly it must be done with hermeneutical wisdom. “All men have sinned (Rom. 3:23), Jesus is a man (1 Tim. 2:5), therefore Jesus sinned” may seem like a valid syllogism, but of course it presupposes a defective Christology. (Thanks to Richard Pratt for this example.) So the right use of logic depends on many other kinds of skill and knowledge. On the other hand, the possibility of error should not lead us to abandon logical deduction. For error is not found only in logic, but also in every other activity by which we seek to understand Scripture: textual criticism, translation, interpretation, theology, preaching, and individual understanding. If our goal is to avoid making any error at all, we should not only avoid logic, but we should avoid all these other activities as well. But that in itself would be an error of another kind.

<sup>164</sup> See DKG, 242-301.



That means as well that we should never place any human words on the same level of authority as those in Scripture. That would be, in effect, adding to God's words.

4. *whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.* Adding to God's words can be done either by claiming falsely to have new words from God, or by regarding human tradition on the same level of authority as God's word. The Confession ascribes these errors to its two main opponents respectively: the enthusiasts and the Roman Catholics. The enthusiasts were largely Anabaptists, who held views similar to some modern charismatics. The Roman Catholics defended their tradition as a source of revelation equal to the Bible. Roman Catholic theology has since changed its formulations somewhat,<sup>165</sup> but it still regards tradition as highly as it regards Scripture. Since the writing of the Confession, it has become important also for Protestants to guard their respect for their own traditions, so that it doesn't compete with the unique respect due to Scripture.<sup>166</sup>

5. *Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word:* To say that Scripture is sufficient is not to deny that other things may also be necessary. We should always remember that the sufficiency of Scripture is a sufficiency of divine words. It is a sufficient source of such words. But we need more than divine words if we are to be saved and to live holy lives. In particular, we need the Spirit to illumine the word, if we are to understand it. So no one should object that the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture leaves no place for the Holy Spirit.

6. *and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.* I shall say more about these "circumstances" when I discuss the second commandment and the regulative principle of worship. For now, let us note that the sufficiency of Scripture does not rule out the use of natural revelation (the "light of nature") and human reasoning ("Christian prudence")<sup>167</sup> in our decisions, even when those decisions concern the worship and government of the church.

The reason, of course, is that Scripture doesn't speak specifically to every detail of human life, even of life in the church. We have seen that in one sense Scripture speaks of everything, for its principles are broad enough to cover all

---

<sup>165</sup> Today, Roman Catholic theologians tend to speak, not of "two sources" of revelation (Scripture and tradition), but of "one source," the stream of tradition of which Scripture is a part. Neither of these views, however, are compatible with the sufficiency of Scripture.

<sup>166</sup> See my articles, "*Sola Scriptura* in Theological Method," in my *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997) and "Traditionalism," available at <http://reformedperspectives.org>, under "practical theology," in two parts.

<sup>167</sup> Note the triad: Scripture, the light of nature, Christian prudence.

human actions. The principle of 1 Cor. 10:31, do all to the glory of God, speaks to every human activity and grades every human act as right or wrong.

But it is often difficult to determine in specific terms what actions will and will not bring glory to God. At that point, natural revelation and Christian prudence give us important guidance. For example, Scripture doesn't mention abortion. But natural revelation tells us that abortion is a procedure that takes innocent life. That shows us that the Bible's prohibition of murder is relevant to the matter of abortion.

Note that in this example, as the Confession says, there are "general rules of the word" that are relevant to our decision. There are always general rules of the word relevant to any human decision, as we have seen, at least the rule of 1 Cor. 10:31. So to use the data of natural revelation in this way, though it is extra-scriptural, is not to add to Scripture in the sense of Deut. 4:2. To do this is not to add more divine words. It is, rather, a means of determining how the sufficient word of Scripture should be applied to a specific situation.

The fact that Scripture doesn't mention abortion, or nuclear war, or financial disclosure, or parking meters, therefore, never means that we may abandon Scripture in considering these issues. There is always a principle of Scripture that is relevant. The only question is, specifically how does that principle apply? Recourse to natural revelation and human prudence is an attempt to answer that question.

### **Biblical Basis**

But is this confessional doctrine itself biblical? I believe it is. As we've seen, the covenant document contains an inscriptional curse, forbidding adding and subtracting. This is to say that God alone is to rule his people, and he will not share that rule with anyone else. If a human being presumes to add his own word to a book of divinely authoritative words, he thereby claims that his words have the authority of God himself. He claims in effect that he shares God's throne.

Nevertheless, through the history of Israel some did have the audacity to set their words alongside God's. False prophets claimed to speak in God's name, when God had not spoken to them (1 Kings 13:18, 22:5-12), a crime that deserved the death penalty (Deut. 18:20). And the people worshiped according to human commandments rather than God's:

And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,<sup>14</sup> therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and

the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden." (Isa. 29:13-14)

Jesus applies Isaiah's words to the Pharisees, and adds, "You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8). And it is likely that some people in Paul's time wrote letters forged in Paul's name, claiming his authority for their own ideas (2 Thess. 2:2).

God's own representatives, however, fearlessly set God's word against all merely human viewpoints. Think of Moses before Pharaoh, Elijah before Ahab, Isaiah before Ahaz, Jonah before Nineveh, Paul before Agrippa, Felix, and Festus. Consider Jesus who spoke with the same boldness before the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Herod, and Pilate. Those who are armed with God's word, the sword of the Spirit, are free from the tyranny of human opinion!

So Paul, in his famous statement about biblical inspiration, speaks of sufficiency as well:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

"Every" refers to sufficiency.

### **General and Particular Sufficiency**

We should notice that 2 Tim. 3:16-17 ascribes sufficiency to the Old Testament. That is an interesting point, that the Old Testament is actually a sufficient moral guide for New Testament Christians. Why, then, does God give us the New Testament as well? That question leads to a distinction between two kinds of sufficiency:

#### *1. General Sufficiency*

At any point of redemptive history, the revelation given at that time is sufficient. After Adam and Eve sinned, God revealed to them how they would be punished, and he also, remarkably, revealed to them the coming of a deliverer, a seed of the woman, who would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). This revelation, extensive as it is, is not nearly as extensive as the revelation available to us in the completed biblical canon. Was this revelation sufficient for them? Yes, it was. Had they failed to trust this revelation, they could not have used as an excuse that it wasn't full enough. In this revelation, they had all the divine words they needed to have. So that revelation was sufficient.

Nevertheless, God added to that revelation, by speaking to Noah, Abraham, and others. Why did he add to a revelation that was already sufficient? Because Noah needed to know more than Adam did. The history of redemption is progressive. In Noah's time, God planned to judge the world by a flood, and Noah had to know that. The Adamic revelation was sufficient for Adam, but not for Noah.

Recall the principle I suggested in Chapter 10 regarding the clarity of Scripture: "Scripture is clear enough to make us responsible for carrying out our present duties to God." Sufficiency should be understood the same way. God's revelation to Adam was sufficient for him to carry out his present duties, but Noah needed more, for he had additional duties. He needed more in order to do God's will in his time.

Similarly, the revelation of the Old Testament was sufficient for the first generation of Christians. But God graciously provided them with much more, including the letters of Paul. In God's judgment these were necessary for the ongoing life of the young church, and when they were collected and distributed the believers recognized them as God's word. Once the New Testament began to function as God's word in the church, the Old Testament was no longer sufficient in itself, but it continued to function as part of the canon which was, as a whole, sufficient.

That consideration raises the question of whether God will add still more revelation to the canon. Sufficiency in itself, what I am calling "general sufficiency," does not preclude divine additions to Scripture, though it does preclude mere human additions.

## *2. Particular Sufficiency*

But there is an additional principle that should lead us not to expect any more divine words until the return of Christ. That is the finality of Christ's redemption. When redemption is final, revelation is also final.

Heb. 1:1-4 draws this parallel:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. <sup>3</sup> He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Verse 3 speaks of Jesus' purification for sins as final, for when finished he sits down at God's right hand. Verse 2 speaks of God's speech through his Son as final, in comparison with the "many times and many ways" of the prophetic revelation. Note the past tense "has spoken." The revelation of the Old Testament is continuous, that of the Son once-for-all. Nothing can be added to his redemptive work, and nothing can be added to the revelation of that redemptive work.

Heb. 2:1-4 also contrasts the revelation of the old covenant with that of the new:

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.<sup>2</sup> For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution,<sup>3</sup> how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,<sup>4</sup> while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

The "message declared by angels" is, of course, the Mosaic law. The "great salvation" in Christ is something far greater. The message of this salvation was declared first by Christ, then by the apostles ("those who heard") and then by God himself, through signs and wonders. From the writer's standpoint, these declarations are all in the past tense. Even though part of that message (at least the Letter to the Hebrews) is still being written, the bulk of it has already been completed.

Scripture is God's testimony to the redemption he has accomplished for us. Once that redemption is finished, and the apostolic testimony to it is finished, the Scriptures are complete, and we should expect no more additions to them.

The same conclusion follows from 2 Pet. 1:3-11. There, Peter notes that Jesus' "divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" (verse 3). All things that pertain to life and godliness, therefore, come from Jesus' redemption. After that redemption, then, evidently, there is nothing more that could contribute anything to our spiritual life and godliness. Peter then mentions various qualities that we receive through Jesus, concluding, "For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (verse 11). This is the language of sufficiency. The virtues that come from redemption are sufficient for us to enter the final kingdom. Nothing more is needed.

So within the concept of sufficiency, I distinguish between "general" and "particular" sufficiency. As we saw earlier, the general sufficiency of Scripture excludes human additions, but is compatible with later additions by God himself.

This is the sense in which the Old Testament is sufficient according to 2 Tim. 3:16-17. The particular sufficiency of Scripture is the sufficiency of the present canon to present Christ and all of his resources. God himself will not add to the work of Christ, and so we should not expect him to add to the message of Christ.

### **The Use of Extra-Biblical Data**

If we remember that the sufficiency of Scripture is a sufficiency of divine words, that will help us to understand the role of extra-biblical data, both in ethics and theology. People sometimes misunderstand the doctrine of sufficiency by thinking that it excludes the use of any extra-biblical information in reaching ethical conclusions. But if we exclude the use of extra-biblical information, then ethical reflection is next to impossible.

Scripture itself recognizes this point. As I said earlier, the inscriptional curses do not forbid seeking extra-biblical information. Rather, they forbid us to equate extra-biblical information with divine words. Scripture itself requires us to correlate what it says with general revelation. When God told Adam to abstain from the forbidden fruit, he assumed that Adam already had general knowledge, sufficient to apply that command to the trees that he could see and touch. God didn't need to tell Adam what a tree was, how to distinguish fruits from leaves, what it meant to eat. These things were natural knowledge. So God expected Adam to correlate the specific divine prohibition concerning one tree to his natural knowledge of the trees in the garden. This is theology as application: applying God's word to our circumstances.

The same is true for all divine commands in Scripture. When God tells Israel to honor their fathers and mothers, he does not bother to define "father" and "mother" and to set forth an exhaustive list of things that may honor or dishonor them. Rather, God assumes that Israel has some general knowledge of family life, and he expects them to apply his command to that knowledge.

Jesus rebukes the Pharisees, not because they had no knowledge of the biblical text, but because they failed to apply that knowledge to the things that happened in their own experience. In Matt. 16:2-3, he says,

When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.'<sup>3</sup>  
And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

The chief deficiency in their application of Scripture was their failure to see Jesus as the promised Messiah, the central theme of the Hebrew Bible. In John 5:39-40, Jesus says,

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me,<sup>40</sup> yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

Against the Sadducees, who deny the Resurrection, Jesus quotes an Old Testament text that at first glance doesn't seem to speak to the point:

<sup>31</sup> And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God:<sup>32</sup> 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."<sup>33</sup> And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. (Matt. 22:31-33).

That text (Ex. 3:6) was a famous one; every Jewish biblical scholar knew it well. The Sadducees' problem was not that they didn't know the text, but that they were unable or unwilling to apply it to the current discussion of resurrection. Jesus teaches them that to the extent that one cannot apply Scripture he is actually ignorant of Scripture. Knowing Scripture cannot be separated from knowing its applications.<sup>168</sup> But that is to say that one cannot know Scripture without understanding how it applies to extra-biblical data. Here, one cannot rightly understand the normative without the situational.

So Scripture itself says that Scripture has an ethical purpose. The right way to study Scripture is to apply it to the issues that face us in our own time. In Rom. 15:4, Paul says,

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Unlike any other ancient book, Scripture is written with the purpose of instructing those who would live many centuries into the future, to give them instruction, endurance, encouragement, and hope. Its own authors (divine and human) intended for it to guide us in our ethical and spiritual struggles. Similarly, the familiar passage in 2 Tim. 3:16-17,

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Indicates, not only that Scripture is God's word, but also that it has a practical and ethical purpose. Both this passage and the famous passage 2 Pet. 1:19-21 are written by aged apostles, concerned about false teaching likely to enter the church after their deaths (2 Tim. 3:1-9, 2 Pet. 2:1-22). Paul and Peter agree that

---

<sup>168</sup> See DKG, 81-85, 95-98.

Scripture contains the resources necessary to distinguish true from false teachers, both in their doctrine and in their character. (The ethics of the false teachers is a main emphasis of these contexts.) But to use Scripture that way is, of course, to apply it to the situations the people encounter.

### The Logic of Application

Much ethical reasoning can be expressed in the form of *moral syllogisms*. In a moral syllogism, the first premise states a principle, the second a fact to which the principle applies. Then the conclusion states the application.<sup>169</sup> We might describe the first premise as normative, the second as situational, and the conclusion as existential, since it brings the principle to bear on our own ethical decision. For example,

1. Stealing is wrong. (Normative premise)
  2. Embezzling is stealing. (Situational premise)
- Therefore, embezzling is wrong. (Existential conclusion)

In Christian ethics, the normative premise ultimately comes from God, for only he has the authority to define ethical norms for human beings. In principle, this premise may come from any kind of divine revelation. But we must remember the primacy of Scripture, which governs our understanding and interpretation of general and existential revelation. Our interpretations of general and existential revelation must be tested by Scripture. If someone claims that God wants me, say, to move to Paris, he needs to show me from Scripture that this is indeed God's will. But then the ultimate norm is Scripture, not general or existential revelation by itself.

So we may formulate the sufficiency of Scripture for ethics as follows: Scripture is sufficient to provide all the ultimate norms, all the normative premises, that we need to make any ethical decision. It contains all the divine words we need to make our ethical decisions, and all ultimate ethical norms come from the mouth of God.

Then what use is general revelation? (1) It is important, especially, in furnishing situational premises. Of course the Bible too furnishes situational premises, as in

1. Adultery is wrong. (Ex. 20:14)
2. Lust is adultery. (Matt. 5:27-28)

---

<sup>169</sup> Within this general structure, of course, there are usually further complications: subsidiary arguments to establish the normative premise and the situational premise. So ethical arguments in practice have many premises and many twists and turns of logic. In the present discussion, I am presenting a general form that summarizes many arguments about ethics.



Therefore, lust is wrong.

But most of the time we need extra-biblical data to formulate the situation we are seeking to address, as in the following example:

1. Stealing is wrong.
  2. Cheating on your income tax is stealing.
- Therefore, cheating on your income tax is wrong.

The Bible, of course, does not mention the US income tax, though it does mention taxes in general. What it says about taxes in general is relevant, of course. It is among the “general rules of the Word” mentioned in the Confession’s statement. But in order to evaluate premise 2, we need to know not only these biblical principles, but also some facts not mentioned in Scripture that tell us what the income tax is. Here is an even more obvious example:

1. Sabbath-breaking is wrong.
  2. Operating a tanning salon on Sunday is Sabbath-breaking.
- Therefore, operating a tanning salon on Sunday is wrong.

To establish premise 2, of course, we need to know some general principles of Scripture about the Sabbath. But Scripture doesn’t mention tanning salons. So we need some specific information from outside the Bible to warrant the second premise.

Of course, to go “outside the Bible” is not to go outside of God’s revelation. It is rather to move from the sphere of special revelation to the sphere of general revelation. So the whole syllogism utilizes general revelation, illumined and evaluated by special revelation.

(2) But it should also be evident that even the normative premises of ethical syllogisms use extra-biblical data at some point. For all our use of Scripture depends on our knowledge of extra-biblical data. Scripture contains no lessons in Hebrew or Greek grammar. To learn that, we must study extra-biblical information. Similarly, the other means that enable us to use Scripture, such as textual criticism, text editing, translation, publication, teaching, preaching, concordances, commentaries, etc. all depend on extra-biblical data. So in one sense even the first premises of moral syllogisms, the normative premises, depend on extra-biblical knowledge. So without extra-biblical premises, without general revelation, we cannot *use* Scripture at all. But Scripture is emphatically a book to be used.

None of those considerations detracts from the primacy of Scripture as we have described it. Once we have a settled conviction of what Scripture teaches, that conviction must prevail over all other sources of knowledge. So Scripture must govern even the sciences that are used to analyze it: textual criticism,

hermeneutics, etc. These sciences enable us to understand Scripture, but they must themselves be carried on in accord with Scripture. There is a hermeneutical circle here that cannot be avoided, and that circle shows how the normative and situational perspectives are interdependent. But in the hierarchy of norms, Scripture must remain primary.

### Adiaphora

The Greek word *adiaphora* means literally “things indifferent,” that is, things that make no difference. In theological ethics people have sometimes used it to designate a class of actions that are neither right nor wrong, a third category of actions in addition to right and wrong. Some people have referred to eating meat and drinking wine (Rom. 14:21), for example, as *adiaphora*.

The question of *adiaphora* relates to the sufficiency of Scripture in this way: Scripture commands certain actions, and these are right. Scripture forbids certain actions, and these are wrong. But it seems as though there are many actions that Scripture neither commands nor forbids, such as eating meat and drinking wine. Scripture is sufficient to determine what is right and wrong. So when it is silent, neither category can apply. So, the argument goes, there must be a third category, the *adiaphora*.

Historically, this concept has been used most frequently in the area of worship. Luther applied the term to certain Roman Catholic forms of worship, which he thought were neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture, and which the believer could therefore observe or not in good conscience. The Puritans and Scots Presbyterians, however, denied the existence of *adiaphora* in worship. For them, what God commands in worship is right; anything else is forbidden. There is no middle ground.<sup>170</sup>

I too reject the concept of *adiaphora*, not only in worship, but in ethics generally. My reasons, however, differ from those of the Puritans and Scots.

First, let us be clear that there are no *things* (in the sense of material objects in the world) that are indifferent in any meaningful way, even though the literal meaning of the Greek term *adiaphora* is “things indifferent.” People sometimes say that, for example, heroin is bad, peaches are good, but wine is indifferent. Remember (a) that such statements refer to non-moral goodness, not moral goodness as I defined it in Chapter 2. And (b) Scripture itself tells us that in that non-moral sense everything God created is *good*, not bad or indifferent (Gen. 1:31, 1 Tim. 4:4). I would judge from these passages that even heroin has a good use and is part of God’s good creation. In any case, these passages leave no room, in the world of material things, for *adiaphora*.

---

<sup>170</sup> I shall discuss this issue in more detail when we consider the Second Commandment.

So those who have used the concept have generally applied it to human actions, rather than material things. So applied, the concept deals with ethical, rather than nonethical, goodness and badness. But are there any human actions that are ethically indifferent? When Paul says, “so, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31), he implies that everything we do either brings glory to God or it does not.<sup>171</sup> The “whatever” is universal. It includes our eating and drinking, sleeping, waking, bathing, working, marrying, entertaining ourselves, indeed every human activity. When we glorify God we are doing right, and when we do not glorify God we are doing wrong. Here there is no room for any third category that we might call “adiaphora.” That is to say that no human action is indifferent to God.

Why, then, has the concept of adiaphora become so popular in some circles? I think because it has been confused with other concepts that are legitimate. These are:

1. Choices between two or more goods, rather than between good and evil. Certainly there are many choices of this kind in human life. But when we make a choice among goods, our choice is good, not adiaphora.

2. Acts concerning which Scripture is silent. Now as we have seen there are no human actions concerning which Scripture is absolutely silent. For 1 Cor. 10:31 and similar passages speak of everything. But there are human actions concerning which Scripture does not speak *specifically*. For example, Scripture doesn't mention specifically my typing on a computer. 1 Cor. 10:31 addresses this action generally and implicitly, but not specifically. So we might be tempted to think that specific actions of this kind are adiaphora. But that is a very misleading way to speak. My typing on the computer is not ethically indifferent. It is either ethically good or ethically bad, for it is either to God's glory or not.

3. Acts neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. This is close to the previous category. But there are some acts that are mentioned in Scripture, and mentioned specifically, that are neither commanded nor forbidden. Again an example would be eating meat and drinking wine in Rom. 14:21. We may be tempted to say that such actions are adiaphora. But recall from Chapter 2 that actions neither forbidden nor commanded are permitted (1 Cor. 7:6). What God permits us to do is good. So actions in this category are good, not bad or indifferent.

4. Acts that are neither right nor wrong in themselves, but are right or wrong in specific circumstances. Eating ice cream, for example, can be right in some circumstances, wrong in others. Drinking a glass of wine may be a good thing to do in many circumstances, but not if one has already had ten glasses. Are such actions adiaphora? I would say not. Eating ice cream is not right or

---

<sup>171</sup> Compare other passages we cited earlier that also emphasize the universality of our responsibility to God: Rom. 14:23, Col. 3:17 and 23.

wrong “in itself;” but no human action is ever performed “in itself.” It is always performed in one set of circumstances or another. Any specific act of eating ice cream will always be either right or wrong, never adiaphora. Same for any other act that is neither right nor wrong “in itself.”<sup>172</sup>

### **The Strong and the Weak**

Those defending the concept of adiaphora often mention Paul’s discussions of the strong and the weak in Rom. 14:1-15:13 and 1 Cor. 8-10. The Roman and Corinthian churches were divided by controversies over vegetarianism (Rom. 14:2), the observing of special days (Rom. 14:5),<sup>173</sup> and the eating of food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8:1). The argument goes that these matters are adiaphora: it is a matter of indifference whether someone abstains from meat, or observes holidays, or eats food offered to idols.

In my view, it is very misleading to describe these issues as adiaphora. The passages make clear that they are not matters of indifference. Rather, the choices that we make in these areas are either right or wrong. There is no middle ground.

The passages contrast two groups of Christians, whom Paul describes as “strong” and “weak.” In 1 Cor., he describes the weak as those who “lack knowledge” (1 Cor. 8:1, 7, 10-11) and have a “weak conscience” (verses 7, 9, 10-12). These groups were opponents, and on the specific issues of the controversy, Paul sides with the strong (Rom. 15:1), though he criticizes their behavior. Some readers are inclined to assume that God always favors those who have the most religious scruples. But in these passages, to the surprise of such readers, the strong are the ones without the scruples, the unscrupulous ones. The strong are the ones who eat meat, who think that observing special days is unnecessary, and who have no problem eating food offered to idols. The weak are the ones whose consciences are troubled by such practices.

Both groups are persuaded of the rightness of their positions. As Paul says, each carries out his practice “in honor of the Lord” (Rom. 14:6). And Paul honors the Christian professions of each. Although he disagrees with the weak,

---

<sup>172</sup> If someone prefers to use the word “adiaphora” to refer to actions that are neither right nor wrong in themselves, I will not protest too much. Definitions are never a matter of life or death. Of course, in this case the term will refer only to general categories of these actions, not to specific examples of these categories. But I think that the use of this term always connotes the thought of moral neutrality, which is, in a Christian understanding, divine indifference. But God is never indifferent to what we do, as is plain from 1 Cor. 10:31 and similar texts. So I think even the most defensible uses of the term, such as this one, tend to mislead.

<sup>173</sup> In my later discussion of the Fourth Commandment, I shall consider the implications of this passage for the keeping of the weekly Sabbath.

he describes them as brothers (verse 15) and as those “for whom Christ died” (verse 15; cf. 1 Cor. 8:11).

This division creates three problems in the churches, and it is important to keep these distinct in our minds:

1. The very fact that one group in the church is spiritually weak or lacks knowledge is a problem. “Weak” and “ignorant” are terms of reproach. People who are spiritually weak and ignorant need pastoral help to make them strong and knowledgeable. That help comes from the Lord, operating through the means of grace, the word, the church, and prayer. Paul doesn’t go into detail about what the strong should do to educate the weak, but he speaks elsewhere of teaching, nurturing, restoring.

2. The two groups have wrong attitudes toward one another. In this regard, both the strong and the weak are at fault. The strong “despise” the weak (Rom. 14:3, 10). The weak “pass judgment on” the strong (verses 3-4, 10).<sup>174</sup> Passing judgment here probably means accusing of sin, perhaps even casting doubt on the other person’s allegiance to Christ.

Paul’s response to this problem is simply to forbid such attitudes: don’t despise, don’t judge. Both groups belong to Christ, and it is simply wrong for Christians to treat one another this way. Note that Paul never suggests in these passages that the strong should subject the weak to formal discipline, as he does with the incestuous man in 1 Cor. 5. Rather, the two parties are to love one another as brothers within the church.<sup>175</sup> To say this is not to contradict the need for education and nurture noted in #1 above. Certainly the strong must seek to educate, nurture, and strengthen the weak. And, doubtless, the weak will continue for a time to seek to change the strong as well. But there are right and wrong ways to carry out this ministry to one another. Despising and passing judgment are not among them. The strong may not despise the weak, because the weak are fellow Christians. The weak may not judge the strong for the same reason, and, of course, because the strong are right.

3. But there is a third issue that Paul here is mainly concerned with in these passages, and here the strong are at fault. The strong, by their behavior, are in danger of placing “a stumbling block or hindrance” (Rom. 14:13, cf. 1 Cor. 8:9) in the way of their weak brothers. This is a very serious matter. Paul

---

<sup>174</sup> 1 Cor. 8-10 doesn’t include these specific expressions, but it is clear from 8:1-3 that Paul sees in the whole controversy a lack of love. In this passage he mainly confronts those who “have knowledge,” the “stronger” party. Although these have knowledge, they have not been using that knowledge in a loving way.

<sup>175</sup> Evidently, then, not all differences within the church are subject to the formal procedures of church discipline. There are disagreements that may and ought to be tolerated. No church or denomination may demand a hundred percent agreement on all matters. For more discussion of this important subject, see my book *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), now available at [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org).

describes the stumbling block as something that not only brings grief to the weak (Rom. 14:15) but defiles the weak conscience (1 Cor. 8:7), destroys (verse 15, cf. 1 Cor. 8:11), even tends to “destroy the work of God” (20),<sup>176</sup> brings condemnation (23). In placing a stumbling block before a weak brother, therefore, the strong himself sins against Christ (1 Cor. 8:12), even though, as we have seen, his convictions about these ethical issues are correct.

What kind of behavior by the strong could have such serious consequences? Evidently the strong were leading the weak into sin, for sin is the only thing with the spiritually destructive power Paul describes. What kind of sin? The strong influenced the weak to sin against the dictates of his conscience (1 Cor. 8:7, 12). Conscience, as we shall see later, is our ability to tell right from wrong. People’s consciences are not infallible. Sometimes a person’s conscience tells him something is wrong when it is right, and vice versa. Consciences have to be taught and nurtured, by the means of grace, as we saw above.

Now a Christian’s conscience tells him what is pleasing or displeasing to God. If that conscience is weak, it tells him that some actions displease God, when in fact they please God. If the weak Christian violates his conscience, then, he violates what he considers to be the dictates of God. In other words, to violate the conscience, even when the conscience is wrong, is to rebel against God.<sup>177</sup>

The “stumbling block,” then, I believe, is an inducement to sin against a weak conscience. Let’s imagine that an elder of the church, a strong believer, invites a weak believer, a Christian who believes God commands vegetarianism, to eat at his table. The strong believer serves meat, perhaps in part to pressure the weaker believer to become strong. The weak believer then is faced with temptation to eat meat, which would violate his conscience. The temptation is all the greater because of his desire to please the elder and the general demands of ancient hospitality. But if the weak believer eats the meat (without his conscience first being strengthened), he will be guilty of sin. Because even though eating meat is not contrary to God’s law, the weak believer is motivated by rebellion against God. He is placing the demands of hospitality, the demands of his host, over the demands of God, and therefore he sins. The sin is not of the act itself, but the motive, the heart attitude.

At Corinth, the strong believers were actually going to feasts at idols’ temples (1 Cor. 8:10). Paul’s view is that the food itself is not a danger, even if it had at one point been offered to an idol (verse 8, 10:25). But the religious context of an idol feast could well be a danger to a weaker Christian. And if the weaker

---

<sup>176</sup> We should make allowance for hyperbole here. In the most important sense, the work of God cannot be overthrown. But the nature of sin, from Satan’s first rebellion down to the present is to destroy, particularly to destroy a person’s spiritual life.

<sup>177</sup> This is a sort of catch-22, to be sure. When one’s conscience misleads, it may be wrong to follow it for to follow it may lead to sin. But it may also be wrong to disobey conscience, for to disobey conscience is always to rebel against what one thinks is right. This dilemma shows the importance of educating the conscience according to God’s word.

Christian hears that the food has been offered to an idol, but he sees the strong eating it (especially in the idol's temple) he may well be tempted to fall back into the actual worship of idols.

The strong, therefore, should avoid doing anything that might tempt the weak to sin against his conscience. The strong should certainly seek to educate the weak with the word of God, to make him strong. But while the weak brother is weak, the strong should not tempt him to do things that violate his weak conscience or that might lead him back into an idolatrous religious system. The strong should teach, in other words, but should not exert pressure. We nurture the conscience, not by force or pressure, but by godly persuasion.

How do these passages apply to us today? People sometimes derive from these passages that a pastor, for example, should not drink alcoholic beverages in front of the teenagers in his church, for fear that they will use his example to justify drinking to excess. There is some wisdom in that advice, though it can be pressed too far. It might be better for the pastor to instruct the youth so that they will not be tempted in that way. But that advice does not in any case arise from the passages we have discussed.

A better parallel with the use of alcohol might be as follows: a pastor invites to his home for dinner a man who is conscientiously opposed to any use of alcoholic beverages. The pastor drinks wine himself and puts pressure on his guest to do the same. The example is a bit artificial. Most conscientious abstainers in our culture today are not likely to be influenced to violate their conscience by such a pastoral example. More likely, they will be inclined to "pass judgment on" the pastor in this case. That would be unfortunate, but that is not what Paul calls the "stumbling block." Nevertheless, that spiritual danger exists in some cases, and it is therefore wrong for the pastor to try to convert the abstainer to his position by using social pressure.

I hope it is evident now that the concept "adiaphora" is entirely inappropriate to describe the issues presented in these passages. It is true, of course, that eating meat, observing days, and eating idol food are not right or wrong in themselves, but become right and wrong in various circumstances. But as I indicated earlier, all human acts are in one set of circumstances or another. None simply occur in themselves. And in the circumstances described in these passages, the acts in view are right in some cases, wrong in others, never neutral. The strong is right to eat meat, for example, but he is wrong when he eats in such a way as to pressure the weak to violate his conscience. The weak is right to abstain, though not for conscientious reasons. Both are wrong in their attitudes toward one another.

In these passages, it is plain that God's attitude toward these actions is not neutral at all. The passages include a pervasive emphasis on God's lordship,

and it is because of God's lordship that Paul exhorts the people as he does. Hear these passages, noting how many times the words *God* and *Lord* appear:

<sup>3</sup> Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Rom. 14:3-4)

<sup>6</sup> The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. <sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. <sup>10</sup> Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; <sup>11</sup> for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." <sup>12</sup> So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (Rom. 14:6-12)

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." <sup>5</sup> For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth- as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"- <sup>6</sup> yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:4-6)

And it is in the context of discussing these problems that Paul writes the verse I have often cited recently:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

Paul commends mutual love in these situations because of the lordship of God. God is not neutral here. He cares what we do, and he cares about how we treat one another: not despising or judging, not setting a stumbling block in a brother's way. Partaking and abstaining are both good acts, when they are done in honor of the Lord. And they are good precisely because they honor God. There is no suggestion here of moral neutrality, nothing for which the term *adiaphora* might be appropriate.

But these passages are relevant to the sufficiency of Scripture, precisely because of the emphasis here on God's lordship. The prevailing issue here is



God's honor, what pleases him. Human opinions must yield to God's words, which alone have ultimate authority. We find those words exclusively in Scripture.

## Chapter 12: Law in Biblical Ethics

We have been studying the normative perspective of Christian ethics. In general, the normative perspective asks what God wants us to do. We saw that the ultimate norm is God himself. More specifically, we find his will for us in his word or revelation. We looked at a number of forms that revelation takes, but we focused intensively on God's written word, the Scriptures, because of its primacy in the covenant God made with us. In the previous two chapters, we discussed six attributes of Scripture that bear on ethics.

When we think of Scripture as an ethical norm, we are thinking about it as law. So it is important for us to give some attention to the concept of law in the Bible. From one perspective, law is a part of Scripture; from another perspective it is the whole.

In an obvious way, law is one part of Scripture that must be coordinated with other parts. The traditional Jewish divisions of their Bible (the Christian Old Testament) were the law, the prophets, and the writings. The law or *torah* is the first five books of Scripture, the Pentateuch. Christians have traditionally divided the Bible (both testaments) into law, history, poetry, prophecy, gospels, epistles, and apocalyptic (the book of Revelation). As with the Jewish division, law is the first five books.

0

But of course the first five books contain not only law, but also other types of literature. Much of the Pentateuch is historical narrative rather than divine commands. So many have translated *torah* as instruction rather than law, and that seems appropriate, though the instruction in these books certainly includes a good amount of law in the literal sense. The centerpiece of the Pentateuch is the covenant that God made with Israel under Moses, which includes law as well as other elements, as we saw in Chapter 3.

And there are divine commands in many parts of Scripture other than the Pentateuch. Kings and Chronicles, for example, contain many divine commands for the temple worship. The Book of Proverbs contains advice from wisdom teachers that carries the force of divine commands. The prophets constantly command Israel to repent, at God's behest. Jesus shows the depth of the law in his teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5-7. The letters of the apostles contain much ethical instruction. So in one sense, "law" is scattered throughout the Bible in many places.

The element of law is important to Scripture, therefore, but Scripture contains many other elements as well. It contains imperatives, which we easily associate with law, but also indicatives, questions, promises, and exclamations.<sup>178</sup> It contains legal material, but also other genres such as

---

<sup>178</sup> For another discussion of genres and speech acts, see DKG, 202-205.

narrative, poetry, song, wisdom, parables, humor, apocalyptic. We should note that *all* of these are God's authoritative word, and all of them are relevant to ethics, for according to 2 Tim. 3:16 *all* Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for our instruction in righteousness, to equip us for good works.

It is interesting and important to consider how material in Scripture that is non-legal in form can be relevant to ethics. Obviously narrative is important, for instance, because it tells the story of how God rescued us from sin and enabled us to do good works, and because it provides many examples of human behavior, some for our imitation, some not. Poetry and song drive God's word (law and narrative) into our hearts, making it vivid, memorable, and motivating. Parables invite us to place ourselves into a provocative story that challenges our ethical complacency. Humor puts our pretensions into perspective. Apocalyptic stretches the imagination with symbolism about God's coming judgments and blessings.

As we see the variety of ways in which Scripture teaches ethics, we should be motivated to use similar variety in our own teaching. Ethical instruction is not just stating ethical norms. It is also singing, telling stories,<sup>179</sup> joking, exclaiming, and symbolizing.<sup>180</sup>

So if we ask the normative question, "how does God want me to live?" we must look, not only at the specifically legal sections of Scripture, but through the whole Bible. This is only to say that the normative perspective is indeed a perspective, a perspective on the whole Bible.

In that sense, the whole Bible is law. For the whole Bible is God's authoritative word, given to us for our instruction in righteousness, to equip us for good works.<sup>181</sup> Everything in Scripture has the force of law. What it teaches, we are to believe; what it commands, we are to do.<sup>182</sup> We should take its wisdom to heart, imitate its heroes, stand in awe at its symbolism, laugh at its jokes, trust its promises, sing its songs.

---

<sup>179</sup> Think, for example, of how Nathan confronted David using a parable to convict him of sin (2 Sam. 12:1-15). More on this when we consider the existential perspective.

<sup>180</sup> Obviously I am not adept at these alternative ways of teaching ethics. But I would encourage others, with other gifts, to employ them for the edification of God's people. These are just as important as the writing of theology books.

<sup>181</sup> The same thing can be said of narrative and the other forms of language as well. Some sections of Scripture are specifically narrative in form, but to know the whole narrative of the Bible you must consult the whole book. For that story includes the stories of God sending prophets, wisdom teachers, and so on. Similarly with other forms of speech and literature. See DKG, 202-205.

<sup>182</sup> This is easier to understand if we recall a frequent theme of the *Theology of Lordship*: epistemology is part of ethics. That is to say that there is an ethics of belief as well as an ethics of action. So even those parts of Scripture that seem to be given for our contemplation rather than our action are ethical: they tell us normatively what and how to contemplate.

## Law and Grace

In what follows, I shall discuss relationships between the concept of law and other concepts in Scripture. First of all, it is important for us to understand the relationship between law and grace.

This relationship is, of course, an elementary aspect of the gospel. It is plain in Scripture that we cannot be saved from sin by obeying the law. Paul says,

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.<sup>20</sup> For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—<sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,<sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom. 3:19-25; cf. 4:1-8, 13-16, 11:6, Gal. 2:15-21, Eph. 2:8-10, Phil. 3:9, Tit. 3:5)

Salvation, in other words, is not something we can earn by doing good works. It is, rather, God's free gift to us, given because of Christ's death for us. Our righteousness before God is the righteousness of Christ and him alone.

This has been the standard Protestant teaching since the Reformation, and it is enshrined in all the Protestant confessions. Recently, however, some have asked questions about Paul's teaching in this area. Some answers to those questions have been described as the "new perspective on Paul." That perspective is based on writings of Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and others. In that perspective, the problem with Judaism, according to Paul, was not works righteousness, but its failure to accept God's new covenant in Christ, which embraced Gentiles as well as Jews. On this perspective, Paul's gospel is not an answer to the troubled conscience of someone (like Luther) who can't meet God's demands. Rather, it is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to bless all nations. The "works of the law" against which Paul contends are not man's attempts to satisfy God's moral law, but the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles such as circumcision, food laws, and cleansings.

Discussions of this new perspective are very complex, entering into details about the nature of Palestinian Judaism at the time of Paul, Paul's own history, and the exegesis of crucial texts. I cannot enter this controversy here. I do agree

with those who believe that Sanders and others have been too selective in their references to Palestinian Judaism, and I believe that the new perspective fails to deal adequately with a number of Pauline passages, such as Rom. 4:4-5, 11:6, Eph. 2:8-10, Phil. 3:9, which make plain that Paul rejects, not only legal barriers between Jew and Gentile, but also all attempts of people to save themselves by their works. Paul's argument in Rom. 1-3, too, makes this clear: all people, Jew and Gentile alike, are guilty before God and cannot do anything to justify themselves. Their salvation comes only by God's grace, according to the passage in Rom. 3 quoted above. So Luther's doctrines of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* are fully scriptural and fully Pauline.<sup>183</sup>

The new perspective legitimately warns us against reducing Paul's gospel to soteric justification by faith. Paul's confrontation with the Jews was on several fronts. Nevertheless, it is important to insist that we are saved only by the grace of God in Christ, not by any works of ours.

In his chapter "Law and Grace," John Murray summarizes well what law can and cannot do for us. Below are the main headings of his discussion:<sup>184</sup>

#### *What Law Can Do*

1. Law commands and demands; it propounds what the will of God is.
2. Law pronounces approval and blessing upon conformity to its demands (Rom. 7:10, Gal. 3:12).
3. Law pronounces the judgment of condemnation upon every infraction of its precept (Gal. 3:10).
4. Law exposes and convicts of sin (Rom. 7:7, 14, Heb. 4:12).
5. Law excites and incites sin to more virulent and violent transgression (Rom. 7:8-9, 11, 13).

#### *What Law Cannot Do*

1. Law can do nothing to justify the person who in any particular has violated its sanctity and come under its curse.
2. It can do nothing to relieve the bondage of sin; it accentuates and confirms that bondage (Rom. 6:14).

### **God's Law as the Christian's Norm**

---

<sup>183</sup> I recommend Kim Riddlebarger's essay, "Reformed Confessionalism and the 'New Perspective' on Paul," available at the web site of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, [www.alliancenet.org](http://www.alliancenet.org), as an excellent introduction to this discussion. I fully endorse the conclusions of that article. I also commend a critical article, "N. T. Wright on Justification," by Charles E. Hill, available at <http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/nt/NT.h.Hill.Wright.html>.

<sup>184</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 184-186.

But if law cannot justify us or relieve the bondage of sin, is it then obsolete to those who receive God's saving grace? Does the believer, then, have nothing to do with law? Quite otherwise. Scripture is clear that the law has a positive role in the believer's life. The law is a gracious gift of God (Psm. 119:29). It is given for our good (Deut. 10:13). The Psalmists express over and over again their delight in the law of the Lord (Ps. 1:2, 119:16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 174). Jesus says,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

And he adds to that law many of his own commandments, which he also expects us to keep: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15; cf. verses 21, 23, 15:10, 1 John 2:3, 5:3, 2 John 6).

Paul says that the law is "holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12; cf. verses 13-14, 16, 19, 21-22, and 25), and he speaks of himself as "not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). He treats the basic principles of the Mosaic law as normative for Christians in passages like Rom. 13:8-10, 1 Cor. 7:19, Gal. 5:13-14. And, like Jesus, he also sets forth ethical commands, as in Rom. 12-16, Gal. 5:13-6:10, Eph. 4-6 and elsewhere.

How is this positive emphasis on law compatible with grace? It is simply that those who are saved by God's grace will want to obey him. Obedience does not earn salvation for us, but it is the natural response of those who have become God's sons and daughters. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it,

Q86: Since, then, we are redeemed from our misery by grace through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we do good works?

A86: Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we show ourselves thankful to God for His blessing, and that He be glorified through us; then also, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by the fruits thereof; and by our godly walk may win others also to Christ.

Now to obey someone, we must know what he wants of us. So to obey God, we must meditate on his law.

How, then, is this positive regard for the law compatible with Paul's statement in Rom. 6:14, "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace?" In what sense are we "not under law?" Again, Murray's analysis is helpful. He argues that "under law" in the context of Paul's argument here refers to the bondage of sin:

The person who is 'under law', the person upon whom only law has been brought to bear, the person whose life has been determined exclusively by the resources and potencies of law, is the bondservant of sin. And the more intelligently and resolutely a person commits himself to law the more abandoned becomes his slavery to sin. Hence deliverance from the bondage of sin must come from an entirely different source.<sup>185</sup>

That "entirely different source," is, of course, God's grace. So Paul says, "you are not under law, but under grace." Grace in Rom. 6 particularly represents the fact that when Jesus died for our sins, we died to sin, and we were also raised with Christ to newness of life.

So, "under law" in Rom. 6:14 has a different meaning from the same expression in 1 Cor. 9:21. In Rom. 6:14, Paul denies that believers are in bondage to sin, since they are not limited to what Murray calls "the resources and potencies of law." But in 1 Cor. 9:21, he recognizes, with the Psalmists, Jesus, and other biblical writers, that the law continues to have authority over him, to show him how to obey the Lord who has saved him by grace.<sup>186</sup>

Paul also uses the phrase "under law" to refer to the distinctives of the Mosaic covenant, such as circumcision, temple sacrifices, the Aaronic priesthood, feast days, and so on, distinctives which Judaizers were trying to impose upon Gentile Christians (Gal. 3:23). This is the theme that has become prominent in the writings of the "new perspective." The phrase in Gal. 3:23 has a different meaning from the use of the phrase either in Rom. 6:14 or in 1 Cor. 9:21. In this sense, to be "under law" is to be under "the pedagogical nonage and tutelage of the Mosaic economy" in contrast with "the mature sonship and liberty enjoyed by the New Testament believer."<sup>187</sup> We should ascribe the same meaning to the "abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances" in Eph. 2:15.

So Murray concludes that we are not "under law" (1) in the sense of being under the bondage of sin (Rom. 6:14), or (2) "being under the ritual law of the Mosaic economy" (Gal. 3:23). But we are under law in the sense of being obligated to obey our Lord (1 Cor. 9:21).<sup>188</sup>

---

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 185-86.

<sup>186</sup> Murray's discussion of 1 Cor. 9:21 is valuable. See Ibid., 186-188.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 190.

## Law and Gospel

I would now like to look at another distinction closely related to law/grace, but by no means identical to it. That is the distinction between law and gospel. As we have seen, we are saved by God's grace, not by our obedience to his law. So some have tried to draw a sharp distinction in Scripture between two "messages." One message, "law," conveys law without grace, the other, "gospel," conveys grace without law. In my judgment, it is not possible to make this distinction, even though Scripture does make a sharp distinction between works and grace.

It has become increasingly common in Reformed circles, as it has long been in Lutheran circles, to say that the distinction between law and gospel is the key to sound theology, even to say that to differ with certain traditional formulations of this distinction is to deny the gospel itself.

Sometimes this argument employs Scripture passages like Rom. 3:21-31, emphasizing that we are saved by God's grace, through faith alone, apart from the works of the law. In my judgment, however, none of the parties to the debate questions that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone. But it is one thing to distinguish between faith and works, a different thing to distinguish law and gospel.

### 1. *The Traditional Distinction*

The distinction between law and gospel is not a distinction between a false and a true way of salvation. Rather, it is a distinction between two messages, one that supposedly consists exclusively of commands, threats, and therefore terrors, the other that consists exclusively of promises and comforts. Although I believe that we are saved entirely by God's grace and not by works, I do not believe that there are two entirely different messages of God in Scripture, one exclusively of command ("law") and the other exclusively of promise ("gospel"). In Scripture itself, commands and promises are typically found together. With God's promises come commands to repent of sin and believe the promise. The commands, typically, are not merely announcements of judgment, but God's gracious opportunities to repent of sin and believe in him. As the Psalmist says, "be gracious to me through your law," Psm. 119:29.

The view that I oppose, which sharply separates the two messages, comes mainly out of Lutheran theology, though similar statements can be found in Calvin and in other Reformed writers.<sup>189</sup> The *Epitome*<sup>190</sup> of the Lutheran

---

<sup>189</sup> Lutheran theologians, however, frequently complain that Reformed theology "confuses" law and gospel, which is in the Lutheran view a grave error. The main difference is that for the Reformed law is not merely an accuser, but also a message of divine comfort, a delight of the



*Formula of Concord*, at 5.5, recognizes that *gospel* is used in different senses in Scripture, and it cites Mark 1:15 and Acts 20:21 as passages in which gospel preaching “correctly” includes a command to repent of sin. But in section 6, it does something really strange. It says,

But when the Law and the Gospel are compared together, as well as Moses himself, the teacher of the Law, and Christ the teacher of the Gospel, we believe, teach, and confess that the Gospel is not a preaching of repentance, convicting of sins, but that it is properly nothing else than a certain most joyful message and preaching full of consolation, not convicting or terrifying, inasmuch as it comforts the conscience against the terrors of the Law, and bids it look at the merit of Christ alone...

I say this is strange, because the Formula gives no biblical support at all for this distinction,<sup>191</sup> and what it says here about the “gospel” flatly contradicts what it conceded earlier in section 5. What it describes as “correct” in section five contradicts what it calls “proper” in section 6. What section 6 does is to suggest something “improper” about what it admits to be the biblical description of the content of *gospel*, as in Mark 1:15 and Acts 14:15.<sup>192</sup> Mark 1:15 is correct, but not proper.

## 2. Law and Gospel in Scripture

---

redeemed heart (Psm. 1:2). Also, the Reformed generally do not give the law/gospel distinction as much prominence within their systematic theological formulations. And, historically, they have been more open to the broader biblical language which the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* calls “correct” but not “proper” (see below).

<sup>190</sup> I am quoting the *Epitome*, a summary of the *Formula*, rather than the *Solid Declaration*, which deals with these matters at greater length. I think the argument of the *Epitome* is easier to follow, and I don’t think the *Solid Declaration* adds anything important to the present discussion, though some Lutheran correspondents have told me otherwise.

<sup>191</sup> The *Solid Declaration* (section 6 of the chapter “Law and Gospel”) mentions Mark 1:15 in which “believing in the gospel” is distinguished from repenting. But especially in view of the use of “gospel” in verse 14, we may not take “gospel” in verse 15 to exclude any command. Indeed, “believe in the gospel” is itself a command. Section 26 of the *Solid Declaration* mentions also 2 Cor. 3:7-18 as a passage that “thoroughly and forcibly shows the distinction between the Law and the Gospel.” That passage does not mention “law” or “gospel,” but it does distinguish the Mosaic Covenant as a “ministry of death” (verse 7) and “ministry of condemnation” (verse 9) from the New Covenant in Christ as a “ministry of righteousness” (verse 9). But Paul’s emphasis here is on a difference in degree, the relative glory of the two covenants. He does not teach that the Mosaic covenant contains *only* condemnation. Indeed, not even Lutheran theologians believe that the gospel was absent from the Mosaic period or that it made its first appearance at the time of Christ. In all periods of redemptive history, God has renewed his promise of redemption.

<sup>192</sup> The passage cited by the formula, Acts 20:21, does not use the *euaggello* root, the usual term for “gospel” and “gospel preaching,” but the term *diamarturomai*. But Acts 20:21 is nevertheless significant, since it gives a general description of what Paul did in his preaching to “both Jews and Greeks.” That preaching was certainly gospel preaching. Paul resolved in his preaching to “know nothing but Christ and him crucified.” Luke 24:47 is also significant, for it includes both repentance and forgiveness of sins as the content Jesus gives his disciples to preach (*kerusso*) to all nations.

I have been told that *proper* at this point in the *Formula* means, not “incorrect” or “wrong,” but simply “more common or usual.” I have, however, looked through the uses of the *euaggel-* terms in the NT, and I cannot find one instance in which the context *excludes* a demand for repentance (that is, a command of God, a law) as part of the gospel content. That is to say, I cannot find one instance of what the Formula calls the “proper” meaning of *gospel*, a message of pure comfort, without any suggestion of obligation. And there are important theological reasons why that use does not occur.

Essentially, the "gospel" in the New Testament is the good news that the kingdom of God has come in Jesus (Matt. 4:23, 9:35, Mark 1:14, Luke 4:43, Acts 20:24f).<sup>193</sup> "Kingdom" is (1) God's sovereign power, (2) his sovereign authority, and (3) his coming into history to defeat Satan and bring about salvation with all its consequences.<sup>194</sup> God's kingdom power includes all his mighty acts in history, especially including the Resurrection of Christ.

God's kingdom authority is the reiteration of his commandments. When the kingdom appears in power, it is time for people to repent. They must *obey* (*hupakouo*) the gospel (2 Thess. 1:8, compare *apeitheo* in 1 Pet. 4:17). The gospel itself requires a certain kind of conduct (Acts 14:15, Gal. 2:14, Phil. 1:27; cf. Rom 2:16).

When God comes into history, he brings his power and authority to bear on his creatures. In kingdom power, he establishes peace. So New Testament writers frequently refer to the “gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15; cf. Acts 10:36, Rom. 10:15), sometimes referring to the “mystery” of God bringing Gentiles and Jews together in one body (Rom. 16:25, Eph. 6:19).

It is this whole complex: God's power to save, the reiteration of God's commands, and his coming into history to execute his plan, that is the gospel. It is good news to know that God is bringing his good plans to fruition.

Consider Isa. 52:7, one of the most important background passages for the New Testament concept of gospel:

---

<sup>193</sup> N. T. Wright believes that this use of *gospel* has a double root: “On the one hand, the gospel Paul preached was the fulfilment of the message of Isaiah 40 and 52, the message of comfort for Israel and of hope for the whole world, because YHWH, the god of Israel, was returning to Zion to judge and redeem. On the other hand, in the context into which Paul was speaking, “gospel” would mean the celebration of the accession, or birth, of a king or emperor. Though no doubt petty kingdoms might use the word for themselves, in Paul's world the main ‘gospel’ was the news of, or the celebration of, Caesar,” “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” available at <http://www.ctinquiry.org/publications/wright.htm>. Of course both of these uses focus on the *rule* of God as Lord, and both involve what is traditionally called law.

<sup>194</sup> This a triad of the sort discussed in this and other books in the *Theology of Lordship* series.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

It is the reign of God that is good news, news that ensures peace and salvation. Even the demand for repentance is good news, because in context it implies that God, though coming in power to claim his rights, is willing to forgive for Christ's sake. As God comes, he reigns, establishing his law throughout the earth.

In Isa. 61:1-2, which Jesus quotes in his Capernaum sermon (Luke 4:18-19), Isaiah proclaims,

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

This verse also provides important background to the New Testament use of "gospel:" note the "good news to the poor" in verse 1. This message too is the message of the coming of a king, a new administration of justice, even vengeance. This gospel, like that of Isa. 52:7, is about the re-establishment of law.

So gospel includes law in an important sense: God's kingdom authority, his demand to repent. And even on the view of those most committed to the law/gospel distinction, the gospel includes a command to *believe*. We tend to think of that command as in a different class from the commands of the Decalogue. But that too is a command, after all. Generically it is law. And, like the Decalogue, that law can be terrifying to someone who wants to trust only on his own resources, rather than resting on the mercy of another. And the demand of faith includes other requirements: the conduct becoming the gospel that I mentioned earlier. Faith itself works through love (Gal. 5:6) and is dead without good works (James 2:17).

Having faith does not *merit* salvation for anyone, any more than any other human act merits salvation. Thus we speak of faith, not as the *ground* of salvation, but as the *instrument*.<sup>195</sup> Faith saves, not because it merits salvation, but because it reaches out to receive God's grace in Christ. Nevertheless, faith is an obligation, and in that respect the command to believe is like other divine commands. So it is impossible to say that command, or law, is excluded from the message of the gospel.

As gospel includes law, it is also true that law includes gospel. God gives his law as part of a covenant, and that covenant is a gift of God's grace. The

---

<sup>195</sup> See, for example, WCF 11.2.

Decalogue begins, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Only after proclaiming his saving grace does God then issue his commands to Israel. So the Decalogue as a whole has the function of offering Israel a new way of life, conferred by grace (cf. Deut. 7:7-8, 9:4-6). Is the Decalogue “law” or “gospel?” Surely it is both. Israel was terrified upon hearing it, to be sure (Ex. 20:18-21). But in fact it offers blessing (note verse 6) and promise (verse 12). Moses and the Prophets are sufficient to keep sinners from perishing in Hell (Luke 16:30-31).

So the definitions that sharply separate law and gospel break down on careful analysis. In both law and gospel, then, God proclaims his saving work, and he demands that his people respond by obeying his commands. The terms “law” and “gospel” differ in emphasis, but they overlap and intersect. They present the whole Word of God from different perspectives. Indeed, we can say that our Bible as a whole is both law (because as a whole it speaks with divine authority and requires belief) and gospel (because as a whole it is good news to fallen creatures). Each concept is meaningless apart from the other. Each implies the other.

The law often brings terror, to be sure. Israel was frightened by the Sinai display of God’s wrath against sin (Ex. 20:18-21). But it also brings delight to the redeemed heart (Psm. 1:2; compare 119:34-36, 47, 92, 93, 97, 130, 131, Rom. 7:22). Similarly, the gospel brings comfort and joy; but (as less often noted in the theological literature) it also brings condemnation. Paul says that his gospel preaching is, to those who perish, “a fragrance from death to death” and, to those who believe, “a fragrance from life to life” (2 Cor. 2:15-16; compare 1 Cor. 1:18, 23, 27-29, 2 Cor. 4:3-4, Rom. 9:32). The gospel is good news to those who believe. But to those who are intent on saving themselves by their own righteousness, it is bad news. It is God’s condemnation upon them, a rock of offense.

### 3. *Which Comes First?*

In discussions of law and gospel, one commonly hears that it is important, not only to preach both law and gospel, but also to preach the law first and the gospel second. We are told that people must be frightened by the law before they can be driven to seek salvation in Christ. Certainly there is a great need to preach God’s standards, man’s disobedience, and God’s wrath against sin, especially in an age such as ours where people think God will let them behave as they like. And very often people have been driven to their knees in repentance when the Spirit has convicted them of their transgressions of law.

But as we have seen, it is really impossible truly to present law without gospel or gospel without law, though various relative emphases are possible. And among those relative emphases, the biblical pattern tends to put the gospel first. That is the pattern of the Decalogue, as we have seen: God proclaims that

he has redeemed his people (gospel), then asks them to behave as his covenant people (law). Since both gospel and law are aspects of all God's covenants, that pattern pervades Scripture.

Jesus reflects that pattern in his own evangelism. In John 4:1-42, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he can give her living water that will take away all thirst. Only after offering that gift does he proclaim the law to her, exposing her adultery. Some have cited Luke 18:18-30 as an example of the contrary order: Jesus expounds the commandments, and only afterward tells the rich ruler to follow him. But in this passage Jesus does not use the law alone to terrorize the man or to plunge him into despair. The man does go sadly away only after Jesus has called him to discipleship, which, though itself a command, is the gospel of this passage.

#### 4. *Legitimate Use of the Traditional Distinction*

Now if people want to define *gospel* more narrowly for a specific theological purpose, I won't object too strongly. Scripture does not give us a glossary of English usage. A number of technical theological terms don't mean exactly what similar terms sometimes mean in the Bible. *Regeneration* and *election* are examples, as is *covenant*.<sup>196</sup> We can define our English terms pretty much as we like, as long as those definitions don't create confusion in our readers.

Over the years, we have come to think of *gospel* as correlative with *faith* and *law* as correlative with *works*. In this usage, law is what condemns and gospel is what saves. Although this distinction differs from the biblical uses of the terms, it does become useful in some contexts. For example, we all know a type of preaching that merely expounds moral obligations (as we usually think of them: don't kill, don't steal) and does not give its hearers the knowledge of Christ they need to have in order to be saved. That kind of preaching (especially when it is not balanced by other preaching emphases) we often describe as a preaching of *mere law*, legalism, or moralism. There is no good news in it. So, we are inclined to say, it is not preaching of the *gospel*. So in this general way we come to distinguish the preaching of law from the preaching of gospel. That is, I think, the main concern of the *Formula*: to remind us that we need to do both things.

We should be reminded of course that there is also an opposite extreme: preaching "gospel" in such a way as to suggest that Christ makes no demands on one's life. We call that "cheap grace" or "easy believism." We might also call it preaching "gospel without law." Taken to an extreme, it is

---

<sup>196</sup> The phrases "covenant of works" and "covenant of grace" found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.2-4 are not found anywhere in Scripture. *Covenant* in Scripture refers to particular historical relationships between God and his people, mediated by Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. "Covenant of grace" generalizes the common features of these historical covenants, seeing them as successive manifestations of God's redemptive Lordship. "Covenant of works" finds in God's relation to our first parents features identical to his later covenants with, of course, significant differences.

antinomianism, the rejection of God's law. The traditional law/gospel distinction is not itself antinomian, but those who hold it tend to be more sensitive to the dangers of legalism than to the dangers of antinomianism.

Such considerations may lead us to distinguish in a rough-and-ready way between preaching law and preaching gospel. Of course, even in making that distinction, our intention ought to be to bring these together. None of these considerations requires us to posit a sharp distinction. And certainly, this rough-and-ready distinction should never be used to cast doubt on the integration of command and promise that pervades the Scriptures themselves.

It should be evident that "legalist" preaching as described above is not true preaching of law, any more than it is true preaching of the gospel. For as I indicated earlier, law itself in Scripture comes to us wrapped in grace.

##### 5. *Law/Gospel and the Christian Life*

The *Formula's* distinction between law and gospel has unfortunate consequences for the Christian life. The document does warrant preaching of the law to the regenerate,<sup>197</sup> but only as threat and terror, to drive them to Christ *Epitome*, VI, 4. There is nothing here about the law as the delight of the redeemed heart (Psm. 1:2; compare 119:34-36, 47, 92, 93, 97, 130, 131, Rom. 7:22).

The Formula then goes on to say that believers do conform to the law under the influence of the Spirit, but only as follows:

Fruits of the Spirit, however, are the works which the Spirit of God who dwells in believers works through the regenerate, and which are done by believers so far as they are regenerate [spontaneously and freely], as though they knew of no command, threat, or reward; for in this manner the children of God live in the Law and walk according to the Law of God, which [mode of living] St. Paul in his epistles calls the Law of Christ and the Law of the mind, Rom. 7, 25; 8, 7; Rom. 8, 2; Gal. 6, 2. (*Epitome*, 6.5).

---

<sup>197</sup> Theological literature speaks of three "uses of the law" : (1) to restrain sin in society, (2) to terrorize people in order to drive them to Christ, and (3) as a guide to believers. In Lutheranism (not in Reformed circles) there has been controversy over the third use, though the *Formula* affirms it. But in Lutheranism, it is often said that "the law always accuses." So the third use is essentially the second use directed at believers, driving us to Christ again and again and away from our residual unbelief. Reformed writers do not deny our continual need for Christ and the importance of hearing again and again that we are saved only by his grace. But in Reformed theology, the law also plays a more direct role, giving us specific guidance in God's delightful paths.

So the law may threaten us to drive us to Christ. But truly good works are never motivated by any command, threat or reward.<sup>198</sup>

In my view, this teaching is simply unbiblical. It suggests that when you do something in obedience to a divine command, threat, or promise of reward, it is to that extent tainted, unrighteous, something less than a truly good work. I agree that our best works are tainted by sin, but certainly not for this reason. When Scripture presents us with a command, obedience to that command is a righteous action. Indeed, our righteousness is measured by our obedience to God's commands. When God threatens punishment, and we turn from wickedness to do what he asks, that is not a sin, but a righteous response. When God promises reward, it is a good thing for us to embrace that reward.<sup>199</sup>

The notion that we should conduct our lives completely apart from the admonitions of God's word is a terrible notion. To ignore God's revelation of his righteousness is, indeed, essentially sinful. To read Scripture, but refuse to allow its commands to influence one's conduct, is the essence of sin.

And what, then, does motivate good works, if not the commands, threats, and promises of reward in Scripture? The Formula doesn't say. What it suggests is that the Spirit simply brings about obedience from within us. I believe the Spirit does exactly that. But the Formula seems to assume that the Spirit works that way without any decision on our part to act according to the commands of God. That I think is wrong. "Quietism" is the view that Christians should be entirely passive, waiting for the Spirit of God to act in them. This view of the Christian life is unbiblical. The Christian life is a battle, a race. It requires decision and effort. I am not saying that the Formula is quietist (Lutheranism rejected quietism after some controversy in its ranks), but as we read the position of the Formula, it does seem that quietism lies around the corner from it.

## 6. *The Objective and the Subjective*

Part of the motivation for this view of the Christian life, I believe, is the thought that one's life should be based on something objective, rather than something subjective. On this view, our life is built on what Christ has done *for* us, objectively in history, not on anything arising from our own subjectivity or

---

<sup>198</sup> We may question the consistency of this position. If the threats of the law drive Margaret to Christ, so that she believes in Jesus, is that belief a good thing? One would be inclined to say yes, but it cannot be if actions motivated by threat are *ipso facto* sinful.

<sup>199</sup> At this point there is an odd convergence between traditional Lutheranism and secular deontology. Secular deontologists, like Kant, whom we considered in Chapter 8, also reject ethical actions motivated by reward or punishment and say that one does good only by doing his "duty for duty's sake." As I indicated in my discussion of Kant, that position is unscriptural. Scripture often motivates our conduct by rewards and punishments, and it is not ethically right to shun these divine provisions. Kant also rejected ethical actions done in obedience to commands from someone outside the self, again violating Scripture, but strangely echoing the *Formula of Concord*.

inwardness. So in this view, *gospel* is a recitation of what God has done for us, not a command to provoke our subjective response.

This understanding focuses on justification: God regards us as objectively righteous for Christ's sake, apart from anything in us. But it tends to neglect regeneration and sanctification: that God does work real subjective changes in the elect.

I have no quarrel with this understanding of justification. But in Scripture, though justification is based on the work of Christ external to us, it is embraced by faith, which is subjective. And faith, in turn, is the result of the Spirit's subjective work of regeneration (John 3:3).<sup>200</sup> So nobody is objectively justified who has not been subjectively changed by God's grace.

So the Westminster Confession of Faith 18.2, even in speaking of assurance of salvation, refers not only to the truth of God's promises (objective), but also to the "inward evidence of those graces" and "the testimony of the Spirit of adoption," which are in some measure subjective.

In fact, we cannot separate the objective and the subjective or, in terms of my earlier distinctions, the situational from the existential. Objective truths are subjectively apprehended. We cannot have objective knowledge, confidence, or assurance, unless we are subjectively enabled to perceive what God has objectively given us.

### *Concluding Observation*

Since the law/gospel distinction, as expressed in the Formula, is unscriptural, I do not commend it to Reformed believers. It is especially wrong to claim that this view is or should be a test of orthodoxy in Reformed churches.

## **Law and Love**

Many discussions of ethics, especially by theologians, deal with the relationship between law and love. The question is important, because love is in some sense the central principle of Christian ethics. Some writers say that love somehow replaces law in the Christian life. But we should not accept that view without some reflection.

---

<sup>200</sup> So, again, saving faith works through love (Gal. 5:6) and is dead without works (James 2:14-26).



We saw in Chapter 3 the centrality of the covenant relation in which God is lord and we are vassals, servants, sons, daughters, bride. In the ancient near east, *love* often refers to the allegiance of a vassal to his lord. Recall the elements of the suzerainty treaty that I listed in that chapter. In the treaty, the first stipulation, or law, is that of exclusive covenant allegiance, sometimes called “love.” In the Decalogue, that stipulation is the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). Deut. 6:4-5 expresses this stipulation with the term “love” in the *shema*, the famous confession of the Jewish people:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Jesus calls this “the great commandment in the law” (Matt. 22:36), “the great and first commandment” (verse 38). In verse 39, he adds, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” another commandment of love, this one from a more obscure Old Testament passage, Lev. 19:18.

Jesus’ own teachings also emphasize the centrality of love in the believer’s life. Not only does he stress love of neighbors, but even love of enemies (Matt. 5:43-48), teaching that as God loves his enemies, we should also love ours. And love is his “new commandment:”

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35, cf. 15:12, 17, 1 John 2:7-11, 3:11-24, 4:7-21).

This commandment is “new” because it is based on the example of Jesus’ own love for his people, a love, as the narrative later indicates, unto death. This love is to be the mark of the church, by which believers are to be distinguished from the world.<sup>201</sup>

Similarly the apostles emphasize love in their ethical teaching (as Rom. 12:9-10, 15:30, 2 Cor. 8:7, Gal. 5:6, 22, Eph. 1:15, 3:17, 6:23, 1 Thess. 4:9, Heb. 13:1, 1 Pet. 1:22). Love is the highest Christian virtue, according to 1 Cor. 13 and 1 Pet. 4:8. And as Jesus had taught in Matt.

---

<sup>201</sup> In the tradition of Reformed theology, the marks of the church are the preaching of the word of God, the right administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. I believe it is biblical to speak of these as marks, but to do so requires a number of inferences. Scripture never directly refers to these as marks. But it does refer in that way to the love of Christ. It is unfortunate that this mark has been suppressed in favor of the others. And it is tragic that the world has often not been able to see this mark in us. Too often the church has not been a notable example of love, but has been more famous for its battles. See my paper, “Machen’s Warrior Children,” in Sung Wook Chung, ed., *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

22:37-40 (cf. also 7:12), Paul also teaches that love fulfills the law (Rom. 13:8-10, Gal. 5:14, cf. 6:2).

What is love? I will discuss the nature of love more fully under the existential perspective. For the present, we may think of it tri-perspectively: love is allegiance, action, and affection. As we have seen, within the covenant, love describes the exclusive allegiance of the vassal to the suzerain. Scripture also defines love by action, as by Jesus' atoning work in 1 John 4:10 and our actions toward others in Rom. 13:10, Eph. 5:2. And biblical love is also affection, as in references to sexual and romantic love (Gen. 29:20, 32, 2 Sam. 1:26, Prov. 5:19), the analogy therein to God's love (Hos. 3:1, 11:4, 14:4, Zeph. 3:17), the believer's affection for God (Ps. 119:97) and for other believers (Rom. 12:10, 1 Pet. 1:22, 1 John 3:17).

The following considerations are important in considering the relationship between love and law:

1. *Love is a command, part of the law.*

Love is the great commandment, the greatest commandment, the highest virtue, the mark of the believer, center of biblical ethics. But it is also, nevertheless a command among others. Many thinkers, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher,<sup>202</sup> Emil Brunner,<sup>203</sup> and Joseph Fletcher,<sup>204</sup> have tried to show that love is something other than a command. Fletcher says,

Only one "general" proposition is prescribed, namely, the commandment to love God through the neighbor... And this commandment is, be it noted, a normative ideal; it is *not* an operational directive. All else, all other generalities (e.g. "One should tell the truth" and "One should respect life") are at most only *maxims*, never rules. For the situationist there are no rules—none at all.<sup>205</sup>

Here Fletcher denies that love is a "rule." He admits that it is a general proposition, but he puts *general* in quotation marks. (And what is the

<sup>202</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (N. Y.: Harper and Row, 1963). He thinks that love cannot be a law, since law is concerned only with outward acts. That may be true of human law, but it certainly is not true of the law of God.

<sup>203</sup> Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Phila.: Westminster Press, 1947). Brunner says that God's will for me, love, is absolutely concrete, though law deals only with general principles. But it certainly is not obvious that general principles can never dictate concrete decisions. Scripture itself assumes that God's commands do and ought to have this effect.

<sup>204</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (Phila.: Westminster Press, 1966).

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. Emphasis his.

difference between a rule and a proposition?) Then he says that love is a “normative ideal,” not an “operational directive.” If he has defined that distinction anywhere, I have not located the definition. Evidently he thinks that even love cannot direct us in all concrete ethical decisions, but serves only as an ideal.

Fletcher, of course, wants to deny that love is a rule or law, because he doesn't want us to be subject to rules at all, but he does want us to be subject to love, at least in an ideal way. But if “love only is always good,”<sup>206</sup> then it is hard to understand why it is not a law or rule. So Fletcher denies the existence of rules and, like Plato, embraces, in effect, a rule that cannot be defined. The first is irrationalistic, in terms of our earlier analysis, and the second is rationalistic. But, as with Plato, since the rationalistic principle lacks content, it is essentially irrationalistic. And since Fletcher's denial of rules is a rational hypothesis,<sup>207</sup> his irrationalism is rationalistic.

In place of all this, Scripture clearly makes love a command of God. That fact immediately rules out any opposition or antithesis between love and commandments in general. Any arguments directed against the keeping of commandments in general bear with equal weight against obedience to the love commandment. But in an ethic governed by Scripture, such arguments carry no weight at all.

## *2. The Love Commandment Requires Obedience to the Whole Law of God.*

In the suzerainty treaty structure of the covenant, the commandment to love the Lord (exclusive covenant loyalty) precedes the detailed prescriptions of the law. We demonstrate our love by obeying the commandments. Such is the relation in the Decalogue between the first commandment and the rest. Note also what follows the love commandment in Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.<sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.<sup>6</sup> And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.<sup>7</sup> You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.<sup>8</sup> You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.<sup>9</sup> You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 57, title of Chapter 3.

<sup>207</sup> However unlikely it is that one can prove by reason such a universal negative.

To love God completely is to take heed to his words, to saturate one's mind and those of his family with the commands of God. This is certainly at least part of what is meant by love fulfilling the law: love carries out the commandments of the lord.

So Jesus says that those who love him will keep his commands, a major theme in the Johannine writings (John 14:15, 21, 23, 15:10, 1 John 2:3-5, 5:3, 2 John 5-6.<sup>208</sup> Unlike Fletcher, Scripture never suggests that one must disobey a divine command in order to fulfill the law of love.

### 3. *Love is a Provocative Characterization of the Law*

We have seen that the law commands us to love, and that love commands us to keep God's commandments. Law requires love, and love requires law. But that relationship suggests synonymy, that law is love and love is law. Can that be right? And the question naturally arises: If love and law impose on us the same obligations, how do they differ? Why do we need two categories, if each contains all the content of the other?

Readers of the *Theology of Lordship* will not find it strange that I describe this relationship as perspectival. Love and law are the same content, considered from two different angles. But then the question becomes, how do they differ as perspectives?

As perspectives, the difference between them is in focus or emphasis. "Law" focuses on the acts we are to perform, while "love" focuses on the heart-motives of these acts. Of course, godly heart-motives are themselves commanded by the law, and acts are part of the threefold definition of love that I presented earlier. But there is a difference of focus here.

To say that love is the central obligation of the Christian is to emphasize that slavish obedience (Kant's "duty for duty's sake") is not the goal of the law. Rather, that goal is a genuine passion for God and others that comes from the heart.<sup>209</sup> Biblical ethics is first of all *personal*, for God is absolute person. It is behavior appropriate to a relationship with the one who created and redeemed us, our covenant lord, a relationship that includes others made in his image.

---

<sup>208</sup> Compare also the interplay between love and obedience in 1 John 3:19-24, where these are wrapped together in a unique Johannine way with the concepts of assurance, God's knowledge, answered prayer, believing in Christ, abiding in him, and the Spirit's witness.

<sup>209</sup> Recall our discussion of God's word written on the heart in Chapter 9.

But unlike Plato's good, Kant's categorical imperative, and Fletcher's love, biblical love is not an abstract conceptual blank. It has definite content, and God specifies that content in his law. That is the principle we express best by describing our obligation from the perspective of law.

### **Moral Heroism**

In this section, I will reflect further on the relation between love and law, particularly in relation to the sufficiency of Scripture.

I have said that Scripture is sufficient for ethics in the sense that it includes all the divine words we will ever need to determine our obligations. And since God's word is the source of our obligations, we have none except those presented in the word.

That emphasis might lead us to think that determining our obligation is fairly simple. If we are obligated to do something, there will be a biblical command to that effect. If there is no biblical command, there is no obligation. So it might seem possible to codify our obligations fairly concisely, as the Jews found 613 commands in the Torah. Once we have obeyed that number of specific commands, we might imagine, we will be right with God.

But a number of Bible incidents discourage such a project. In 2 Sam. 23:13-17, David longingly expresses a wish for some water from the well of Bethlehem, his home town, now under the rule of the Philistines. In response, David's three mighty men

broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate and carried and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it. He poured it out to the LORD<sup>17</sup> and said, "Far be it from me, O LORD, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?" Therefore he would not drink it.

Were these men ethically obligated to perform this action? One looks in vain for any text of the Torah or elsewhere in Scripture that commands such a thing. Nor did David actually command his men to do this, so they were not carrying out the will of a civil authority.

So it may seem that they were not obligated to do what they did. Nevertheless, the text agrees with David that what they did was something noble, wonderful. This was an action of surpassing valor. Scripture never suggests that they sinned by adding to the word of God. And it is hard for me to imagine that

they would have done such a thing except under moral compulsion, a great loyalty to their leader.

The same question can be asked about the story of the widow in Mark 12:44 who gave two mites, all that she had, to the temple treasury. The law mandated only a tithe. Was she, then, performing a work of supererogation, doing more than the law requires, adding to God's word? Or was she doing something she was not actually obligated to do? What about Barnabas who sold his property and gave it to the church (Acts 4:37)? Peter told the liar Ananias that in such cases believers are not *required* to give land to the church (Acts 5:4).

So some might be inclined to say that David's mighty men, the widow, and Barnabas were governed, not by obligation, but by some other motive. If they were not obligated, then, although they performed works of heroism, they would not have sinned if they had chosen to omit these actions.

But to say that these actions are not obligatory poses problems. Are these actions optional, then? Something you can do or not do, at your own pleasure?

In 1 Cor. 9, Paul describes all his exertions for the Gospel, with all the "rights" he has relinquished so that the Gospel might be made available without charge. If he had a right to be paid by the church, we are inclined to say, certainly he can't have been *obligated* to preach without pay. But there is a sense of obligation in the passage:

For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! <sup>17</sup> For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. (verses 16-17)

If Paul has a certain "right" not to preach without payment, he has a *compulsion* of some sort to forego that payment. Further, his decision discharges a "stewardship entrusted" to him. What if he had refused to discharge that trust? Would he have sinned?

Before you answer, note that Paul says later, "I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (verse 23) and then describes his compulsion as that of a runner with his eye on the goal, concluding, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." In some sense, winning the prize depends on Paul's moral heroism.

This almost sounds like salvation by works. Of course, we know from other Scripture that it isn't that. What is it, then? Well, ultimately the prize is Jesus. It is his Kingdom; it is the full blessing of knowing him.

Compare what Paul says here with another passage reflecting his moral heroism, Phil. 3:7-11, 14:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith-<sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,<sup>11</sup> that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead... I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul is so passionate about Jesus that he wants to experience all the blessings that come to those who go all out for him. It's not that otherwise he will go to Hell, or that there is some precise proportion between the merit of earthly works and heavenly reward. It is just that Paul wants to know Jesus as best he can. Cf. 2 Cor. 12, where he endures his sufferings "for Christ's sake" (verse 10), for in that weakness is his strength. Compare also 2 Cor. 1:5-6, and the perplexing verse Col. 1:24.

But aren't we *obligated*, in one sense, to know Jesus as best we can? Eternal life itself is knowing Jesus, John 17:3. God told Israel through Moses that they should come to know him (Deut. 7:9). He did his mighty deeds "so that they might know that I am the Lord." Not only are we obligated to know him, but to *love* him, with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind (Matt. 22:37).

Paul's particular moral heroism is not obligatory for all of us. Preaching without charge was Paul's way of carrying out his passion for knowing and loving Jesus. Other apostles accepted payment for their ministry, as was their right. But they showed their passion for Christ in other ways. It is that passion that is obligatory, not a particular way of carrying it out. It is the principle, not Paul's particular application of it.<sup>210</sup>

But God expects some level of heroism from each of us. The Great Commandment, to love God with all we have, is an extreme demand. God may never call you to an act of military heroism like David's mighty men, or to give away all your belongings, like the poor widow, or to sell your

---

<sup>210</sup> Every commandment makes obligatory some specific applications. For example, Matt. 22:37 implies that we should not bow down to Baal or Zeus. But every commandment also allows a certain amount of leeway for individual application. For example, the fifth commandment requires Ruth Billingsley to honor her own parents, Joe and Katherine Billingsley. But it doesn't specify precisely how she is to honor them, in financial support, living arrangements, personal visits, etc. We shall discuss this flexibility of application again in the next chapter, under "Priorities."

property, like Barnabas. But he will ask you to make some kind of really hard sacrifice, as he asked the Rich Young Ruler to sell all his goods to feed the poor.

Moral heroism is an obligation, because our overall obligation is to be like Jesus: to love as he did (John 13:34, 35, 1 John 4:9-12) in his most extreme sacrifice, and to serve others as he served us (Mark 10:45).

Moral heroism is another illustration of the fact discussed in Chapter 11, that the whole counsel of God for ethics includes, not only the explicit content of Scripture, but also what may be deduced or drawn from it by way of application. Moral heroism applies the law of love to situations of life that excite our admiration, even though the specific action may not be described explicitly in Scripture.

So moral heroism is part of our obligation. Of course, when we understand this obligation, we can see much more clearly why our good works can never measure up to God's standards. By comparison with the heroism of Christ, and even by comparison with some of his best followers, we fall far short. So we rely wholly on God's grace in Jesus for our salvation. But as we renounce our own righteousness for that of Christ (Phil. 3 again), we come to see Jesus' glory in comparison with our rubbish, and God plants in us that passion to run the race with Paul: to know the fullness of Christ's blessings and, above all, to know Christ himself.



## Chapter 13: Applying the Law

Under the normative perspective, we have considered the norms of Christian ethics from the most general to the most specific: God himself, his word-revelation, his written word, his law. As we saw in the previous chapter, law is both a part of Scripture and a way of looking at Scripture as a whole. Either way, God's law is norm for our lives. It tells us what to believe and what to do.

But we need to get still more specific. How shall we determine in specific terms what God's law has to say to us? In discussing moral heroism in the previous chapter, we saw that determining God's will is not a simple matter of looking things up in a list of commandments. For God's commandments, particularly the law of love, are very broad. Their applications may take many forms that would never appear on a list of commands, indeed which do not appear explicitly in any biblical text. For, as I indicated in Chapter 11, most applications of Scripture require extra-biblical data, and they lead to conclusions that may not be stated explicitly in Scripture.

And this question is further complicated by the fact that Christians, rightly or wrongly, ignore many biblical laws. How many of us bring burnt offerings to church with us? But God commanded Israel to do that. The law of animal sacrifices is part of the law of God.

If we deny the necessity of animal sacrifices today, then we must distinguish some divine laws that are, and others that are not, *currently* and *literally* normative. Everything in Scripture is normative in some way, because it comes from the mouth of God. Even those laws which we no longer observe literally, like the animal sacrifices, have much to tell us about God's redemptive purpose, and what they teach us is divinely authoritative. But we believe that God no longer commands such sacrifices, and we believe that too on the authority of the word of God. So there is a difference in Scripture between what is generally normative and what is currently and literally normative.

How do we tell the difference? This is a hermeneutical question, a question of how we are to interpret the laws of the Bible. We may also describe it as a question of application: we are asking how the legal material in Scripture applies to us today.

When you think about it, it is fairly obvious that not every divine command in Scripture is normative for us today. As a rather absurd example, consider Jesus' command to his disciples in Luke 19:30,

Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here.

Jesus here asks his disciples to bring him a colt to ride into Jerusalem in the event we celebrate on Palm Sunday. One can imagine a contemporary religious sect (perhaps called the Church of the Divine Horseman) that takes this verse as a literal demand on every Christian: every year, before Palm Sunday, every church member goes into town to fetch a colt for Jesus to ride.<sup>211</sup>

Such a practice is ludicrous, of course, because it is obvious from the context of Luke 19:30 that Jesus was not issuing this command as a perpetual ordinance for all time. Rather, this command was limited to a single instance, in a single, narrowly defined setting. How do we know? Well, the passage doesn't say so explicitly. But to make the commandment broader than that defies good hermeneutics and even common sense.<sup>212</sup>

So it will not do for us to simply take every imperative in Scripture as a law to obey today. God has not given every biblical command to us so that we will carry it out immediately. Indeed, every command is directed to a particular situation that has both similarities and differences to our situations today.<sup>213</sup> That fact introduces complications into the project of formulating an ethic based on biblical law.

When such complications appear in theology, it is often time to make distinctions. In this case, some distinctions within God's law will give us some guidance in determining what is currently normative. I shall distinguish, first, between creation ordinances and later laws, second between the Decalogue and other legislation, third between old and new covenants, fourth between moral, civil, and ceremonial law within the Old Testament, then, fifth, certain kinds of priorities that exist in all biblical law. As in the previous chapters, we are moving from broad distinctions to more precise ones. Along the way, we shall look at the question of Theonomy. And at the end we shall look at the concept of "tragic moral choice," which claims that God's requirements for us are sometimes inconsistent.

### Creation Ordinances

Creation ordinances are laws that God gave to Adam and Eve before the Fall. John Murray lists among them the following: "the procreation of offspring, the replenishing of the earth, subduing of the same, dominion over the creatures, labour, the weekly Sabbath, and marriage."<sup>214</sup> These are taken from Gen. 1:28,

<sup>211</sup> But we wonder, why only once a year? If Jesus commanded this act as a perpetual obligation, shouldn't we be doing it all the time? Even at the cost of martyrdom (for some governments have been unkind to horse thieves)?

<sup>212</sup> Common sense is not the chief rule of theology, but it is not to be routinely ignored.

<sup>213</sup> Note again the overlap between normative and situational perspectives. Without taking account of the situation in which the norm is given, we simply don't know what the norm is.

<sup>214</sup> Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 27.

2:2-3,<sup>215</sup> 15, and 24. Of course, God also gave them the specific command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17), but that is not usually considered a creation ordinance, because God gave it only for one occasion, not as a perpetual ordinance for mankind.

I would add worship to this list. It is implicit in the Sabbath ordinance, but it is best to make it explicit. Though the term *worship* is not found in Gen. 1-3, it is inconceivable that Adam and Eve should not have responded in worship to God's intimate and immediate presence in the Garden. The Garden is a sanctuary, a dwelling of God, and therefore holy ground. Like God's dwellings on Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion, Eden is evidently a mountain-dwelling of God. Note the reference to rivers flowing downhill in 2:10.

I also believe that the teaching of Gen. 1:27-28 that man is the image of God has ethical implications, as in Gen. 9:6 and James 3:9. God's procedure in creating Adam (Gen. 1:26-28) and Eve (2:21-23) was uniquely different from his creation of other beings. And to humans, not to any other creature, God assigned the Godlike task and privilege of taking dominion over the whole earth (Gen. 1:26, 28). Given these honors, Adam surely knew that human life was something exceedingly precious to God, to be deeply respected. In Gen. 9:1-7, God renews the cultural mandate to Noah, with a reminder that man is made in God's image (verse 6). He thereby justifies the law against shedding man's blood. Certainly that law was known to Adam and Eve as well, heightening the tragedy of Cain's murder in Gen. 4.

So the creation ordinances, like other biblical laws, have a threefold, indeed triperspectival, focus: on God (worship, Sabbath), the natural world (replenishing, subduing, and dominating the earth), and man himself (marriage, procreation, labor).

Creation ordinances are important, because they form the basic law of human existence. They do not presuppose any particular historical circumstances, as do, for example, the laws of Moses. Creation ordinances are given to man as man, presupposing only our createdness in God's image and the earth as our created environment. So it is unlikely that God would abrogate or significantly modify any of these ordinances in the course of history.

After the consummation of history, of course, at least one of these ordinances will change. Jesus teaches that in the resurrection, human beings will neither marry nor give in marriage (Matt. 22:30). Evidently then procreation also ceases. Some have taught, too, that since Jesus has filled all things (Eph. 4:10) and has subdued all things to himself (Matt. 28:18) that the cultural mandate is no longer in effect for New Testament believers. I disagree with this view, as I shall indicate under the situational perspective. But although the creation

---

<sup>215</sup> This justification for the Sabbath ordinance is controversial. I shall argue its validity under the Fourth Commandment.

ordinances are, among biblical laws, the least problematic, there is room for discussion as to their present and future application.

### The Decalogue and the Case Laws

The Decalogue may be seen as a republication of the creation ordinances, applying them to Israel's life within the Mosaic Covenant. The first four commandments<sup>216</sup> deal with worship, including Sabbath. If I am right to include worship as a creation ordinance, and Murray is right to include the Sabbath, then these four commandments are direct applications of these ordinances. The Fifth and Seventh Commandments are based on the ordinances of marriage and family. The Sixth and Ninth Commandments are based on the preciousness of human life in the image of God. The Eighth and Tenth Commandments are based on God's command to labor, to subdue the earth, and to take dominion over it. God gives to us possessions, inheritances, and he calls us to increase these by the sweat of our brow, not by taking what belongs to others.

Certainly the commands of the Decalogue still bind new covenant believers, in general terms. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount contains extended exposition of some of the commands in the Decalogue. He condemns the oversimplifications and distortions of the Scribes and Pharisees, but he affirms the commandments in their deepest significance. To the rich young man who asks Jesus what he must do to attain eternal life Jesus presents first commandments of the Decalogue (Matt. 19:16-19), before asking him to sell his goods and "follow me" (verse 21).<sup>217</sup> Paul cites commandments from the Decalogue when he seeks to show that love fulfills the law (Rom. 13:9-10). James also affirms commandments of the Decalogue as he demands that his readers fulfill the whole law, not just part of it (James 2:8-12).

So the whole church has recognized that the Decalogue remains normative for us, with the exception, in some circles, of the Fourth Commandment. I shall address the controversy over the Fourth Commandment at a later point. But there are no changes in redemptive history sufficient to make adultery lawful or to render immoral the honoring of parents.

---

<sup>216</sup> In referring to the numbers of the commandments in the Decalogue, I am using the numbering system common in Reformed (and most evangelical) circles, rather than the different systems used by Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Jews. The First, then, is the prohibition of other gods, the Second the prohibition of idol-worship. The prohibition of coveting is all one commandment, the Tenth.

<sup>217</sup> It may be significant that the commandments Jesus cites in verses 18-19 are from the "second table" of the law, dealing with our responsibilities to fellow human beings. The requirement to "follow me," then, in effect summarizes the first table, our responsibility toward God. So Jesus' use of the Decalogue may contain a startling testimony to his own deity.

Nevertheless, there are some features in the Decalogue that refer specifically to Israel's situation as they wait in the wilderness to enter the promised land. In the Deuteronomic version of the Fourth Commandment, the people are to keep the Sabbath because "you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 5:15). The Fifth Commandment promises to those who honor parents "that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12). When we apply these commandments to our own situations, we need to apply these details in ways different from, though analogous to, Israel's situation. We keep the Sabbath, not because we were literally delivered from Egypt, but because Jesus delivered us from the greater bondage of which Egypt is a type: bondage to sin. And we honor parents, not literally to have long life in the land of Canaan, but to enjoy God's fullest blessings wherever we are on the earth (*epi tes ges*)<sup>218</sup> (Eph. 6:3), and, beyond that, in the new heavens and new earth to come.

So it is not unthinkable that some elements of the Decalogue may change in their application, even though the basic obligations set forth bind all human beings until the last judgment.

Now within the Pentateuch, it is also important for us also to distinguish between fundamental law (creation ordinances, the Decalogue) and case law. Some scholars use the terms *apodictic* and *casuistic* to identify these two categories. Apodictic laws are, as Kant would say, categorical imperatives. They simply tell us what to do, as in the Decalogue, "You shall not steal," etc.

Casuistic laws are hypothetical imperatives. Typically, they begin with an "if," indicating the circumstances and conditions in which the law is applicable. For example, Ex. 22:1 reads, "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep." The apodictic laws serve as the fundamental constitution of Israel. The case laws are judicial precedents, examples of how judges have applied the apodictic laws to various circumstances. The law of Moses includes many casuistic laws, as a guide for judges who must make similar applications.

Of course, every situation is different. Ex. 21:33-34 says,

When a man opens a pit, or when a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it,<sup>34</sup> the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his.

---

<sup>218</sup> This may be a bit of an exegetical stretch. Paul may simply be quoting the commandment, and the *ge* may simply refer to the promised land, as the corresponding Hebrew term does in Ex. 5:12. But as we shall see in the next section, the equivalent of the promised land in the new covenant is nothing less than the whole earth.

But what if the owner of the field has taken steps to cover his pit, but a storm weakens the cover? Then, presumably, the judge must assess (as judges must do today) how much of the responsibility belongs to the owner and how much he should pay, taking the circumstances into account. The case laws are not intended to refer specifically to every situation that may arise. Rather, they address representative situations, so as to guide judges in assessing responsibility.

The Decalogue leaves judges no discretion. They have no authority to make theft legal, or to penalize people for worshipping the true God. But the case laws encourage judges to be flexible in considering how the principles of the Decalogue apply to each case. They may not contradict the case laws, any more than they may contradict the Decalogue. But since cases vary, God gives to judges discretion to relate the Decalogue to new cases in wise and creative ways. As in modern courts, the judges certainly had power to determine mitigating and aggravating circumstances, to assess motives, to determine probabilities in the evidence.

The penalties attached to crimes in the case laws are also exemplary, rather than to be woodenly applied. For example, it is evident that in many capital crimes, there is provision to ransom the life of the criminal. Num. 35:31 prohibits ransom for the life of a murderer. But that suggests that ransom was possible in other crimes for which the case laws specify the death penalty, even when the text does not specifically mention the possibility of ransom. Examples may be adultery, homosexuality, and blasphemy. Ex. 21:30 specifically mentions the possibility of ransom in an otherwise capital case. It may well be that judges in Israel had considerable liberty to determine penalties for crimes, following general principles of law found through the Pentateuch.

### **Old and New Covenants**

When the New Testament refers to the “old covenant” (2 Cor. 3:14, Heb. 8:13) it speaks of the covenant God made with Israel with Moses as mediator (Ex. 19-24). The “new covenant” is, in Heb. 8 and 10, the covenant of which Jesus is mediator, identified with the new covenant of Jer. 31:31-34.

God is the author of both covenants, and the covenant documents of each continue to be normative for God’s people. Jesus proclaims the authority of the old covenant Scriptures in Matt. 5:17-20, as we’ve seen, and Paul says the same in 2 Tim. 3:16-17. And the New Covenant words of Jesus and the Apostles come to us authoritatively through the New Testament Scriptures.

Both covenants continue the promise that God will bless all nations through Abraham’s children (Gen. 12:3), a promise of God’s grace. Both

covenants also include divine commands. Murray argues that the demand for obedience and the promise of salvation by grace through faith are substantially the same in both covenants.<sup>219</sup> The demand for obedience in both covenants is not a demand that people earn their salvation through meritorious works (though the Jews sometimes misconstrued the Mosaic Covenant as works righteousness). Rather, it calls upon the believer to obey God (by God's grace) as the appropriate response to redemption. Murray quotes Geerhardus Vos in this connection:

It is plain, then, that law-keeping did not figure at that juncture [the Mosaic Covenant-- JF] as the meritorious ground of life-inheritance. The latter is based on grace alone, no less emphatically than Paul himself places salvation on that ground. But, while this is so, it might still be objected that law-observance, if not the ground for receiving, is yet made the ground for retention of the privileges inherited. Here it can not, of course, be denied that a real connection exists. But the Judaizers went wrong in inferring that the connection must be *meritorious*, that, if Israel keeps the cherished gifts of Jehovah through obedience of His law, this must be so, because in strict justice they had earned them. The connection is of a totally different kind. It belongs not to the legal sphere of merit, but to the symbolico-typical sphere of *appropriateness of expression*.<sup>220</sup>

Nevertheless, Heb. 7-10 does indicate substantial changes that come with the New Covenant, changes so great that the author refers to the Old Covenant as "obsolete" (8:13). He adds, "and what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." Those changes are

1. *A New Priesthood* (7:1-28). Jesus, the priest after the order of Melchizedek replaces the Aaronic priesthood. This fact involves a "change in the law" (7:12), for the Mosaic law itself makes no provision for such a change. For this reason alone, many of the laws of the Pentateuch are no longer literally applicable: those that deal with the ordination of priests, their daily work of sacrifice, the cleansing rituals they must follow, their daily maintenance of the tabernacle and temple, their yearly entrance into the holiest place.

2. *A New Sacrifice* (8:1-10:18), by which Jesus deals with our sins "once for all" (9:26-28, 10:12-18). It was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats, under the old covenant, to take away sins (10:4), but Jesus sacrifice of himself dealt with the sins of his people completely and for all time, so that we need no additional sacrifice. So in the new covenant sacrifices of animals, grain, oil, and wine play no further role. Laws requiring these are no longer literally normative, though we can learn much from them about the nature of Jesus' sacrifice.

---

<sup>219</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957). 194-201. His whole discussion is very valuable.

<sup>220</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 143.

Other passages mention three more changes that are also vitally important, namely,

3. *A New Nation.* The new covenant is not specifically between God and national Israel, as was the old. It is with a new family, a new nation, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. Of course, even the old covenant was open to Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel and accepted circumcision. And the new covenant is in a sense an extension of the old: the olive tree of Israel with some branches broken off and other (Gentile) branches grafted in (Rom. 11:17-24).

But the new covenant is nevertheless radically new. In the new covenant, "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6, cf. 6:15, 1 Cor. 7:19). Because of this new family, the council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15 stated that Gentiles could be members of the church in good standing without being circumcised and without keeping all the laws of Moses. The council did ask that Gentiles abstain from "things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood"<sup>221</sup> (Acts 15:20, 29). The reason given was not the intrinsic immorality of these actions, but because "from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues" (verse 21). Of course, sexual immorality is to be avoided as something wrong in itself (as 1 Cor. 5:1-13). But the council was immediately concerned, evidently, not with morality as such, but with the offense that Gentile Christians might give to Jewish Christians.

So God has broken down the "dividing wall" (Eph. 2:14) between Jews and Gentiles, as Paul writes to Gentile Christians:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands-<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.<sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility<sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,<sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.<sup>17</sup> And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.<sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens,

---

<sup>221</sup> These are among the "Noachian commandments" recognized by Jewish tradition as pertaining to Gentiles as well as Jews. A good, brief introduction to this tradition can be found in J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 202-207.



but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph. 2:11-22)

Note that breaking the dividing wall leads to the abolishment of commandments and ordinances (verse 15). Note also that there is a new temple (verses 21-22).

So in the new covenant, the temple in Jerusalem has lost its status as the unique dwelling place of God. Its veil was torn in two, from top to bottom, when Jesus was crucified (Mark 15:38). In 70 AD, the building itself was destroyed, as Jesus had predicted (Matt. 24:1-2). God's dwelling now is in the heavenly tabernacle (Heb. 9:11), in Jesus (John 1:14), and in Jesus' people (1 Cor. 3:16).

And if God no longer dwells uniquely in the temple, the unique significance of the land of Palestine must change as well. For the land was holy, because the holy God dwelled in that land, with his holy people. But if there is a change in the holy people and the place of God's dwelling, then the land loses its special significance.

It is hard to say precisely what modifications these principles introduce into the law, but let me suggest the following:

(a) Certainly this development does away with the requirement of circumcision, effectively replacing it with the new covenant sacrament of baptism. It vindicates the judgment of Acts 15.

(b) I would assume that it also changes those provisions of the old covenant law that are primarily designed to defend the unique holiness of the temple, the land, and the nation of Israel. The new covenant church as such possesses no land in Palestine. The annual feasts, which brought the Jews near to God's dwelling three times a year, are no longer appropriate to a truly international people of God. The laws such as the Jubilee that guarded the original divisions of the land of Palestine are not binding on Gentiles who never had such land rights.

(c) Advocates of the "new perspective on Paul" claim that certain laws had a particular importance in the conflict between Judaism and Hellenism, and therefore in the New Testament controversy over the "works of the law." Don Garlington describes the views of James D. G. Dunn:

Dunn does maintain that "the works of the law" encompass the whole Torah, but within the period of the Second Temple certain aspects of the law became especially prominent as the boundary and identity

markers of the Jewish people: prominently circumcision, food laws, purity laws, and sabbath.<sup>222</sup>

It may well be that these are the laws Paul especially considers to have been set aside<sup>223</sup> by the work of Christ, though as Dunn implies these are not the only laws, for Paul, that lack the power to save.

(d) Vern S. Poythress argues that many other laws in the old covenant are, in part or in whole, means by which God guarded his unique relationship with the Jewish people in the holy land of Palestine. Israel, for example, was to purge the land of false religion. Deut. 13:1-18 calls Israel to destroy unbelieving cities within the holy land, as part of its holy war against the Canaanite tribes. But in the New Testament, God does not call the church to exterminate unbelievers for their unbelief, but rather to fight against the “ultimate opponents” of the Lord, Satan and his hosts (Eph. 6:12). And,

...now during the New Testament era there is an advance. Holy war is waged through baptism and union with Christ. The flesh is crucified (Gal. 5:24). Human beings are not simply destroyed as were the Canaanites, but raised to life because of Christ’s resurrection. This situation is the foundation for widespread evangelism. Now the whole inhabited earth has become the new land that is to be conquered in God’s name (Matthew 28:18-20). We are to wage holy war. But the nature of that holy war is redefined because of Christ.<sup>224</sup>

So we should also take into account

4. *A New Mission*: As Poythress indicates, the new covenant requires a new conquest, not the military conquest of a piece of territory, but the conquest of the whole world through the preaching of the Gospel. As with the Old Testament holy war, this conquest brings God’s judgment. But for those whom God has chosen, the judgment has fallen on Christ, and what remains is resurrection unto new life. This Great Commission is the fundamental task of the church:

---

<sup>222</sup> Garlington, “Law and Gospel: the Contribution of the New Perspective on Paul,” forthcoming. The reference to sabbath will trouble some who follow the tradition of the Westminster Standards. But of course that term is found in Col. 2:16, so there must be some sense in which the term *sabbath* can designate a law transcended by Christ. I shall discuss this issue under the Fourth Commandment.

<sup>223</sup> In one sense, no law of God is ever set aside or abrogated (Matt. 5:17-20). But there are some that, because of events in redemptive history, we come to observe, in our new covenant age, in very different ways from what God asked of the old covenant Israelites. The commands to worship God by sacrifice, for example, continue to be normative, but we now worship by the sacrifice of Christ. Please insert this qualification whenever I use terms like “abrogated” or “set aside.” What I mean is that such laws are no longer to be *literally* obeyed. But I cannot make that qualification every time the issue comes up.

<sup>224</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood, TN: Wohlgemuth and Hyatt, 1991), 147-48.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-20)

This missionary conquest takes God's presence to dwell in people all over the world, "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev. 7:9). In the Old Testament, there was also a concern for the nations of the world. God had promised Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). But in the Old Testament itself, the missionary direction was, as it has been called, predominantly "centripetal:" the nations were to come to worship God in Jerusalem (as Zech. 14:16-19). Isaiah anticipates a greater reality: altars to the Lord in foreign lands, equality between Egypt, Assyria, and Israel, as God's people (Isa. 19:23-25). But only in the New Testament, in Jesus' Great Commission of Matt. 28, does the movement of God become fully "centrifugal," moving outward to all the nations of the world.

This expansive mission reinforces the importance of the changes in law noted in #3. As the church moves to many nations, there is no place for laws mandating distinctive clothing or diet. Rather, Paul's rule is "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). God no longer asks us to preserve the distinctiveness of our own national culture, but to sacrifice that distinctiveness to reach others for Christ. So God admonishes Peter, who resists outreach to the Gentile Cornelius, that "what God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15). God drives home the point in a vision where he tells Peter to kill and eat all sorts of animals that the law describes as unclean.

So the cleansing laws and dietary laws no longer bind the Christian literally, though we may still learn much from them about God's desire for purity in his people.

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col. 2:16-17)<sup>225</sup>

According to this arrangement [that of the Old Testament priesthood and temple-JF], gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, <sup>10</sup> but deal only with food and drink and

---

<sup>225</sup> We shall have to discuss under the Fourth Commandment the specific teaching of this passage concerning Sabbath observance.

various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. (Heb. 9:9-10)

As for dietary laws, see Mark 7:14-23 (especially 19), Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16 and 11:2-10, and the passages we considered earlier in Rom. 14 and 1 Cor. 8-10, which emphasize that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).

5. *A New Maturity.* In Gal. 3:23-4:11, Paul compares our freedom from the law to the freedom of slaves liberated from their bondage. The law was our "guardian until Christ came" (3:24). The "guardian" (*paidagogos*, translated "schoolmaster" in the KJV) was the servant who took the children to school, often giving them some harsh discipline along the way. But "now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian" (verse 25). This means that we are no longer slaves, but sons, crying "Abba! Father!" (4:6-7). This new relationship to God sets us free from "elementary principles of the world" (4:9), such as the observance of "days and months and seasons and years" (verse 10).

It is difficult to determine precisely what laws Paul refers to here. I shall refer to this passage again under the Fourth Commandment. But here I want to observe that Paul regards the New Testament believer as more mature than those under the old order. Children need constant restraint to keep them moving in the right direction. Adults, ideally at least, are expected to discipline themselves from within. So it is right for them to have more freedom and responsibility. In the religious parallel, Christians are sons, rather than mere slaves. Our relation to God is more spontaneous.

This maturity comes from the work of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit in a far greater fullness than was known under the old covenant. So, as we saw in Chapter 3, the New Testament writers motivate us to good behavior, not only by citing the law, but by appeal to the work of Christ (Col. 3:1-3) and the presence of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16).

### **Moral, Ceremonial, and Judicial Law**

Chapter 19 of WCF presents a distinction between various kinds of law:

II. This law, after [man's] fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.

III. Beside this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.

IV. To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

The moral law, then, is our fundamental responsibility toward God as set forth in the creation ordinances and, as we have seen, in the Decalogue. Ceremonial law has to do with the Aaronic priesthood, animal sacrifices, annual feasts, circumcision, the Day of Atonement, laws of uncleanness, and others. Judicial law (often called civil) includes crimes punishable by the state and the penalties required for them.

The distinction is a good one, in a rough-and-ready way. As we have seen, there are such things as moral laws, that are based on our nature as human creatures of God, and are therefore literally normative for all history. It will never be right to steal or murder. It will always be right to worship the one true God exclusively and to honor one's parents. And, as we saw in the last section, there are many laws which should not be kept literally in the present period of redemptive history, and those are what the Confession calls ceremonial. Finally, there are laws given to guide the actions of civil magistrates in Israel, and those may be called civil.

But when we get into details, these designations are not as sharp or as helpful as we might like. For one thing, the laws of the Pentateuch are not clearly labeled as moral, civil, or ceremonial. In passages like Lev. 19, laws that we group under these categories are all mixed together. And the New Testament doesn't mention such distinctions either, typically referring simply to "the law." As we've seen, "the law" has various meanings in the New Testament, which must be determined by context. The threefold distinction, then, is a theological one, not found explicitly in Scripture. Theologians use it as a tool to analyze and classify the various laws in the Bible.

Further, there are problems with each of these designations:

1. *The Moral Law*: The creation ordinances and the Decalogue are surely the most obvious candidates for the status of "moral laws." But as we saw earlier, there are open questions as to the present applicability of these. Of course, if one believes, for example, that the cultural mandate is no longer normative, then he can claim to relegate that commandment to the ceremonial, rather than the moral category. But then, the categories *moral* and *ceremonial* are not as helpful as we

might have thought. In these cases, we don't determine that a law is ceremonial and therefore not currently normative; rather the reverse. Rather than determining that a law is abrogated because it is ceremonial, we determine that it is ceremonial because we believe it to be abrogated. So *moral* is just a label for those laws we believe to be currently normative, rather than a quality of the laws that leads us to that conclusion. Similarly, *ceremonial*. There is nothing particularly wrong with this procedure, as long as we understand what we are doing.

2. *The Ceremonial Law*: One might think that ceremonial laws are about ceremonies, particularly liturgies used in worship. Many of them are, including circumcision, the sacrifices, priestly ordination, priestly garments, feasts, perhaps cleansing laws, and so on. However (a) Some laws about ceremonies are generally considered part of the moral law, rather than the ceremonial law. For example, the first four commandments of the Decalogue govern the worship of God's people. (b) Some laws often called ceremonial have little to do with ceremonies, such as dietary laws, clothing laws (as Num. 15:38), laws concerning leprosy and other diseases. Again, it seems as though theologians call certain laws "ceremonial," not because they share a certain subject-matter, but rather because they are judged not appropriate to the new covenant. The name ceremonial, therefore, is somewhat misleading. But I suppose we need some word to refer to laws that are not currently normative, and *ceremonial* is the word adopted by the Reformed tradition for that purpose.

3. *The Civil Law*: These are defined as the laws of the state of Israel as it existed in the Old Testament period. There are a number of problems, however, with this concept:

(a) The laws of the Pentateuch rarely indicate precisely who is to enforce them. Some fall under the authority of judges (as Ex. 21:22), others of priests (as Lev. 1-9). Sometimes the elders play a role (as Deut. 19:12). But many others are not assigned to any government except that of God (as, we presume, in Lev. 19:18), the self-government of individuals (as the dietary laws), and the informal sanctions of the community.

(b) In Reformed theology, as in WCF, the distinction of "civil" from "moral" indicates that all the laws deemed civil are no longer normative. But that begs questions that deserve to be investigated. The Mosaic law contains a death penalty for the crime of murder, for example (Ex. 21:14, Deut. 19:11-13). But that law is not given merely to Israel. God gave it long before to Noah, and through him, to the whole human race (Gen. 9:6). This law does not serve any purpose unique to the Israelite theocracy. Rather, it is an administration of simple justice. So among the civil laws are at least some that apply to nations other than Israel—i.e., some that are not merely civil, but moral.

(c) The WCF 19.4, quoted earlier, makes a significant exception to the “expiration” of the civil laws: “not obliging any other now [that is, any state other than Old Testament Israel—JF], further than the general equity thereof may require.” What is this “general equity?” The meaning of this phrase has been the subject of considerable debate. But the basic idea is not difficult to ascertain.

God gives some laws to Israel that presuppose its unique status as God’s chosen people. Among these are the laws concerning sacrifice, tabernacle, and priesthood. But he gives other laws that do not presuppose Israel’s unique status, but which merely command basic justice. We saw this in (b) above in relation to the death penalty for murder. As another example, the basic penalty for theft is double restitution (Ex. 22:7). This penalty, again, is not based on Israel’s unique status as God’s holy people. Rather, it is a matter of simple justice: the thief must return what he stole, plus an equal amount, so that he loses what he hoped to gain. So this law is not only normative for Israel, but for any nation that seeks justice. That is to say, this particular civil law is a moral law.

All the laws God gives to Israel are just, and in that sense they are a model for other nations. Moses says to Israel,

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.<sup>6</sup> Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' (Deut. 4:5-6)

That is to say, all the laws of God are perfectly just and right, given Israel’s situation. Israel is God’s holy people, and these laws are perfect laws for a holy people in the environment of the promised land. When Israel keeps these laws, the nations will see them as good and wise.

This does not mean that all the laws of Israel should have been transferred verbatim into the law-books of Egypt and Babylon. Egypt and Babylon are not holy peoples. Their culture and economies are different. But certainly some laws, like double restitution for theft, should be adopted by those and other nations as well. Further, Lev. 18:24-30, speaking of laws concerning sexual relations, indicates that nations other than Israel are responsible to the same standards as Israel:

Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean,<sup>25</sup> and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.<sup>26</sup> But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you<sup>27</sup> (for the people of the land, who were before you,

did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean),<sup>28</sup> lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.<sup>29</sup> For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people.<sup>30</sup> So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God."<sup>226</sup>

So we should understand “general equity” to refer to the overlap between the civil law and the moral law. In the law of Israel, God enforces justice upon his people. The law has other purposes as well, including ritual holiness, typology, and symbolism, that are not appropriate for other nations. But justice is appropriate for all nations, and the justice of the law of Moses is a model for justice in all nations.

The problem, then, in dealing with Israelite civil law, is distinguishing between the demands of justice as such and the special demands made of Israel as a holy people of God. The Feast of Tabernacles is clearly one of the latter, and the death penalty for murder is one of the former. But the two aren't always as easily distinguished. What about the provision of cities of refuge for those accused of murder (Num. 35)? Is that a wise provision to protect the lives of those falsely accused, or is it a special provision for God's holy people (note that the slayer is released only at the death of the high priest, verse 28). The student of the Mosaic law must think through each statute to determine what it means, asking why God gave that statute to Israel. Did God give it simply as justice? As a type of Christ? As a way to remind Israel of their special covenant? Or some combination of these? Students of the law must think through many possibilities.

## Theonomy

Theonomy, sometimes called Christian reconstruction, is a movement of Reformed thinkers dedicated to encourage observance of the Mosaic law among Christians. The patriarch of the movement was the late Rousas J. Rushdoony, founder of the Chalcedon ministry, who set forth his position in many writings, especially *The Institutes of Biblical Law*.<sup>227</sup> This position is also espoused in many writings by economic historian Gary North, Rushdoony's son-in-law. The most cogent exponent of theonomy was the late Greg L. Bahnsen, author of *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*.<sup>228</sup>

<sup>226</sup> For other evidence of the continuity between what God demands of Israel and what he demands of other nations, see Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 339-64.

<sup>227</sup> Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1973. See my review in an Appendix to this volume.

<sup>228</sup> Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1977.



Bahnsen uses a phrase that expresses well the overall program of theonomy, as theonomists understand it. That is, “The Abiding Validity of the Law in Exhaustive Detail.”<sup>229</sup> It appears to be a simple and radical proposal, telling us to simply hear God’s law and do it, all of it. According to Bahnsen, this proposal is an implication of Matt. 5:17-20. So he and other theonomists see their opponents as antinomian—as people who are not willing to obey God’s commands.<sup>230</sup>

But as we have seen, the question of obeying biblical laws is not simply whether we will obey them. It is also a question of how to interpret them, how to apply them. And theonomists are not oblivious to the hermeneutical questions. Indeed they, like the majority of Christians, regard much of the law as no longer currently normative. When Bahnsen speaks of the “abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail,” he does not mean that we should literally keep the dietary laws or bring animal sacrifices to church with us. Rather, like most of us, he sees these laws as fulfilled in Christ, in such a way that they don’t need to be kept literally today. The “abiding validity” of these laws means, rather, that we keep them by worshipping on the basis of Jesus’ final sacrifice. When we bring the sacrifice of Christ before the Father, we are obeying the Old Testament command to bring sacrifices to God. So the “abiding validity of the law” is flexible enough to allow considerable change in the specific nature of our obligation. But understood in that flexible way, most all orthodox Reformed thinkers would agree with the principle. Given that flexible understanding, the principle is not nearly as radical as it sounds.

So what is different about theonomy? I would say that theonomy is not absolutely different from other Reformed positions, but relatively so. The relative difference is as follows: Theonomy is a school of thought within Reformed theology which prefers literal, specific, and detailed applications of Mosaic civil laws to modern civil government. The word “prefers” gives us some leeway. At points, the theonomists, like the rest of us, apply the law in general and non-literal ways. But they tend more than the rest of us to prefer the specific and the literal.

In terms of our earlier discussion, theonomists tend to see a larger overlap between civil laws and moral laws than do other Reformed thinkers. Greg Bahnsen even rejects the distinction between civil and moral. For him, there is a major, systematic distinction in Scripture between moral laws and ceremonial laws (or “restorative,” as he prefers). And the civil laws, particularly the penalties for civil crimes, are not a third category. Rather, they are themselves either moral or ceremonial. In Bahnsen’s view, they are largely moral.<sup>231</sup> In particular, Bahnsen and other theonomists insist that the penalties for civil crimes in the

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 39, from the title to Chapter 2.

<sup>230</sup> Bahnsen calls his opponents “latent antinomians” in *ibid.*, 306-314.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 207-216.

Pentateuch are normative for modern civil governments, including death penalties for adultery, homosexuality, and blasphemy.

Theonomy appeals to many who are unhappy with the vagueness of much Christian ethics. Theonomy seems to promise them clear-cut answers to their ethical questions. But theonomists differ much among themselves as to how the civil laws are to be applied. In their movement, there is controversy, for example, over the status of dietary laws, the levirate, and long-term loans.

So the differences between theonomists and other Reformed thinkers are not sharp, but somewhat fuzzy. Rather, theonomy as defined above is an *emphasis, a tendency*.

The opposite tendency is found in a number of authors, notably Meredith G. Kline. Like Bahnsen, Kline makes a bold, programmatic statement, namely, "the Old Testament is not the canon of the Christian church."<sup>232</sup> By this statement, he does not intend to deny the authority of the Old Testament. Indeed, he recognizes the Old Testament to be God's word, inspired and infallible. But it is not *canon*, which in his view is

...not a matter of faith-norms but of life-norms. More specifically, inasmuch as the nuclear function of each canonical Testament is to structure the polity of the covenant people, canonicity precisely and properly defined is a matter of *community* life-norms.<sup>233</sup>

For Kline, the Old Testament is not part of the Christian canon, because it is the covenant document of the Mosaic covenant, not of the new covenant in Christ. The New Testament alone is the document of the new covenant. Although the Old Testament is normative for the faith of New Testament believers (i.e. for their "faith-norms"), it is not normative for its community life-norms (though presumably it is authoritative in some way for individual life-norms).

I find these distinctions unpersuasive. I grant that we should define canon as those documents God has given to govern the lives of the covenant people of God. But I don't see any biblical basis for the distinctions between life and faith, or individual and community, that Kline sets forth here. Faith is part of life, and both individual and community life are under God's covenant.

But my main point is that Kline, like Bahnsen, is not as brash as his initial hypothesis might suggest. When Kline says that the Old Testament is not our canon, he does not mean what most of us think of when we hear the word canon. Rather, he has a technical concept of canon that doesn't exclude at all the authority of the Old Testament as the word of God. Further, Kline, like Bahnsen, is willing to apply Old Testament statutes to contemporary civil law, as in his

<sup>232</sup> Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 99.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

discussion of Ex. 21:22-25.<sup>234</sup> In that article, he argues that the Israelite regard for the unborn rules out the practice of abortion. So Kline, like the theonomists, represents a *tendency*, not an extreme.

One gets the impression from reading Bahnsen and Kline that their principles are intended to determine our application of specific texts in the Mosaic law. Bahnsen's approach suggests that we should always, or most often, apply them literally; Kline's approach suggests the reverse. But since both principles have exceptions, we still need to give close attention to the application of each individual text. For example, as we examine the statute forbidding the eating of blood (Lev. 17:10-12) we must ask questions such as "What did this mean to its original audience?" "Why did God give them this rule?" "Does that reason make it appropriate to our situation, as it was in the situation in which it was written?"

We must ask such questions of every statute, regardless of whether Bahnsen is right, or Kline, or some third alternative. That fact suggests to me that the exegesis of specific texts is more fundamental than the truth of any broad theological principle. That is, the exegesis determines the principle, rather than the other way around. That is always true in theology, and it is importantly true in this case.

So whether the theonomist tendency, the Klinean tendency, or more conventional Reformed approaches are correct will depend, in my opinion, not upon general theological principles, but on the exegesis of specific passages. If, on investigation, the best exegesis finds that most of the contested texts warrant highly specific, literal and detailed applications, then we will have to say that the theonomists were most right. If that exegesis more commonly points the other way, we will have to say that the theonomists were relatively wrong.<sup>235</sup>

I cannot here present exegeses of all the relevant passages; but perhaps the following comments will be found helpful.

1. Historically, Reformed thought has shown elements of both relatively theonomic and relatively non-theonomic emphases. I do not believe that either approach may claim unequivocally to be "the Reformed position." Of course, Reformed people are not antinomian. They believe that Christians are governed by God's law, and that includes the Old Testament. But Reformed exegetes including Calvin have varied greatly as to how literally and specifically they apply the details of the Mosaic legislation to their own situations.

---

<sup>234</sup> Kline, "Lex Talionis and the Human Fetus," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20.3 (Sept., 1977), 193-201.

<sup>235</sup> *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, by Vern S. Poythress, referenced in an earlier note is, in my judgment, the best attempt so far to analyze the meaning of the statutes of the law. After a comprehensive discussion of the laws themselves, Poythress presents, as an Appendix, a critical analysis of theonomy.

2. Kline's rejection of theonomy presupposes some ideas which are themselves controversial and in my opinion dubious: (a) the sharp distinction between life-norms and faith-norms, (b) the derivation from the Noachic Covenant of a religiously neutral state, (c) his view of the New Testament as the sole canon of the Christian church. We should not, therefore, assume that Kline any more than theonomy represents unambiguously the Reformed tradition.

3. Other critics of theonomy tend to be very vague in their arguments or even reveal a certain antipathy toward the Mosaic laws themselves (e.g. the horror displayed at the very idea of making homosexuality a capital crime).

4. Since both Bahnsen and Kline make broad, bold programmatic statements which they modify considerably in their detailed discussions, it seems to me that their bold programmatic statements do not really or fairly represent the views they are presenting. In actual fact, they are much closer together than their rhetoric would suggest.<sup>236</sup>

5. In the application of Scripture, there is never unity without diversity or diversity without unity. Every law of Scripture must be applied to situations. Since every situation is different, every application is somewhat different. On the other hand, since all Scripture is God's word, all applications have one thing in common: they are applications of the word of God, applications of a fundamental unity. Rhetoric, therefore, which denies unity or diversity is misleading. Contrary to theonomic rhetoric, there is *always* "change" from one application to the next of the same law. Contrary to anti-theonomic rhetoric, all of God's word must be brought to bear upon all of human life (Matt. 4:4).

6. "Change" in this discussion applies both to redemptive-historical change (e.g., old covenant to new covenant) and to cultural change (e.g., we no longer fence our roofs as in Deut. 22:8, because we no longer use the roof as space for living or entertaining guests). Assessing the relevance of all these forms of change is not always easy. Should believers wear tassels on their garments (Num. 15:38-39)? Is that ruled out by redemptive-historical change? Is it ruled out because the tassel has no symbolic value in the present-day world? How about head-covering for women in worship (1 Cor. 11:2-16)? We should not assume that for each of these questions there is one obvious and easy answer, such that those who come to opposite conclusions from ours are insincere or heretical. God has ordained, and therefore takes account of, our epistemological limitations.

7. Given the various changes from situation to situation in the application of the law, it is certainly not self-evident that God intended the civil laws given to Israel to bind all civil societies. If some of the statutes given to Israel are or are

---

<sup>236</sup> See my "The One, the Many, and Theonomy," in William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: a Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 89-99.

not also binding on other nations, that point must be demonstrated in piecemeal fashion, from one statute to the next.

8. Recall my earlier discussion of the relationship between the Decalogue and the case laws. Given the flexibility allowed to judges in Israel, it is not evident that the penalties of the case laws form a code to be mechanically imposed on each case. Every case is different. The penalties of the case-laws are exemplary. And even if the case laws given to Israel are normative for modern civil governments, they do not constitute an exhaustive catalogue of penalties for every situation. There will always be a need for judicial flexibility. That flexibility will be all the more important in a modern society, in which judges must deal with many things unknown to ancient Israelites. What penalty should be given to internet pornographers, for example? So even if the case laws are normative today, they would not preclude judicial flexibility; rather, they would necessitate it.

9. There is some confusion in theonomy between present and future application of the law. The rhetoric of theonomy is often calculated to arouse immediate action, and at least some of the appeal of the movement is that people see in it a practical political program for today's society. But others are horrified by the idea that theonomists, taking over government in these confused times, would immediately proceed to execute homosexuals, adulterers, and so on. Confronted with this objection, Bahnsen argued that the Mosaic laws should *not* be enforced today. They presuppose, he said, a people who understand and believe the law and who are committed to be God's people.<sup>237</sup>

But this idea turns theonomy from a practical program for the present to a future ideal. I suspect that few of us would disagree with theonomy, or would disagree as strongly, if it were simply presented as a future ideal. Sure: if the postmillennial hope<sup>238</sup> is realized and the world-society with its institutions becomes largely Christian, then most of us would find very attractive the prospect of living under something like the Mosaic civil law.

We can well agree that there are elements of the Mosaic law which would be enforceable and helpful in contemporary society: e.g. double restitution for theft without prison sentences. But the question of what is or is not to be implemented now is a difficult question, and it is made all the more difficult by Bahnsen's present/future distinction. We need not only to determine how literally the law is to be applied in the ideal situation; we must also determine how it is to be applied in the non-ideal situation of today.

---

<sup>237</sup> Another theonomic reply has been that theonomists believe in limited government, so that a theonomic government would not have the power to conduct a reign of terror. That point is reassuring to some extent. But it is odd to hear that a theonomist government would deny to itself sufficient power to enforce what it considers to be biblical norms.

<sup>238</sup> Most theonomists are postmillennialists. They believe that there may be a very long time before Jesus returns in glory. In that time, perhaps tens of thousands of years, it is not difficult for theonomists to envision the world becoming substantially Christian.

To the extent that theonomy is a future ideal, rather than a present-day political program, it becomes less radical and more theoretical. To some readers, that makes theonomy more attractive; to others, less.

10. Much of the rhetoric of theonomy is based on the assumed need for certainty on specifics. I have often heard Bahnsen ask candidates for licensure/ordination in Presbytery how they would argue against, say, bestiality, without referring to OT case law. We need the case laws, his argument goes, because the other parts of Scripture are not sufficiently specific. Another example: theonomists typically deny the appeal to "natural light" (an appeal commonly made by Calvin and his successors) because the natural light is not sufficiently specific in its directives. The argument suggests that we need divine direction that is perfectly specific, that leaves no room for human reflection; else we will be obeying ourselves rather than God.

But in my view, this is not the nature of Christian ethics. No command of Scripture is perfectly specific; all Scripture commands are general to some extent. Scripture does not tell me what key to press on my computer as I write this chapter. But it does tell me in general what I ought to say. Scripture does not anywhere specifically forbid abortion; we determine that abortion is wrong by applying the eighth commandment and the language of Scripture concerning the unborn. Scripture does not speak of nuclear war, of the use of artificial life-support, and so on. So in Christian ethics there is always a situational perspective. To apply Scripture to specifics, we need to have knowledge of things outside the Bible.

Thus we should not be frustrated that we do not have, say, a Scripturally-dictated maximum figure limiting government taxation. We will never escape the need to apply general principles to specific situations.

11. After some reflection, I have come to the conclusion that theonomy is a good case study of how theological ideas should *not* be introduced. The sharp polemics of the theonomic movement (and, to be sure, of its critics in return) have been in my view quite unnecessary and indeed counter-productive to its own purposes. People have a hard time seeing the important truths that theonomy communicates; it is hard to learn from someone who is always accusing you of something. Reformed people have always had a high regard for God's law. They are not, on the whole, antinomians and should not be stigmatized as such. Theonomy's approach should not be to attack them for "latent antinomianism," but to ask probing questions, to gently guide those readers into more thoughtful and accurate applications of God's Word.

Am I condemning here the accusatory language used by the Reformers and Scripture itself? Doubtless there is a place for harsh language. Jesus was harsh with the Pharisees, but not with the woman of Samaria, although he certainly did convict her of sin. In general I think the Reformers were justified in

their polemics, but I confess I have often wondered how much more persuasive they might have been if they had more regularly observed the adage that "you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

12. For all of this, I would say that theonomy has in many ways been a helpful movement. When I went to seminary, we had excellent courses in Old Testament history, poetry, and prophecy, but almost nothing on the law. My initial exposure to the details of the Mosaic law was through the theonomic literature. Further, the theonomists point the way to show how we can incorporate into Christian faith and life the *love* of God's law evident in Psm. 1, 19, 119, and elsewhere.

At the very least, the theonomic writings show us why the nations around Israel would marvel at the wisdom of the law (Deut. 4:6). Certainly, God gave these statutes for the good of his people (Deut. 10:13). Had Israel kept the law, she would have been far better off. And as we come better to appreciate the goodness of the law in its original context, we may come more to understand how it may be relevant to our own society, how it could be good for us as well.

### **Priorities**

We have been looking at various factors that determine whether particular biblical laws are currently normative. But even among laws that are normative at a particular time and place, there are priorities to be observed, and those priorities also should influence our decisions.

As we saw in Chapter 9, our ultimate ethical authority is God himself. He is law in the highest sense. The law he reveals to us is a system, a comprehensive way of life in which the supreme goal (*summum bonum*) is to bring glory to him (1 Cor. 10:31). Within that system, some elements are more important, more pressing than others.

That is true in any system of law. In the United States, for example, there are many different kinds of law: the Constitution, federal statutes, orders from the executive branch, state constitutions and statutes, local laws, decisions of courts. Even the orders given by a policeman on his beat are law in a sense. But within this system, some kinds of law take precedence over others. When someone believes that a statute is unconstitutional, for example, he may appeal to the court system. The court's decision, for better or worse, takes precedence over the statute in question. When Paul, in Rom. 13:1, tells us to be subject to the "governing authorities" (cf. 1 Pet. 2:13), he means, therefore, to be subject to the entire system of law.

In US law, we may assume that there are contradictions within the system that have to be resolved by court appeals and such. We may not assume that in the case of God's law. Nevertheless, it too is a system, and there are parts of it that, at any given time, will take precedence over other parts. In what follows, I shall describe several kinds of priorities.

### 1. *Normative Priorities*

There are some principles of God's law that Scripture explicitly states to be more important than others. In Matt. 23:23, Jesus says that justice, mercy, and faithfulness are "weightier matters of the law," compared with the Pharisees' concern with the tithing of mint and dill and cumin. Significantly, Jesus affirms the tithing of herbs, when he tells the Pharisees, "These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." Both the more weighty and the less weighty matters are part of the law, divine norms. But there is a difference between them.

Similar is God's statement in Hos. 6:6, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (cf. Micah 6:6-8, Matt. 9:13, 12:7). In fact, God did desire burnt offerings, for he commanded them often in the Old Testament. The statement in Hosea is comparison, and to some extent hyperbole. It means that God's desire for steadfast love is so much greater than his desire for sacrifice that in the context of such a comparison it seems that he does not desire sacrifice at all. Clearly these passages indicate not only normative principles, but normative emphases. The principles God considers most weighty are the ones that should preoccupy us above all.

Similarly, the WLC, 151-52, tells us that some sins are worse than others. That principle is implicit in the above references, and in passages like Ezek. 8:6, 13, 15, Matt. 12:31-32, Luke 12:47-48, John 19:11, Heb. 10:29 (cf. 2:2-3), 1 John 5:16. Any sin is sufficient to condemn us to Hell. But even in Hell there are degrees of punishment, as seems to be implicit in Luke 12:47-48.

These passages describe objective differences of importance among God's laws. The law itself declares these differences, and so I call these normative priorities.

### 2. *Situational Priorities*

In various situations of life, it becomes more important to follow one principle of the law than another. Modern secular legal systems, for example, make special provision for emergencies. Normally, for example, we are expected to drive on the right side of the road and not to cross solid lines. But when Jim is driving on a crowded highway, and a sinkhole unexpectedly appears ahead, leaving him no room to drive on that side, it is legitimate for Jim to wait until a safe moment, then to drive on the left, across the solid line, around the sinkhole. The highest principle of the law is safety, and that takes precedence over the



normal traffic rules. If Jim is arrested for breaking a traffic law, concern for safety can serve as a legal defense. In fact, in such a case, Jim has not violated the law. He has maintained its highest intention, which is to keep people safe.

Scripture also recognizes that emergencies can affect our relation to God's law. Jesus notes how David and his men "entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" (Mark 2:26) The reason, simply, was that they were hungry (verse 25). Thus Jesus defends his own disciples, who plucked grains to eat on the Sabbath: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."<sup>28</sup> So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath" (verses 27-28). God did not make the Sabbath to starve human beings, says the lord of the Sabbath himself. If Sabbath restrictions prevent nourishment, they must yield. This is not Sabbath-breaking, he says. It is, rather, a keeping of the Sabbath, as God intended it to be kept.

Similarly, the Bible's instruction to submit to human authorities (Rom. 13:1, 1 Pet. 2:13, Heb. 13:17, cf. Ex. 20:12). This is an important rule, but it is, of course, subordinate to our higher duty to obey God. So when the highest Jewish authority, the high priest, together with the Sanhedrin, commanded the apostles not to teach in the name of Jesus, they answered, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), and they violated the order "every day, in the temple and from house to house" (verse 42).

Philosophers have sometimes distinguished "prima facie duties" from "actual, present duties." Obedience to legitimate human authority is a prima facie duty in biblical ethics. We should practice such obedience except in the rare instance of an overriding consideration. One who argues that there is such an exception must bear the burden of proof. But there are indeed cases of such overriding considerations, where our actual, present duty is an exception to a prima facie duty.

To practice a legitimate exception, as the apostles did in Acts 5:29, is not to break the law of God. Taken as a whole system, the law requires such an exception.

We are on somewhat dangerous ground here. Ethicists are sometimes tempted to say, for example, that since love is the highest principle of Christian ethics, it warrants exceptions to laws of chastity. The argument is that one may have sexual relations outside marriage, as long as that is a true expression of love. Why should we accept Acts 5:29 as an exception to the general principle of Rom. 13:1, and not accept loving fornication as an exception to, say, 1 Cor. 6:18?

The answer is that the exception of Acts 5:29 comes from Scripture itself. It comes, not only from Acts 5:29 itself, but from the overall biblical teaching that

God alone is the supreme authority. But Scripture never suggests that the law of love warrants fornication. To say that it does is to misunderstand biblical love. Love is first of all a love to God, a relation of allegiance, action, and affection, as we saw in Chapter 12. Those who love God will obey his standards for sexuality. Second, love is a relation of allegiance, action, and affection between human beings, a relation in which one seeks what is best for the other. Scripture teaches that fornication is never best for anybody.

So we should be able to see that “situational priorities” are never opportunities for us to deviate from Scripture. Rather, they inform us as to the complexity and depth of Scripture’s own ethical standards. Indeed, as in other contexts, here the situational is the application of the normative, and therefore part of the normative. Normative and situational are never opposed; they always imply one another.

### 3. *Existential Priorities*

But there is yet a third kind of priority in our attempts to keep the law. That is the set of priorities related to our own callings.

Perhaps we can get at this issue by noticing that obeying God usually takes time and planning. We tend to think of obedience as instant response to divine commands, as when Jesus called his disciples and “immediately” they followed him (Matt. 4:18-22). And certainly, when God gives us a negative command, telling us to *stop* doing something, he gives us no opportunity to postpone our obedience.<sup>239</sup>

So sermons sometimes suggest that to obey God means to drop everything we are doing and to do something else. If the sermon text calls for persistent prayer, we ought to stop everything else and pray. The preacher reminds us that Luther spent hours in prayer, and we feel guilty that we have not done that.

But then the next sermon says the same thing about another duty, say, evangelizing your neighborhood. And then feeding the poor, visiting the sick, pursuing social justice, studying Scripture, parenting your children, working on your marriage, attending worship services, and on, and on. The guilt becomes greater than we can bear.

The fact is that although all these are legitimate biblical duties, we cannot do them all at once. We are finite. Our schedules are limited. We must frequently

---

<sup>239</sup> Someone once told me that a man in a church charged who had committed adultery claimed that he was “in the process of” repenting. I gathered that meant that he committed adultery less frequently than before. But of course repentance for a particular sin is not a process, but a decisive break.

stop obeying one command (say, praying) in order to carry out another (say, presenting the gospel to the neighbor down the street).

In fact, God understands our finitude. He does not assume that every command of his must be carried out immediately. It is comforting and reassuring for us to realize that as well.

God also understands that Christians will vary from one another in the emphasis they place on each command. That emphasis will vary with gifts and calling. Those who are called to be full-time preachers will spend more time preaching than those who are called to be full-time homemakers. Even prayer varies among us. All of us are called to pray, but some of us, like the widows mentioned in 1 Tim. 5, may be called to continue “in supplications and prayers night and day” (verse 5).

So we are responsible to set priorities among divine commands. How arrogant that sounds! Who are we to determine how much time we are to spend carrying out each divine command? How can anyone presume to determine priorities among ultimates!? But we do and must.

We can understand this principle better when we see that many of God’s commands are given, not primarily to individuals, but first to a corporate body: the human race as a whole, or the church as the body of Christ. God gave, for example, the cultural mandate of Gen. 1:28 not to Adam and Eve as individuals, but to them as a corporate family, including their descendants. Adam could not have filled or subdued the earth as an individual. Only the human race as a whole could have any hope of accomplishing that mandate. The same is true of the Great Commission of Matt. 28:18-20. Neither Peter nor Andrew could singlehandedly make disciples of all nations. But the church, acting as a body under the impetus of God’s Spirit, can and will.

So my individual responsibility is not to subdue the earth or to disciple all the nations. It is, rather, to find a specific role, for which God has gifted me, that will contribute something to those results. In my case, though some might disagree, I think God has called me to be a theologian. That calling requires me to study the Bible more than most, and to spend less time than others bringing the gospel door to door. It is that calling that determines, or should determine, my personal set of priorities. I must make a decision, but God offers his guidance for such decisions.

To speak of such a decision is merely to talk about applying God’s word to one’s individual situation. We have seen over and over again that Scripture can do its work in our lives only as we apply it to our situations. Scripture itself requires it, and so existential prioritizing is a norm. Existential priorities, therefore, are not exceptions to divine norms, any more than situational priorities are. Indeed at this point the existential and the normative coincide.

It is important that we recognize a legitimate diversity here within the body of Christ. The person who spends ten hours a week feeding the poor is not necessarily more faithful than the widow who spends those ten hours in prayer. Or vice versa. We should be thankful to God for this diversity, for it is through this diversity of contributions that God will accomplish his great work.

One application of this principle: People sometimes think that if God has commanded something it must be given unlimited emphasis and time.<sup>240</sup> So in some denominations, one commonly hears that since God requires sound doctrine, the church assemblies must give unlimited attention to doctrinal issues, even at the expense of missions, evangelism, and prayer. The problem is, of course, that God has also commanded missions, evangelism, and prayer. And if a denomination is to have a balanced view of things, it must at some point stop its doctrinal debates long enough to concentrate on other matters.

Imbalance sometimes occurs in the opposite direction, as well. Unfortunately, because of the denominational divisions of the church, people preoccupied with doctrinal issues tend to gravitate to some denominations, and people preoccupied with missions to others. It would be better to have people with both preoccupations in the same church organization.

But we should be clear that people preoccupied with doctrinal matters are not necessarily more holy, more faithful, or more Reformed (!) than those who are preoccupied with missions. People with one group of priorities need not criticize those with a different emphasis. The difference is often a difference in divine calling.

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church is relatively preoccupied with issues of doctrinal purity, while the Presbyterian Church in America, holding to the same confessional standards, is relatively more preoccupied with church planting and missions. Some in each body are convinced that the other body is unfaithful to the Lord, because of its different emphasis. Attempts to merge the two denominations have proven futile. In my judgment, part of the problem is that some in each group have confused the group's priorities with biblical principle.

A better way to look at it is this: the PCA is like a breadwinner, leaving the home each day to reach the world outside. The OPC is like a homemaker, keeping the house clean, determining who should be invited to dinner. Homemakers and breadwinners often get into arguments, but both are necessary

---

<sup>240</sup> I belonged to a presbytery once that consumed enormous amounts of time on the reading and correcting of minutes, normally the first thing on the docket. When I asked why, I was told that of course God wants us to do all things decently and in order, and that entails a concern for accurate minutes. So God has ordained, the argument went, that the perfecting of minutes be given as much time as it takes. Even if (with other things on the schedule) it squeezes out discussions of church planting and evangelism. I didn't find the argument persuasive.

to a good marriage. A church without breadwinners, or without homemakers, is a church that lacks some important gifts of God. So in my judgment the two denominations should not let their priority differences interfere with their fellowship. They should rather be attracted to one another. Indeed, they should become one.<sup>241</sup>

### Tragic Moral Choice

We have been looking at various ways in which divine laws can lose their immediate, present, normativity. But an important question remains, namely whether two divine laws can ever make incompatible demands on us. This is the question of “conflict of duties,” sometimes called “tragic moral choice.” It is one of the most discussed questions in the ethical literature. You have probably thought about the famous illustration from World War II: You are hiding Jews in your basement. The Nazis come and ask you directly whether there are any Jews in your house. If you answer truly, you give innocent lives over to death. If you answer falsely, you tell a lie and violate God’s standards of truthfulness. So in this case, the sixth commandment, do not murder, seems to impose on you a responsibility incompatible with the ninth commandment, which mandates truth.

In this situation, it seems as though we must disobey one divine command in order to obey another, which is to say that at this point the demands of God’s law are inconsistent. Or we can look at the problem from the situational perspective and say that in this situation there is no righteous alternative. In this situation it is impossible not to sin.

Many ethicists, perhaps most, assume that such conflicts exist. Liberal theologians have no problem affirming this, for they do not believe that the Bible teaches a single, consistent system of ethics. But even evangelicals sometimes affirm the existence of tragic moral choice. John Warwick Montgomery, who believes strongly in biblical inerrancy, writes,

The Christian morality fully realizes the difficulty of moral decision, and frequently a Christian finds himself in a position where it is necessary to make a decision where moral principles must be violated in favor of other moral principles, but he never vindicates himself in this situation. He decides in terms of the lesser of evils or the greater of goods, and this drives him to the Cross to ask forgiveness for the human situation in which this kind of complication and ambiguity exists.<sup>242</sup>

---

<sup>241</sup> For more on the biblical mandate for church union see my *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), now available at [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org).

<sup>242</sup> Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1970), 69.

Montgomery says here that sometimes we find ourselves in situations so difficult that we cannot avoid sinning. Doubtless he would say that this is one of the effects of the curse on the ground following Adam's sin. But though there is no alternative available to us in such situations, we must nevertheless ask God's forgiveness through Christ.<sup>243</sup>

I must, however, take exception to this reasoning. I don't believe that the theory of tragic moral choice is compatible with Scripture, for the following reasons:

1. In Scripture, we have a moral duty to do right, never to do wrong. But Montgomery seems to think that in situations of conflicting norms we have a moral duty to do something wrong, something for which we must afterward ask forgiveness. That notion is, in my judgment, morally confused.

2. In Scripture, ethical knowledge presupposes knowledge of what is right. God judges even pagans because they knew what was right, but rejected that knowledge (Rom. 1:18-23, 32). But on Montgomery's view, in conflict situations there is no right alternative and therefore no possibility of knowing the right. By what standard, then, does God judge such conduct?

3. On this view, the law of God itself is contradictory, for it requires contradictory behavior.<sup>244</sup>

4. Indeed, on this view, Scripture counsels us to sin, contrary to Psm. 19:7-9, which says,

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; <sup>8</sup> the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; <sup>9</sup> the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.

5. And then, on this view, since Scripture is God's word, God himself counsels us to sin. That is a blasphemous supposition, rejected in the strongest terms by James 1:13-14.

6. It is also important to consider the Christological implications of this view. If Jesus faced conflicts of duties, then he was guilty of sin, for a conflict of duty is by definition one in which any choice is sinful. That conflicts with the

---

<sup>243</sup> Montgomery is Lutheran, and we can hear in his words echoes of Luther's "sin boldly" and "*simul justus et peccator*."

<sup>244</sup> Someone may want to argue that the law is consistent, but its applications are not. But I have argued that the applications of words are their very meanings, in DKG, 81-85 and 93-98. And in this book, I have argued in Chapter 11 that the extra-biblical data by which we apply God's commands never subtract from the authority of those commands. Surely the consistency of Scripture is an empty concept if Scripture can command us to do contradictory things.

biblical affirmation of Jesus' sinlessness (Heb. 4:15, 1 Pet. 2:22, 1 John 3:5). On the other hand, if Jesus did not face tragic moral choices, and we do, then we cannot affirm that he "in every respect has been tempted as we are" (Heb. 4:15). If tragic moral choices exist, they are the toughest choices we have to make, the height of our moral and spiritual warfare. If Jesus did not have to make them, he did not endure our spiritual battle at its hardest point, and so the assurance of Heb. 4:15 rings hollow. The only way to avoid this problem is to say that there are no tragic moral choices, that Jesus did not face them, and neither do we.

7. God's word gives us a specific promise concerning temptation, in 1 Cor. 10:13:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

This text says that no temptation is so great that the Christian cannot escape it. That is, even in the worst temptations, God gives us the resources to be faithful to him, to make right choices, to find ways of escaping from wickedness. Tragic moral choice, however, is a situation where by definition there is no way to escape. So this passage implies directly that there is no tragic moral choice.

This verse is, of course, a promise to Christian believers, not to others. But it would be odd to imagine a world in which every situation offers a right alternative to the Christian, but not to the non-Christian. It is true that non-Christians, lacking God's grace, commit sin in all they do. But that is not because there is no right alternative available for them. To the contrary, it is because they know what is right (Rom. 1) and refuse to do it.

So I must conclude that there are no tragic moral choices, no conflicts of duties. We should try to understand, however, why the theory of tragic moral choice is so plausible to many. The main reason, I think, is that many moral decisions are very difficult. Sometimes it is hard to find the way of escape, and people are tempted to think that such a way does not exist. Please don't think that in rejecting the theory of tragic moral choice I mean to imply that ethical decisions are easy. Rather, I encourage you to sympathize with those who wrestle with these issues, pray for them, help them to find a godly solution.

Some alleged examples of tragic moral choice are really questions of priority within the divine law, such as we discussed earlier in the chapter. Others have to do with questions of interpretation. For example, as I shall argue later, I think a sound interpretation of the ninth commandment will allow us to withhold the truth from those who seek innocent life. So, rightly understood, the ninth commandment does not conflict with the sixth, and the example of the Nazis

demanding information about Jews is not an example of tragic moral choice, difficult as the situation certainly was for many in that time.

Another reason why people find this theory attractive is that they have found themselves in situations where they must choose “between two evils.” As we recall, Montgomery used this as an example of tragic moral choice, but more analysis is needed. It is important to distinguish between “evils” and “wrongs.” An evil is an event that brings suffering. A wrong is a moral evil, a sin against God, a violation of his law.

Now it is usually wrong to inflict evils on people, but not always. The punishment of criminals and just war bring suffering on those deemed to deserve it. But Scripture does not regard these as wrong. A surgeon may choose to inflict pain on a patient in order to heal him. The pain is an evil; it exists only as part of the curse brought on the earth by sin. But it is not wrong for the surgeon to inflict pain for a good purpose. In doing this, he brings about evil, but he does not do wrong.

So it is sometimes necessary and right to choose the lesser of two or more evils. But it is never necessary or right to choose between two wrongs. The surgeon does no wrong when he inflicts evil on a patient for a good reason. Choosing between two evils, so understood, is not tragic moral choice. It may, indeed, be virtuous.

### **Casuistry**

The application of Scripture to situations is sometimes called casuistry. Casuistry deals with cases, relating general ethical principles to the specifics of human life. Casuistry has gotten a bad name, because many have abused the process. For that reason, I prefer the term *application* to the term *casuistry*. But in fact, we should recognize that, by whatever name, casuistry is unavoidable. Ethical norms, including those in Scripture, are always somewhat general. Scripture does not describe every situation in which we find ourselves day by day, nor does it prescribe norms specifically for each of those situations. The work of applying its general norms to those specifics belong to us, making use of both special and general revelation. And that work is called casuistry.

In casuistry, we see clearly the complexity of ethical decision making. The casuist must rightly interpret both the moral law and the situation to which the law will be applied. He must understand also people’s motives (existential perspective), which can often affect or even determine the rightness or wrongness of their actions. He must understand mitigating circumstances and aggravating circumstances, which can also affect whether an action is right or wrong, and the degree of rightness or wrongness.



The chief danger is that the casuist will replace or even contradict the moral law with his own (or a tradition of) interpretations. Jesus charged the Pharisees with breaking the commandment of God for the sake of their tradition (Matt. 15:3). Tradition is not in itself a bad thing. Used well, it makes the godly thinking of past generations useful to us today. But used wrongly it imposes barriers between the believer and God's word.

This danger has taken two distinct forms through the history of ethics. Some casuists have been lax, using their interpretative powers to rationalize sin. Others have tried to be more rigorous, using casuistry to impose a burdensome yoke of regulations on God's people. So in ancient Judaism there was conflict between the schools of Hillel (lax) and Shammai (rigorous). And in post-reformation Roman Catholic circles there was debate between the Jesuits (lax) and the Jansenists (rigorous).

The relatively lax parties have been famous for their justifications of apparently sinful conduct, such as, (1) justifying a wrong action because it is more right than its opposite, (2) determining exceptions to general commands, (3) determining implicit qualifications for commands, (4) excusing normally sinful actions if done from a good motive. These justifications are not entirely wrong. As we saw earlier, not every biblical command is to be fulfilled literally and immediately. There are exceptions and qualifications to some commands that Scripture presents implicitly or explicitly, as (2) and (3) indicate. We shall see under the existential perspective that motive does play a role in the moral quality of actions (4). I have no sympathy for (1), however, which either assumes tragic moral choice or assumes that in some other way a wrong action can be right. But even in areas (2)-(4), casuists of the lax sort have often gone too far, not observing the limits set by Scripture.

The rigorist schools of casuistry have added vast catalogues of moral restrictions to the relatively simple requirements of God's word, leaving little freedom to the believer. Sometimes their motive in this has been to "fence" the law, adding extra-biblical restrictions to keep us from violating genuine biblical laws. Hence, to keep people from the possibility of boiling a kid in its mother's milk (Ex. 23:19), the Jews insisted that people not eat meat and dairy products at the same meal.

This encourages a nit-picking mentality, interest in minutiae, over against the "weightier matters of the law." There is nothing wrong with an interest in the minutiae of Scripture, unless, as with the Pharisees, that interest crowds out the things that most matter. Rigorism also obscures the clarity of Scripture, making it seem as though ethical questions can only be decided by experts.

To guard against the abuse of casuistry, we need to have (1) a firm, practical confidence in the Scriptures as the clear and sufficient word of God, (2)

an awareness of what is more or less important within Scripture itself, (3) a mature conscience, resisting rationalization and self-justification.

It is also important to know the limits of casuistry. Sometimes we dream of constructing a very large book that would contain, not only all the biblical ethical principles (totaling 613, according to Jewish tradition), but also all the possible applications of those principles. But that dream is a delusion. The possible applications of the law of God can never be listed or written down. The number of them is far too large to be written in a book. For with every breath we take we are applying God's law. Every thought, word, or deed, is done either to God's glory or to the glory of an idol (1 Cor. 10:31 again). And even if there were such a book, the moment the book were published new situations would arise. And then there would be questions about the application of that book itself—how it governs our conduct in those new situations.

Ethics books have their value, I hope, but that value is not to exhaustively describe the number of our moral responsibilities. There will always be a need for individual application. Experts can help us in this task, but they cannot anticipate every fork in the road. God can, and his Spirit alone can equip us adequately for the moral journey.

## Section 2: The Situational Perspective

### Chapter 14: Situation and Norm

We will now begin to look at Christian ethical methodology from the situational perspective. Since it is a perspective, like the normative and existential, it covers the same subject-matter as the other two, namely the whole of ethics. Therefore, you can expect some overlap between the content of this section and that of the last. This section will not be a mere repetition, however, because it will look at the data from a different angle. Further, there are some subjects that I might have discussed under the normative or existential perspectives, that I have chosen to discuss here instead, such as natural law<sup>245</sup> and redemptive history. The question of what one discusses under which perspective is largely pedagogical. Since the three perspectives cover the same ground, the question is not which choice is objectively true, but which choice is most helpful in presenting the material to people.<sup>246</sup> Theology is application!

Recall that under the normative perspective, the ethical question can be formulated, “What does God tell us to do?” or “What is our duty?” Under the situational perspective, the question is “how can we change the world in order to bring glory to God?” As with the normative perspective, the situational perspective includes everything, but the focus is on the world, on the course of nature and history as the environment in which we make ethical decisions. It is focused less on the Bible than on extra-biblical data of importance to ethics. But it looks at those data in the light of the Bible. It is important to remember that the Bible (like everything else ) is not only part of the normative perspective but is an element of the other two perspectives as well. It is a norm of particular importance, but it is also an important fact of our situation (situational) and of our personal experience (existential).

As the normative perspective focused on God’s lordship attribute of authority, the situational perspective focuses on his lordship attribute of control. For when we observe the course of nature and history, we are observing the outworking of God’s eternal decree and his power to carry out that plan in creation and providence. It is God who has fashioned the world by his power, so that certain means lead to certain ends. This fact provides a basis for science in its examination of causes and effects. It also provides a basis for ethics as we attempt to accommodate means to ends.

---

<sup>245</sup> Natural law could have been discussed under the normative perspective, because it deals with a means by which God reveals ethical truth. Or it could have been discussed under the existential perspective, since natural law theory places much weight on human nature and conscience.

<sup>246</sup> In general, I don’t take much interest in questions about which perspective is appropriate for a certain topic.

As the normative perspective presents what may be called a Christian deontological ethic, so the situational perspective may be called a Christian teleological ethic. Teleological ethics sees ethical decision as formulating goals for life and then determining means to reach those goals. Scripture also does this. As we shall see, it presents goals for human life and means of reaching them. And although Scripture is indispensable in revealing to us these goals, achieving them requires close attention to the situations in which we live. It is those situations that disclose to us many of the resources and opportunities we have for reaching godly goals.

Unlike secular forms of deontologism and teleologism, the normative and situational perspectives, as Christian ethics should understand them, are not inconsistent. A right understanding of God's norms and a right understanding of the situation in which we live are ultimately identical. Along the way, as the focus of our attention varies back and forth between the two perspectives, God's word tells us much of what we need to know about the situation, and our observations of the situation tell us much about how we should be applying God's word.

In Chapter 11, I indicated that even though Scripture is sufficient to give us all the words of God we need for any task, every moral decision requires a knowledge of extra-biblical data as well, so that the word may be applied rightly to our circumstances. The situational perspective focuses on the use of that extra-biblical data, without forgetting that Scripture provides necessary directions for interpreting and using that data.

We can summarize the value of extra-biblical data in ethics in the following ways:

1. It provides many of the minor premises of moral syllogisms (Chapter 11). Recall that the moral syllogism includes at least one normative premise, one situational premise, and a conclusion that is an applied norm. Example:

A. Lying is morally wrong.

B. Bill's statement was a lie.

Conclusion: Bill's statement was morally wrong.

2. It poses moral questions. When God told Adam to fill and subdue the earth, that command gave moral significance to Adam's every experience. When unfallen Adam saw a snail crawling along the ground, his first concern would have been to ask, how should I use this creature to subdue and fill the earth to God's glory? In that way, every fact of Adam's experience raised a moral issue, as it does for us as well.

3. It helps us to answer moral questions. Everything we learn about the facts helps us to answer the questions posed as in 2, above. As Adam and other people studied snails, they would have discovered various nutritional uses of

them, as well as the sheer aesthetic value of one of God's odder creations. This is simply to say that everything we experience in the world enables us in some way to apply God's norms to our lives.

In this chapter we will consider the interface between normative and situational perspectives. That is, we will consider further the ways in which the situation, particularly the data of our experience outside the Bible, helps us to learn God's norms for our lives.

In general, all the facts of our situation are normative. This is because God expects us to live lives in accord with reality, with the facts, with the world as he has made it. So in Rom. 1 and elsewhere, we learn that God reveals himself in the created world and therein communicates ethical content. This, as we saw in Chapter 9, is natural or general revelation.

So the hierarchy of norms is also a hierarchy of facts. Under the normative perspective, in Chapter 9, I discussed various kinds and levels of divine norms, ranging from God himself as a norm, through the word of God, nature and history, persons, and language, spoken and written. Our situation also can be described in various levels. As God is the supreme norm, he is also our supreme situation, the supreme fact of our experience with which we must deal. More specifically, our situation is God's eternal plan, which directs the whole course of nature and history.<sup>247</sup> Still more specifically, our situation is nature itself, the general workings of the world perceived by our senses and reason and described by the physical sciences.

One subdivision of nature is what we call history, the events of human existence.<sup>248</sup> And one important subdivision of history is redemptive history, the story of creation, fall, and redemption.<sup>249</sup> Still more narrowly, we can focus on

---

<sup>247</sup> For an account of God's eternal plan, or decrees, see DG, 313-339. If DG didn't exist, I would also examine in the present volume the question of whether God's sovereign control of everything is compatible with human freedom and responsibility. That is an important ethical question, because some have argued that our ethical responsibility depends on a certain kind of free will, a free will that is able to act apart from God's decree, a person's own character, even a person's own desires. That is the view called "libertarian free will." I believe that theory is wrong, unbiblical, incoherent, and actually destructive of moral responsibility. I have argued so at great length in DG, 119-159. The related question of how a good God could foreordain sin (given that libertarian freedom does not exist and therefore does not account for evil) is treated in 160-182.

<sup>248</sup> *History* refers either to the events themselves or to accounts of those events in language. In a broad sense, history includes everything that has ever happened to any human being. In a narrower sense, it includes only the most significant events, those most important to God's plan, the course of later events, and our present thoughts and feelings (note the triad). Naturally, historical literature deals with history in the narrower sense rather than the broad sense, because historians must deal with their finitude. But this fact opens areas of disagreement, for what is important to one historian may not be to another. There are, therefore, differences of opinion about both about what history is, and about what happened in history.

<sup>249</sup> Some prefer a term like "covenant history" rather than "redemptive history," for the latter term literally embraces only events later than the Fall. The former term would embrace creation and

various phases of redemptive history. And one important part of that history is our own experience, what God is doing with us today. In our present experience, we deal with God, angels, other people (our social environment), and ourselves. That last item deserves more comment: Strange as it may seem to say it, we ourselves are part of our environment, our situation; for in our decisions we must take into account our own heredity, past history, gifts, strengths, weaknesses, and so on. Here the situational and existential perspectives coincide.

### Natural Law

In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to examine a method of relating norms to situation that has enjoyed great prestige in this history of theological ethics. Traditional Roman Catholic theology, together with many contemporary Protestant and Jewish thinkers, hold what they call a "natural law" theory of ethics. This idea can be traced from Aristotle and the Stoics to Aquinas, to Hugo Grotius, and to many modern thinkers both religious and secular. Modern political conservatives, even some nonreligious ones, often appeal to natural law in their ethical judgments, because they believe that such an appeal gives them an objective basis for moral judgments, contrary to the relativisms of most contemporary thought.

One reason religious conservatives often appeal to natural law is because it enables them to argue their cherished positions without directly appealing to the Bible and church tradition. Secularists regularly attack Christians for "trying to impose religion on society." By appealing to natural law, rather than religion itself, the Christian can counter this criticism. For example, many Roman Catholics have argued that the case against abortion is not religious at all, but based only on scientific judgments about the nature of the unborn. So they oppose abortion by appealing to natural law.

"Natural law" is understood to be a moral order, found in nature and in man himself. It is accessible through reason and conscience. Knowledge of it does not require Scripture or God's saving grace. Following Aquinas, J. Budziszewski defines natural law as "moral principles that are both right for everybody and knowable to everybody by the ordinary exercise of human reason."<sup>250</sup>

Budziszewski says that reason comes to know natural law through God's general revelation.<sup>251</sup> He mentions five forms of general revelation, which I

---

fall as well. But in common theological language, "redemptive history" covers the whole history narrated in Scripture, and I will maintain that common usage.

<sup>250</sup> Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: the Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997).

<sup>251</sup> Recall my discussion of general revelation in Chapter 9.

paraphrase and abbreviate: (1) creation's testimony to the existence of the true God, (2) "the fact that we are made in the image of God," (3) "the facts of our physical and emotional design," (4) "the law of conscience," (5) "the order of causality, which teaches us by linking every sin with consequences (Proverbs 1:31)."<sup>252</sup>

Several questions should occur to those who have so far accepted my own account of general revelation (Chapter 9):

1. Scripture says that those who lack saving grace repress the truths of general revelation, exchanging them for a lie (Rom. 1:18, 25). Does that not make it impossible to base an ethic on general revelation alone? Budziszewski agrees that sinners hold down the truth, and that "persistence in such pretense darkens or perverts such natural knowledge as God has given us."<sup>253</sup> He says, "the human race has been in the condition psychologists call 'denial' ever since the Fall."<sup>254</sup> Nevertheless, Budziszewski notes that when the apostles in the New Testament confront Gentiles with the gospel, they appeal to the "testimony of creation."<sup>255</sup>

It is difficult theologically to understand how best to coordinate depravity with common grace. But it is right to say that depravity is never so extreme that it entirely blots out God's law from the unbeliever's consciousness. Rom. 1 teaches that the unbeliever knows it well enough that when he rebels against it, it leaves him without excuse (Rom. 1:20, 32). So I would say that the non-Christian both knows and suppresses the truth, and his knowledge of the truth may sometimes be conscious.<sup>256</sup> It is not wrong, therefore, to say that he is aware of God's moral standards through general revelation. Here I agree with Budziszewski.

But the rather precarious status of general revelation in the nonbeliever's consciousness calls in question the likelihood of that revelation producing a stable moral consensus in modern secular culture sufficient to govern nations.

2. What is the role of Scripture in natural law ethics? Obviously, for Aristotle, the Stoics, and other pagan predecessors of modern natural law theory there is no role for Scripture at all. Aquinas, Grotius, and others, however, have

---

<sup>252</sup> Budziszewski, op. cit., 180-81. He says on 181 that "The doctrine of natural law is grounded by the second, third, fourth and fifth of God's ways of general revelation." He does not explain his omission of the first. Elsewhere, as on 210, section 6, he argues that natural law loses its force if it is not seen as the law of a personal creator, so the first would seem to be at least as relevant as the others.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 183. See also his account of denial in *The Revenge of Conscience* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Co., 1999), 84-86.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> The Pharisees who opposed Jesus in the gospels would be an example of a very conscious understanding of moral truth, accompanied by an unregenerate nature. For a fuller analysis of this question, see my *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), 187-230.

had to deal with the relation of natural law to Scripture. It has sometimes been tempting for natural law ethicists to leave Scripture out of the picture, regarding it as a theological, rather than an ethical authority. But that won't do, if I have been right about the "comprehensiveness" of Scripture (Chapter 10).

Budziszewski, however, has a high view of biblical authority and often argues the existence of natural law by appealing to Scripture. At one point, he relates natural law to Scripture as follows:

There is a natural law, and it can be known and philosophically analyzed. But that which is beside the Scripture can be vindicated only with the help of Scripture; that which is revealed before the gospel can be secured against evasion only in the light of the gospel. The doctrine of natural law is best grounded not in the study of nature independent of God's Word but in the Word of God itself. I do not mean that natural law is the same as Divine law; I do mean that Scripture is our foremost authority about both.<sup>257</sup>

Budziszewski admits, however, that natural law theories often fail to be fully scriptural:

Even among Christian philosophers the doctrine of natural law often fails to measure up. Either it focuses on matters peripheral to the text and the devices of our heart, or it wanders from its scriptural foundation. To one degree or another these have been flaws of almost all previous natural-law theorizing, including my own—and nearly all books about it, perhaps including the present one.<sup>258</sup>

This statement is a remarkable expression of candor. And I do appreciate Budziszewski's attempt to bring Scripture into his argument in a way that has not been common in the natural law tradition. But still more needs to be said.

If "that which is beside the Scripture can be vindicated only with the help of Scripture," then appeals to natural law depend on Scripture. If one presents a natural law argument to someone who doesn't believe in natural law, who keeps challenging the authority on which the law is based, ultimately the argument must have recourse to Scripture. So natural law arguments ultimately depend on arguments from Scripture. The argument is not merely "Play fair, because that is the natural law," or even "Play fair, because you cannot help believing in fair play," but "Play fair, because you cannot help believing in fair play, and we know that because the Bible says so."

Of course, to say that is to remove much of the appeal of the natural law tradition, which is the claim that we may argue objective principles of ethics

---

<sup>257</sup> Budziszewski, *op. cit.*, 183-84; cf. 186.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.



without recourse to Scripture. If Budziszewski and I are right, there is no such thing as a natural law argument apart from Scripture. Natural law arguments are, in fact, natural-law-arguments-warranted-by-the-Bible. That doesn't mean that every natural law argument must be accompanied by Bible texts, but rather that as when an argument attempts to trace natural law back to its ultimate foundation, that foundation must be located in Scripture.

This is, in fact, what the Bible itself would lead us to expect. When God spoke with Adam in the Garden, he presupposed that Adam had some natural knowledge of trees and animals and such. But he did not want Adam to interpret these objects autonomously, apart from God's own spoken word. Similarly, throughout the Bible, God expects human beings to interpret the world by God's word, so that all human knowledge is a knowledge of world and word at the same time. This principle is especially important since the Fall, though it would have been important even if Adam had not fallen. For since the Fall, human beings do distort natural revelation (Rom. 1). That distortion can be removed only by saving grace, and saving grace comes through the gospel, the message of Scripture.

So, although nonbelievers have a certain knowledge of God apart from Scripture, which challenges them even though they repress it (as we saw under 1, above), that is not a desirable situation. Far better that they come to know God through the gospel and then learn to look at every fact in the world through the "spectacles" of Scripture.

3. But, given that Budziszewski recognizes a significant role for Scripture in warranting natural law, why do we need natural law, after all? What use is natural law, when we have the Bible? Budziszewski answers,

The main use of general revelation, including the natural law, is apologetics: giving a reason for the hope that lies within us. I do not mean that in apologetics we always *refer* to the natural law but that we depend on its existence.<sup>259</sup>

He mentions three forms of apologetics, evangelical, moral, and political. In evangelical apologetics, we seek to persuade people of the truth of the gospel. In moral apologetics, we "engage in ethical persuasion or counsel."<sup>260</sup> In political apologetics, we seek

...to leaven the civil law we share with our nonbelieving neighbors—for instance, when we seek agreement that life in the womb should not be destroyed, that sodomy should not be granted legal equivalence with marriage, or that sick people should be cared for and comforted instead of starved or pressured into suicide. In this area we can hardly get far by proclaiming to nonbelievers "The Bible says!" But we can get somewhere

---

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

by proclaiming extrabiblical truths which we know, on biblical authority, that the nonbeliever really knows too.<sup>261</sup>

Budziszewski is himself a skillful and cogent apologist in moral and political matters. His *What We Can't Not Know*<sup>262</sup> is, on the whole, a brilliant defense of basic ethical norms. He is at his best with “the basics of right and wrong,”<sup>263</sup> such as “Play fair,” “Don’t murder,” and “Take care of your family.” Everyone, he says, acknowledges these standards. Even when people are unfair, they maintain that they are fair, rather than repudiating fairness. When they make excuses for their misdeeds, they appeal to these and other basic ethical standards. In the few instances when they repudiate these ethical standards, they nevertheless use these standards to rebuke others.

In his *The Revenge of Conscience*, Budziszewski takes another apologetic approach, showing how repressing the conscience leads to worse and worse moral conduct and to natural consequences, as when sexual immorality leads to sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>264</sup>

But when natural law thinkers get beyond these basics I find them less persuasive. Roman Catholic writers often argue that since there is a natural connection between sexual relations and procreation, contraception is wrong. That argument seems to me to be a naturalistic fallacy: sex leads to procreation, so sex *ought* to lead to procreation, an argument from is to ought. Budziszewski defends natural law theory against the charge of naturalistic fallacy by saying,

An “is” which merely “happens to be” has no moral significance because it is arbitrary; that’s why it cannot imply an “ought.” But an “is” which expresses the purposes of the Creator is fraught with an “ought” already. Such are the inbuilt features of our design, including the design of deep conscience.<sup>265</sup>

This is essentially the same as my own defense of Christian-theistic ethics against the charge of naturalistic fallacy (see Chapter 5). And Budziszewski does show in various ways that natural law is a law of God, not a merely human conjecture about the natural purposes of things. But in the argument against contraception, and others, it is difficult to show that the proposed restriction is in fact a law of God. I shall try to show under the seventh commandment that Scripture doesn’t teach it. And in the absence of biblical support, I don’t know how one could show that God forbids contraception. Opposition to contraception is not like opposition to murder, stealing, unfairness, or betraying friends. One

---

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Dallas: Spence Publishing Co., 2003. The dialogue on 107-135 is an admirable example of that philosophical genre.

<sup>263</sup> *What We Can't Not Know*, 112.

<sup>264</sup> *Revenge*, 20-38.

<sup>265</sup> *What We Can't Not Know*, 108.

can use means of birth control without evident inconsistency with universally acknowledged moral principles.<sup>266</sup>

The same is true in the argument over abortion. Later I shall try to present a argument against abortion from Scripture. But if we set Scripture aside, the natural law argument runs like this:

1. It is wrong to take the life of an innocent human person.
  2. Abortion takes the life of an innocent human person.
- Therefore, abortion is wrong.

But how do we establish from natural law alone the personhood of the unborn child presupposed in premise 2? Usually the argument is that the unborn child is genetically different from his parents and therefore not a “part of his mother’s body.” But there is a logical jump between genetic uniqueness and personhood. Genetic uniqueness is a physical property, personhood a moral one, implying moral rights. How can it be shown that genetic uniqueness conveys a right to life? I believe Scripture teaches that the unborn child is a person, but it is by no means evident how that conclusion can be proved by natural law. So natural law arguments often cry out for scriptural supplementation.

And if we can’t argue an ethical point from Scripture, it would be best not to argue it at all. In Chapter 11 on the sufficiency of Scripture, I tried to show that Scripture contains a complete transcript of God’s will for ethics. So principles that cannot be established from Scripture cannot be established by natural law arguments either. When people try to add to God’s word by natural law arguments, they violate the sufficiency of Scripture. This is not to say that it is wrong to use natural law arguments. As Budziszewski shows, they can be very useful. But if I am right, these arguments have significant limitations.

I conclude, then, that natural law is an important apologetic tool, but it does not provide ethical norms in addition to those in Scripture. And those who use natural law arguments need to beware of naturalistic fallacies.

4. A final question about natural law is whether it is adequate to govern civil society.

Aquinas distinguishes several kinds of law: (1) Eternal Law (God’s own mind), (2) Natural Law (“The reflection of eternal law in the very structure of the created rational mind, directing us to our natural good”<sup>267</sup>), (3) Divine Law (Scripture), and (4) Human Law (laws of civil society). Aquinas says that human law should be derived from natural law, not divine law. Why? Budziszewski paraphrases Aquinas’s answer:

---

<sup>266</sup> I shall discuss this issue in more detail, including the possibility of a natural law argument, under the Seventh Commandment.

<sup>267</sup> Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart*, 61.

Because government is charged with directing the community to its natural rather than its supernatural good, so God does not intend the enforcement of Divine law upon nonbelievers.<sup>268</sup>

He adds, however, as Aquinas surely would, that “even if human law should not enforce Divine law, it should not *violate* it either—not any more than it may violate natural law.”<sup>269</sup>

As an example, Budziszewski argues that the biblical principle, “I am prohibited from divorcing a faithful spouse” should not be imposed as law on civil society without “a good deal of watering down.”<sup>270</sup> The reason is that “before the coming of Christ not even believers were expected to understand the true nature of marriage”<sup>271</sup> (he refers to Matt. 19:8).

I agree that we should exercise care about turning biblical principles into civil law. Not every command in Scripture is appropriate for civil law (for example, commands about our heart-attitudes, as Deut. 6:4-5). And not every command that is appropriate for civil law should be enacted in every nation, or immediately. As I indicated in the discussion of theonomy, Chapter 13, some laws like the death penalty for adultery presuppose a national commitment to God’s Lordship and a population instructed in God’s law.

But I cannot agree with Aquinas and Budziszewski that natural law alone, without the supplementation of Scripture, *should* determine the civil law. For one thing, I question Aquinas’ distinction between natural and supernatural goods, and his limitation of the state’s competence to the former, as I shall indicate in various later discussions. And if that distinction cannot be maintained, then I see no reason to argue that Scripture should be excluded from influence on civil law.

This is not to say that I would necessarily quote Scripture texts in the context of political debate. As Budziszewski says,

In this area we can hardly get far by proclaiming to unbelievers “The Bible says!” But we can get somewhere by proclaiming extrabiblical truths which we know, on biblical authority, that the nonbeliever really knows too.<sup>272</sup>

But surely our goal is to get beyond these extrabiblical truths. As Budziszewski himself argued, natural laws are not fully warranted without an appeal to Scripture (as we saw under 2, above). And I argued further that we should never investigate nature except with the spectacles of Scripture.

---

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Budziszewski, *Revenge*, 112.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Budziszewski, *Written*, 184.

And that same conclusion follows from the very nature of politics according to Scripture. The ultimate goal of political apologetics is nothing less than to present Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The political goal of biblical Christianity is a civil state that acknowledges him for who he is. For every institution of human culture, as well as every individual human being, is called to do homage to King Jesus.<sup>273</sup> We may not reach that goal in the course of modern political debate; but that is where the debate should point, and we may well find occasion to tell nonbelievers, in all honesty, that this is the direction in which we would urge society to move.

And if the Lord tarries, it should not be unthinkable that one day our society could become predominantly Christian, so that the people will be, not only tolerant of biblical arguments, but eager to hear them. When and if that happens, we should certainly not refuse to bring the Bible into the public square.

Some readers, including some Christians, might disagree with this understanding of Jesus' lordship and its relevance to the state. But at the very least, this is a view that many Christians have held. It would be wrong to limit political discourse so as to exclude such a view a priori. Secularists are eager to keep "religious" views out of the public square, an utterly undemocratic restriction. Christians should oppose all such limitations, even the exclusion of views they reject.

So although I would not insist on bringing up Bible passages in every political debate, I think we should not exclude them either. Budziszewski says that "Scripture is our foremost authority about [natural law as well as Divine law]."<sup>274</sup> There is no reason to deprive unbelieving society of this authoritative source, when they need it so very badly, and when they need to know so much that natural law cannot supply.

So in my judgment the natural law tradition contains both bad and good. It is important for us to be discerning, here as always "to take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).<sup>275</sup>

---

<sup>273</sup> More on this in our discussion of the fifth commandment.

<sup>274</sup> Budziszewski, *Written*, 184.

<sup>275</sup> For a more elaborate critique of natural law theory, as exemplified in writers such as John Courtney Murray, Jacques Maritain, and Ken Myers, see Peter J. Leithart, *Natural Law: A Reformed Critique* (Niceville, FL: Biblical Horizons, 1996). I think Leithart's treatment of human depravity needs more nuance, but he makes a powerful case for the use of Scripture in political discourse. At least some of the weaknesses Leithart attributes to natural law thinkers have been overcome somewhat by Budziszewski, who has evidently been in correspondence with Leithart (see Budziszewski, *Revenge*, xviii). That is why I have focused so closely on Budziszewski in this chapter. But Budziszewski has not come to see clearly the political claims of Christ in Scripture. For more on this subject, see my discussion of the Fifth Commandment.

## Chapter 15: Our Ethical Situation

In this chapter I will attempt to describe our ethical situation as Scripture presents it. That is, what are the chief facts we must take account of in making ethical decisions? How does the Bible characterize our ethical environment?<sup>276</sup> As I indicated in the last chapter, just as there are various levels within the normative perspective (God, revelation, verbal revelation, etc.), so there are various levels of facts that we deal with in the world. These include God, angels, human society, individual existence, and nature. Let us look at each of these:

### God

I have already said much about the role of God in our ethical decisions—both in this volume and, in effect, in DG, and I will say much more. So the present discussion will be much shorter than the subject warrants. But I will offer some summary thoughts.

As God himself is our chief norm, he is also the chief fact of our experience, the chief person “with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13, KJV). He is our ultimate situation, for everything else in our environment, including ourselves, comes from his eternal decree (Eph. 1:11), his creation (Neh. 9:6), and his providence (Acts 17:26, Heb. 1:3).

He is not just a fact among other facts. He is the all-conditioner,<sup>277</sup> the fact from which every other fact receives its existence and nature. So he is the fact that is revealed in every fact, the fact we encounter in every fact. As Calvin said, therefore, all that we do is *coram deo*, in the presence of God. Wherever we go, he is there (Psm. 139).

The biblical view of God is radically different from the views of God found in other religions, philosophies, and worldviews. That difference can be summarized in three headings:

1. *The Creator*. No other worldview presents us with a God who created all things out of nothing. Some worldviews are pantheistic, believing that the supreme being is the whole universe. Others offer no account of the origins of all things. For pantheistic and nonpantheistic alternatives to the biblical worldview, all reality is equal in dignity and authority. But in Scripture, there are two levels of

---

<sup>276</sup> Of course, it is also important to discuss the extrascriptural facts that form our ethical environment. I shall try to do that a bit in my later chapters on Christ and Culture. But there are so many extrabiblical facts that it would be impossible to do justice to them in a single book.

<sup>277</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God* (Phila.: Committee on Christian Education, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, n.d.). This pamphlet is available on various web sites and in Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1998), 121-143.

reality, the divine and the nondivine, the creator and the creatures. The creator has ultimate power and authority; the creature does not. The ethical importance of this fact is staggering. In every ethical decision, the first consideration must be how that decision will affect our relation to God.

2. *Absolute Personality*: It is also the case, as we saw in Chapter 5, that only in Scripture is the supreme being an absolute person. There are personal gods in polytheistic religions, but they are not absolute. There are absolutes of a sort in worldviews like Hinduism and Hegelianism, but those absolutes are not personal. Only in biblical Christianity (and to some extent in those “Christian heresies” influenced by the Bible) is there a being who is truly supreme, absolute, and who is also a person. Our God is not only our creator; he also knows, loves, feels, and speaks to his creatures. Life *coram deo* is a fully personal relationship. So in our ethical decisions we are interested above all in what God thinks and how he feels about what we do.

3. *Lordship*: Again, I mention the importance of covenant lordship, the specific relationship God has formed with his creatures. That relationship involves control, authority, and presence, and we have explored, in Chapter 3 and elsewhere, the ethical implications of these lordship attributes. (a) God controls all there is. And, most significantly in this context, he controls our environment. Whether we find ourselves in happy or difficult situations, God has placed us there. So we should regard our situation, not as a predicament brought on us by impersonal fate, but as an opportunity and/or challenge, brought to us by our covenant Lord.

(b) God speaks to us with supreme authority. We have explored the implications of this fact under the normative perspective.

(c) God is the ultimate presence, the one who is closest to us, the one with whom, of all persons, we have the most to do. He is not far away from us, always inescapable. We live *coram deo*. So God sees all we do, and he evaluates all we do, in blessing and judgment. Yet he not only evaluates our conduct. He draws near also to give grace, undeserved favor, beyond anything we can ask or think. So he sent his Son to dwell among us (John 1:14) and to die the death we deserve. So he sends his Spirit to comfort, sanctify, and lead us into all truth. Our ethical life is a deepening of that relationship, a walking together with God.

## The Angels

The Bible also presents angelic beings as beings “with whom we have to do,” as one of the environments of the Christian life. It is hard for the modern Christian to know what to make of this. Believers in Bible times were deeply conscious of the presence of angels in their midst, as when Paul mentions that

women should wear a head covering “because of the angels” (1 Cor. 11:10). Paul feels no need to explain this phrase. He assumes the Corinthians will understand what he means. But I recall my revered professor of theology, John Murray, shaking his head sadly after reading this passage and confessing he had no idea what it meant. Nor can I offer insight. Modern Christians including myself have lost the vivid consciousness of angelic beings that New Testament believers took for granted. Some popular writers and television shows have recently explored claims to angelic activity in our time, but these seem like cultural curiosities without much intellectual or spiritual weight.

Part of the problem is that modern people have lost touch with the supernatural and preternatural.<sup>278</sup> They have become skeptical of any world or any beings beyond those of our senses. Christians at least believe in God, but they have absorbed enough of the anti-supernaturalism of their culture that belief in angels seems foreign to them. It seems that belief in God is hard enough. Why add further difficulty by bringing angels into it? And if God is sovereign, what need do we have for preternatural beings? God is the one who judges and blesses us, sometimes in extraordinary ways. Why are angels important?

But Scripture itself mentions angels over 300 times. This fact suggests that we need to take angels into account in our ethical decisions. Being a modern person myself, I don't pretend to have gotten very deeply into the doctrine of angels, but I would cautiously venture the following thoughts.

1. *The doctrine of angels rebukes the smallness and impersonalism of our cosmology.* Modern worldviews typically claim to have discovered a much larger universe than was known to the ancients and medievals. But they have a much smaller view of the universe of persons, having abandoned belief in God and in angels. According to Scripture, however, there are vast numbers of angels that inhabit the world. So we need to develop a larger perspective. In 2 Kings 6, Elisha's servant was terrified by the armies of Syria surrounding their city. Elisha comforted him with a vision of angels:

He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." <sup>17</sup> Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (Verses 16-17)

Mysterious warriors, even mysterious horses!—poised to bring victory to the prophet (in a most mysterious way, as the later verses indicate). Elisha's servant needed a larger cosmology, one allowing for more persons. He needed, further, to see that the physical conflict is only part of a larger spiritual conflict, a larger warfare, as we will discuss further below.

---

<sup>278</sup> In traditional theology, God and his works are supernatural, above nature; angels and theirs are preternatural, beyond nature.



So the doctrine of angels makes our worldview even more personalistic. It reminds us that not only is God a divine person, but that many of the means he uses to bring about events in the world are also personal, rather than impersonal. Scripture has little if anything to say about natural laws and forces, much to say about God's personal agents, both angels and men. Typically, God does not press buttons; he sends messengers. This is important, because impersonalism always detracts from ethical responsibility.

*2. The doctrine of angels shows us something of the dimensions of our ethical-spiritual warfare. We see this in at least three ways:*

(a) Angels participate in the kingdom warfare. Above and around us are good and evil angels, engaged in spiritual warfare. Satan and his hosts engage human beings in the battle by tempting them to sin. The good angels, however, are "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Heb. 1:14). The two armies fight one another, as well as fighting against and for us (Dan. 10:13, 21, Jude 9, Rev. 12:7).

So Scripture urges us not to underestimate the difficulty of the struggle, as if we could succeed with human resources alone (Eph. 6:10-20). If we were fighting human beings, physical weapons would prevail, though even in human warfare God's will is decisive. But we are fighting beings who are far more intelligent, strong, and numerous than we are, and who, to us, are exceedingly mysterious.

On the other hand, we should not overestimate the difficulty either, for there are angels fighting on our side (2 Kings 6:15-17) and the spiritual weapons of Eph. 6 are sufficient.

It may seem uninteresting to conclude with the advice "don't underestimate," and "don't overestimate." But the main point here is that we should not base either our hopes or our fears on the empirical situation alone. News media and opinion makers in our culture seem to think that the most important issues are political, followed closely by entertainment. But Scripture says otherwise. The really decisive issues of human life are ethical and spiritual. And it is the religious and ethical equipment God gives us that will prevail over the hosts of evil.

(b) Second, angels are witnesses to human salvation (Luke 12:8-9, 15:10, 1 Cor. 4:9, Eph. 3:10, 1 Tim. 3:16, 1 Pet. 1:12, Rev. 4:10). Although (as above) angels participate in the redemptive drama, there is another sense in which they are spectators rather than participants. Redemption doesn't extend to them, for unfallen angels need no redemption, and fallen angels receive none (cf. Heb. 2:16). So, although the angels contend for God's redemptive purposes, they do not have the experience of being redeemed themselves. Thus Scripture

sometimes pictures them as standing in amazement, looking in from the outside, as it were. Remarkably, they even *learn* the wisdom of God from observing the church (Eph. 3:10). It is our privilege to *teach* the angels by our words and life!

(c) Third, the doctrine of angels is a measure of the greatness of our salvation in Christ, for salvation lifts us above the angels. According to Heb. 2:9, Jesus was made, for a little while, lower than the angels for the suffering of death. But in his resurrection he is again exalted above them. The passage implies that Jesus brothers, the church, share that exaltation with him, fulfilling man's dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28, Ps. 8). Although we do not yet see everything subject to man, we see this dominion in Jesus (Heb. 2:8). So the angels minister to us, not vice versa (Heb. 1:14). The world to come is not theirs, but ours (2:5-8; Cf. Paul's odd statement that we shall judge angels, 1 Cor. 6:3). It belongs to man, God's image, not the angels.

Scripture applies these facts by indicating that angel worship is not only a sin, but also a delusion, from which Christ has set us free (Col. 2:18-19, Rev. 19:10, 22:8-9). Further, because of redemption, the prince of the evil angels, Satan himself, is a defeated foe. We may resist him, and he will flee (1 Pet. 5:8-9, James 4:7).

## Human Society

A much more visible dimension of our ethical environment is the social dimension. We live with other people. God expects us to take our fellow human beings into account when we make moral decisions. I shall say much more about social ethics in connection the fifth through tenth commandments of the Decalogue. But here I wish to make some general observations.

### 1. *The Cultural Mandate: a Corporate Task*

From the beginning of our existence, ethical life has presupposed a community. The first creation ordinance, the cultural mandate of Gen. 1:28, comes to Adam and Eve together ("And God blessed *them*, and God said to *them*"). The mandates themselves, to fill and subdue the earth, are not tasks that Adam could even conceivably have done alone.<sup>279</sup> Since God made man male and female, and since reproduction is itself part of the cultural task, God evidently intended from the beginning that this work be carried out as a corporate task, a task for the whole human race. The individual is *not* responsible to fill and subdue the earth. His responsibility, rather, is to make the best contribution to this task of which he is capable.

---

<sup>279</sup> Cf the discussion in Chapter 13, under "Existential Priorities."

Thus, from the very beginning, God intended for us to make our individual decisions by taking other people into account, and specifically by seeking how we can best help our fellow human beings in their divinely ordained task.

## 2. *The Fall: a Corporate Failure*

God made Eve to be a helper to Adam (Gen. 2:18) in every respect and therefore also in the ethico-religious sphere. Both were to encourage one another in keeping the commands of God. But in the Fall, Eve took on the role of Satan, becoming temptress rather than helper to her husband. And Adam forsook his headship in the family, capitulating to the sinful request of his wife.

So the Fall involved, not only individual sins on the part of Adam and Eve, but simultaneously a breakdown of their *relationship*. God had intended human beings to have dominion over the animals, the man to have authority over his wife,<sup>280</sup> and all human beings to be subordinate to him. In the Fall narrative, Satan inhabits an animal, who takes dominion of the woman, who usurps the authority of the man, who blames it all on God (Gen. 3:12). So Satan seeks an exact reversal of the authority structure.

We see the destruction of the relationship also in the sexual shame between the man and the woman, (Gen. 3:7, 10-11, 21, cf. 2:25), Adam's blaming his wife for his sin (3:12), and the further breakdown in family harmony implied in 3:16. By God's curse, both elements of the family task, childbearing and labor, are to be painful (3:16-19). So we see at the very beginning of the history of redemption that disobedience to God brought consequences upon corporate human society as well as individuals.

## 3. *Fallen Society*

People sometimes ask whether sin is a merely individual thing, or whether it has corporate dimensions. A related question is, whether there are "sinful structures of society." I believe that sin is basically individual, because it is irreducibly personal. But sinful individuals contaminate the institutions they inhabit, and those institutions make the effects of sin even worse. When sinners gather together, they can accomplish more wickedness than they can individually.

---

<sup>280</sup> I'll try to justify this non-feminist reading at a later point. For now, consider 1 Cor. 11:3, Eph. 5:22-24, 1 Tim. 2:8-15.

In Gen. 4:17-24, the descendants of Cain develop the earliest forms of culture. These developments are not evil in themselves. But Moses chooses, as a paradigm of the moral quality of that culture, Lamech's song of vengeance (verses 23-24).

It is hard to know what sin it was that so provoked the Lord in Gen. 6:1-7,<sup>281</sup> but evidently at that point human wickedness reached a zenith, so that "every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (verse 5). God sent the great flood as a judgment. But the flood did not wash away sin. In Gen. 8:21, God in effect repeats the condemnation of 6:5: "the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth."

So in Gen. 11, there is another compounding of sin through corporate unity. People build a city and a tower "lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth," defying God, who had ordained for the human race precisely to be dispersed. In preparing his judgment, the Lord comments on the effect of this corporate enterprise on the moral character of the human race:

Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. (Gen. 11:6)

The compounding of evil through corporate units then becomes a common biblical theme. There are not only wicked people, but wicked cities: Sodom, Gomorrah, Tyre, Sidon, Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum (Matt. 11:20-24). And, not only wicked cities, but wicked nations (the Canaanite tribes, Moab, Edom, Ammon, Amalek, Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, etc.). Here the sinful practices of individuals are reinforced by social agreements, covenants, and traditions. Sinful patterns of life become accepted by society, and therefore they are more easily accepted by individuals. So sinful individuals corrupt society and vice versa.

So biblical apocalyptic (Daniel, Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, Revelation) presents the ultimate spiritual battle as a battle between kingdoms: that of God, and that of human national-ecclesiastical units under the ultimate rule of Satan.

#### *4. The Corporate Character of Redemption*

But redemption, too, has a corporate dimension. As Satan works through institutions and groups, so does God. Even after the Fall, the cultural mandate continues as our corporate task. Childbearing and labor bring toil and pain, but

---

<sup>281</sup> Scholars have made various suggestions: (1) marriages between Sethites and Cainites, (2) sexual relationships between women and angelic beings, and (3) royal polygamy. I'm somewhat inclined toward the third suggestion.

ultimately they succeed in keeping the human race alive until God sends his redeemer.

And God redeems, not only individuals, but peoples. The Book of Genesis describes the process of election,<sup>282</sup> in which God chooses one family and rejects another for his purposes of redemption. He chooses the family of Seth rather than the family of Cain. He chooses Noah's family from all the others. He chooses the descendants of Shem over those of Ham and Japheth, Peleg over Joktan (Gen. 10:25?), Abraham over Nahor and Haran, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau. In his covenant with Abraham, God ordains circumcision as a sign and seal of covenant membership, identifying the family of God and distinguishing them from all the other families of the world.

The equivalent to circumcision in the new covenant is baptism. Infant baptism is a controversial doctrine in the church today, but certainly the Jews of the first century who first heard the gospel would have assumed that their children were included in the new covenant as in the Abrahamic. That assumption would have been strengthened by Peter's statement that "the promise is for you and for your children" (Acts 2:39) and by the regular baptism of households (Acts 11:14, 16:15, 31, 1 Cor. 1:16). Nothing in the New Testament suggests a change from the Old Testament principle of family membership in the covenant. So we should recognize that in the New Testament too, God claims for himself, not only individuals, but families.

After God claimed the family of Israel, it grew into a great nation. So there was need for additional institutions to order different aspects of family life. So God gave to Israel prophetic, priestly, and kingly institutions. In the new covenant too there are apostles, prophets, pastor-teachers, elders, and deacons. As sinful institutions magnify the power of sin in the world, so godly institutions, working as God intends, magnify the influence of righteousness and grace.

So in the consummation of history there will be, not only new heavens and new earth, but also a city, the new Jerusalem. The goal of history is for God's righteousness to take institutional form, as well as to take root in the hearts of individuals.

##### 5. *Corporate Life and Moral Decisions* (Summary)

So God intends for us to help one another in our common task, not to try to do everything alone. He authorizes us to seek help and guidance from those equipped to give it. Because of sin, however, other people are not only helpers, but tempters as well. So there is need of vigilance, testing, and proving as well as

---

<sup>282</sup> In terms of the distinction made in DG, Chapter 16, I am speaking here primarily of historical election, not eternal election, though the former is an image of the latter.

trust. As in the Russian proverb quoted often by President Reagan, “trust, but verify.” This temptation and sinful influence is compounded by the development of social institutions in unregenerate society.

But redemption builds a new society, in which we can again expect to work together with other people in a constructive way, carrying out God’s commands. In that society, we can expect help, not only of a natural kind, but also help that comes from the gifts of the Holy Spirit. So we meet Christ in our brothers and sisters. The highest gift is the highest task, to love one another.

The blessing of the Spirit is magnified in the development of godly institutions. Indeed, regenerate people cannot help but bring God’s standards into their places of service: businesses, schools, the arts, technology, agriculture, labor, even government (1 Cor. 10:31 again). So Christians have an obligation to address all areas of human life, including all social institutions, with the commands of God. In some cases, as history has shown, this will lead to distinctively Christian institutions within the larger society. In other cases, it will bring about change in the secular institutions themselves.

### **Living With Ourselves**

But Christian ethics is individual as well as social. Even in deciding how to contribute to a corporate project, we must make individual decisions. And in doing so each person should take account of his own strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and limitations.

In some ways, all human beings are alike, made in the image of God, under his lordship, responsible to him in every area of life, but fallen into sin. All Christians are alike in that in addition to their human nature and history, they are redeemed by Christ. So they are new creatures in Christ, free from sin’s dominion, filled with gifts of the Spirit. In all Christians, also, sin itself lingers until the consummation.

But in other respects, each of us differs from every other person, and every Christian differs from every other Christian. We have different personalities, different abilities and disabilities, different histories and experience. In the body of Christ, each of us plays a unique role, with distinctive calling, gifts, and opportunities.

And each of us fights, in some ways, a unique spiritual battle. Generically, the temptations we face are “common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13). They can be summarized as temptations to violate any of the Ten Commandments. Hence, Heb. 4:15 tells us that Jesus was tempted “in every respect... as we are.” But these temptations take different forms in each person’s life. All of us are tempted

to steal, for example, but in different ways. Some are tempted to steal from individuals, others “only” from corporations or government, via such things as fraudulent use of warranties or tax evasion. Others of us are tempted mainly to steal honor that belongs to God.

All of us are tempted sexually. But some are tempted to homosexual sins, others heterosexual. All of us are tempted to dishonor our parents, but some are tempted to despise their counsel, others to leave them without support in their old age.

And each of us has unique moral responsibilities, which are applications of our general moral responsibilities. Scripture teaches us to keep our contracts and work hard. For some, that will mean showing up regularly each day at a corporate office. For others, that will mean delivering a sermon each Sunday in a Presbyterian church. For others it will mean doing the wash, cooking meals, and raising young children.

So moral decisions require us to take into account both the likenesses and differences between ourselves and others. That is to say that each of us must apply the word of God to his own unique situation. Though we can and should seek help from others, no one else can do this for us.

Strange, then, as it may sound, the self is a crucial element of its own environment. As we must learn to live with God, angels, and other people, we must also learn to live with ourselves. Here the situational and existential perspectives coincide.

I would like to look more closely at two areas where living with ourselves is a crucial consideration.

### 1. *Living With Our Genes*

One particular problem often discussed today in this area is the bearing of genetic inheritance upon moral responsibility.

The rapid progress of genetic science has brought certain interesting facts to our attention. Some years ago, it was learned that an abnormally high proportion of boys with a double "y" chromosome (xyy) engage in anti-social or criminal behavior. There was discussion of whether that discovery might help us in maintaining social stability. Should we abort children who have this genetic combination? Should we test children early for this condition and take special pains to steer xyy boys into constructive paths? Should we seek ways to change the genetic makeup of such children?

Later came the discovery that a certain gene is associated with a relatively high percentage of alcoholics. And then Simon LeVay, a gay activist

and neuroscientist, published a paper in *Science*<sup>283</sup> arguing that there are some minute but statistically significant differences between heterosexual and homosexual men in the size of the "INAH-3" region of the anterior hypothalamus, part of the brain. Some have argued that this discovery tends to establish what gay activists have long been saying, namely that homosexuality is an innate condition rather than a "choice," that it cannot be helped, and therefore it should be accepted as normal.

I am not competent to evaluate LeVay's research. For a brief scientific critique by a Christian who appears at least to know what he's talking about, see P. D. Brown, "Science and Sodomy."<sup>284</sup> I do think that we are wise to suspend judgment until LeVay's work is corroborated by others who are more objective on the question. However, we should note as others have that there is an unanswered "chicken and egg" problem here: how do we know that this condition (or perhaps the larger unexplored physical basis for it) is the cause, and not the result, of homosexual thought and behavior?

And of course we must also remember that these discoveries were made through studies of the brains of people who were exclusively homosexual, compared with brains of people who were (I gather) exclusively heterosexual. But there is a wide spectrum between these two extremes. The exclusively homosexual population seems to be between 1% and 3% of the population (the widely used Kinsey figure of 10% is now largely discredited). But many more people have bisexual inclinations, and still others are largely heterosexual but willing to enter homosexual relationships under certain circumstances (experimentation, prison, etc.) Is there a genetic basis for these rather complicated patterns of behavior? Neither LeVay nor anyone else has offered data suggesting that.

But let's assume that there is an innate physical basis for homosexuality, and for alcoholism, and indeed for general criminality. I suspect that as genetic science develops over the years there will be more and more correlations made between genetics and behavior, and that will be scientific progress. What ethical conclusions should we draw?

For one thing, we certainly should not draw the conclusion that gay activists want to draw, namely that any "innate" condition must therefore be accepted as natural, normal, and ethically right. As Charles Krauthammer points out,<sup>285</sup> innateness has nothing to do with normality. Many diseases, for example,

---

<sup>283</sup> 253:1034-37.

<sup>284</sup> *Credenda Agenda* 5:3, p. 18. More recently, "According to a March, 2004 report provided by the National Association of Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH): 'There is no evidence that shows that homosexuality is simply 'genetic'....And none of the research claims there is. Only the press and certain researchers do, when speaking in sound bytes to the public.' [See [www.narth.com/doct/istheregene.html](http://www.narth.com/doct/istheregene.html), emphasis in the original.]" The citation is from an unsigned article, "Is There a 'Gay Gene'?" in *Chalcedon Report* 466 (Sept., 2004), 14.

<sup>285</sup> Column in *Escondido Times-Advocate*, July 25, 1993.



are genetically determined. But we don't consider Tay-Sachs or Sickle-Cell Anemia to be "normal" or desirable conditions, let alone to possess some ethical virtue. Nor do we consider alcoholism or "xxy" anti-social behavior to be normal and natural. Rather, we do all we can to fight them. Genetic discoveries, indeed, open up more possible weapons for this fight. Some have suggested, indeed, that the discovery of a "gay gene" would give us the opportunity, through abortion or genetic manipulation, of eliminating homosexuality (or at least one impulse toward homosexuality) from society altogether.<sup>286</sup>

And, of course, to say that innateness entails moral desirability is to commit a textbook example of the naturalistic fallacy.

Further, we must keep these discoveries in perspective. Not everyone who has the xxy gene becomes a criminal, and not everyone with a genetic risk factor for alcoholism actually becomes an alcoholic. Similarly, it is quite unlikely that a "gay gene," should it exist, would actually *determine* people to be homosexual. Although studies of twins do show a correlation between genetics and homosexuality, half of all twin brothers of homosexuals are heterosexual. So the data suggest something less than genetic *determinism*. Indeed, they suggest that it is possible for someone to resist patterns of behavior to which he is genetically predisposed. Genes do determine eye color, sex, blood type and so on; but patterns of behavior, although influenced by genetic make-up, do not seem to be *controlled* by it. The typical behavioral differences between males and females, for example, have a genetic basis; but (as feminists are quick to point out) that genetic basis does not exhaustively determine how we will behave in every situation. Women sometimes behave in ways more typical of men, and vice versa. Astrologers like to say "the stars impel, but they do not compel." The same would have to be said for the influence of genes over behavior.

Indeed, other sorts of influences are often more compelling than genetic inheritance. An unsigned editorial in *National Review*<sup>287</sup> points out that "the effects of childhood brutalization can restrict one's freedom far more than does a physiological preference for sweets; and many purely biological impulses pale in strength before the smoker's need of a cigarette." So if we excuse homosexuality on the basis of genetic predisposition, we should also excuse all acts resulting from environmental influence and from bad choices in the past. Clearly, however, we should deny the validity of any such excuses. We may not excuse otherwise wrong acts on the ground that they are influenced by "compulsions," hereditary or not.

Nor do we in other cases excuse acts committed on the basis of genetic predispositions. One who has a genetic propensity to alcoholism cannot *excuse* his alcoholism on that basis; nor can an xxy man excuse his criminality. These conditions do not force people to do anything contrary to their desires;

---

<sup>286</sup> That is precisely what gay activists *don't* want to hear.

<sup>287</sup> Aug. 9, 1993, p. 17.

thus they do not compromise moral freedom.<sup>288</sup> They do create moral challenges, venues for moral temptation. But that too should be seen in perspective: all of us have moral "weak spots," areas where we are especially vulnerable to the Devil's enticements. These areas of temptation have many sources; heredity among them. Others would be environment, experiences, and our own past decisions. Thus some have a particular problem with temptation to alcohol abuse; others, because of their early training, personal taste, or social attachments, are not often tempted to commit that particular sin. But these will certainly have other areas of temptation. This is true even for those who are most mature in the Christian faith: such maturity opens one to the temptation of spiritual pride. Thus the person whose special moral challenges have a genetic component is not in a totally unique situation. We all face such challenges; they are never entirely under our control. For all of us, this world is a spiritually dangerous place. Truly, "your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (I Pet. 5:8). But thanks to God's grace, we may "resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (verse 9).

Would a genetic basis for homosexuality eliminate the element of "choice?" Certainly not. A person with a genetic propensity for alcoholism still makes a choice when he decides to take a drink, and then another, and then another. Same with an xyy male who decides to punch somebody in the nose. If we assume the existence of a genetic propensity for homosexuality, it is true as we said that those with that makeup face greater temptation in this area than others. But those who succumb to the temptation do choose to do so, as do all of us when we succumb to our own besetting temptations. Homosexuals certainly choose not to remain celibate, and they choose to have sexual relations. They are not forced to do this by their genes or by anything contrary to their own desires.

Is it possible for a homosexual to repent of his sin and, by God's grace, to become heterosexual? Christian ministries to homosexuals claim that this is possible and that it has happened, though they admit that this is a particularly difficult sin to deal with. Sexual orientation is something that goes very deeply into human personality, and we have an instinct to keep it relatively private. That instinct is a good one, but it does make counseling in this area especially difficult. Gay activists claim that transformation of sexual orientation is impossible, and they dispute alleged "ex-gay" testimonies. Indeed, some people who have professed deliverance from homosexuality have later returned to homosexual relationships. And many "ex-gays" have candidly admitted that they continue to experience homosexual attraction, attraction which they now perceive as a moral and spiritual challenge. Pro-gay advocates argue that this lingering homosexual temptation proves that homosexuality is ineradicable.

---

<sup>288</sup> I am assuming here the view of free will developed in DG, 119-159.

I believe on faith that God can deliver homosexuals (1 Cor. 6:9-11), because Scripture teaches that His grace can deliver his people from all sin.<sup>289</sup> I haven't done first-hand research on the results of various ministries to homosexuals. It would certainly not surprise me to learn that many people who struggle by God's grace to overcome their homosexuality still experience homosexual temptations. People who have been addicted to alcohol often face continuing temptations in this area long after they have stopped drinking to excess. Similarly those who have overcome the impulses of hot tempers, drugs, or heterosexual promiscuity. If that were true in regard to repentant homosexuals, it would not cast the slightest doubt on the power of God's grace to heal such people. Recurrent temptation is a problem for all of us, and will be until glory. One may not judge the fruits of Christian ministries on a perfectionist criterion, namely the assumption that deliverance from sin must remove all temptation toward that sin in this life.

The bottom line, however, is that the genetic element in sin does not excuse it. To see that, it is important to put the issue into an even wider perspective. Christianity forces us again and again to widen our viewpoint, for it forces us to see everything from the perspective of a transcendent God and from the standpoint of eternity. Such perspective helps us to see our trials as "light and momentary" (II Cor. 4:17) and our sins as greater than we normally admit. From a biblical perspective, the difficult fact is that in one sense *all sin is inherited*. From Adam comes both our sin and our misery. We are guilty of Adam's transgression, and through Adam we ourselves inherit sinful natures. If a genetic predisposition excuses sodomy, then our inheritance from Adam excuses all sin! But that is clearly not the case.<sup>290</sup>

Is that fair? Well, here we resort to the usual apologetic defenses of the doctrine of original sin: Adam contained all the (genetic!) potentialities of all of us, and lived in a perfect environment save one source of temptation. None of us could or would have done any better. And, American individualism to the contrary notwithstanding, the human race *is* one in important senses, and God is right to judge it as a single entity. The final analysis, of course, is that we are His creations. He defines what is "fair," and he has the right to do as he pleases with the work of his hands.

In this broad context, however, the argument that one sin should be declared normal on the basis of a genetic component appears entirely self-serving, and must be dismissed as invalid.

---

<sup>289</sup> John Jefferson Davis asks, "If Masters and Johnson can achieve a 66 percent success rate in dealing with homosexuals with purely secular techniques, can we doubt that with the power of God's Holy Spirit even more dramatic rates of transformation are possible?" *Evangelical Ethics* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 132.

<sup>290</sup> Of course, Reformed theology construes our relationship to Adam as representative, rather than *merely* genetic, and that is important. But Adam represents all who are descended from him "by natural generation;" so there is also an inevitable genetic element in human sin.

## 2. Living With Our Limitations

Another area of current discussion related to "living with ourselves" is the question of accepting our limitations. The Bible teaches that we have two outstanding sources of weakness: finitude and sin. In the previous section we explored one aspect of human sinfulness. In this, we will explore a dimension of our finitude.

More and more, various groups within society are calling upon governments to remedy the disadvantages that they have relative to other groups. Thus there are today various "rights" movements, demanding remedies against real and alleged oppression based upon race, culture, sex, handicap, sexual orientation and many other things, such as unusual height or weight. I shall deal with racism, sexism and other such issues elsewhere. Homosexuality was discussed above and will be treated again in other connections.

For the present, let me use as an example the movement to accommodate persons with disabilities.<sup>291</sup> People with disabilities certainly have a special claim on Christian compassion. God tells Israel, "You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:14, cf. Deut. 27:18). Jesus showed his qualifications to be the Messiah by fulfilling Isa. 35:4-6,

Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup> then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert...

He cited this verse to show John the Baptist that he was indeed the one who was to come (Matt. 11:4-6). Jesus restores the disabled as a particularly vivid image of redemption from sin. For indeed in our moral and spiritual lives we are all disabled, and we need Jesus as our healer (Mark 2:17).<sup>292</sup>

This fact creates a major responsibility for the church, to be a society that welcomes, values, and assists the disabled. Far too often, Christians have been unwilling to take the trouble to understand the needs of the disabled and then to treat them as valued and gifted members of Jesus' body.

---

<sup>291</sup> I know; you're supposed to say "challenges" or "different abilities" instead of "disabilities." I prefer the politically incorrect, but more honest and descriptive language. And I am quite ready to use it of my own present and future disabilities! Should I lose my sight, I would not want to be patronized by being called "perceptually challenged."

<sup>292</sup> Thanks to my friend Michael S. Beates, who makes this point powerfully in his Doctor of Ministry dissertation, *Wholeness from Brokenness: Disability as a Model of the Transforming Power of the Gospel* (Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando campus, 2003).

Perhaps in part because of the church's failure, government has stepped in to remedy the needs of disabled people. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992 is a bold government plan to remove many types of impediments to the handicapped, mandating accommodations of various sorts to disabled employees, students, customers. Since that time, most new buildings have become wheelchair accessible and many new employment opportunities have opened up.

Like most legislation, this has produced problems for some. Conservatives have objected to a number of provisions and judicial applications of the act. Llewellyn H. Rockwell<sup>293</sup> argued that the act had a crippling (!) effect upon American business and, indeed, upon the national economy. He lists a number of individual absurdities like wheelchairs at third base forced upon the Little League, the use of Braille at automated drive-in (!) bank tellers, the forced rehiring of a blind fireman, accommodation for a man who failed his electrician certification test (because he was "no good at taking tests"), the forced rehiring of a postal worker fired for alcoholism. But the broader picture is that "The number of complaints, however, will never measure the degree to which the act is radically changing American business. The threat of a complaint is as effective as the complaint itself. The hundreds of pages in the *Federal Register* spelling what the ADA is supposed to mean don't come close to exhausting the possibilities."<sup>294</sup>

My own impression, a decade after the act and after the Rockwell article, is that the ADA has done much more good than harm. Knowing what I know now, if I had had the opportunity to vote on the ADA in 1992, (up or down, with no opportunity for amendment) I would have voted for it.

But we do need to look at this matter in broader perspective. We all have different levels of abilities in different areas of life, which means that each of us is relatively disabled in some way in comparison with others. Some kinds of disablement are very visible: people who must use wheelchairs, people who are treated badly because of their skin color or gender. But less visible kinds of "oppression" can be even more significant in individual cases. Consider the boy who is poor at athletics and therefore finds it harder than most people to achieve his romantic and vocational goals. Consider the biologist whose Christian convictions keep him from achieving deserved prominence in his field. Consider the worker who loses his job because his employer must downsize in order to afford compliance with the ADA. Consider the people who are forced into poverty because of a recession prolonged by excessive government regulations on business. It would be utopian in the extreme to think that all of these complaints can be remedied by government edict.

---

<sup>293</sup> "Wheelchairs at Third Base," *National Review* (July 7, 1993), pp. 47-50.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Franklin Roosevelt was confined to a wheelchair by polio, long before anyone thought of the concept of "disability rights." There were many things he could not do that others could. Yet he was elected president of the United States for four terms, something that no one else has ever accomplished. People with disabilities also have abilities; indeed, their advocates keep reminding us of that, and rightfully so. A person with a visible handicap is not necessarily disabled in the more profound sense, i.e. less able than others to achieve his goals. The Franklin Roosevelts of this world do not need government-mandated advantages in order to succeed. And many of the "abled" do find it hard to succeed without special help.

Therefore, laws like the ADA cannot succeed in creating ultimate equality. They give special help to many who don't need it and penalize people who, considered on an objective basis, *do* need help. This is, of course, the nature of government. It cannot make fine distinctions among individuals to determine absolutely who needs help and who doesn't. It can only mandate help to certain broad, visible groups. And when it does so, it inevitably creates injustice against those who are forced to sacrifice in order to help those whom the law defines as victims. And the more it tries to make finer and finer distinctions of this sort, the more injustice it brings about. The rationalist impulse, trying to produce perfect justice by fiat, almost necessarily increases injustice.

The church can do better, for the local church can look at each individual situation to see what a person's needs are and the resources he has for meeting those needs; and it can do this with the insight that God's word provides. Ultimately, however, only God can see the heart, and so only God can say definitively who is disabled and how, and who needs what.

As I shall indicate later, I do not absolutely oppose all government involvement in welfare. Governments are the ruling bodies of our extended family in Adam.<sup>295</sup> But I do believe that government should give families and churches the first opportunity to meet diaconal needs. And, when government steps in, it should do so with a full understanding of its own disabilities, particularly its own inability to micro-manage moral inequities. Government should enter the scene only when the families, churches, and other private agencies have shown themselves clearly unwilling or incompetent to do so. And in this enterprise, local government should have priority, then regional/state, then federal; for the more local a government is, the better position it is in to assess true need.

But the larger perspective is this: Scripture calls us to be content, not to covet the advantages of others. See Ex. 20:17, Luke 3:14, Phil. 4:11, I Tim. 6:6-8, Heb. 13:15, III John 10. The early Christians, especially the apostles, were the most disadvantaged of human beings, save Jesus. Yet, following the path of

---

<sup>295</sup> See my essay, "Toward a Theology of the State," *Westminster Theological Journal* 51.2 (Fall, 1989), 199-226.

the cross, they did not try to force others to "equalize" those disadvantages. They accepted their disadvantages as part of their ethical situation and sought to live in that situation so as to please Christ. New Testament advice to citizens, slaves, wives and children is entirely contrary to the rights-rhetoric of modern politics; see Rom. 13, 1 Cor. 9, Eph. 5:22-6:9, Col. 3:18-4:1, I Pet. 2:13-3:22. Of course, the Old Testament prophets do teach us to fight against oppression. But our main weapon in this battle is the word of God. We are not to imagine that all problems can be solved by an omniscient, all-benevolent state. Here the first commandment, as well as the tenth, becomes relevant.

### **Our Natural Environment**

The natural environment will claim our attention under the Sixth Commandment, but it is appropriate here to make some basic observations.

1. *Human beings are part of nature.* Our very creatureliness is something we have in common with nature, rather than with God. Further, God made us from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7) and dependent on the ground for our continued life (Gen. 1:29, 2:8-9, 15-17, 3:1-19). Therefore, there are many obvious similarities and analogies between human and animal life. And we must protect plant and animal life, and their habitats, if we are to protect our own survival and that of our descendants.

2. *Human beings are lords of nature.* We are, nevertheless, radically different from other forms of life in important ways. Our creation comes from a special consultation of the divine council (Gen. 1:26). We are special creations, not the products of evolution (Gen. 2:7, 21-23). We are the very image of God (Gen. 1:26-28). Therefore God has given us vassal lordship over the earth, to fill, subdue, and have dominion over it (Gen. 1:26-28, 2:19-20).

3. *Our fall brought a curse on the natural world.* In Gen. 3:17-19, God declares that the earth now will resist our attempts at dominion. Now the earth is a source of toil and weariness. God's declaration that all created things are good (Gen. 1:31) remains true even after the fall (1 Cor. 10:26, 1 Tim. 4:4). But human lust finds in things a source of temptation, as Eve found temptation in the forbidden fruit. And events in the natural world serve as means of divine judgment and chastening, as well as deliverance.

4. *God uses nature in the history of redemption.* God uses things in creation as signs of his redemptive activity, such as the rainbow (Gen. 9:13) and the star of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:2). Signs will also anticipate Jesus' return and the final judgment (Matt. 24:29-30). Though salvation itself is not a natural event, nature collaborates with God's redemptive purposes. Creation itself waits anxiously for the consummation (Rom. 8:19-23). So events in nature are not only

occasions of temptation, but also of the believer's growth and victory. They work ultimately toward the accomplishment of God's purposes (Rom. 8:28). The consummation itself is, not only a new heavens, but a new earth, 2 Pet. 3:13, Rev. 21:1. And in that new world dwells righteousness.

5. *God calls us to take account of nature in our moral decisions.* From the beginning, God expected Adam to apply God's word to his natural environment. The cultural mandate challenged him to determine how every object could be used to subdue and fill the earth to God's glory. Similarly with the command to work and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15), to name the animals (2:19-20), and to abstain from the forbidden fruit (2:17). God still calls us to replenish and subdue the earth, and to deal with each part of creation in a way that honors God.

Such is the biblical mandate for ecological responsibility. God calls his people to have dominion over the earth, but that does not mean to exploit or destroy. As God asked Adam to "work" and "keep" the Garden, so we are to work and keep the earth.<sup>296</sup> As God commanded Israel to give rest to the land (Lev. 25:4), so he calls us to maintain its vitality. And we are to be kind to animals as well (Deut. 5:14, 25:4).

---

<sup>296</sup> "Work" and "keep" are used elsewhere for priestly functions. These priestly connotations are appropriate in Gen. 2:15, given that Eden is, as I said earlier, a sanctuary of God. "Keep" (*shamar*) can mean to guard the sanctuary against intruders. But, of course, given in the context of gardening (and the command about the fruit in verses 16-17), these terms serve to make man's care of the earth part of his priestly responsibility to God.



## Chapter 16: Redemptive History

The situational perspective deals with our ethical environment, which includes everything. By “everything” in this context, I mean God himself, and the whole course of nature and history which he directs by his divine plan, his creation, and providence. In the previous chapter, I listed the elements of nature and history: God, the angels, human society, our individual make-up, and the natural world. That discussion was ontological in the sense that it focused on the realities (divine and human, persons and things) that participate in nature and history, rather than on the *events* of nature and history. But of course our ethical situation is constituted by events, not only by persons and things.

Events occur in the course of nature, which I defined in Chapter 14 as “the general workings of the world perceived by our senses and reason and described by the physical sciences.” A subdivision of nature is history, “the events of human existence.” And an important subdivision of history is redemptive history, “the story of creation, fall, and redemption.” In this book I shall not try to describe the ethical significance of natural events in general. Although I will make allusion to natural history at appropriate times, the general subject exceeds my competence and the plan of this volume. But we must look more carefully at human history as the Bible describes it. And according to Scripture the most important events of human history are those I have described as redemptive history. We must make our ethical decisions recognizing that the world is created, fallen, and redeemed by Christ, and understanding the ethical implications of those facts.

### Narrative

I have mentioned that the normative perspective presents us with a Christian “command ethic,” the situational a “narrative ethic,” and the existential a “virtue ethic.” Our concern now is narrative, the story of our life with God. The Bible contains many kinds of literature as we have seen, but one of its most important genres is narrative. The narrative tells us what God has done to secure the salvation of his fallen creatures. Centrally, that narrative presents Christ and tells us what he has done for us. So it defines the content of faith and gives assurance. It also defines our ethic. Our ethic is to respond appropriately to that story, to the one who has redeemed us.

The narrative genre has many advantages for preachers, teachers, or anyone interested in communicating ethical content. People seem to enjoy listening to stories, rather than listening to commands or even descriptions of virtues. So we can understand why so much of the Bible is in narrative form. Jesus’ own teaching is especially full of stories, many of them parables. We recall how God used Nathan’s parable of the ewe lamb (2 Sam. 12:1-7) to

convict David of sin. Narrative has a way of overtaking the listener by surprise, of involving him in the story.

Narrative is especially important in communicating *gospel*. Gospel is good news, and therefore a narrative of what God has done for us in Christ. In 1 Cor. 15:1-11, Paul enumerated the elements of the gospel as a series of events, as a narrative. We might imagine, therefore, that narrative corresponds to gospel, and command to law. As I indicated in Chapter 12, however, Scripture does not distinguish gospel and law with any rigid sharpness. Law, among other things, tells us to believe in Jesus; and gospel narrates how the king came into the world to re-impose his law upon rebellious creatures.

In one sense, the narrative of creation, fall, and redemption includes the whole Bible. No part of Scripture is outside the story. Psalms and Proverbs are not narrative in form, but they add to the narrative, telling us how God instructed his people Israel in piety and wisdom. To learn the whole story, we need the whole Bible. Without Psalms and Proverbs, we would not have the complete narrative. So the narrative is the whole Bible, and in that sense the whole Bible is narrative.

But it is also true to say that the whole Bible is divine command, for every passage is an authoritative word from God telling us what we must believe and/or do. So narrative and command (gospel and law, if you will) are complementary perspectives on the whole Bible. And the same may be said about the existential perspective, that the whole Bible is virtue description, showing us the virtues of God himself, Father, Son, and Spirit, and of those who belong to him by grace.

So narrative is important, but not all-important. It is an important perspective on the whole Bible, but it is not the only perspective. The narrative is the whole Bible, and the whole Bible is narrative, but not to the exclusion of commands and virtues.

It is therefore important to note that though Psalms and Proverbs, for example, are aspects of narrative in a larger sense, they do not belong to the narrative genre. They have their own purposes, which are not merely to narrate events (although the poetry of the Psalms often does narrate redemptive history), but to inform the praises and the wisdom of God's people.

### **The Redemptive Story**

The story of the Bible is of God coming to be with his people as their Lord, in his control, authority, and presence. After creation and fall, the story is about redemption, and thus about Jesus.<sup>297</sup>

Before the Fall, Adam lived in God's garden-sanctuary, tending and guarding it as God's priest. God was Adam's friend as well as his Lord. God spoke to Adam and Eve, defining their nature and task as human beings (Gen. 1:28) and granting them the blessings of the garden (1:29-31). He also gave to Adam the terms of a crucial test of covenant fellowship (2:15-17) and, through Eve's creation and the institution of marriage, constituted the human community (Gen. 2:18-25).

After the Fall, God again came to be with Adam and Eve, this time in judgment, but also, surprisingly, with blessing. He curses the Satan-serpent, Eve, and Adam, in the areas most appropriate to each. The serpent, who would exalt himself above God, will go on his belly and eat dust, awaiting his final destruction by the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:14-15). The woman will have pain in childbearing, and the rule of her husband will be frustrating to her (verse 16).<sup>298</sup> The man also will labor in pain, as the ground produces thorns and thistles. He will raise crops by the sweat of his face, looking toward his return to the ground from which he came (verses 17-19). Now human death enters the picture. But, we wonder, in terms of Gen. 2:17, why doesn't God execute the sentence of death immediately?

The very postponement of death is God's redemptive grace. And there is yet more grace in the fall's aftermath. The curse on Satan is blessing to humanity: the promised seed will destroy him and will thus rid the world of evil. And the curse on the woman also hides a blessing. She is not to die immediately, but will continue to live and have children, one of whom will redeem the race. Similarly, the curse on the man's labor is also mixed with God's grace. His toil, though painful, will keep the human race alive until the coming of the deliverer.

Immediately, then, the narrative focuses on God's grace through the coming Messiah. Christ, even at the beginning, is the focus of the story. Human ethical life, then, is a response to God's grace that looks forward to final deliverance. Judgment occurs as well, in God's limitation of human life (Gen. 6:3), in the great flood (Chapters 6-9), and in the confusion of languages at Babel (11:1-9). These judgments indicate to believers that God will not be mocked, that his standards will prevail. Thus law and grace combine to guide the human race in the paths of God.

---

<sup>297</sup> I know of no better summary of the story than Edmund Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988). Clowney's book shows, often in very striking ways, how Christ is the central subject of the Old Testament narrative.

<sup>298</sup> I agree with Susan T. Foh that the "desire" Eve had for her husband was a desire to dominate him, a desire destined to be frustrated. See her *Women and the Word of God* (NP: P&R, 1980).

In the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, God comes to dwell with his chosen people (Gen. 26:3, 24, 28:15, 31:3, Ex. 3:12, 4:12, Deut. 31:8, 23, Josh. 1:5), anticipating the coming of Jesus, Immanuel, God with us (Isa. 7:14). In these covenants, the presence of the Lord governs all human life. God is the Holy one, who has called the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from among all the nations of the earth, to be his holy people. They are to be holy, because he is holy (Ex. 19:6, Lev. 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:7, 26, 21:8, 1 Pet. 1:16). So they are to live their lives as those who live on holy ground, who dwell in the closest proximity to God.

In one sense, to live in such fellowship with God is a wonderful thing. But that presence of God is also threatening. When God meets with Israel at Mt. Sinai, death awaits any human being or beast that touched the mountain (Ex. 19:12-13). When God comes to dwell in the holiest part of the tabernacle and temple, many barriers stand between the believer and that place. Death looms for those who violate the rules of approach.

But this fearsome God is also the savior, the deliverer. Israel is to keep the law because of redemption, for the Decalogue begins, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). And in the republication of the Decalogue in Deut. 5, the Lord commands Israel to give rest to her households, because "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (verse 15).

Through the Old Testament, God asks Israel to obey him, motivating them by his past deliverances and blessings. The prophecy of Isaiah begins with God lamenting that the children he has "reared and brought up" have rebelled against him (Isa. 1:2). He also mentions past judgments: For her sin, God has struck Israel down (verse 5), so Israel should know better than to defy the Lord. The judgments will cease if and when Israel repents (verses 18-20), for God is ready to forgive those who are willing to obey him.

He also motivates their obedience by promises of future blessing (2:1-5) and judgment (2:12-22). He is the Lord of history, and he controls the fortunes of Israel. At the end, the Lord will be glorious, and his people holy (4:2-6). That movement of history is certain, and those who wish to share in that glory must turn back to God. So the situation, past, present, and future, motivates obedience.

Between the Old Testament and the final judgment, however, comes Jesus. The Old Testament foreshadows his work, in the sacrificial system, in the lives of prophets, priests, and kings, and in specific prophecies of his coming. The Scriptures bear witness of him (John 5:39; cf. Luke 24:27, 44). Those who repent of sin and look to God in faith are at the same time looking forward to the

Messiah. It is the prospect of his coming that encourages them to trust and obey the Lord, despite apparent defeats to his purposes.

When Jesus comes to accomplish our redemption from sin through his death and resurrection, these events give his people a fresh motivation for godly behavior (John 13:34, Rom. 6:1-23, 13:11-12, 1 Cor. 6:20, 10:11, 15:58, Eph. 4:1-5, 25, 32, 5:25-33, Phil. 2:1-11, Col. 3:1-3, Heb. 12:1-28, 1 Pet. 2:1-3, 4:1-6, 1 John 3:16).<sup>299</sup> Jesus has loved us beyond measure by dying for our sins, and the only appropriate response is for us to love him and one another. Since he has died for our sins, and since we died with him to sin (Rom. 6), we should live as those who are alive to righteousness. Since we have been raised with him to newness of life, we should seek the things that are above (Col. 3:1-3).

So, as biblical theology emphasizes, in the New Testament imperatives flow from indicatives. Obligations follow from the narrative, from the story. This is not a naturalistic fallacy, because as I said in Chapters 5 and 9, everything that God is and does is ethically normative. And, of course, it is obvious that when a situation changes, behavior must change. On a warm day, it may be appropriate to wear short pants; not so when the temperature is ten below zero. When Jesus has died for our sins and has risen again, our only appropriate response is to love him. And if we love him, we will keep his commandments. Those who are convinced that Jesus has saved them will be powerfully moved to love and serve him. This fact underlies the structure of the Heidelberg Catechism, which moves from guilt, to grace, to gratitude. In the view of the Catechism, we keep the law out of gratitude, in response to grace.

To say this is not to contradict what I said earlier under the normative perspective. The simple fact that God commands X is sufficient ground for me to do X. So far as sheer obligation is concerned, people should obey God whether they are redeemed or not. Even Satan and the fallen angels are under that obligation. Redemption adds a substantial motivation for obedience, but it does not create the obligation. Further, even when we are serving Christ in response to his redemptive work, we need to know what he wants us to do. And so we continue to need the law to tell us what kind of behavior is appropriate to redeemed people. If we love him in response to his love, we will keep his commandments; but to do that we need to know what his commandments are.

## **The Two Ages**

Biblical theology, which focuses on the history of redemption, has emphasized the “two-age” structure of the New Testament. In Matt. 12:32, Jesus speaks of a sin that will not be forgiven “either in this age or in the age to come.”

---

<sup>299</sup> See the discussion in Chapter 3 on the History of Redemption as one of the Bible’s “reasons to do good works.”

Paul also refers to these two ages in Eph. 1:21. The first of the two ages is “this age” (*ho aion houtos*), the period of time in which we live, a period that is to end at the second coming of Christ and the final judgment (Matt. 13:39-40, 49, 24:3, 28:20). This is the age in which sin and the curse continue in the earth, before God’s final victory. So Scripture describes this age in ethical terms. It is “the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) from which Christ’s redemption delivers us.

Nonbelievers are caught up in the affairs of “this age,” unwilling to be bothered by the demands and promises of God. Jesus speaks of “the sons of this age” (Luke 20:34), Paul of “the debater of this age” (1 Cor. 1:20), the “rulers of this age” (1 Cor. 2:8), and the “wise in this age” (1 Cor. 3:18).

Some Christians, to be sure, are “rich in this present age” (1 Tim. 6:17), that is, that they have acquired things that are valued by this age. That is not necessarily sinful, but Timothy must give them a special charge “not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” So all believers must take heed “to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Tit. 2:12). The present age, even to believers, is a source of temptation.

The “age to come,” however, is the age of fulfillment. Jesus contrasts the “sons of this age” (Luke 20:34) with “those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead” (following verse). In the understanding of those Jews who believed in resurrection, “that age” follows our death and God’s final judgment. In “the age to come,” God’s people have “eternal life” (Mark 10:30).

But the remarkable thing about New Testament teaching, in contrast with the Jewish conception, is that in one sense the “age to come” has already appeared in Christ. Believers in Christ are those “on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). The closing of the holy places in the temple to worshipers is symbolic of the present age, so that when the veil is torn and we enter boldly into God’s presence through Christ, another age has begun (Heb. 9:8-9). Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26). For believers, then, the “coming age” has begun in Christ. He has dealt with sin once for all.

The Resurrection of Jesus is the crucial sign that the “last days” are here. The Pharisees associated the last days with the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked. So Jesus associates that time with resurrection in John 6:39-40, 44, 54. But when the grieving Martha says that her brother Lazarus “shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (John 11:24), Jesus replies, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (verses 25-26). Then he proceeds to raise Lazarus from the dead, indicating that the life-giving power of the age to come is present in himself. So in Luke 17:21 Jesus tells the

Pharisees that the kingdom is already in their midst, certainly referring to himself. Wherever Jesus is, there is the age to come.

After Jesus himself has risen, and signs of the Spirit's presence abound (sent from the throne of Christ) Peter proclaims that the Joel's prophecy of the "last days" has been fulfilled (Acts 2:17). The writer to the Hebrews proclaims in the past tense that "in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son" (1:2).

The same conclusion follows from New Testament teaching on the kingdom of God. Geerhardus Vos defines the kingdom as follows:

To him (Jesus), the kingdom exists there, where not merely God is supreme, for that is true at all times and under all circumstances, but where God supernaturally carries through his supremacy against all opposing powers and brings man to the willing recognition of the same.<sup>300</sup>

The kingdom of God, long awaited, has come in Christ (Matt. 3:2, 4:17, 12:28). The gospel is the gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 4:23, 9:35, 10:7), the Sermon on the Mount is the ethic of the kingdom (Matt. 5:3, 10, 19, 20, 6:33), the Lord's Prayer the prayer of the kingdom (6:10), the parables the mysteries of the kingdom (Matt. 13:11). The church has the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19). The kingdom of God has come. Christ the king has been raised to God's right hand, where he has authority over all things (Matt. 28:18).

Yet there are also some biblical expectations for the last days and the kingdom that are still unfulfilled. The bodily resurrection of the just and unjust has not taken place. The return of Christ and the final judgment remain future. The saints pray "thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10) regarding the kingdom as future. Sin and the curse continue on the earth. Indeed, these "last days" are "times of difficulty" (2 Tim. 3:1; cf. 2 Pet. 3:3). It is a time in which false teaching abounds, in which unscrupulous people try to undermine the doctrine and holiness of God's people.

So the biblical data is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the last days are here in Christ. On the other hand, much remains future. The age to come is present, the present age lingers. From Jesus' ministry until his return, the two ages exist simultaneously. Our present existence is, as Vos put it, "semi-eschatological."

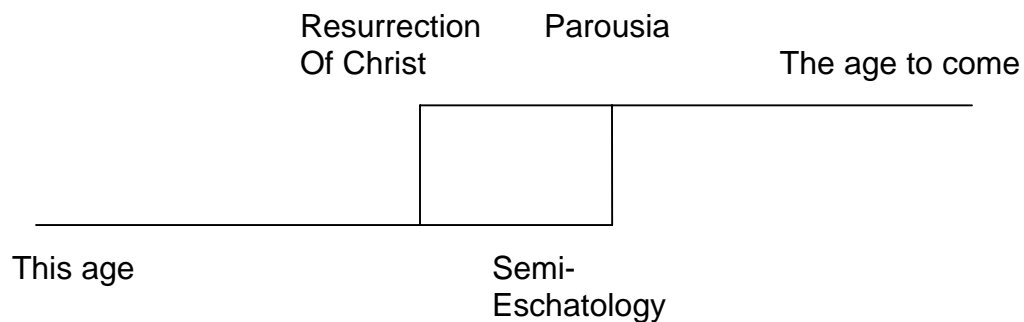
Below is Vos's diagram of the two ages.<sup>301</sup> "This age" runs from the fall of Adam to the return of Christ (parousia). "The age to come" runs from the

---

<sup>300</sup> Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 50.

<sup>301</sup> Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1986), 38. [P&R Editors: Can you scan this image in here from the book, or do this up more artistically? I'd like a better version. At least draw

Resurrection of Christ through all eternity. During the period between the Resurrection and the Parousia, the two ages exist side-by-side.



It is important for us to understand the dynamic and the tension of the semi-eschatological age in which we live. Our salvation is complete in Christ, but sin will not be destroyed until his return. Or, as biblical theologians often put it, salvation is “already,” but also “not yet.” Christ has all authority, but Satan still has some power. We can draw confidently on the power and love of God, yet there are perils in the way. We have died to sin and have been raised to righteousness in Christ (Rom. 6), and yet we must “Put to death... what is earthly in you” (Col. 3:5). The battle is won, but there is much mopping-up to be done.<sup>302</sup>

This historical paradox is a current form of the larger paradox of the relation of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God has saved us through Christ, by his own sovereign power. We must rely on him for all our provision. But this fact does not allow us to be passive. There is a battle to be fought (Eph. 6:10-20), a race to be run (1 Cor. 9:24-27). We are not to “let go and let God.” Rather, as Paul says, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). God’s sovereign action does not discourage, but rather motivates us to fight the spiritual battle.

---

arrows or something from “Resurrection” and “Parousia” to the appropriate points in the diagram.—JF]

<sup>302</sup> I believe that it was Oscar Cullmann who used World War II language to illustrate this paradox: Christ’s atonement and resurrection are like D-Day, his return and the final judgment V-Day. But of course the resurrection of Jesus guarantees its final outcome in a way that D-Day could not.



## Ethics and the Millennium

Having discussed the implications of semi-eschatology for the Christian life, let us now look at eschatology proper, that consummation of history that is still future, consisting of the return of Christ, the final judgment, and the eternal state.

I will not get into detailed discussions here about millennial positions and the order of events in the last days, but I will look briefly to see what ethical implications there may be to the three main millennial theories. These are, premillennialism, the view that the return of Christ precedes the thousand years of peace mentioned in Rev. 20, postmillennialism, traditionally the view that the return of Christ follows that period, and amillennialism, the view that this period is a symbol for the present age. In more recent discussion, postmillennialists (henceforth, "postmils," and similarly for the others) and amils have come to agree that the thousand years are a symbol of the present age. The two viewpoints differ, however, as to the degree to which Christianity becomes culturally and politically dominant during that period, postmils expecting much cultural success and amils expecting little. Amils typically think that the gospel will be fruitful spiritually, but not culturally or politically.

The conventional wisdom, then, is that premils and amils tend to be pessimistic about influencing society in biblical directions, while postmils tend to be optimistic. Of course I have known some optimistic premils and amils, and some pessimistic postmils. Optimist and pessimism seem to me to have more to do with one's personality and spiritual maturity than with his theology of the end times. And there are some types of postmillennialism which are actually conducive to pessimism. One postmillennialist thinks that Western civilization is doomed, at least in the near future; his optimism is for the long term only. But how long are these "terms?"

The movement in the 1970s and '80s toward greater Christian involvement in social issues was spearheaded, not by Reformed amils and postmils, but by Arminian premils like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. This is an embarrassment for us Reformed people, who like to think that we have a corner on Christian political thought and action, and tend to look down our noses at "fundamentalists" for their lack of a "full-orbed Christian world-and-life view." Of course, it may be argued that fundamentalists like Falwell and Robertson were influenced, maybe at third or fourth hand, by Reformed people like Rousas J. Rushdoony, Gary North, and Francis Schaeffer. But it was the Evangelical premils who took the lead in the actual movements for social change, and we should give them credit. Herein is another reason why the church should re-examine its divisions.

Full implementation of Christianity in our time requires the gifts given to all Christian traditions.<sup>303</sup>

Therefore, a premil commitment does not destroy all motivation to Christian social action, though perhaps one might still argue that from a strictly logical (as opposed to emotional or empirical) standpoint postmillennialism *ought* to be a greater encouragement to such action. Thus would I resolve the argument between North, who thinks one must be postmillennial to be a theonomist, and Bahnsen, who thinks postmillennialism is an advantage to a theonomist but not an absolute necessity.

My own eschatology? Through my career I have avoided the millennial question like the plague, thinking that Scripture does not clearly address it. Needless to say, I have never been asked to teach a course in eschatology. But let me try a "perspectival" approach, suggesting that all three views have some of the truth. I agree with the amils and premils that this age is an age of suffering and persecution for God's people (2 Tim. 3:12). I also agree with the postmils that in the *long* run this age can be seen as an age of Christian triumph, not only in narrowly "spiritual" matters, but in the church's social influence as well. That is in fact what we see in history: believers are always persecuted in some measure; but eventually Christianity triumphs and comes to profoundly influence the institutions of the societies it touches. To limit the church's triumph to a narrowly "spiritual" realm is, as postmils emphasize, Platonic rather than Scriptural. When God saves a person, that person brings his regenerate values into every area of life (1 Cor. 10:31).<sup>304</sup>

Ethically, this approach saves us from premature triumphalism and from undue pessimism and frustration. Suffering comes first, then glory; but the blood of the martyrs is the seed of a great church. And as we look back over two thousand years of Christian history, it is wonderful to see how divine providence, slowly, but surely, brings triumph out of dark circumstances. The church follows the path of the cross, and it shares in the glory of the cross. Here is another form of the paradox of the already and the not-yet.

The troubles of Christianity in our own time are not, in my opinion, the worst troubles the church has experienced. The Roman persecutions, the barbarian invasions of Europe, the spiritual darkness preceding the Reformation and the religious wars following it, the secularist "Enlightenment" of the eighteenth century, the totalitarian persecutions of Christians in the early twentieth century were all more difficult challenges, in some respects, than we face today in modern Western civilization. But the church's persecutors are now obscured in historical dust, while the Christian church continues by God's grace as a powerful witness to Christ's Lordship and salvation. The troubles we face today, including the attacks of militant Islam, will be similarly dispatched. In God

<sup>303</sup> See my *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), available at [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org).

<sup>304</sup> Recall our discussion of the comprehensiveness of Scripture in Chapter 10.

we trust, and in Him we are confident for the future. So I lean toward a short-term amillennialism and a long-term postmillennialism.

Now: can I say anything in favor of premillennialism specifically? Sure, why not? I believe that Jesus is coming visibly to earth to judge the living and the dead, and that that judgment just might take a thousand years!<sup>305</sup> But I do not base that assertion on Revelation 20.

### **Ethics and Eschatology in Scripture**

Scripture, as I pointed out, has little to say about the millennium and its supposed ethical implications. But it does say much about the ethical implications of the return of Christ and the final judgment. Indeed, Scripture's main use of these doctrines is ethical. It does not teach us about Jesus' return primarily to stimulate us to draw up charts, to determine the precise order of events in the last day, but to show us how to live. It is remarkable that almost<sup>306</sup> every text about the return of Jesus has an ethical thrust.

These ethical applications are of several different kinds:

1. Since this age is to end and the things of this world are to be dissolved, the Christian ought to have a set of priorities radically different from those who belong to "this age." So Peter says,

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.<sup>11</sup> Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness,<sup>12</sup> waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!<sup>13</sup> But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Pet. 3:10-13)

It is not appropriate to set our hearts on things that are doomed to be burnt up. Holiness and righteousness, however, last forever, and are therefore worth pursuing.

---

<sup>305</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, a premillennialist, taught, I'm told, that the millennium is essentially a thousand year judgment.

<sup>306</sup> I insert this term as a scholarly caution. I don't actually know of any exceptions. Of course, if I am right in my larger thesis, that *all* Scripture is given for ethical purposes (2 Tim. 3:16-17), then this narrower thesis follows as an implication.

2. As Christians, we claim to eagerly await the return of Christ, praying “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). As we saw above, Peter calls us to “wait for” and “hasten”<sup>307</sup> the coming of Christ. But so often we belie our eagerness by our preoccupation with this age. To authenticate our eagerness, we need to live “lives of holiness and godliness” (2 Pet. 3:12). John tells us that when Jesus appears, “we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The parousia will enable us much better to image the holiness of Jesus. If we are really eager to see Jesus, then, we should want to anticipate that new holiness as much as possible in this sinful age. So anyone with this hope “purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).

3. Since the Resurrection of Christ has established the new age<sup>308</sup> of the kingdom of God, we are confident that our labors for Jesus will not be in vain, but will inevitably prevail. Paul says, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

4. We also look to the parousia as our deliverance from tribulation, and therefore as a source of hope for Christians undergoing persecution (Luke 21:28).

5. Since we know that Christ is coming, but we do not know the day or the hour, we must always be ready to meet him. That means being up and about his business (Matt. 24:44-51, 1 Thess. 5:1-10, 1 Pet. 1:7, 2 Pet. 3:14).

6. We also look forward to receiving our rewards on the last day. God promises rewards to his people, and they receive those rewards when Jesus returns. That promise serves as an additional motivation (Ps. 19:11, Matt. 5:12, 46, 6:1-6, 10:41-42, Rom. 14:10, 1 Cor. 3:8-15, 9:17-25, 2 Cor. 5:10, Eph. 6:7-8, Col. 3:23-25, 2 Tim. 4:8, 1 Pet. 5:4, James 1:12, 2 John 8, Rev. 11:18).

I confess I was surprised by the number of times Scripture uses rewards to motivate obedience. Like many of us, I tend toward the Kantian notion that we should simply do our duty for duty’s sake and never think about reward. But that notion is quite unbiblical. If God takes the trouble (this many times!) to urge our obedience by a promise of reward, we should embrace that promise with thanks, not despise it. That is, we should not only do good works, but we should do them for this reason.

---

<sup>307</sup> We “hasten” it, I presume, by praying for it and by evangelism, by which the full number of the elect are brought into the church. And, appropriate to the present discussion, evangelism is by both word and deed.

<sup>308</sup> Obviously in this context, “new age” refers to the biblical “age to come,” discussed earlier, rather than to the occult new age of contemporary neo-paganism. See Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars: Pagan Revival in Christian America* (Escondido, CA: Main Entry Editions, 1997).

This teaching is, of course, not salvation by works or merit. Although the word “reward” is used in these passages, there is no suggestion that we have earned the reward in the sense that we have paid God what the reward is worth. Jesus says that even when we have done everything we have been commanded (and none of us have done that) we have done no more than our duty (Luke 17:7-10). Indeed, in that case we are “unworthy” servants. Elsewhere, Scripture represents the reward as something out of all proportion to the service rendered (Matt. 19:29, 20:1-16, 24:45-47, 25:21-30, Luke 7:36-50, 12:37).

Nevertheless, there is some sort of gradation in the rewards given to individuals. Jesus says that the apostles will judge the “twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28), suggesting that in the consummate kingdom there will be varying degrees of authority. But if the apostles have a special status, it is doubtful that they have it because they are more holy than all the saints in the succeeding centuries. Rather, they are the foundation (Eph. 2:20) on which the church is built, and they continue in that role, for no other reason than that Christ has called them to fill it. Some passages suggest degrees of blessing, as when Paul distinguishes those who build on the foundation of Christ gold, silver, and precious stones from those who build wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:8-15), some being saved “only as through fire.” But this passage deals with broad classes of Christians, not with some micro-analysis of merits.

The parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30, cf. Luke 19:12-27) provides the best argument for proportionate rewards. One cannot argue, however, that the degree of investment success ascribed to the first two servants entitles them, as strict payment, to the master’s rewards. Rather, the master acts generously, out of the goodness of his heart. This is to say that here, as with every transaction we have with God, we deal with him as a person, not with an impersonal principle of cause and effect.

Essentially, the reward is the kingdom itself (Matt. 5:3, 10, 25:34), which in other passages is said to come by electing grace (Matt. 25:34, Luke 12:31-32). Good works follow, rather than precede, this gift (Luke 12:33-49). To put it differently, the Lord himself is the inheritance of his people (Ps. 16:5, 73:24-26, Lam. 3:24). He is the inheritance of every believer. If there are differences of degree, they are differences of intimacy with the Lord himself. If some glorified saints lie closer than others to God’s heart, no one else will be jealous or angry, for the eternal kingdom excludes such emotions. Rather, the lesser members of that kingdom will rejoice at the greater blessings given to others, and those who are greatest will serve the lesser—beginning with the Lord himself, as Jesus says in Luke 12:37,

Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.<sup>309</sup>

---

<sup>309</sup> Thanks to Bill Crawford for bringing to my attention this amazing promise of our Lord.

But who would not want as much intimacy as possible with such a wonderful Lord? Here is a reward that profoundly motivates holiness of heart and life.

### **Between the Resurrection and the Parousia: Bearing the Burdens of Change and of Knowledge**

As we have seen above, we live between the resurrection of Jesus and his return in glory. The apostles also lived in this period, toward its beginning. So our time is a continuation of theirs, and it is like the apostolic age in many ways: the already and the not-yet, the empowerment of the Spirit, the Great Commission mandate, looking forward to Jesus' return. It is also different in some ways: the charismatic gifts of prophecy and tongues (I believe) have ceased, being replaced in effect by the written canon of apostolic teaching. The apostles as leaders of the church have been replaced by elders and deacons, officers whose teaching does not have the foundational infallibility of the apostles, but which must be subject to that apostolic authority in the Word. There are also, of course, changes of cultural and social kinds, changes in science, technology and the like. Through all the changes, however, God is present with his people: in the word, in the sacraments, in the body of believers, in the Spirit's inward witness.

Historical change is an important part of the ethical situation. As we apply the law of God, we must understand how it applies to each situation that comes before us. That work never ends. We may not assume that the Reformers or the Puritans, for example, finished the task, no matter how great our respect for these great ministers of the word. The Puritans did not have to evaluate nuclear warfare, genetic engineering, modern science, or neo-paganism from Scripture; but we cannot avoid those tasks in our own time.

I must warn you against taking certain popular shortcuts. (1) For example, it is not scriptural to approach ethics with a mere traditionalism, a desire merely to emulate the Christianity of a past age. Whether or not we believe that past ages were "better" than this one, our mandate is not to re-pristiniate or recreate a past situation; it is to apply the scriptures to the situation of today. I fear that some Reformed churches seek to be mere museum pieces: historical artifacts where people can go to hear old-fashioned talk and experience older forms of church life; spiritual versions of Colonial Williamsburg. On the contrary, Christian worship is to be *contemporary* (because it must be intelligible, I Cor. 14), and the church's preaching must adapt (insofar as Scripture permits) to the language and habits of the target population (I Cor. 9).

(2) The task is also avoided illegitimately by people who pit divine sovereignty against human responsibility and therefore refuse to make use of modern technology, science, medicine, communications, demographic studies, etc. All modern tools must be evaluated by the Scripture as to what we should use and how we should use it. But the fact that God is sovereign in salvation does not invalidate human study, strategy, plans, techniques, efforts. Otherwise there would be no point in seeking even to communicate effectively; we could walk into a crowd, say any dumb thing we please, and wait for God to act. We all know that is not right. We all see the importance of studying the languages and culture of our target audiences, and in preaching classes people preparing for ministry learn to speak effectively. In doing so we have no thought that such human preparation violates divine sovereignty. Why should we not extend this logic to demographic studies and modern communicative techniques?

If we avoid these shortcuts, we will have to face the fact that ethics in our time, theology as well, to say nothing of church life and evangelistic strategy, should be different today, in important ways, from all past ages of church history including the New Testament period. We face situations (both difficulties and opportunities) that were not faced by Machen, Kuyper, Hodge, Edwards, Owen, Calvin, Augustine, Paul. The word must be applied to those new situations. Of course, I grant that we are in the same warfare as the older saints, and that we must use the same spiritual weapons. But in its *specifics* that war is different now. Those who take the lazy way, the way of shortcuts, will be left behind. They may be instructive historical artifacts, but they will not be powerful instruments to bring people to Christ. God can, of course, use the feeblest instruments; but he typically honors the work of believers who count the costs and seize the opportunities.

Besides laziness, there is a certain selfishness about the shortcut mentality.<sup>310</sup> Shortcutters are those who feel comfortable with certain "tried and true" forms of life and witness, forms that God has used in the past. Then they seek to produce a theological rationale for keeping those forms even when times have changed. They talk as if they are fighting for biblical principle, though in fact they are merely arguing for a certain *application* of scripture that was appropriate to a past situation.

The debate is confused, of course, by words like "conservative," which are applied both to defenders of scriptural principle and to those who merely defend past ways of doing things without scriptural justification. But defending authentic biblical principle is one thing; defending the continuance of past applications into our own time is something very different. Both shortcutters and critics of shortcutters need to be more aware of this distinction.

---

<sup>310</sup> Laziness is a form of selfishness, but the wider category also needs to be addressed in this context.

But what masquerades as a battle for biblical principle is often at bottom a mere rationalization of selfish impulses, a desire to stay comfortable, to avoid having to change familiar patterns. Often, however, Scripture itself is on the side of change! I Cor. 9 is an important text in this respect. Paul was willing to be a Jew among the Jews, a Gentile among the Gentiles, that some might be saved. He did not seek his own comfort, even his own rights. Indeed, he allowed his body to be buffeted, lest while preaching to others he himself should be a castaway. He tried "to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of many, that they might be saved" (1 Cor. 10:33). And note: Immediately after this verse, he urges "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (11:1).

This means that in our evangelistic methodology, indeed in our worship (for that too has an evangelistic element, 14:24-25), our goal must not be to please ourselves, but to bend and stretch, to accept discomfort and the trauma of change, in order to speak the Christian faith into the contemporary world.

Let me also discuss here another, rather different, problem connected with our historical distance from the New Testament. That problem is that our present historical situation is something of an epistemological burden. We are around 1,920 years removed from the later books of the New Testament canon. Now in some ways this is an advantage. We have had much more time to study Scripture than did the early church fathers like Clement and Justin Martyr. And in some ways, I think, contemporary orthodox Reformed theology has a far deeper and more precise understanding of the gospel than did the church fathers.<sup>311</sup> I say this contrary to those evangelicals who are joining Eastern Orthodox churches in order to return to the supposedly more profound teachings of the early church Fathers. Although the Fathers did wonderful work in their day, standing heroically for the faith amid terrible oppressions, their writings were confused on many important points, such as the Trinity and justification by faith. And although it is valuable to read them today (often they look at things from angles that today are unusual and edifying), we would be wise in perusing their writings not to confuse vagueness with profundity.

So in some ways our historical distance from the New Testament is an advantage. In other ways, however, it is a disadvantage. If I were a Christian church elder in, say, A. D. 62, and my church faced a controversy over, say, infant baptism, I could simply fax the nearest apostle, in effect (I realize that this was not always a perfectly simple process), and ask what the apostolic practice was. That would settle the question. In the early generations following the apostles, doubtless there were some reliable traditions dealing with questions not explicitly answered in the New Testament. In my view, for instance, the early

---

<sup>311</sup> One remarkable evidence of biblical inspiration is the incredible difference in spiritual understanding between the last books of the New Testament and the first writings of the post-canonical period. Clement, for example, is confused about all sorts of important things. Scripture, however, is so rich that it has taken 1,920 years for the church to learn many of its lessons.



church did not need to have an explicit New Testament command to baptize infants. They just did it, for that was the apostolic practice, and the church had always done it that way.<sup>312</sup> But we do not have today such access to the apostles. And there are a lot of questions which the early church could easily have answered, which nevertheless perplex us today. Hence all the debates about baptism. We cannot "fax the nearest apostle;" we must engage in a somewhat complicated process of theological reasoning. Same with regard to the nature of church government, the church's attitude toward war, the new covenant application of the Sabbath commandment, the style of worship, the grounds of divorce, the demands of Christ upon civil government, the proper criteria for determining physical death, many other things. Some things mentioned in the New Testament, and evidently well understood by the original readers, are quite obscure to us, such as baptism for the dead (I Cor. 15:29) and the covering of women "because of the angels" (I Cor. 11:10).

Today, however, we are removed by many centuries from the time of the apostles. And controversy in the church, particularly during the time of the Reformation, has made it impossible to identify any single strain of church tradition as unambiguously apostolic. Thus, although we understand the central aspects of biblical teaching better than the church fathers did, there are other aspects which we, perhaps, understand less well than they did.

It is also the case, as we mentioned before, that many issues of the modern day are not specifically discussed in scripture. If we cannot fax the apostles to learn their view of baptism, much less can we determine directly what they would say about nuclear weaponry, the government role in welfare, the medical use of life-support equipment. Here too, there are biblical principles which apply; but the argument can be complicated. It is not as if the apostles were readily available for interviews.

In facing our epistemological disadvantages, the first thing to be said is that God understands. He is the Lord of history. His providence has planned and controlled it. It is no accident that we are in the present epistemological situation. That situation, uncomfortable as it may be at times, suits God's purposes perfectly, and we must be thankful for it. We should not murmur or complain, as Israel in the wilderness. When someone calls and asks me a hard question, say, about whether they should remove life support systems from a dying relative, I usually begin by saying that these are, after all, hard questions, and that God understands how hard they are for us. We cannot fax the apostles, but He doesn't expect us to. He has left us with Scripture and the Spirit's illumination, and He has determined that that is enough. We may fumble around in searching for answers. We may make decisions which we regret

---

<sup>312</sup> I am not, of course, advocating a Roman Catholic view of tradition. Scripture is judge over all such traditions, and of course it is very difficult today to tell what truth, if any, there may be in extra-biblical traditions.

later on, because we hadn't at first considered all the relevant principles and facts. But God understands.

In such situations, it is helpful to remember that we are justified by faith, not by works, nor, therefore, by ethical accuracy. That comfort does not, of course, excuse us from hard thinking. If God has justified us, we will want to please him, and we will make intellectual and other efforts to do what he wants. But the sincerity of such efforts is not measured by the perfection of the results. We may try very hard to apply biblical principles and come up with an answer that later proves inadequate. Yet God will still honor the attempt. He knows the heart, and he takes into consideration the obstacles (including epistemological) that we must overcome.

Thus when after prayerful, honest searching of scripture you determine to let your mother die, and afterward wish that you had kept her alive longer by life support, do not be overcome with guilt. God still loves you, for Jesus' sake, more than you could ever love yourself.

Beyond that, I think that our "epistemological disadvantages" should give us more understanding and forbearance for one another. If God still loves the believer who honestly makes a decision which proves wrong, we should also love and encourage that brother or sister. Sabbatarians should have a greater love and understanding for non-Sabbatarians and vice versa; same with anabaptists and paedobaptists, premillennialists and amillennialists, pacifists and just-war theorists. We should not pretend that everything is cut and dried, even though perhaps these issues were cut and dried in the New Testament period itself. We should agonize a bit with those who are wrestling with these issues. I am a paedobaptist; but what if I had been raised in a Baptist church? Would I have seen things the same way? Would the same arguments carry with me the weight they carry presently? I don't know. I believe I am right, and that Scripture teaches infant baptism. I will present that truth as God's truth. But I won't pretend that it is so plain that those on the other side must be insincere.

God in his good providence has given us advantages and disadvantages, challenges and opportunities, which are not precisely the same as those of any past generation. He calls us to meet those challenges and seize the opportunities for Christ. The church of past ages can help us, to keep us from merely repeating the mistakes of history and to give us a platform on which to build the next story of God's temple. But we must not shirk our responsibility. We must be modern (or post-modern!) Christians, focused on the world of our own time, and upon the Christ who is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

### **Ethics, Preaching, and Biblical Theology**

At theological seminaries within the Reformed tradition, one of the most exciting discoveries students make is the history of redemption. Biblical theology is that discipline that studies the Bible as a history of redemption. So many students become greatly excited about biblical theology. Many have done basic exegetical theology before coming to seminary, and many have experienced systematic theology in the form of confessions and catechisms. But biblical theology appears to them as something new.

And the content of biblical theology is exciting to the believer. When we come to see Scripture as the history of redemption, we see far more clearly how all of Scripture bears witness to Christ. And biblical theology opens up to us the wonderful vision of the eschatology of redemption: that in Christ the last days are here, and we are dwelling with him in the heavenly places. Redemption has been accomplished already, and its blessings are ours. There is, of course, a “not yet” as well as an “already.” The consummation has come, but it is still yet to come. We live as those who are sanctified, but not perfected.

As we have seen, the tension between the already and the not-yet is the setting of New Testament ethical reflection. God has justified us in Christ and has given us his Spirit; yet sin remains and will not be completely destroyed until the final day. Nevertheless, the “already,” the definitive accomplishment of redemption in Christ is our motivation for obedience. In our preaching and teaching, we should clearly set forth this framework as the context of ethical decision making.

I believe, however, that it is possible to go too far in our emphasis on the history of redemption. Some have claimed that the history of redemption is the primary context for theological reflection in Scripture, and that it must always be the primary subject-matter of preaching. With this assertion I must respectfully disagree. In DKG<sup>313</sup> I took issue with these claims as applied to the concept and practice of theology and of preaching. Here I will comment a bit on the implications of this view for ethics.

Although the two-age structure of Pauline ethics is important, it does not by any means exhaust the biblical teaching relevant to our ethical decisions. There are pages and pages of Scripture devoted to the details of God’s law, to

---

<sup>313</sup> 207-212. In footnotes I mention there some of the authors who maintain the view I am contesting. Other sources would include Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979), James T. Dennison, “What is Biblical Theology?” in Howard Griffith and John Muether, eds., *Creator, Redeemer, Consummator* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic Press, 2000), 187-191, Richard B. Gaffin, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in John H. Skilton, ed., *The New Testament Student and Theology* (NP: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 32-50, and many articles at [www.kerux.org](http://www.kerux.org) and [www.two-age.org](http://www.two-age.org). On the other side, I am pleased to see that Dr. Jay Adams has also registered protests against the extreme emphasis on biblical theology in some circles. See his “Reflections on Westminster Theology and Homiletics” in David Van Drunen, ed., *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 261-68.

proverbs about the practical life of the believer, to the heart motivations of love and faith that should impel our passion for holiness.

Now some will point out that all these other elements of biblical ethics are to be understood “in the context of” the two-age schema. True enough; but contextual arguments work both ways. If the law and the proverbs are to be understood in the context of the already and not-yet, the opposite is also true: the semi-eschatological tension must be understood in terms of the law of God. It is the law that defines the sinfulness from which Christ redeemed us. And God saves us so that we may keep the law (Rom. 8:4). The law defines *how* we should express our gratitude for Jesus’ redemption.

Should preaching be redemptive-historical? Certainly; but it should also expound God’s laws and the new inner motivations to which we are called. In my terminology, redemptive history is the situational perspective, the situation in which we make ethical decisions. The law is the normative, and the motive is the existential. All three perspectives should be preached and taught, if Christians are to gain a balanced perspective on Christian ethics.

Should every sermon have redemptive history as its principal subject? I would say no. There is nothing in the Bible itself that requires us to restrict preaching in this way. It is common to develop a theology of preaching from the Book of Acts, in which most of the preaching is evangelistic, given in marketplaces or synagogues. The preaching in Acts to Jews is quite overtly redemptive-historical, as the apostles and their colleagues (such as Stephen and Philip) present Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament scripture. It is less so in the two instances where the apostles speak to crowds of unconverted Gentiles (Acts 14:8-18 and 17:16-34). In those passages, Paul bases his addresses on creation, indeed on general revelation, to rebuke the idolatry of his audience. There are allusions to Scripture, and in Acts 17:31 Paul does refer to Christ, without naming him. But neither of these addresses can be fairly described as redemptive-historical.

But in developing an understanding of the nature of preaching in Christian worship, we must go beyond the Book of Acts. For it is by no means clear that the preaching and teaching that went on in Christian worship services were significantly like the evangelistic preaching in Acts, either to Jews or to Gentiles. For one thing, references to teaching in such services are sparse in the New Testament. The only clear reference is 1 Cor. 14:26, which refers to a “lesson” (*didache*).<sup>314</sup> I am not inclined to draw a sharp distinction between *kerygma* (preaching) and *didache* (teaching). Certainly, the two words can describe the same content. But I imagine that teaching in Christian worship was less

---

<sup>314</sup> Of course, there was also teaching in the worship services through tongues, interpretation of tongues, and prophecy (1 Cor. 14:26-33). I am assuming that these do not continue past the apostolic age. See Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1979).

evangelistic and more pedagogical in its main thrust, like the New Testament letters of the apostles, which were most likely read in worship (Col. 4:16, 1 Thess. 5:27). Although these letters take account of redemptive history, they also contain long sections of ethical exhortation, responses to specific questions, and so on.

There are some passages that are very confusing to modern congregations unless we say something about their redemptive-historical setting. God told Israel under Joshua to kill the Canaanites. Does he tell us to do the same? Certainly not, because the command presupposes a redemptive-historical setting very different from ours. The iniquity of the Canaanite is full; it is time for God's judgment against those nations and the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. Those conditions don't exist in our relationships with non-Christian neighbors. So every preacher must be aware of the redemptive-historical setting of his text. But that doesn't imply that the sermon must always be *about* that setting. There is no biblical rule that such settings are the only proper subject-matter of sermons.

Indeed, there are many ethical passages in Scripture itself which do not explicitly focus on the redemptive-historical context. Proverbs, for example, says nothing about the semi-eschatological ethical tension, not to mention the Mosaic Law. We should not demand that a preacher emphasize something that is not emphasized in his text. If one argues that these texts must be seen in the light of the broader biblical principles of redemptive history, again I would reply that the reverse is also true. Surely we cannot maintain that *every* relevant theological context be brought into the exposition of every text.

I would like also to say a bit about the terms "moralist" and "exemplarist," used as deprecating terms for preachers and sermons deemed insufficiently redemptive-historical in focus. "Moralism" is, as I indicated in Chapter 2, a very vague expression, mainly used as a term of abuse. It was used to describe the liberalism of Ritschl and his disciples. They had no gospel at all. To use that term of principled evangelicals of our own time, I believe, is an injustice. *Moralism* also connotes legalism and salvation by works. I believe that if a preacher emphasizes grace in his overall ministry, including the proper relationship between grace and works, it is not wrong for him occasionally to preach on a Proverb, a law, or a norm, without devoting his central attention to the structure of redemptive history or to the semi-eschatological ethical tension.

The use of the term "exemplarist" among advocates of redemptive history is, in my judgment, even more confused. It seems to mean that it is somehow wrong to refer to a Bible character as a moral example. On this view, preachers should refer to Bible characters only as plot devices, as means of advancing the narrative, not as positive or negative examples for our moral guidance.

It is true, of course, that Bible characters other than Jesus are sinful and therefore not always exemplary. It is also true to point out that when biblical characters are exemplary we must take into account their situation (i.e. their place in the history of redemption). The story of David and Goliath, for example, is not an exhortation to little boys to go out and kill bullies with slingshots, but it tells of David's courage in carrying out his responsibility as God's anointed, and thus points to Christ. But David's courage is exemplary nonetheless, and we may apply his example to our circumstances, making appropriate allowance for the difference between our calling and David's.

But it is clearly wrong to say that they are in Scripture no moral examples.<sup>315</sup> We saw in chapter 9 that the imitation of God, of Christ, and of godly human beings is a major biblical mode of moral instruction.

Some redemptive-historical preachers seem to have an antipathy to the very idea of practical "application," preferring metaphors like "identification" and "participation." Here is an example:

We are saying to the pew, "Come up to the heavenlies in Christ Jesus; come and find your life hidden with Christ in God in this text." Here is your life. We do not ask you to derive lessons from the life of Adam. We proclaim that your life is in Adam—miserable, sinful, rebellious, selfish, autonomous, hellish but we plead with men, women and children everywhere to find their life in that second Adam, to find themselves in Christ Jesus a new creation clothed upon with the righteousness of the Lamb of God, ushered into the paradise of God by the one who has tasted the flame and felt the edge of the sword of divine justice. We preach to you life in Christ Jesus—your life hidden with Christ in God—from first Adam to second Adam—from Adam protological to Adam eschatological—that is our method, that is our message.<sup>316</sup>

The rhetoric here is impressive. But what, concretely, is the difference between deriving "lessons" or "applications" from the life of Adam, and proclaiming "that your life is in Adam?" Most readers would think that our identification with Adam is one lesson we could derive from the story. Is the real point of this statement that this is the *only* application one can make? That we should never, for example, use the unfallen relationship of Adam and Eve as a model for Christian marriage?

---

<sup>315</sup> One student actually told me that there are no moral examples in Heb. 11 for us to imitate. His argument was that in Heb. 12:2 we are told to look to Jesus, and therefore, presumably, not to any of the saints mentioned in Heb. 11. In my judgment, commitment to an unbalanced kind of redemptive-historical emphasis had blinded that student to the obvious.

<sup>316</sup> James T. Dennison, "Building the Biblical-theological Sermon, Part One: Perspective," <http://www.kerux.com/documents/KeruxV4N3A3.asp>.

I have heard some enthusiasts for redemptive-history complain that the term “application” has bad connotations deriving from its use in theologies like Schleiermacher’s and Bultmann’s. But criticizing language on such grounds is an instance of genetic fallacy. And the proposed alternatives, such as “participation” and “identification” have also been used in non-Christian philosophies, particularly those of Plato and the mystics. The alternative “living in the text” is really too vague to denote a purposeful ethical preaching thrust.

If the argument about application were merely a terminological dispute, it would be of little importance. But I get the impression that some who stress redemptive history really want to avoid “practical” application. They want the whole sermon to focus on Christ, not on what works the believer should do. They want it to focus on gospel, not on law. So they want the sermon to evoke praise of Christ, not to demand concrete change in people’s behavior. In their mind, Christocentricity excludes any sustained focus on specific practical matters.

I too think sermons should magnify Christ and evoke praise. But it is simply wrongheaded to deny the importance of concrete, practical, ethical application. Such application is the purpose of Scripture itself, according to 2 Tim. 3:16-17. And since Scripture itself contains many practical “how tos,” our preaching should include those too. To say that this emphasis detracts from Christocentricity is unscriptural.

Christ is central in Scripture as the Redeemer. But he is also the Word, Wisdom, the Lawgiver, the Lord of the Covenant, the Lion of Judah, the Shepherd who leads his people into the right paths. It is wrong to assume that an emphasis on Christ as Redeemer (redemptive history) excludes an emphasis on Christ as norm and motivator.

When a preacher avoids concrete ethical applications in his sermons, he is not preaching the whole counsel of God, and he is not adequately edifying his people. The best redemptive-historical preachers understand this. Some of the most powerful ethical preaching I have heard has come from Edmund Clowney and James Dennison. But in my judgment the concept of ethical preaching does not fit very well into their overall theory of preaching.

Let me also mention some dangers in the practice of preaching exclusively on redemptive-historical themes:

1. Much biblical truth can be left out or illegitimately de-emphasized. The preacher does not feel free to dwell on the specifics, say, of Romans 12, because he feels he must spend most of his time of the redemptive-historical setting of the passage (i.e. Romans 1-11).

2. Some redemptive-historical preachers develop a jargon-laden vocabulary. One recent seminary graduate preached a sermon in which he used

the word “eschatological” about fifty times (at least it felt like that), and a lot of other technical biblical-theological jargon. Maybe he thought that was all right, or even an advantage, with an audience of seminarians. My guess is that seminarians tend to tune out to such discourses—they have heard all of that many times. But so facile was the young preacher with this language, I feared that he preached this way in his own congregation. If he did, I fear that anyone who visited the service would have been entirely bewildered.

In my view it is best to avoid jargon in preaching generally. And one can make the relevant points about redemptive history without all the technical terms. Most evangelical preachers emphasize (a) that God forgives all the sins of everyone who believes in Christ, (b) that we nevertheless need to continue fighting the spiritual warfare (in our hearts and our society) until the return of Jesus (c) that the redemptive work of Christ is what motivates us to pursue holiness. I believe that those truths constitute the essence of the “already/not-yet,” and this language communicates the truth far more effectively than does the jargon.

3. Excess enthusiasm for redemptive history has sometimes produced division in churches and presbyteries. Some pastors not only preach redemptive history, but they condemn as moralistic anybody who fails to emphasize it as much as they do. So “redemptive history” becomes a party label, and factions battle over the concept. In my opinion, this partisanship is wrong.

Why is it, I wonder, that in our circles whenever anybody gets an interesting idea, it produces a party that makes it a test of orthodoxy, leading to another party that opposes it, and then to battles between these parties in the churches? Why can’t those who think they have new insights quietly teach their insights to others while embracing them as brothers and sisters in Christ? If some don’t “get it,” why should that amount to heresy? Why not simply permit both views to be taught until the Spirit convinces God’s people generally that one view is Scriptural and the other is not?

In recent Reformed history, we have had these partisan battles over Van Til’s apologetics (and now, different *schools* of Van Tillian apologetics), common grace, the incomprehensibility of God, supra/infralapsarianism, theonomy, the relation between grace and law in the covenants, Shepherd’s view of justification, nouthetic counseling, exclusive Psalmody, contemporary worship, means of church growth, redemptive-historical preaching. None of these is resolved in our Reformed confessions, but partisans act as if they were. They think their view alone is orthodox, and their opponents are dangerous heretics. Can’t we just lighten up a bit? Can we never admit our fallibility? Is there not a place, on some issues, for teachability, even tolerance? Can’t we ever agree to disagree in peace and love, working together on those matters where we agree?<sup>317</sup>

---

<sup>317</sup> For more on this subject, see my article, “Machen’s Warrior Children” in Sung Wook Chung, ed., *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 113-1476.



4. For some reason, it seems to me that enthusiasts for redemptive history are often poor logicians. In some sermons, presbytery speeches, student papers, even some published treatises, I have often heard elaborate citations of Scripture, already's and not-yet's, Messianic this and Eschatological that, and then at the end some conclusion (a doctrinal, ethical, or procedural point) that doesn't have much at all to do with the redemptive-historical argumentation.

5. Young preachers who try to preach redemptive-historical sermons often spend so much time preparing the theology of their messages that they completely neglect rhetorical considerations, i.e. *communication*. So their sermons come across as a lot of gobbledeygook. The redemptive-historical method of preaching typically takes much more preparation time than others. And at its best it requires substantial intellectual and rhetorical gifts which few seminarians and young pastors possess. When average preachers with busy schedules try to prepare redemptive-historical sermons, the result is often incomprehensible. Now, you can say what you like about the dangers of neglecting redemptive history; but a sermon that does not communicate with the people is not preaching at all.

So all I ask of a young preacher is that he preach clearly the gospel of grace, a proper relation between grace and works, and no major errors stemming from redemptive-historical ignorance. These are simple goals, well within the abilities of seminary trained young men whom God has called to the ministry. When a preacher accomplishes these goals, he may not fairly be accused of moralism. His preaching will be biblical and effective.

6. Young preachers often think that their sermons must be, not only clear, but also profound and original. The redemptive-historical method often attracts them, because it encourages such creativity. The best of the redemptive-historical preachers, like Vos and Clowney, often lead the listener into unique biblical depth. But young preachers need to be more humble about what they can expect from their first sermons. Better to realize one's own limitations and to seek what's most important: clear communication of the biblical gospel.

I will conclude by observing that I personally receive more benefit from redemptive-historically focused sermons than from any other kind. At best, redemptive-historical preaching exalts Christ and shows how all Scripture points to him. It also shows how Christ is relevant to all aspects of human life. So I hope that seminaries will continue to teach students how to preach on the history of redemption. What disturbs me is the recent movement to develop a redemptive-historical *party* in the Reformed churches, set over against other partisan groups, dividing the body of Christ.

## Chapter 17: Our Chief End

In Chapter 14, I indicated that the situational perspective is a sort of Christian teleological ethic. For in the situational perspective we ask how we should seek to change the world in order to bring glory to God. That question assumes that we are working toward a goal (the glory of God) and seeking means to reach that goal. So under the situational perspective, our ethics has a formal structure similar to secular teleological ethics, which seeks means to reach an end. In secular teleological systems, the end is usually human happiness or pleasure. Christian ethics does not ignore those goals, but makes them subordinate to the glory of God.

In this chapter I will discuss several definitions of the goal of the Christian life, from the literature of Christian theology.

### The Doctrine of the Twofold End

On the very first page of his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas presents his justification for a science of God (Scripture, theology) in addition to philosophy:

It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason. Firstly, indeed, because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason: "The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee" (Is. 66:4). But the end must first be known by men who are to direct their thoughts and actions to the end. Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation.<sup>318</sup>

God has ordained for human beings, therefore, to pursue two ends, an earthly end and a heavenly one. Philosophy, without the aid of Scripture, enables us to understand our earthly end. Scripture and theology provide understanding of our heavenly one. Edmund Gardner finds the same duality in Dante's *De Monarchia*:

Man is ordained for two ends: blessedness of this life, which consists in the exercise of his natural powers and is figured in the terrestrial paradise; blessedness of life eternal, which consists in the fruition of the Divine aspect in the celestial paradise to which man's natural powers cannot ascend without the aid of the Divine light. To these two ends man must come by diverse means: "For to the first we attain by the teachings of

---

<sup>318</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.1.

philosophy, following them by acting in accordance with the moral and intellectual virtues. To the second by spiritual teachings, which transcend human reason, as we follow them by acting according to the theological virtues." But, although these ends and means are made plain to us by human reason and by revelation, men in their cupidity would reject them, were not they restrained by bit and rein. "Wherefore man had need of a twofold directive power according to his twofold end, to wit, the Supreme Pontiff, to lead the human race in accordance with things revealed, to eternal life; and the Emperor, to direct the human race to temporal felicity in accordance with the teachings of philosophy."<sup>319</sup>

This quotation adds to the first that (1) to each end correspond virtues: moral and intellectual virtues corresponding to our earthly end, and theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) to our spiritual end, and (2) this duality implies a duality of institutions, the state to guide us to earthly happiness and the church to lead us to heaven.

These quotations represent the main thrust of Roman Catholic teaching concerning the ends or goals of human life. The view of Augustine and earlier church fathers was somewhat more otherworldly. Aquinas, under the influence of Aristotle, seeks balance between heavenly ends and earthly ones. Scripture also acknowledges the legitimacy of our earthly concerns. The things God created are good, even after the fall (1 Tim. 4:4), according to Paul. Jesus teaches that God is concerned to provide us all our physical needs (Matt. 6:33), but he places this teaching, as we shall see, in the context of a rather different view of the goal of human life.

For Aquinas, unaided human reason is sufficient to guide us toward earthly happiness, but not toward eternal life. We can see that this view of things fits in well with the traditional natural law approach to ethics, especially without the Budziszewski emendations. (Recall our discussion of this in Chapter 14.) For Aquinas, natural reason (operating in accord with Aristotelian epistemology) is sufficient to direct the state, which in turn administers the affairs of earthly society. The church governs the spiritual sphere of life. Those who are most serious about seeking heaven take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and leave the sphere of earthly life for a "religious" vocation. These follow the *consilia evangelica*, the evangelical counsels.

We should also connect this view of things with our earlier discussion of the Lutheran law/gospel distinction (Chapter 12). Although Lutherans and Roman Catholics have very different views of what constitutes the gospel, they share the notion that one sphere of human life, civil society, should be governed apart from gospel influence, apart, that is, from those teachings of Scripture that transcend natural revelation.

---

<sup>319</sup> Edmund G. Gardner, "Dante Alighieri," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, online edition, 2003, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04628a.htm>.

Aquinas' view should be understood as part of the larger distinction between nature and grace that underlies his thought. That distinction became the foundation of traditional Roman Catholic theology. Herman Dooyeweerd describes the "nature-grace motive" as follows:

Within the natural sphere a relative autonomy was ascribed to human reason, which was supposed to be capable of discovering the natural truths by its own light. Within the supra-natural sphere of grace, on the contrary, human thought was considered to be dependent on the divine self-revelation. Philosophy was considered to belong to the natural sphere, dogmatical theology, on the other hand, to the supra-natural sphere. In consequence, there was no longer a question of Christian philosophy. Philosophical thought was, in fact, abandoned to the influence of the Greek and Humanist basic motives in their external accommodation to the doctrine of the Church. These motives were masked by the dogmatic acceptance of the autonomy of natural reason.... The Thomistic attempt at a synthesis of the opposite motives of nature and grace, and the ascription of the primacy of the latter found a clear expression in the adage: *Gratia naturam non tollit, sed perfecit* (Grace does not cancel nature, but it perfects it.)<sup>320</sup>

The nature-grace motive also appears in Roman Catholic anthropology, in which God supplements the natural gifts given to Adam at creation with a *donum superadditum*, a gift of divine grace, by which man's senses are brought under the control of reason and thus Adam enters a deep fellowship with God. In the fall, Adam and Eve lost the superadded gifts, which must be restored through the operations of grace. Their natural gifts remain intact.

The picture is always one of supplementation. The fall has not radically disrupted the functions of nature. For the most part those functions still operate pretty well. But human beings need something more, and grace provides what is lacking. Similarly, Aristotelian philosophy, to Aquinas, is sufficient for earthly happiness, though it must be supplemented by Scripture if we are to attain heaven. Occasionally, to be sure, Scripture must correct the conclusions of natural reason. Aristotle thought, for example, that the world was eternal. The Bible teaches otherwise. So Aquinas, who is first of all a Christian and only secondly an Aristotelian, gives Scripture veto-power over philosophy. But Aquinas did not believe that philosophy, our study of the cosmos, had to be built upon Scripture from the outset. The foundations of philosophy, for Aquinas as for Aristotle, lie in would-be autonomous human reason.

---

<sup>320</sup> Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 44-45. Roman Catholic thinkers do in fact speak of "Christian philosophy" and of the thought of Aquinas as a notable example of that. They believe that Scripture and tradition actually encourage the kind of synthesis that Aquinas made between Christianity and Aristotle. Dooyeweerd, of course, denies that such a synthesis is legitimate.

But in Reformed thought there is a much deeper integration between nature and grace. As we saw in Chapter 14, Calvin held that we cannot use natural revelation rightly apart from the spectacles of Scripture. Scripture does not merely<sup>321</sup> supplement Aristotle and correct him here and there; it rather challenges the non-Christian philosopher to place all of his thinking on a different basis, to bring every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

In Reformed theology, there is no distinction in Adam's original constitution between natural and gracious gifts; rather, God constituted Adam as a good and righteous man. In the fall, Adam did not merely lose certain gifts, but his whole life became corrupt. So saving grace does not merely add a supplement to fallen human life; rather, it restores it from the heart outward.

So it should not surprise us that Reformed understandings of “man's chief end” tend to be unitary rather than dualistic. Our goal is to glorify God in all of life. It is not that earthly happiness is unimportant. As Matt. 6:32-33 indicate, our Father knows what we need to preserve and enjoy our earthly lives. But our goal is not to attain these things, but rather the kingdom of God (verse 33). The “religious” life is not a monastic existence, but human life as a whole, directed to God's glory.

### **To Glorify God**

The WSC's answer to the question, “What is the chief end of man?” is, “Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”<sup>322</sup> This formula might seem to belie my last point, that Reformed concepts of the goal of ethics are unitary, rather than dualistic. The Catechism seems to call us to two things: glorifying God, and enjoying him forever. We shall see, however, that these do form a close unity. Certainly it should be immediately evident that these two goals, if they be two, do not pertain, respectively, to spiritual and earthly life, as on the Roman Catholic construction. Rather, both pertain to human life as a whole. There is no area of life where we are not called both to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Let us ask first what it means to glorify God.<sup>323</sup> The glory of God is literally the great light that shines forth when God makes his presence visible to human beings. As such, the glory is something physical, part of the creation. But glory is

---

<sup>321</sup> Of course, this *merely* is important. Scripture does supplement the knowledge of God available in natural revelation. So to speak of supplementation is not necessarily wrong. But there is much more to be said. Talk of supplementation must be supplemented. See my *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), 248-51, 260-61.

<sup>322</sup> Q. and A. 1.

<sup>323</sup> This discussion summarizes, and occasionally quotes, a longer one in DG, 592-95.

also a divine attribute, coordinate with greatness, power, majesty and splendor in 1 Chron. 29:11. As God, Jesus shares in the Father's glory (John 17:5). In Scripture, glory in this sense is more or less equivalent to the lordship attribute of divine presence. Wherever God is, even when he is invisible, there is glory. So the term glory can refer to God himself, his revelation of himself in the world, his reputation among human beings, or even the praise that human beings bring to him.<sup>324</sup>

His presence, in one sense, is throughout creation. So creation declares God's glory (Ps. 19:1). Human beings, his special image within creation, are also his special glory (Ps. 8:5, 1 Cor. 11:7). The image of God, as we saw in Chapter 9, is both a fact and a norm. So is the glory in which God has made us. As God's image, we are made to reflect God's glory back to him. In one sense we do that by virtue of our creation. In another sense, to reflect that glory is a deliberate choice that we make or refuse to make.<sup>325</sup>

So Scripture calls us to glorify God in everything we do (1 Cor. 10:31). In one sense, we cannot increase God's glory. But when our lives image God, others see the presence of God in us. So we ourselves become part of that light from God that goes forth over the earth. When we speak truly of him and obey his Word, we enhance his reputation on the earth, his praise, so that we, like Jesus, become "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14).

To glorify God is to recognize him as the chief fact of human life. He determines our purpose, governs our lives. The first four of the Ten Commandments focus on our duty toward him. Everything we do must take him into account, and whenever we properly take him into account, our actions are right (Rom. 14:23, Col. 3:17, 23).

### **To Enjoy Him Forever**

But the Catechism adds a second phrase to its formulation of our chief end, "to enjoy him forever." At first it is difficult to see how these two phrases fit together. The first is theocentric, but the second appears anthropocentric. The first is distinctly biblical, but the second sounds a bit like the goal of pleasure in secular teleological ethics.

---

<sup>324</sup> *Doxa*, glory, can also often be translated praise.

<sup>325</sup> These two senses correspond to the larger biblical distinction between God's decreative and perceptive wills (DG, 531-38). God has decreed that all creatures will glorify him, whether they are in themselves good or evil. But his precepts demand that creatures choose consciously to glorify him. Sometimes creatures obey those precepts, sometimes not. So in one sense everything glorifies God; in another sense God receives glory only from what is holy and righteous.

It helps to notice, however, that even the second phrase is centered on God. We are to enjoy *him*. So the second phrase calls us to find our chief enjoyment in God, not in the world. To embrace the enjoyment of God as the goal of life is to sing with Asaph,

<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. <sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. <sup>27</sup> For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. <sup>28</sup> But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works. (Ps. 73:25-28)

Although Asaph uses forms of the first person pronoun ten times in this passage, and thirty-three times through the whole Psalm, these verses are profoundly theocentric.<sup>326</sup> So when the Catechism moves from the first phrase to the second, it is not moving from God-centeredness to man-centeredness. Rather, it is looking at God-centeredness from two perspectives.

The second perspective is entirely Scriptural. To redeemed human beings, glorifying God is a delight. In Chapter 16, I showed how pervasively Scripture emphasizes the rewards God has promised to those who love him. Those rewards are delightful beyond our imagining, and they are a powerful motivation to obedience. In that chapter I emphasized that the Christian ethic is far removed from Kantian deontology, in which we do our duty for duty's sake, with no thought of reward. Rather, in the Christian life, we seek to do God's will for God's rewards.

Even God's law, which we often regard as a stern taskmaster, is a delight to the redeemed heart (Ps. 1:2, 119:97, Rom. 7:22), a gift of God's grace (Ps. 119:29). It is our way of life, not in the sense that it brings us eternal life apart from grace, but in the sense that it brings fullness of blessing to those who are saved by grace, when they walk in God's ways (Lev. 18:56, Deut. 5:33, 8:3, 11:13-15, 28:1-4, 30:11-20). God has given the law for our good (Deut. 10:12-13, 4:40, 12:28).<sup>327</sup>

Scripture does condemn selfishness and preoccupation with our own comfort and pleasure (Matt. 6:24-34, 1 Cor. 6:13, Phil. 3:19, 1 Tim. 5:6, James 5:5). It demands self-sacrifice, even enduring hardship (Matt. 24:13, Mark 10:29-30, 2 Tim. 2:3, 4:5, Heb. 12:7, James 1:12, 1 Pet. 2:19), and persecution (Matt.

---

<sup>326</sup> It is still common for some to criticize contemporary worship songs for their overuse of first person pronouns. Critics often take this as a symptom of narcissism, evidence that these songs aim to glorify ourselves rather than God. Let us be done with this kind of argument. The Psalms abound in first-person references, but they are nonetheless profoundly God-centered. Compare my discussion of Ps. 18, in critique of Marva Dawn, in *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 169-70).

<sup>327</sup> This emphasis is, of course, contrary to the law/gospel view discussed in Chapter 12, in which the law includes no blessings and the gospel includes no obligations.

5:10-12, 44, 10:23, 13:21, John 15:20, Rom. 8:35, 12:14, 1 Cor. 4:12, 2 Cor. 12:10, 2 Thess. 1:4, 2 Tim. 3:12). But some of the passages that describe most graphically the rigors and difficulties of the Christian life also emphasize its rewards. Matt. 5:10-12 reads,

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

And James 1:12, also a beatitude,

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Mark 10:29-30 promises blessings, not only in the next world, but in this one as well:

Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, <sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

And Paul, in 2 Cor. 12:10, says,

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Evidently, then, the biblical principle is that the pleasures of serving God are not primarily short-term, but long-term, though of course God gives us many short-term blessings as well. Note the "little while" by which Peter describes the length of our hardship:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup> so that the tested genuineness of your faith- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at



the revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,<sup>9</sup> obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet. 1:3-9)

Compare with this Paul's reference to his "slight momentary affliction" that is "preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17, cf. Rom. 8:18-25, 35-39). Although our suffering in the present may seem sometimes to outweigh the blessing of God, in eternity those troubles will seem tiny. And through God's word we are able to view the present time in the light of eternity, recognizing the true proportions of things. In that light, those like Paul are able to say even in the midst of terrible suffering<sup>328</sup> that it is light and momentary.

In contrast, the pleasures of sin are fleeting (Heb. 11:25). Even pursuing the good things of God's creation is vain outside the context of God's overall purpose for us (Eccl. 2:1-11, 12:13-14).

So our life with God is in the deepest sense an enjoyment of him. To say this may require us to look at life from perspectives different from our customary ones. But Scripture teaches us how to attain these perspectives, showing us how not to be anxious in anything,

but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.<sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:6-7)<sup>329</sup>

In the end, one cannot glorify God without enjoying him. The goal of WSC 1.1 is, in the most profound sense, not twofold, but one. God desires to share his glory with his people, his image, his sons and daughters, his bride. He is not like Molech (Lev. 18:21), the false god who demanded human sacrifice. Rather, our God delights in the fulfillment of human potential.

So grudging obedience is not what he desires of us. It is, I think, better than no obedience at all. But it is seriously defective. We should seek, not only to obey him, but also to delight in obedience. That delight comes from prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, through immersion in the words of Scripture and the hearts of the great saints of redemptive history, and through the fellowship of the church in word and sacrament.

---

<sup>328</sup> Paul actually describes his slight momentary affliction in 2 Cor. 11:24-33. Most people would describe these sufferings as unendurable.

<sup>329</sup> John Piper has rendered a valuable service to the church in his advocacy of "Christian hedonism." He shows powerfully and biblically that delight in God motivates the Christian life. See his *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003).

## The Kingdom of God

Another biblical formulation of the goal of human life is Matt. 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” “These things” are the necessities of earthly life, food, drink, and clothing (verse 31). So in this text, as in the ones considered above, God is concerned with human life and enjoyment. But here the Lord presents the goal from still another perspective.<sup>330</sup>

We discussed the kingdom of God in Chapter 16. It is the movement of history by which God overcomes all his opponents and establishes his righteousness on the earth. We saw in Chapter 12 that the gospel, the good news, is the declaration that God is bringing his kingdom to earth. In Matt. 6:33, we learn that the kingdom is what we should seek “first,” that it should be the chief purpose governing our lives.

How does this goal cohere with that of WSC 1? It shows further how God’s glory and our pleasure are related. For the kingdom is an institution that incorporates both God and his people. He is the king, we are the subjects. In the kingdom, God and his people work together to bring transformation to people and to the world. Insofar as the kingdom prospers, God will be glorified, and we will find our highest pleasure.

Or we can think of the relationship of these goal-formulations as follows: Glorifying God is normative, enjoying him is existential, and seeking his kingdom is historical and therefore situational.

So to speak of the kingdom as ethical goal is to focus on the important factor of historical development. Our goal is not obedience in the abstract, but participation in a specific historical program. So everything we do should in some way contribute to the progress of that kingdom program. Not only should our own lives be righteous, but we should be seeking to establish God’s righteousness on the earth.

## The Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission

The dynamism of the kingdom becomes even more evident when we consider two more specific forms of the biblical goal of human life. These are the Cultural Mandate of Gen. 1:28, and the Great Commission of Matt. 28:18-20.

---

<sup>330</sup> Cornelius Van Til’s favorite description of the goal of human life was “the kingdom of God as man’s *summum bonum*,” *Christian-Theistic Ethics* (NP: Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971), 44, cf. 41-151.

God gave the cultural mandate to Adam and Eve at their creation. Their first recorded experience was the word of God giving this mandate to them, defining their task on the earth:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

This mandate can be understood in three parts: (1) Man's whole life is to be governed by God's commands. In this passage, God's word claims the right to govern the whole direction of human life. In terms of our three perspectives, this is the normative side of the mandate. (2) Man is to subdue the earth and have dominion over all other creatures. Here, Adam and Eve are to image the power of God's lordship, taking control over the world to God's glory. This is the situational perspective of the mandate, showing how man is to use his power to bring his environment under his vassal lordship, ultimately to the glory of God.<sup>331</sup> (3) Man is to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth with human beings, again imaging God, who fills the earth with his divine presence. This part of the mandate corresponds to the existential perspective.

Jesus gives the Great Commission to his disciples following his resurrection, preceding his ascension to God's right hand. This commission establishes the church as a missionary body:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-20).

In the Old Testament too, God intended to bless all nations through his covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:3). But the predominant imagery of that blessing (as Isa. 2:1-4) was centripetal: the nations coming to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh. The Great Commission begins a centrifugal movement: God's people going out from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, and "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), to bring the kingdom to all nations. The Cultural Mandate, as we have seen, is also centrifugal. So in the Great Commission, Jesus renews God's original purpose, to fill the earth with worshipers of the true God.

Of course, great events have intervened between the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission: the fall of man, and the redemptive work of Christ. If the earth is to be filled with worshipers of the true God, they must first be saved

---

<sup>331</sup> As I indicated in Chapter 15, this does not mean that Adam should exploit the natural world. Of course, to exercise godly dominion, he must not only make use of the other creatures, but also preserve and nurture them, imaging the structure of God's own dominion.

from sin, by the word and Spirit of God. So, unlike the Cultural Mandate, the Great Commission is focused on the communication of the gospel message, by which we are to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them a new way of living.

Otherwise, the two mandates cohere. The Great Commission, like the Cultural Mandate, can be described triperspectively: It is based on Jesus' sovereign control of all things, verse 18 (situational)<sup>332</sup>. It requires discipling, baptism, and teaching (normative). And it guarantees the presence of Jesus with his people for all time (existential).

We can also see a congruence between the two mandates in terms of another triad: seed, land, and divine promise. The divine promise is the norm that creates the obligation and insures the blessing. Land is the territory (situational) God has given for man to occupy. Seed is the presence of man on the earth, analogous to God's presence in the creation (existential). The Cultural Mandate begins with God's word of blessing, which calls Adam and Eve to fill the earth with their seed and to take dominion over the land.

Scripture continues to stress this triad through redemptive history. In Genesis 3, God responds to the fall by promises encased in threats (see Chapter 16), reiterating his normative will. Then he pronounces curses and blessings precisely in the areas of seed (childbearing) and land (man's toil). In these areas, man is to experience pain. But these are also to be God's means of preserving the human race until the child of the promise comes into the world.

All of the post-Adamic covenants are promises (normative) of land (situational) and seed (existential). God saves Noah by his word and he renews the Cultural Mandate in Gen. 9:7. Abraham, too, trusts in God's word to give him land (Canaan) and seed (descendants through Isaac, as the sand and the stars, Gen. 22:17). In the Mosaic covenant, God renews the promise of land and chooses a people to fill that land. For David, God promises that a royal seed will always occupy the throne (2 Sam. 7:4-16, and that that seed will rule all the earth (Ps. 72).

The Great Commission carries this theme into the New Covenant. Christ is himself the seed of the promise, the fulfillment of Gen. 3:15. He fills all things with his presence (Eph. 1:23, 4:10). And he takes title to all lands in God's creation (Matt. 28:18). It might seem, then, that there is nothing left for believers to do, since Jesus has fulfilled the terms of the cultural mandate. But we must not

---

<sup>332</sup> Verse 18 uses the term "authority" (*exousia*), which I have usually associated with the normative perspective. In this context, however, I think that Jesus refers to his authority over all things to embolden his disciples, to recognize that no disaster can prevent the success of their mission. That encouragement brings his control (situational) to the fore. But of course the situational and normative perspectives are inseparable. The situational is always normative in the sense that God's authority (normative) extends to all events of nature and history (situational).

forget that we live in a semi-eschatological age, the age of the already and the not-yet. This is the age in which Christ has fulfilled history, but in which nevertheless he calls his disciples to apply his finished work.

That call is the Great Commission. Believers too are to fill the earth with worshipers of God and thus to take dominion of all lands, by the resources that Christ gives them from heaven. Now the land is the whole earth, not just Palestine, and the seed are all those who have been begotten by God's Spirit. Thus will be fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9).

The Great Commission, therefore, can be understood as a republication of the Cultural Mandate for the semi-eschatological age. Unlike the original Cultural Mandate, it presupposes the existence of sin and the accomplishment of redemption. It recognizes that if the world is to be filled with worshipers of God, subduing the earth as his vassal kings, they must first be converted to Christ through the preaching of the gospel. But when the evangelization of the world is complete, the result will be that envisaged in the Cultural Mandate.

In Reformed circles there have been different views concerning the relation of these two mandates. Some have thought that the Cultural Mandate is obsolete, because of the fall and redemption, and because Christ has already filled and subdued all things. On that view, Christians should be concerned only with the work of the gospel, not with bringing potentialities out of the earth for human dominion. Secular work is legitimate, but only as a means of supporting the work of the Great Commission.

Others believe that since the Cultural Mandate is the original mandate given to Adam, a creation ordinance (see Chapter 13), it should be the main focus of human life. Some, indeed, on this view, are called to preach the gospel, but that is only one way of fulfilling the Cultural Mandate.

If, however, I am right about the conceptual congruence of these two mandates and the semi-eschatological nature of Christ's fulfillment of Gen. 1:28, then, first, the Cultural Mandate continues in force. It is right and good for us to explore and inhabit the earth and to use its resources for the glory of God and the betterment of human life. The works of science, art, technology, study, government, and so on are good, when done for God. These are good in themselves, not only as means to bring people to faith.

In the broadest sense, however, the Cultural Mandate cannot be fulfilled until the fulfillment of the Great Commission. There cannot be a world full of worshipers of God until people repent of their sins and turn to Christ. So all of human life in this semi-eschatological age should have a redemptive focus. Everything we do should contribute in some way to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Construction of an office building, for example, can be good in

itself. But Christians involved in such a project should also ask how that project can be used to turn hearts to Christ, as by contributing some profits to the work of the church.

So the goal of human life in this age always has a redemptive aspect. Scripture emphasizes this fact in a number of ways:

1. As we saw in Chapter 16, the kingdom of God is not only the sovereign reign of God over creation, but specifically, as Vos said, “where God supernaturally carries through his supremacy against all opposing powers and brings man to the willing recognition of the same.”<sup>333</sup> So the kingdom is redemptive in character, and that redemptive kingdom is the goal of human life in Matt. 6:33. Jesus here contrasts that kingdom with lesser priorities (which are nonetheless necessities!), food, drink, and clothing. So it is the highest priority.

2. The love commandment in John 13:34-35 calls us to love as Christ loved us, and it says that this is the mark of those who are Jesus’ disciples. But that love of Christ is distinctly redemptive.

3. In 1 Cor. 9, Paul speaks of the goal of his life as saving human beings through the gospel (verses 19-22, cf. 10:33), and indeed gaining his own share of the benefit of the gospel (verses 23-27). We might think that these goals are unique to Paul’s calling as an apostle. But in 9:24 and 10:31-11:1 he urges the Corinthians to have the same goals as he. We saw earlier how 10:31 (“do all to the glory of God”) serves as a goal for all human life. Now we see the redemptive context of that goal.

4. In Phil. 3, Paul again sets forth the overall motivation of his life and ministry. He has counted “all things” as loss for Christ (verses 7-8); so everything in his life is now directed toward Christ. Pressing on toward the “prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (14) is the “one thing” he does (13), the “goal” he runs toward (14). Again, Paul does not adopt this goal for himself alone, but he presents this as a model for our imitation (15-17).

So everything we do should be done to advance, not only God’s purposes in general, but specifically his program of redemption as presented in the Great Commission.

### **Vocation**

So far, I have discussed goals primarily of a corporate kind: goals for the human race as a whole and for the church as God’s people. Glorifying God, enjoying him, and seeking his kingdom are universal goals as well as individual.

---

<sup>333</sup> Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 50.

But the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission are not really individual goals. As I indicated in Chapter 15, neither of these presents a goal for each individual to attain. Adam could not have replenished and subdued the earth all by himself. This task presupposes a society in which each member plays a different role in achieving the result. The same is true of the Great Commission. No individual believer can “teach all nations,” but the church as a body can do this with God’s help. God has gifted individuals differently (Rom. 12:3-8, 1 Cor. 12:1-31, Eph. 4:1-16), so each believer must determine what specific role God has enabled him to play in the fulfillment of the Commission.

Specific roles entail specific goals. The teacher in the church must seek to achieve clarity and effectiveness in his teaching. Someone laboring in mercy ministry must seek the goal of meeting the needs of all God brings his way, expressing to them the love of Christ.

Protestantism has described these individual roles and goals as *vocations*, divine callings. In the medieval period, Christians applied the term to positions in the church: priests, monks, and nuns. The Reformation broadened the term to include all believers, so that even those doing secular work have divine callings.<sup>334</sup> Paul uses the term in this broad sense in 1 Cor. 7:17.

Although the term vocation suggests a divine revelation to each individual of God’s assignment to him, the Reformers did not consider vocation to be a special revelation. Special revelation is limited to Scripture. But God gives to each believer wisdom to discover how God has gifted him and how he can best use that gift in God’s kingdom. That wisdom should of course be compared with the wisdom of other believers who can help us to evaluate our gifts. It would not be wrong to describe this process as “existential revelation” (see Chapter 9). In vocation, God enables us to apply the principles of Scripture to our own lives and to our circumstances. In this process we come to see God’s will for our lives<sup>335</sup> and to gain assurance that we are in the place where God wants us to be.

Vocation comes to us, then, by way of (1) God giving gifts to us, (2) the Spirit enabling us to discern those gifts through self-examination and through the confirmation of others in the church, (3) God providing opportunities for us to develop and exercise those gifts, (4) God providing wisdom so that we can use those gifts in ways that glorify him, extend his kingdom, fulfill his mandates, and in the end enjoy him forever.

---

<sup>334</sup> Calling in this sense differs from (1) “effectual calling,” God’s sovereign work of summoning elect people into union with Christ (as in Rom. 1:6-7) and from (2) the “gospel call” or “outward call” in which preachers of the gospel call their hearers to trust in Christ.

<sup>335</sup> In DG, 539-542, I suggest that there is a third sense in which Scripture uses the phrase “will of God,” alongside the decretive and perceptive senses. I think this is the case in Rom. 12:1-2, and similar expressions can be found in Eph. 5:8-10, Phil. 1:9-10, and Heb. 5:12-14. Vocation as discussed here is one kind of revelation of this will of God.

## Short-Range Goals

We continue to move from the general to the specific. As there are specific goals for each believer, so there are specific goals for each moment.

If Laura is asked to submit a report to her employer, she should do it “heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23-24). Paul directs this admonition specifically to slaves. How much more does it apply to those voluntarily employed.

There is no Scripture passage that specifically requires her to submit that report, on time, in the form requested. But this is the application of many more general teachings of Scripture, such as those we have already considered. Glorifying God, enjoying him, seeking his kingdom, obeying his mandates—all of these take place in thousands of individual decisions. The path toward the major goals of the Christian life requires many little steps.

So I have an obligation to teach a class in systematic theology in Classroom 3 of Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, at 2 PM today. So far as I know, nobody else has that specific ethical obligation. But I have it, because of my individual calling and because of the specific jobs that calling entails. And my goal is to cover certain subjects in that class in such a way as to help the students learn them. The big goals entail many little goals. We need to ask more often how our little tasks advance the big ones. And we need to consider whether the sublimity of the larger tasks gives shape to the details of life, motivating us to seek God’s glory again and again through the day.



## Section 3: The Existential Perspective

### Chapter 18: Goodness and Being

We have seen that the normative perspective of Christian ethics asks, “What is my duty before God?” The situational perspective asks, “How should I change the world in order to bring about those goals pleasing to God?” Now we shall investigate the existential perspective, in which the ethical question is “How must I be changed, if I am to please God?” The question may also be asked from a corporate standpoint, “How must we be changed, if we are to please God?” The three questions are ultimately equivalent, but they present different perspectives on ethical choice, and each can sometimes help us to correct our misapprehensions of the others.

The normative perspective can be seen as a Christian deontological ethic, the situational as a Christian teleological ethic, and the existential as a Christian existential ethic. These reflect the emphases of their non-Christian counterparts (as we investigated them in Chapters 6-8), but they bring these emphases together into a more coherent and fruitful unity, in the context of our covenant relationship to God.

I begin with some ontological observations, similar to those I made about the other two perspectives. Under the normative perspective (Chapter 9), I showed how God’s word is God himself, revealing himself through created media. Under the situational perspective (Chapter 15), I indicated that our basic situation is God himself, and all the persons and things he has made. Now again, under the existential perspective, we must consider the supremacy of God, and his relation to his creatures.

God is, not only the chief norm and the chief fact, but also the chief person, the chief subjectivity. As such, he is for us, not only law and situation, but also our example of holiness, righteousness, and love.<sup>336</sup> He is himself good, as only a person can be.<sup>337</sup> But to say that is not to say that he conforms to a standard of goodness imposed on him from above. Nor is it to say that he creates goodness as he creates the world, so that he could change it tomorrow. Goodness is not something above God, or something below God. Rather, goodness is God. God is his own goodness. Good is God’s own character, his eternal attribute. Without his goodness, he would not be God. So he will never be other than good. “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). And,

<sup>336</sup> I understand holiness, righteousness, and love, as forms of divine goodness. See DG, 394-401.

<sup>337</sup> This is true in both ethical and nonethical senses of goodness, but in this context I am thinking primarily of ethical goodness.

“Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8, cf. 16).<sup>338</sup>

This is to say that, like the highest being, the highest goodness is a person. He is not an impersonal, abstract form, like Plato’s good.<sup>339</sup> So our supreme standard of goodness, holiness, righteousness, and love is an absolute person. Since he is a person, he is not only a standard, but also an example to us of ethical perfection. He calls us to imitate what he is (Lev. 19:2) and what he does (Matt. 5:43-48, John 13:34-35).

So God does not need to have anyone tell him what to do. He does good because it is his character to do so. In the most important sense, he cannot do anything else. He does good, because it is his deepest desire, because in the most profound way he wants to do it. God’s goodness and his being are one.

### God’s Image and Human Goodness

Now God has made human beings to be his image, and his intention is for his own union of goodness and being to be reflected in us. Of course the image is never quite the same as the original reality. We know that human goodness is not inseparable from human nature as God’s goodness is from his, because we have indeed fallen from our original goodness. Nevertheless, God made Adam to be a good person (Gen. 1:31); he gave him a good ethical character.<sup>340</sup> It is a great mystery how Adam, good as he was, came to sin against God.<sup>341</sup>

Besides being good, Adam was free and responsible before God. I discussed the nature of human freedom and responsibility in DG.<sup>342</sup> The ethical implication is this: that Adam had to make his own decisions. He was responsible to obey God’s norms, but to do that he had to adopt God’s norms as his own. Adam had to decide whether God’s standards would become his own standards, the standards by which he would make his own decisions.

---

<sup>338</sup> This is the doctrine of divine simplicity, that all of God’s defining attributes are necessary to his being. For a general discussion of simplicity, see DG 225-236 and *passim* through the chapters dealing with the attributes.

<sup>339</sup> Cf. my discussion of Plato in Chapter 8, especially on the dialogue *Euthyphro*. Also recall my discussion in Chapter 3 of the importance of the fact that the Lord is a person, and the argument in Chapter 4 and AGG 93-102 that the highest standard of ethics must be personal.

<sup>340</sup> This is the common Reformed view, in contrast with the Roman Catholic position I discussed briefly in Chapter 17. On the Roman view, Adam is created with an inner tension between his senses and reason, a tension that required a special gift of grace (*donum superadditum*) to relieve. Reformed theology does not recognize any such tension in Adam’s original constitution. But WCF does say that Adam was “yet under a possibility of transgressing” (4.2). It does not specify what it was in Adam that made sin to be possible.

<sup>341</sup> John Murray calls this an “insoluble psychological and moral problem” in *Collected Writings 2* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 75.

<sup>342</sup> 119-159.

A person can obey another simply out of fear. But in our relation to God, that is hardly the ideal. God wants us to obey him because we believe that his norms are *right*, that he is indeed the highest standard of goodness. One who obeys only out of fear might think that the one he obeys has false standards. But he obeys anyway, because he doesn't want to be hurt. But to obey God in the fullest sense is always to confess that his standards are right and true. And to confess that is to adopt his standards as our own. And so a Christian who has faithfully internalized God's standards lives by standards that are both God's and his own. Such Christians do what they want to do, living by their own desires. That is the limited truth in the existential tradition of secular ethics (Chapter 6).

Since there is no ethical tension within man as originally created, I can add that Adam also reflected God in the unity of his ethical commitment. He did not have to wrestle with tensions between will and intellect, or emotions and reason, between heavenly ends and earthly ends. All of his being was an image of God's goodness.

Human beings reflect God's goodness in another way as well. As God's vassal kings, charged with taking dominion of the earth (Gen. 1:28), we have the responsibility to apply God's norms to the rest of creation. Everything in creation is subject to us as we carry out our cultural task. So God intends us not only to be good in our inmost being, but also to be lawgivers to the rest of creation. So as the image of God, we reflect God's ethical authority. As God is lawgiver, he has made us also to be lawgivers, as well as law-keepers. As such we seek to fill the earth with the righteousness and love of God.

So God created Adam to be something truly wonderful, a glorious image of God himself. Like God, though on a different level, Adam was worthy of respect and honor. The image of God is what makes human life exceedingly precious (Gen. 9:5-6, James 3:9).

### **God's Image and the Fall**

There is controversy in the church as to whether in the fall the image of God was lost (as in Lutheran teaching) or merely defaced or marred (as in Reformed). I hold to the latter view because of Bible references to the existence of the image in sinful people (Gen. 9:6, James 3:9). The continuance of the image implies that even after the fall, human beings are exceedingly precious in God's sight and ought to be in man's as well. Gen. 9:6 and James 3:9 invoke that preciousness as a principle to which we are morally responsible. Clearly the fall takes nothing away from our moral responsibility, though it inhibits us from carrying out that responsibility.

So it remains true, even after the fall, that we are responsible to internalize the law of God, so that it becomes the law of our being as well. Our sinfulness will impede this process until glory; but we should still seek as an ethical goal that unity of goodness with our being. As that unity increases, we will be more confident in deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong: that is, deciding according to our internalized divine standards.

We must never be satisfied with less than obedience to God from the heart. That is a large order, and it is a measure of our fallenness that we never do that perfectly in this life. Even when we conform outwardly to the law, we often note in ourselves some deficiency in inward motivation.

How does the fall affect the unity of human nature discussed earlier? As I said in the previous section, sin is not the result of inevitable conflict between various aspects of our being. Rather, it is the result of personal, willful choice, a choice of the whole person. It is true that following the fall, human beings often have to wrestle with ethical choices. A part of us wants to do right, another part to do wrong (Rom. 7). Sometimes we present this wrestling as a conflict between intellect and emotions, or between intellect and will. But as we shall see later, this is not the best way to describe such moral instability. Intellect, emotions, and will, even assuming that they can be distinguished in the conventional way, are equally fallen, equally subject to regeneration. So our struggle is not between intellect, emotions, and will, but between right and wrong.

All of our faculties and capacities are subject to temptation and therefore to inward ethical anxiety. We experience struggle between good and bad emotions, good and bad volitions, and good and bad thinking. These are different ways of saying that we struggle as whole persons between obedience and disobedience to our God. So even as fallen creatures, there is a unity in human nature, though there is inward tension as well.

### **God's Image and Redemption**

The atonement of Christ, applied to our hearts by the continuing work of the Spirit, renews us in the image of Christ (Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:10). This restores in principle the moral excellencies with which God originally created Adam. Sin does remain in the believer, not to be wholly eradicated until the return of Christ. But the *dominion* of sin is gone forever (Rom. 6:14).

The basis of Paul's confidence in Rom. 6:14 is that when Jesus died we died with him, and we were raised from the dead with him to newness of life (verses 1-11). John Murray<sup>343</sup> argues thoroughly and cogently that the believer's

---

<sup>343</sup> In his *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 202-228.

“old man” (verse 6), the unregenerate self enslaved to sin, is dead once for all, never to be resuscitated. He is not “dead, but still alive,” but simply dead.

Our ethical struggle, then, is not a struggle to put to death our unregenerate self, but rather to grow as regenerate people. Murray says,

The definitive transformation, summed up in the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new, does not remove the necessity or the fact of progressive renewal.<sup>344</sup>

Referring to this progressive renewal, he cites Eph. 4:23, Col. 3:10, 2 Cor. 3:18, Rom. 12:2.

But this *progressive* renewal is not represented as the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new, nor is it to be conceived of as the progressive crucifixion of the old man. It does mean the mortification of the deeds of the flesh and of all sin in heart and life. But it is the renewal of the ‘new man’ unto the attainment of that glory for which he is destined, conformity to the image of God’s Son.<sup>345</sup>

If, of course, the old man is simply dead, then it is something of a mystery as to why there is any sin in the new man, why anything remains to be mortified.<sup>346</sup> But this is the mystery of the “already and the not-yet” that we discussed in Chapter 16. Our present concern, however, is to indicate the unity of goodness and being in the new man. Our union with Christ in his death and resurrection leads to a unity in our own being. The ethical struggle is anomalous. Our deepest desire as regenerate believers, and the Spirit’s overall purpose for us, is to remove the remnants of sin from our hearts, so that our character is consistently righteous. The goal of God’s dealing with us is that one day it will be impossible for anyone to conceive of us apart from our good character, that our goodness becomes an essential and defining attribute of our being, as with God himself.

So Paul says of believers that they *are* light in the Lord (Eph. 5:8; cf. Matt. 5:14). As new covenant believers, the law is written on our hearts (Jer. 31:33,

---

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>346</sup> Strangely, Murray does not refer to the two passages in the New Testament that speak of mortification, Rom. 8:13 and Col. 3:5, though he does affirm the concept in the above quotes. But what is it that is mortified, if the old man is already dead? Perhaps we should recognize that although Scripture is consistent with itself, metaphors in the Bible need not be perfectly consistent with other metaphors. For example, Jesus is both the foundation of the church (1 Cor. 3:11) and the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20, where the apostles and prophets are the foundation). The point we should take from the mortification language of Scripture is that there is something in us that has irrevocably died with Christ, but there is something in us that remains to be put to death. Mortification, like other aspects of the Christian life, is both already and not-yet.

Heb. 8:10). We have God's word, not only as general and special revelation, but as existential revelation as well (Chapter 9): God's word illumined by God's Spirit.

In the meantime, there is a battle to be fought. Scripture attributes sanctification to a work of God's grace that begins in our death and resurrection with Christ and continues as God constantly renews us in the image of Christ (Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:10), creating us as his workmanship unto good works (Eph. 2:10, Tit. 2:14). But this work of divine grace does not justify a passive attitude on our part. We are not to wait for the Holy Spirit to act in our lives. Rather we are to take up arms against the forces of evil (Eph. 6:10-20) and to devote ourselves to good works (Tit. 3:8). The Christian life is not a walk in the park. It is a war, a race (1 Cor. 9:24-27). We are not to "let go and let God," but rather to follow Paul's mandate, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," not in spite of the fact, but because "it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13).

Sometimes the sovereignty of God excludes human responsibility. For example, because God alone is the creator, we cannot create ourselves. Because God is absolutely sovereign in providing atonement, we cannot atone for ourselves. His sovereignty excludes any attempt on our part to claim his distinctive prerogatives. But most often, God's sovereignty engages our responsibility, rather than detracting from it. So it is with sanctification.<sup>347</sup>

So Cornelius Van Til, perhaps to the surprise of some of his readers, says that "the primary ethical duty for man is self-realization," for "When man becomes truly the king of the universe the kingdom of God is realized, and when the kingdom of God is realized, God is glorified."<sup>348</sup> Van Til expounds the concept of self-realization in three subheadings: (1) "Man's will needs to become increasingly *spontaneous* in its reactivity,"<sup>349</sup> (2) "...man's will needs to become increasingly *fixed in its self-determination*,"<sup>350</sup> and (3) "man's will must increase in *momentum*."<sup>351</sup> His illustration of momentum is a growing business: as the business increases, its managers need to increase in "alertness, stability, and comprehensiveness of decision."<sup>352</sup>

Here Van Til uses many bywords of the existential tradition. But he sees no tension between this language and his overall emphasis on the authority of God's law and the kingdom of God as man's *summum bonum*. For Van Til as for

---

<sup>347</sup> For the general relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, see DG, 119-159. See also my comments on quietism in Chapter 12 of the present volume. Quietism has appeared, not only in Lutheranism, but also in other Christian circles, such as the "victorious life" teaching of the Keswick Bible conferences. See B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958).

<sup>348</sup> Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Ethics* (NP: Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971), 45.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*

Scripture, God's sovereign control and authority do not exclude, but encourage a bracing sense of human responsibility and a deep reflection upon human ethical subjectivity. Note especially his emphasis on the freedom of the believer. Our trust in God does not extinguish our spontaneity, but rather fires it up. Our will is indeed God-determined, but also self-determined. And redemption creates within us a "momentum" toward godliness, a momentum that comes from within, as well as from without.

So we should not follow those who think that a proper emphasis on the objectivity of redemption excludes an emphasis on subjectivity. Divine grace, atonement, and justification are certainly objective—realities occurring outside ourselves, which we cannot change. But regeneration and sanctification are realities also. They too are objective works of God's grace, but they are also events that occur within us. And sanctification is a process for which we, together with God, must take responsibility. Christian ethics requires consideration of both the objective and the subjective, and of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

## Chapter 19: Motives and Virtues

In Chapter 3, I discussed three “necessary and sufficient conditions of good works” mentioned in WCF 16.7, namely right standard, right goal, and right motive. Under the normative perspective (especially Chapter 9), I discussed the standard, the word of God in its various forms. Under the situational perspective (especially Chapter 17), I discussed the goal, the glory of God, which, like the word of God, can be particularized in various ways (human enjoyment of God, the kingdom of God, the Cultural Mandate, the Great Commission). In this chapter, as part of the existential perspective, I shall consider the motive of Christian ethics.

A motive is “an emotion, desire, physiological need, or similar impulse that acts as an incitement to action.”<sup>353</sup> Some motives are desires to accomplish some specific result in the external world, as when a prosecutor says of a defendant, “his motive was revenge.” In that context, “motive” becomes roughly synonymous with “goal.” We discussed goals under the situational perspective, but since the desire to achieve a goal is subjective we might have carried on much of that discussion under the existential perspective. This is another example of how the three perspectives overlap.

But in the present discussion, I will focus on the inner, subjective dimensions of motive, those aspects of character, desire and feeling that incite us to good actions or bad.

Scripture is clear in teaching that a right motive is necessary for a human action to be good. Both Old Testament (Deut. 6:5-6) and New (Matt. 5:8, 28, 6:21, 12:34-35, 15:8, 18-19, 22:37, Rom. 6:17, 10:9-10, etc.) emphasize that true obedience to God is from the heart. As we have seen, God intends for his law to be written, not only on stone and paper, but also on the human heart (Jer. 31:33, Heb. 8:10). The heart is the center of human existence, the whole person as God sees him, the true self when all its masks are removed. So the heart is the motive of motives, the fundamental disposition of every person. The heart is the source of our most fundamental commitment, either to the service of God or to an idol. So it governs our actions (Matt. 15:19), words (Matt. 12:34), and thoughts (Matt. 9:4, 15:19).

Scripture strongly opposes hypocrisy, apparently good deeds done by people whose hearts are directed against God (Isa. 29:13-14, Matt. 15:8-9). Jesus sees this especially in the Pharisees, who did their good works to be seen by other people (Matt. 6:1-8, 23:5). External goodness is not enough, says

---

<sup>353</sup> *The American Heritage College Dictionary, Third Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), 890.



Jesus. Not only the outside, but the inside of the cup must be clean (Matt. 23:25-26).

So the apostle Paul tells us that love is necessary for any good work (1 Cor. 13), and the author of Hebrews (11:6) says that “without faith, it is impossible to please [God].” WCF 16.7 speaks of faith as that which purifies the heart, without mentioning any other motive to purity, evidently because faith is the sole instrument of justification. But Scripture, concerned not only with initial justification, but also with the continuing process of sanctification, mentions other motives as well, most notably love.

If love and faith are motives of good works, there is evidently a significant overlap between motives and virtues. That should not surprise us. Virtues, in Scripture, are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) applied to the heart (Eph. 6:6, many other passages). If the Spirit applies love, for example, to the heart of the believer, that believer becomes a loving person. He displays love in his behavior. Our behavior is always governed, motivated, by the character of our heart (Matt. 12:35). So the qualities of the regenerate character are motives, and our motives are virtues. This is to say that in a Christian view of things virtues never lie dormant. They are active, dynamic. They seek expression. They motivate. Motives are virtues and virtues are motives.

### **A Christian Virtue Ethic**

So the existential perspective of Christian ethics is not only a Christian counterpart of secular existential ethics. It is also a Christian virtue ethic. Recall in Chapter 3 the distinction between command ethics, narrative ethics, and virtue ethics. I maintain that a complete Christian ethic contains all three of these, and that each includes the others perspectively. I have presented a command ethic under the normative perspective, a narrative ethic under the situational. Now we should consider under the existential perspective what an ethic of virtue might mean in a covenantal Christian setting.

From what we have seen earlier, it is possible to teach ethics in several ways. In a command ethic, one sets forth the requirements of God’s word and seeks to apply those to all areas of human life. In a narrative ethic, we tell the story of God’s people, from creation, through the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, ascension of Jesus, to the present day as we anticipate the eschaton. There is no inconsistency between these two approaches, and they reinforce one another substantially. The commands of God must be applied to the whole situation of mankind, that situation described in the narrative. The

narrative includes events in which God gives commands to us, and it declares to us the resources that God has given us by grace to keep those commands.<sup>354</sup>

A Christian virtue ethic will focus on a description of the regenerate heart. It will describe the biblical virtues and show how they motivate us to do good works. It will give examples of people who are loving, faithful, self-controlled, and so on. In doing so, of course, it will also expound God's commands, for the virtues are what God requires of us. And it will expound the Christian narrative, for that story tells us what God has done to plant such virtues in our hearts. Ultimately, then, a Christian virtue ethic will differ from the other two only in emphasis, in perspective. But that perspective is very important. It provides a window into the soul.

In this book, my main discussion of ethical issues will be an exposition of the Ten Commandments, thus a command approach. This is in line with the Reformed tradition, which typically expounds Christian ethics in terms of the law of God. But it is important for us to know that this is not the only biblical option. A command ethic operates in terms of the normative perspective, but it is also possible to teach ethics focusing on the situational (narrative ethics) and existential (virtue ethics) perspectives. I would hope that authors other than me will take up this challenge: to write genuinely Reformed ethical treatises from situational and existential perspectives.

What follows will not be a complete virtue ethic or anything close to it. But it will attempt to list and describe some of the more important biblical virtues, virtues which, of course, motivate us to good works.

## Faith

The WLC, 72, defines saving or justifying faith as follows: "Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation."

---

<sup>354</sup> "Narrative ethics" in recent theology sometimes means an ethic without commands, an ethic in which we tell the story only to encourage ethical action and to suggest ethical possibilities or "trajectories," but not to define our ethical responsibilities. But that is to eviscerate the narrative of Scripture. The narrative as Scripture presents it is a narrative of God making demands on us, as well as making and fulfilling promises. To base ethics on a narrative devoid of revealed commands leaves us with no ethical standards except those derived from would-be autonomous human thought.

Scripture emphasizes faith<sup>355</sup> in two contexts: as the way in which we initially receive God's saving grace, and as a mentality that pervades the Christian life. Initial saving faith is the "alone instrument of justification."<sup>356</sup> It is not the basis or ground of salvation; Christ's atonement is the only basis or ground. Nor is faith the efficient cause of salvation; that can only be the grace of God. Rather, we are "justified by faith alone" in an "instrumental" sense. Faith is the instrument, or means, by which we receive the grace of God in Christ.

There is nothing in our faith that deserves, or merits salvation. We should not think that faith is the one work we can perform to earn God's favor. None of our works deserve that. Even our faith is defiled, weak, contaminated by sinful impulses. In that respect, faith is no different from any other work we perform. Why, then, does Scripture single out faith from among all our other works so that we are saved by faith, rather than by love or by longsuffering? Because the nature of faith is to receive grace. What saves is not faith itself, but what faith receives.

How does saving faith receive the grace of God? By believing God's promise.<sup>357</sup> *Believe* is the verb-form of the noun *faith*. Concerning Abraham, Paul says, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,<sup>21</sup> fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Rom. 4:20-21). Paul adds, "That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness" (22), and he presents such faith as a model of saving faith in Christ (24-25).

The example of Abraham connects the two phases of faith that I mentioned in the first paragraph: initial saving faith and faith as a mentality that pervades the Christian life. Paul's concern in Rom. 4 is the doctrine of justification by faith. But Abraham's faith did not occur only at the beginning of his relationship with God. It continued through his whole life. Rom. 4 describes incidents that occurred long after he first responded to God's call in Gen. 12:1-4. So Heb. 11 lists Abraham among the many Old Testament saints who lived by faith. Like them, he trusted God's promise, despite the fact that it was unfulfilled

---

<sup>355</sup> Here I enumerate Scripture's most theologically significant uses of *faith* and the corresponding verb *believe*. But there are other uses of these terms, uses that do not imply the salvation of the one who believes. For example, in John 8:31-59, Jesus addresses some Jews who are said to have "believed in him" (verse 31). The later conversation reveals, however, that these are in fact opposed to him. Here, belief or faith is a kind of initial and superficial commitment, not based on any inward change.

<sup>356</sup> WCF 11.2.

<sup>357</sup> Following the main part of the Reformed tradition, I identify saving faith-belief with trust, not merely with assent to propositions. See the relation between these in the definition given earlier from the WLC. For the relationship between trust and assent to propositions, see DKG, 54-57. To summarize: it is not entirely wrong to identify faith with propositional assent, as long as that assent is strong enough to govern our behavior and attitudes. But it is far less confusing to say that faith is trust in Christ through his word. In our usual way of speaking, trust includes assent and more: covenant friendship, reliance, and a disposition to obey.

through his earthly life. He looked toward “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16).

So Paul contrasts living by faith with living by sight (2 Cor. 5:7; cf. Mark 10:52). Many of God’s promises remain unfulfilled. We cannot verify them by our experience. But we look forward to them, because we trust God’s word above all other sources of authority, even above our own eyes. So “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). We trust in God, who made the world from no visible source (verse 3). With Moses, we see him “who is invisible” (27), so the visible challenges to our faith cannot prevail. The world says that seeing is believing. Jesus says, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” (John 11:40)

So faith, both in its initial and later expressions, is trusting God’s promise above any other considerations.

That trust is shown through our works. To trust another person is not merely to commend his words, but to act on them. So James says, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:18). This is the context of his later statement, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (verse 24). James is not contradicting Paul statements that we are justified apart from works (Rom. 3:27, 4:2, 6, 9:11, 32, 11:6, Gal. 2:16, 3:5, 10, etc.). He is saying that saving faith is necessarily a living, working faith. Faith justifies, not *because* it brings about good works, but because it is the means of receiving God’s grace. Yet it is not genuine unless it motivates good works. The Westminster Confession (11.2) tells us, “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.”

That fact should not surprise us, and we should not regard it as some kind of theological puzzle. The grace that faith receives is a grace that leads to good works. Scripture emphasizes this:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,<sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8-10)

...he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,<sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,<sup>7</sup> so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.<sup>8</sup> The saying is

trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. (Tit. 3:5-8, cf. 2:14)

So in Gal. 5:6, Paul speaks of “faith working through love.” God saves us by grace apart from works; but that grace produces works, for that is God’s intent, his reason for saving us. Our faith receives this grace and through it we begin to do good works, as God has planned.

Evangelicals are sometimes inclined to think of faith as an event that takes place in the mind, perhaps the experience of saying inaudibly “Yes, Lord, I believe.” But when we say phrases like that in our heads, we may sometimes be deceiving ourselves. It is possible to say such phrases to ourselves as mere forms, without any intention of changing our behavior. In those cases, these words are not expressions of faith; much less can we identify them with faith. “Yes, Lord, I believe” may be an expression of true faith, or it might not be.

We should identify faith, not with that phrase itself, but with the motive that underlies that phrase, when the phrase is uttered sincerely.<sup>358</sup> It is misleading, then, to say that faith is a “mental act,”<sup>359</sup> as much as it is misleading to call it a physical act (perhaps the act of coming forward in response to an altar call). It is rather a motivation underlying both mental and physical acts, when those are done to the glory of God. Faith can be seen equally, then, in faithful thoughts, words, or deeds. This analysis helps us to see more clearly both the distinction between faith and our other actions and the close relation between these. They are not identical, for the motivation of an act is not identical to the act. But, as James teaches us, our only means of recognizing faith in ourselves and others is through good works. Or, as Jesus says of false teachers, “you will recognize them through their fruits” (Matt. 7:16).

Scripture tells us that faith is both necessary and sufficient for good works. It is necessary, because “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6), and because “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). It is sufficient, because when we believe God, as did Abraham, God credits it to us for righteousness (Gen. 15:6). As Jesus said, “This

---

<sup>358</sup> Notice that I am not *defining* faith as a motive. My definition of faith is that of the WLC, cited earlier. I am only trying to indicate how faith is related to good works. Since saving faith receives and rests on Christ, it motivates us to live as Jesus does.

<sup>359</sup> Here I take issue with the position of Gordon Clark, set forth in his *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1961), 94-100. If one wishes to divide the human being exhaustively into two parts, mental and physical, then faith, not being a physical action, would have to be in the mental category. But it is very different from those episodic experiences we usually call “mental acts,” experiences of visualizing things to ourselves, talking to ourselves, solving problems, etc. It rather seems that motivations, like faith, require another category in addition to the physical and the mental. But I am disinclined toward such categorizations in general (see DKG, 319-346, and in the following chapter of this volume).

is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29). When our works (thoughts, words, and deeds) are true expressions of faith, they cannot be anything other than good and right.

So in a sense it is true to say “believe God and do as you please.” But as we have seen, to believe God is always to believe his word, and that includes his law. So the existential perspective never permits us to transgress the normative.

But the existential perspective gives us a different image of the Christian life from the others. We are not only scribes, poring over God’s statutes (normative) and pilgrims, walking toward a goal (situational), but also children, trusting their heavenly Father, knowing that he will prove true though everyone else is a liar (Rom. 3:4). So Scripture regularly commends those who believe, who have faith, even amid temptations to disbelieve (Matt. 8:10, 9:2, 22, 17:20, 21:22, Rom. 4:20-21, Heb. 11). The Christian life is a wonderful adventure, as we live by God’s promises, even when Satan tempts us to doubt and fear.

## Repentance

Repentance is not just believing that one is a sinner, or feeling sorry for one’s sins, or even hating them.<sup>360</sup> It is the very act of turning away from them. To turn from sin is to turn to goodness. So there is a very close relationship between repentance and faith. “Repentance unto life” in Acts 11:18 is virtually a synonym of faith. And in the WCF, 15.3, the relationship between repentance and pardon (part of justification) is the same as that between faith and justification:

Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.

Repentance and faith are opposite sides of a coin. You can’t have the one without the other. Faith is turning to Christ, and repentance is turning away from sin. These two turnings are the same motion. You can’t turn toward Christ without turning away from sin, and vice versa.

So as faith is a motive of good works, so is repentance. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came for John’s baptism, the Baptist exhorted them to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). If repentance is true

---

<sup>360</sup> Nor is it the Roman Catholic concept of penance, which includes the idea that one may partially pay God back for transgressions by making sacrifices or engaging in various devotional exercises.

repentance, it issues in good deeds. Paul presented the same challenge to Gentile converts (Acts 26:20). Compare 2 Tim. 2:25-26, Rev. 2:5.

So as the Christian life is a life of faith, it is also a life of repentance. As we journey ahead by trusting in God's promises, so we look back from time to time, noting how we have offended God and others, and asking forgiveness. All Christians confess in at least a theoretical way that repentance is important. We believe that all are sinners. Practically, however, we find it difficult to admit, to others, ourselves, and God, that we have personally done wrong and need to change. When someone criticizes our behavior, our first instinct is, too often, to defend ourselves. Although we confess in general terms that we have sinned, we don't want anyone to think that we have sinned in any specific way. That attitude is even more prominent among people in authority. For them, the stakes are higher. For a prominent person, to admit wrong is to endanger the status that one may have carefully nurtured for a long time.

So when a Christian leader freely admits wrong and asks forgiveness, many of us find that passing strange, but, in the long run, impressive. It is impressive, not only because of its rarity, but also because of its profoundly biblical character. It marks people who aim to lead as servants, rather than as masters (Matt. 20:25-28). It also enhances the leader's ability to deal with the sins of others, as Paul says in Gal. 6:1, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."<sup>361</sup>

## Hope

Having looked at faith, and repentance as an aspect of faith, we now look at the other two of the three "theological virtues" I mentioned in Chapter 3 and that occur together frequently in the New Testament. There I suggested that faith, hope, and love correspond to the three lordship attributes: faith focusing on the authority of God's word, hope on his control, his ability to bring about his purposes in the future, and love on his intimate presence with us. Each of these involve the other two; neither can be practiced without the others.

Hope is faith directed toward the future aspect of salvation, the "not-yet." Like faith, it is firm and sure, not tentative and wishful as our English usage often suggests. It is "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Heb. 6:19, cf. Rom. 5:5) based, like faith, on the revelation of God.

---

<sup>361</sup> In this section I have benefited greatly from the ministry of C. John Miller and his writings, particularly *Repentance and Twentieth-Century Man* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1980, 1998).

As such, hope, like faith, is a motive to good works. Our hope makes us bold (2 Cor. 3:12). The hope of salvation is the helmet that keeps us from the attacks of Satan, in 1 Thess. 5:8. In Col. 1:5, hope motivates faith and love! These passages review for us the teaching we considered in Chapter 16, that God's promises for the future motivate our behavior today. If we know that a wonderful reward awaits us, then we will let all our decisions be governed by that hope.

## Love

In Chapter 12, I mentioned that love is the center of biblical ethics. We saw there that the term love expresses the fundamental loyalty of the vassal to the Lord in a covenant. So love should be defined triperspectively as allegiance (normative), as well as action (situational) and affection (existential). In that chapter my main concern was to show the relation of love to law. My conclusion was that there is no conflict between these. The command of love requires obedience to God, though it also serves as a "provocative characterization" of the law. We also considered, under the heading of "moral heroism," the radicalism of love, that it goes beyond the surface meaning of the law to its depth, leading to extreme forms of obedience. The model is the love of Christ, giving himself in death for his people, setting us a standard of love far beyond that we normally set for ourselves (John 13:34-35).

Here I wish to consider various characteristics of love as a motive of good works. Paul in 1 Cor. 13:1-3 makes clear that no human work (including faith!) can be good unless it is motivated by love:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Without love, any attempt to do good will be a failure. Here are certain qualities of love that motivate good works:

### 1. *Covenant Loyalty*

As I indicated in Chapter 12, the fundamental demand of a suzerainty treaty is love, in the sense of exclusive loyalty. The vassal is not to make treaties with any king other than his covenant lord. The same is true in the covenant



between Yahweh and Israel. Notice how the term *love* is used in the great confession of the Mosaic Covenant, the *shema*:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut. 6:4-5)

Israel's love for Yahweh is one that allows no competition, that tolerates no rivals. So in the covenant document called the Decalogue, the first commandment is "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). This first commandment is, in effect, a law of love. In its exclusiveness, this love is closely parallel to marital love, so that in Scripture adultery and idolatry are symbols of one another.

In the New Testament as well, love is covenant loyalty, to Christ as lord. He has loved us in an exclusive way, by giving his life for his sheep (John 10:15). He gives that love to us (John 17:26), and we return that love to him, and to one another as members of his body (1 John 4:19-21). Our love to Jesus and to one another marks us as distinct from those outside the covenant (John 13:34-35).

Here we find prominently that element of love I earlier called "allegiance." God has chosen us, and we have chosen to be his servants, together with the body of his people. Love is being faithful to our covenant vows. Johan Douma says,

We understand more clearly exactly what love toward God really is when we see *love is a choice*. Because only Yahweh is God, Israel and we must choose for Him. *To love means to stick with your choice.*<sup>362</sup>

Douma also draws out well the parallel with marriage:

When a marriage gets into trouble, the only path to resolution is the choice to love. The emotional element in that love may be wholly or partially absent, but faithfulness must come out. Concretely, then, love means that husband and wife form no relationships with third parties, but maintain the choice they made for each other with their wedding vows. The same is true with our relationship with the Lord.<sup>363</sup>

Both in divine and human covenants, loyalty is not only a negative requirement, forbidding rival alliances, but also a positive virtue, motivating us to serve the one to whom we are committed. So allegiance leads to action. In the Decalogue, the first commandment motivates the remaining nine, and in the New Testament, Jesus tells his disciples that if they love him, they will keep his commandments (John 14:15, etc.).

<sup>362</sup> Douma, *The Ten Commandments* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996), 21.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

## 2. Gratefulness

In the suzerainty-treaty structure of the covenant document (see Chapter 3), the love command follows the historical prologue, which sets out the gracious deeds of the Great King. So in the Decalogue, the first commandment, the requirement of exclusive love, follows the statement of Yahweh's deliverance: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). Here love is Israel's grateful response to redemption.

Similarly, in the New Testament, we love because God first loved us in Christ (1 John 4:7-21), and we love as he loved us (John 13:34-35). So the Heidelberg Catechism treats the Decalogue under the category of "gratitude" in its general outline of guilt, grace, and gratitude:

Q2: How many things are necessary for you to know, that in this comfort you may live and die happily?

A2: Three things: First, the greatness of my sin and misery. Second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery. Third, how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption.

It is not that we can pay God back for salvation, or even try to pay back a small portion. God's gift of salvation is too large for us to even begin to measure (Eph. 3:18-19). Nevertheless, the only appropriate attitude for those bought with so great a price is thankfulness (Luke 17:12-19). And thankfulness, like loyalty, is not only a feeling, but a disposition toward actions that express that thankfulness. Those who are thankful to God will not bow to idols, take his name in vain, violate his day, dishonor their parents, and so on.

Gratefulness and allegiance, therefore, are inseparable. But gratefulness adds to allegiance a further perspective on our love. Even on the human level, when someone gives us a large gift, we feel an obligation to please him. Ingratitude, though widely practiced, is universally despised. If our salvation is the greatest gift anyone has ever given, the greatest gift imaginable, then how can we do anything other than give ourselves wholeheartedly to our covenant Lord? How can we be other than deeply wounded at the very thought of betraying him?

## 3. Comprehensive Reorientation of Life

The grateful allegiance we owe to God is comprehensive. That is, it reorients every aspect of life.<sup>364</sup> Earlier we saw in Deut. 6:4-5 the command to love God with heart, soul, and might. Jesus replaces “might” with “mind” in Matt. 22:37, and he adds mind to might in Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27. Certainly Jesus is not distorting the meaning of Deut. 6:4-5. Love with the mind is implicit in that passage, the purpose of which is not to limit our love to certain specific human faculties, but to expand it to every area of life, centered in the heart. Similarly, we have seen the apostle Paul exhorting us, “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Note also the comprehensiveness of love as a way of life in 1 Cor. 13, its necessity for all other human moral acts (verses 1-3), and its connection with other moral virtues:

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

So covenant love reorients everything we say, do-- and feel. People have sometimes said that the love described in Deuteronomy is a kind of political allegiance, which does not gain any emotional content until later in Israel’s history, as in Hosea’s love for his unfaithful wife. Certainly covenant love is allegiance, and I don’t object to the term *political*. But opposition between the political and the emotional fails to account for the comprehensive language of Deut. 6:4-5 and the nature of our “political” allegiance to Yahweh. The covenant is a political relationship, at least metaphorically, but a political relationship of a unique kind. If our exclusive love for Yahweh the lord permeates all of our existence from the heart, as in Deut. 6, it certainly permeates all of life: our emotions, as our intellect and will. The heart governs all aspects of human life. And if God is the greatest allegiance of our heart, he is our greatest passion as well. Our greatest desire is to serve him. One cannot love another wholeheartedly while remaining emotionally cool toward him.

So it shouldn’t surprise us when in Scripture God’s love for us takes on a passionate character (Ezek. 16), with marital and even sexual imagery. Similarly, note fatherly and maternal figures of God’s compassion in Ps. 103:13, Isa. 49:15, 66:13, Hos. 11:3. Our allegiance to God should be equally passionate. A faithful heart creates faithful emotions. So, as I indicated earlier, biblical love is allegiance, action, and affection, existing together as a perspectival whole.

#### 4. Imitation of God’s Atoning Grace

---

<sup>364</sup> Recall the discussion of the comprehensiveness of Scripture in Chapter 10.

We saw in Chapter 9 that imitation of God is the fundamental principle of Christian ethics. We saw above how our love should image God's, in its depth, comprehensiveness, and passion.

In the history of redemption, God reveals himself particularly as the gracious God, the one who delivers those who have no claim on his mercy, even at the price of the death of his beloved Son. The love Scripture commands is a love that images God's love, specifically his redemptive love. As he has given Israel rest in redeeming them from Egypt, so they should give rest to others (Deut. 5:15). As he has forgiven us, we should forgive others (Matt. 6:12, 14-15, 18:21-35). And, more generally, as he has loved us, so we should love others (John 13:34-35, 1 John 4:7-21).

We might think that we can imitate Jesus in many ways, but not in his atoning love. After all, none of us can bring about the salvation of others by giving our lives. But remarkably, in the New Testament, it is the atonement that is the main point of comparison between the love of Christ and the love of the Christian. The love of God that we are to imitate is most fully displayed in the atonement, according to John 3:16, 15:13, Rom. 5:8, 8:39 (in context), Eph. 2:4-5, 2 Thess. 2:16, 1 John 3:16, 4:9-10, Rev. 1:5. Cf. Mark 10:45, 1 Pet. 2:18-25, Phil. 2:1-11.

God's love to us in the atonement is beyond measure (Eph. 3:18-19), in the depth of Jesus' suffering, including his estrangement from his Father, in the greatness of the blessing he bought for us, and also in our total lack of fitness for this blessing. As recipients of God's grace, we are supremely unattractive to him. We are the tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:9-13), the "poor and crippled and blind and lame" (Luke 14:21), those "still sinners" (Rom. 5:8) when Jesus came to die for us.

Truly, no sacrifice of ours can atone for the sins of someone else. But these passages make abundantly clear that our obligation is nothing less than to lay down our lives for one another, as Jesus did for us. Moral heroism, extreme self-sacrifice, as we discussed it in Chapter 12, is the heart of the Christian's ethical obligation.

For examples, revisit the discussions in Chapter 12 of the heroism of David's mighty men and of the poor widow who gave everything she had to the temple treasury. Paul generalizes in Phil. 2: to love in imitation of Christ is to put the interests of others ahead of our own: "<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (verses 3-4). It is remarkable that he produces one of the richest Christological passages in

Scripture in order to persuade people in the church to set aside their rivalries (perhaps especially Euodia and Syntyche, named specifically in 4:2).<sup>365</sup>

When we meditate on the cross, indeed our rivalries with Christians of other traditions, denominations, parties, usually seem rather trivial. Jesus died for us; can we not just bend a little to accommodate a brother or sister? The demands of love upon us seem so little compared to what love demanded of him.

And, when we consider how unattractive we were in God's eyes prior to the atonement, his love should move us especially to love the unlovely, especially those who don't seem to merit the compassion of the world: the poor, the weak, the disabled, hated minorities, and, least, but not least, the unborn.

### *5. Imitation of God's Common Grace: Loving Our Enemies*

"Common grace," defined as God's kindness to the nonelect, is something of a misnomer, since the word "grace" in English translations of Scripture almost always has a redemptive meaning. Yet it is clear that God's love extends to the unregenerate and even to the nonelect.<sup>366</sup> In Matt. 5:43-48, Jesus says that God loves his enemies and gives them good gifts. God's enemies certainly include the unregenerate and the nonelect. And Jesus presents this common-grace love as an example to us:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.<sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?<sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?<sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This teaching is not unique to the New Testament. In Ex. 23:4, God tells us to return our enemy's ox or donkey if we find it wandering away. Enmity with someone else, for whatever cause, should not keep us from showing kindness to him.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), following Jesus' affirmation of love as the heart of the law, shows that we are to offer help to

---

<sup>365</sup> This is another illustration of my general thesis (see Chapter 16) that the redemptive-historical emphasis of Scripture is not opposed to ethical teaching, but is given for the purpose of ethical application, as is all Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

<sup>366</sup> For a systematic discussion of the doctrine of common grace, see DG, 429-437.

people without putting them to a religious test. In Gal. 6:10, Paul says, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." Especially, he says, not exclusively. The household of faith, the church as our extended family, has first claim on our resources. But our hearts should be generous enough to help those outside the fellowship as God gives us opportunity.

Jesus' teaching on the love of enemies faces a major problem: the imprecatory Psalms, and other imprecatory passages in Scripture. In imprecation, one calls down God's judgments on others. Some of these passages even commend hatred of the wicked, as Psm. 119:113, 139:21-22. It would seem that such passages are incompatible with the Jesus' teaching that we should love our enemies.

But imprecations are found in the New Testament as well as the Old, on the lips of Christ and the apostles as well as the Psalmists. See Matt. 23:13-39, Gal. 1:8-9, Rev. 6:10, 18:20. On the other hand, as we have seen, the biblical ethic of love is also found in both Testaments. Scripture always proscribes personal vengeance<sup>367</sup> and calls us to love our enemies: Ex. 23:4-5, Lev. 19:17-18, Ps. 7:4-5, Prov. 20:22. So the problem we have in reconciling these two biblical themes cannot be met by some view of dispensational change.

Jesus did refuse to exercise divine vengeance during his earthly life, because he came not to judge the world, but to save. Thus he rebuked his disciples who wanted to call down fire from heaven upon a city that rejected them (Luke 9:54-55), but he did promise judgment on unbelieving cities in the last day (Matt. 11:20-24). In these passages we learn that Jesus' first advent was not to bring vengeance, but that ultimate vengeance is postponed until his return (which will be vengeful, II Thess. 1:6-10). But these facts in themselves neither authorize nor forbid the use of imprecatory prayers today.

Nor is it a sufficient solution to say that the imprecatory Psalms are prayers of Christ himself through his people.<sup>368</sup> While this is true in a sense, that merely raises the same question (the love/justice relation) again with respect to Christ's own motives, and it renders problematic the use of such sentiments in free prayer.

Meredith G. Kline<sup>369</sup> suggests that imprecatory Psalms represent an "intrusion" of the end-times into the present. In the final judgment, there will be no more common grace, but only eternal punishment, for the wicked. In that day, we

---

<sup>367</sup> Of course, the state is given the power to carry out divine vengeance in limited ways. See Rom 13 and our later discussion of the Fifth Commandment.

<sup>368</sup> As in James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1991). There are, however, a number of useful observations in this book.

<sup>369</sup> In "The Intrusion and the Decalogue," *Westminster Theological Journal* 16 (1953-54), 1-22, reprinted in Kline's *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 154-171.

will not be called to love our enemies, for those will be manifested as God's eternal enemies, subject only to death. In imprecatory Psalms, then, the speaker calls down upon his enemies God's final judgment.

Kline says that we may never call down God's wrath on people on our own initiative: the intrusion is exclusively within God's prerogative. The imprecations are divinely inspired. In the imprecatory Psalms, God knows that David's enemies are nonelect, eternally lost, so he inspires David to pronounce divine judgment upon them. But to make this view consistent, we should also conclude that we should not pray or sing the imprecatory Psalms, or at least we should not apply their sentiments to anyone other than the immediate enemies David had in mind. And we should not compose other songs like them. Yet it seems obvious to most readers of Scripture that the Book of Psalms is given for our present liturgical and devotional use, that they should be applied to analogous situations in our own experience, and that they serve as a model for our prayers and worship songs.

Imprecation does belong to the end-time, as an invocation of final judgment. Our own time is not that final time. But as we have seen in Chapter 16, ours is a time in which the last days have begun. God's final dealing with mankind is, as of now, already as well as not-yet. That Scripture seems sometimes to encourage, sometimes to discourage, imprecation expresses the tension between the fulfilled and the unfulfilled aspects of God's plan. The problem is that, contrary to Kline, Scripture does not clearly tell us when to use imprecations and when not to. There is nothing in Scripture that says specifically that we may pray imprecatory prayers only when they are divinely inspired, and only when we are not applying them to anyone in our own time.

I was helped by J. A. Motyer,<sup>370</sup> who reminds us of the larger biblical pattern, "vengeance is mine, says the Lord." The imprecatory Psalms, he points out, are prayers, calling upon God to remedy those injustices which neither we as individuals, nor the state, are competent to remedy. They do not seek personal vengeance; rather they leave vengeance to God, as God has demanded.

Imprecatory prayers are like all prayers in that there is always the qualification implicit in the phrases "thy will be done" or "in Jesus' name." When we ask for things, we should do it with the realization that our ultimate desire is God's glory. If God will be glorified in giving us our request, then we thank him; if he is more glorified in denying our request, our prayer has not thereby become useless; for all prayer is a recommitment to God's purpose, his kingdom. The Lord's Prayer beautifully exemplifies this spirit.

Now sometimes we are persuaded that someone is guilty of a great injustice that we are not able to deal with in our own strength. As in Biblical imprecations, the believer is to share this concern with God. In doing so, he must

---

<sup>370</sup> In Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 554.

share God's evaluation of injustice: that "because of these things God's wrath comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 5:6). And so he calls for divine vengeance to be exercised: not by himself, but by God.

Can we *love* an enemy and still call for God's wrath against him? Is a desire for divine judgment consistent with a desire for our enemy's salvation? The psychology of it is difficult, to be sure. But consider this example: when Idi Amin went abroad in Uganda, killing Christians right and left simply to satisfy his personal hatred, many Christians prayed that God would bring vengeance upon him. Such vengeance, of course, does not, either in the Psalms or in our example, necessarily entail ultimate damnation. The prayer is primarily for a *historical* judgment. Though historical judgment is not entirely divorced in the biblical mind from ultimate damnation, the two are not inseparably conjoined either.

But what if God had converted Amin, instead of judging him? Would those Christians have been disappointed? Surely not; they would have glorified God for answering their prayer beyond their wildest expectations. Answering their prayer? Certainly. (1) In one sense, such a conversion would have precisely brought vengeance against this man, a vengeance visited by God's grace upon Christ in his atoning sacrifice. (2) Their prayer would have been answered in that Amin the persecutor would have received the sharpest divine rebuke (cf. "Saul, why do you persecute me?") and a historical defeat for his murderous regime. (3) Their prayer would have been answered in that their deepest desire was the glory of God.

Should the Christians, then, have prayed for his salvation rather than his judgment? No. Prayer is often somewhat immediate, and rightly so. Of course, Christians sometimes get into a mood where they start praying for all sorts of wild things: the conversion of people like Hitler, the conversion of all the members of the US Congress, the coming of Christ at 6 p.m. tonight, and so on. I do not rebuke the naive, immature faith that motivates such prayers. God often gives special help to those who are children at heart. Indeed, there are even times when the prayer of mature believers properly anticipates the broad sweep of history: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven." But most often, prayer is based on our hopes for the near-term. And biblical prayer follows this pattern: it is often realistically short-term in its expectations. We see a situation before us, and we make a tentative judgment, based on our understanding of God's usual workings (from Scripture and providence), as to what help we might reasonably expect. When Peter was in prison, the church prayed for his release, not for the conversion of everybody in the correctional system.

When Amin was ravaging the church, the immediate need was for judgment. Though one with a great childlike faith might have anticipated the possibility of Amin's conversion, to most Christians that was not an immediate



possibility, even taking account of the riches of God's grace. Amin was a militant Muslim, a hater of all things Christian, and mentally irrational to boot. Yes, God's grace has converted hopeless cases before; but this was not a time for considering big theological possibilities. It was time for an earnest cry for help, based on present realities in the light of Scripture. The best short-term possibility was judgment: the death of Amin or his expulsion from the country. So the prayer of these believers often did not explicitly include his conversion. But as I said earlier their prayer did not exclude that either; indeed that possibility was always implicit in the nature of divine judgment (which provides for and offers atonement), in the nature of salvation (which is always a judgment upon sin) and in the qualification "thy will be done." I suspect that this is also the way the earliest believers prayed for Saul the persecutor.

What about the "hatred" expressed in the imprecatory Psalms (e.g., 139:21f)? How is this compatible with Jesus's command to love, not hate, our enemies? Again, as we have distinguished between personal and divine vengeance, I think we must distinguish between two kinds of hatred. Love and hate in Scripture are patterns of behavior, as well as emotions.<sup>371</sup> To love is to seek another's benefit; to hate is to seek his destruction. When we pray for divine vengeance, granting all the above qualifications on that prayer, we are seeking the destruction of an enemy of God. We are "hating" that person. But in our individual relationships with that person, in which vengeance is excluded, we are to love, to seek what is best for our enemy. So Scripture similarly distinguishes between good and bad anger: the quickly aroused, difficult to extinguish, murderous anger of personal vengeance (Matt. 5:22), and the slowly aroused, easily extinguished, righteous anger of God's servants defending His honor (Eph. 4:26) (like the anger of God itself). So hatred and love are not contrary to one another in every respect. It is possible to have a godly hatred and a godly love toward the same person, paradoxical as that seems.<sup>372</sup>

We today may be called to cry for divine justice: against abortionists and abortion advocates, against homosexual militants who try to destroy the church's freedom to proclaim God's word, against the remaining anti-Christian dictators of the world, against those in bondage to false religions who think God has given them the right to kill innocent people. We crave great historical signs of God's displeasure with injustice. That desire is quite legitimate. But if God pleases instead to rebuke these movements by sending revival and converting the hearts of His enemies, our desire for divine judgment will be completely fulfilled. And in our cry for divine justice, the imprecatory Psalms will rightly guide our prayers.

And, strange as it may sound, we do have a responsibility to cultivate hatred of evil. In an age that takes the vilest behavior for granted, we are called

---

<sup>371</sup> In terms of our earlier analysis, love is action as well as affection, and hatred is action as well as revulsion.

<sup>372</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the relationship between love and hatred, see the discussion of God's own love and hatred in DG, 460-63.

to hate what God hates, as to love what God loves. Holy hatred and holy love are inseparable. If we love God, we will join him in his hatreds, both in our actions and in our feelings. So godly hatred, like godly love, is a virtue. And both serve as motives of Christian ethics.

### 6. *Seeking Out Responsibility*

In Chapter 12, I emphasized that love is a disposition to keep all the commandments of God. If we love him, we should keep his commandments. So I should here list as a characteristic of love that it seeks our responsibility.

All the commandments of the Decalogue except the fourth and fifth are put in negative terms, and that is the predominant mode of legal instruction in Scripture. One might imagine, then, that Christian ethics is largely negative, that it is a matter of avoiding things. Now the negative focus of biblical law is not wrong. It is a good warning that we live in a spiritually dangerous world, where temptation is rife. The Christian must learn to say no. But in fact, the biblical ethic is very positive, and we learn that especially from the law of love. For love is, emphatically, not just avoiding this or that spiritual danger. Love seeks every possible way to serve God and the neighbor. Love seeks, indeed, modes of moral heroism.

### **Other Motive-Virtues in the New Testament**

The Scriptures refer to many other virtues as well. There are several long lists of them and others noted here and there. These lists are not intended to be exhaustive, nor is it possible to define each virtue in sharp distinction from all the rest. The virtues overlap considerably. Each one implies and presupposes many others, perhaps all the others, just as faith, hope, and love, imply one another. So the virtues are more like multiple perspectives on the whole ethical life than like independent atomic constituents of ethical rectitude.

I have focused on the three “theological virtues,” faith, hope, and love. These include one another, as we’ve seen, and they include all the other biblical virtues as well. Someone with perfect love would also be perfectly joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, self-controlled, to use the list of virtues in Gal. 5:22-23. Col. 3:12-13 adds to this list compassion, humility, meekness, forbearance, and forgiveness, then adds “and above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Compare 2 Pet. 1:5-7:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,<sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and

self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,<sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

Again, love is the conclusion and the summation.

In each of these virtues, then, we see the workings of love, as in 1 Cor. 13:4-7 which I quoted earlier in this chapter.

Any of these virtues would reward further study, study that could be supplemented by a survey of the various non-virtues, with which Scripture contrasts the virtues (as in Rom. 1:29-31, Gal. 5:19-21, Eph. 5:3-5, Col. 3:5-10). I shall not be able here to go through these lists one by one. If I did, much of that discussion, of course, would overlap our later consideration of the Ten Commandments.

However, I should report some impressions that occurred to my hypertriadic mind as I perused these virtues. I would suggest that there are three major emphases in these virtues that parallel the three perspectives based on the Lordship attributes.

Looking only at the lists of positive qualities, I am struck by the following themes:

### 1. *Acceptance of God's Promises* (normative perspective)

We saw earlier that faith in Scripture is directed toward the promises of God and toward the fulfillment of those promises, as in Rom. 4 and Heb. 11. The godly person trusts God's word, even when it seems to conflict with other sorts of evidence, even the evidence of the senses. We see this theme also in the virtues of faithfulness, steadfastness, godliness (piety), patience, joy, and knowledge. We might call these the virtues of faith. Here the child of God continues steadfast in his trust, faithful to God's covenant, patient to the end. Having knowledge of God's revealed truth, he worships God in all of life (Rom. 12:1-2), recognizing God as Lord in everything.

### 2. *Humility Before Other People* (situational perspective)

If God's promises govern our lives, they free us from any autonomous attempts to create significance for ourselves. Such attempts are always at the expense of other people. With God as Lord, however, we need not fear man, and we need not define ourselves by dominating other people. Hence in the list of biblical virtues we see a prominent emphasis on humility, under such names as

meeekness, forbearance, forgiveness, gentleness, peace. So in Jesus' teaching, we return good for evil, turning the other cheek, walking the second mile (Matt. 5:38-42; cf. Rom. 12:14-21).

Stretching our conceptual scheme a bit, these virtues might be called virtues of hope, which I connected earlier in this chapter with the situational perspective. The point is that God is in control of this world, and we are not. Therefore, we are free from the need to be in control of every situation and to dominate other people. We recognize ourselves as what we are, sinners saved by grace, and we honor one another, knowing that our own honor comes from God and not from any source in this world. So we can be genuinely humble (knowing, as in the classic gag-line, that we have a lot to be humble about). We can ignore offenses, be gentle in correcting others (considering our own proneness to temptation, Gal 6:1-3), and seek peace with others, even when we are not entirely satisfied with the terms of peace.

### 3. *Affection for Others* (existential perspective)

As we trust in God and humble ourselves before him and other people, we find ourselves, not resenting others, but caring for them from the heart. So our list of virtues includes compassion, brotherly love, kindness, and goodness (benevolence). Although all the virtues display love in different ways, these affections seem to be most obviously virtues of love.

## **The Fear of the Lord**

I have so far been restricting my consideration of biblical virtues mainly to the New Testament. The New Testament contains lists of virtues, lists that are rare or nonexistent in the Old. The Old Testament teaches godly living mainly through laws, applying those laws by narratives, psalmody, wisdom teaching, and the covenant admonitions of the prophets. It does not focus much on virtues as subjective elements of godly character.

Yet there is one virtue that the Old Testament mentions very prominently, and which the New Testament also emphasizes, the fear of the Lord. So John Murray, in a profoundly enlightening discussion of the subject, says,

The fear of God is the soul of godliness. The emphasis of Scripture in both the Old Testament and the New requires no less significant a proposition.<sup>373</sup>

---

<sup>373</sup> Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 229. Much of this section summarizes Murray's discussion.

He mentions that in Scripture the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7) and of wisdom (Ps. 111:10). Job's unique, exemplary piety is founded on the fear of God (Job 1:8). In Isa. 11:2-3, the Messiah's unique endowment of the Spirit brings a delight in the fear of the Lord. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes, after describing alternative value systems, gives us his final word: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13). In the New Testament as well, the fear of God sums up the godly life (Luke 1:50, Acts 9:31, 2 Cor. 7:1, Col. 3:22, 1 Pet. 2:17). Murray observes,

This emphasis which Scripture places upon the fear of God evinces the bond that exists between religion and ethics. The fear of God is essentially a religious concept; it refers to the conception we entertain of God and the attitude of heart and mind that is ours by reason of that conception. Since the biblical ethic is grounded in and is the fruit of the fear of the Lord, we are apprised again that ethics has its source in religion and as our religion is so will be our ethic. This is to say also that what or whom we worship determines our behavior.<sup>374</sup>

Murray then distinguishes between two senses of "fear of God." The first is being afraid of God, which brings "terror and dread."<sup>375</sup> The second is "the fear of reverence" which "elicits confidence and love."<sup>376</sup> The first is appropriate when sinners stand in the presence of God, anticipating judgment. Murray says, "it is the essence of impiety not to be afraid of God when there is *reason* to be afraid."<sup>377</sup> He finds examples of this legitimate terror in Deut. 17:13, 21:21, Ps. 119:120. This theme is not absent either from the New Testament (Matt. 10:28, Luke 12:4-5, Rom. 11:20-21, Heb. 4:1, 10:27, 31, Rev. 15:3-4). Considering how terrible the judgments of God are, it would be wrong for us not to dread them.

But this fear of dread and terror cannot of itself lead us to love God. So it is not, Murray argues, the fear of God that is the soul of godliness. Rather,

The fear of God in which godliness consists is the fear which constrains adoration and love. It is the fear which consists in awe, reverence, honour, and worship, and all of these on the highest level of exercise.<sup>378</sup>

Reverential fear of God is the sense of living in God's constant presence. In considering the life of Abraham, Murray argues that it was because Abraham

---

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 231. Note that Murray does not advocate an ethic of natural law, as that phrase is sometimes understood (see Chapter 14).

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 236.

feared God that he obeyed God's commands, even the command to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22:11-12).

The same relationship can be traced in the other virtues that adorned Abraham's character. Why could he have been so magnanimous to Lot? It was because he feared the Lord and trusted his promise and his providence. He had no need to be mean. He feared and trusted the Lord. Why could he have been magnanimous to the king of Sodom? It was because he feared the Lord, God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, and might not allow the enrichment offered to prejudice the independence of his faith; he needed not to be graspingly acquisitive... *That* is all-pervasive God-consciousness, and it is God-consciousness conditioned by covenant-consciousness. This is the fear of God, or its indispensable corollary.<sup>379</sup>

Murray concludes by presenting the fear of God as an antidote to the superficial Christianity of our time. The phrase "God-fearing" seems to have disappeared from the vocabulary of Christian virtues, reflecting a lack of understanding of God's majesty, glory, and holiness:

The fear of God in us is that frame of heart and mind which reflects our apprehension of who and what God is, and who and what God is will tolerate nothing less than totality commitment to him.<sup>380</sup>

I have expounded Murray at length, because I think he provides here a necessary and neglected perspective on the Christian life. What he says here, of course, must be balanced by other emphases we have already considered, the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Although there is no contradiction between fearing God and loving him, we often find it hard to achieve an emotional state that incorporates both and neglects neither. Another reason for the difficulty which Murray does not discuss is the problem of relating the fear of God to the New Testament concept of the friendship of God (John 15:13-15), based on the redemptive work of Christ. Because Jesus has torn the temple veil by his sacrifice of himself, believers have bold access into the holiest place, such as was not known in the Old Testament (Heb. 10:19). How is this new intimacy, conferred by grace, compatible with the fear of the Lord?

It erases the need for fear in the sense of terror and dread (1 John 4:18), but not the need for reverence as we stand in God's presence. At the present time, however, it is not always easy in our experience to separate the two kinds of fear. Until the consummation, I suspect, there will always be some element of terror in our reverence for God. Thus there will always be some tension between the fear of the Lord and our experience of sonship.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 139-140. Murray follows this discussion with an interesting reflection on God as "the fear of Isaac" (Gen. 31:42, 53).

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 242.

But as for the relation between reverence and intimacy, we need to remind ourselves that our new friend Jesus, our heavenly Father, and the Spirit who dwells intimately within us are God indeed, the majestic, sovereign ruler of heaven and earth. The praise of God in the Psalms and the Book of Revelation express both intimacy and reverence. For many of us, there is tension here. But we do sometimes feel these two qualities fuse together in times of worship, sometimes in surprising ways. Christians are often overwhelmed with the consciousness that our Father God is the holy one who works all things according to his eternal plan. May that unity of fear and love extend to all aspects of our lives.

## Chapter 20: The New Life as a Source of Ethical Knowledge

As I indicated in DKG, knowledge always involves a subject (the knower), an object (the known) and a norm (the standard or criterion). This triperspectival understanding of epistemology pertains to ethical knowledge as well as to all other knowledge. Under the normative perspective, Chapters 9-13, I considered the criterion of ethical knowledge. Under the situational perspective, Chapters 14-17, I discussed the object of ethical knowledge, as well as such issues as general revelation, context, and goal.

Now under the existential perspective I shall talk about the subjective aspect of ethical knowledge. In this chapter we shall see the overlap between the existential and normative perspectives, for we shall see that the existential perspective is an indispensable means of coming to know ethical norms.

We cannot know anything without minds, that is, without sense organs, reason, and other mental capacities. And we cannot know anything without these capacities functioning together in a subjective process by which we discover truth.

In one sense, these subjective capacities and processes are themselves revelation. In Chapter 9, I argued that knowledge of God's revelation can be found through nature and history, through language, and through persons. Human beings are made in the image of God, and so they are themselves revelation. We find that revelation in everything human beings are and do, including their thought processes. So we need not fear that in investigating these thought processes we are abandoning revelation.

Further, as we have seen, Scripture teaches that God actually writes his words on our hearts: that is inwardly, subjectively. Without this divine act we cannot understand, believe, or apply the revelation of Scripture itself. Traditionally, Reformed theology has described this divine work as illumination, but in Chapter 9 I argued that it is equally biblical to call it "existential revelation," coordinated with "general revelation" and "special revelation" in a triperspectival set. So our own subjectivity is an important locus of divine revelation, and we examine that here under the existential perspective.

In all of this, we should not forget the primacy of Scripture, as I presented it under the normative perspective. Although everything is revelation, including our own thought processes, Scripture plays a special role within this organism of revelation: (1) Scripture is the document of the covenant, the written constitution of the people of God. (2) It contains the gospel that alone can enable us to see other forms of revelation rightly. (3) It alone is an infallible text, words and



sentences authored by God himself. So, even though we come to know the content of Scripture through the processes of our own thinking, with the help of natural revelation (knowledge of languages, ancient culture, archaeology, etc.), the words of Scripture take precedence over any other source of knowledge. When by responsible methods of exegesis I come to believe Scripture teaches A, I must believe it, even though other sources teach not-A.

So Scripture is our primary guide even concerning the existential perspective, as it was concerning the situational and normative. But we have seen and shall see that Scripture gives great importance to the subjective side of knowledge.

## **Ethical Knowledge a Product of Sanctification**

### *1. The Knowledge of God*

In DKG I argued that knowing God, in Scripture, is not merely learning an additional fact or becoming familiar with an additional object. Rather, since God is a person, to know him is to enter a personal relationship with him. His relationship to us is covenantal, for he is Lord. Therefore to know him is to become his covenant servant.<sup>381</sup> Here the meaning of “know” is very close to “have as a friend,” as in “I know Bill.” In the covenant, we are God’s people and he is our God. He makes everything work for our good, and we seek to glorify him. Thus obedience is a constituent aspect of this knowledge (as Jer. 22:16, Hos. 6:6).

As we grow in grace, therefore, we grow in the knowledge of God. We come to know God better when we become more obedient to him. Knowing God, therefore, is not merely an intellectual process, but an ethical one as well. And, as we shall see, the intellectual itself presupposes the ethical.

### *2. Wisdom*

Besides the knowledge of God, *wisdom* is another virtue in Scripture that is both intellectual and ethical. Wisdom is a knowledge that penetrates to the deeper significance of things and therefore enables us to apply that knowledge to practical situations. Scripture often represents it as a skill, a knowing *how*, rather than knowing *that*. In Ex. 31:1-5, Bezalel and Oholiab have wisdom (ESV

---

<sup>381</sup> I am speaking here, of course, and through this chapter, of the believer’s knowledge of God. Scripture teaches (Rom. 1:21) that unbelievers also “know God,” but in a very different way: as an enemy, rather than as a friend. See DKG, 49-61.

translates “ability”) from the Spirit of God to produce designs and crafts for the tabernacle. In James 3:13-17, wisdom is clearly ethical, the skill of godly living:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.<sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.<sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.<sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.<sup>17</sup> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

Specifically, wisdom is the ability to do the right thing in difficult situations (Luke 21:14-15), especially to say the right thing (Acts 6:10, 1 Cor. 2:6 (cf. 1, 4, 13), 12:8, Col. 1:28, 2 Pet. 3:15).

So wisdom, personified as the wisdom of God, serves as an ethical guide (Prov. 3:5-6, 21-26). Wisdom is God’s own attribute, by which he made all things (Prov. 3:19, 8:22-31). He communicates it to us by his word and Spirit (Deut. 34:9, Prov. 30:5, Jer. 8:8-9, Acts 6:3, 1 Cor. 2:6-16, Col. 3:16, 2 Tim. 3:16) on the basis of our union with Christ (1 Cor. 1:24, 30, Col. 2:3).

Like the knowledge of God, then, wisdom is ethical in character, and our progress in wisdom is parallel to our progress in sanctification.

### 3. *Truth*

Truth has several dimensions in Scripture. There is “metaphysical” truth, which John Murray defines as

not so much the true in contrast with the false, or the real in contrast with the fictitious. It is the absolute as contrasted with the relative, the ultimate as contrasted with the derived, the eternal as contrasted with the temporal, the permanent as contrasted with the temporary, the complete in contrast with the partial, the substantial in contrast with the shadowy.<sup>382</sup>

Examples of this usage abound in the Johannine literature, as in John 1:9, 17, 14:6, 17:3, 1 John 5:20, and in Heb. 8:2.

The term *truth* is often used also in an “epistemological” sense, for correct statements, language that neither errs nor deceives. This usage is far more common in our language. Note, for example, how the Johannine writings speak

---

<sup>382</sup> Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 123.

of an authentic witness as true (John 5:31-32, 8:13-14, 16-17, 10:41, 19:35, 21:34).

Then there is also an “ethical” meaning of truth. Truth is something we can walk in, according to 1 Kings 2:4, Ps. 86:11, 1 John 1:6-7, 3 John 3-4. To walk in truth is to obey the commands of God. This language reflects the figure of the word of God as a light on our path (Ps. 119:105). Because God’s word is true in the metaphysical and epistemological senses, it can keep us from stumbling in our ethical pilgrimage.

Here too, then, we can see an ethical dimension to an epistemological term. We do not respond adequately to the truth until we apply it to life, until that truth changes our lives.

#### 4. *Doctrine*

The Greek terms based on *didasko* typically refer in the Pastoral Epistles to a teaching of the word of God that leads to spiritual health. This is “sound” or “healthy” teaching (1 Tim. 1:10, 4:6, 6:3, 2 Tim. 1:13, 4:3, Tit. 1:9). So doctrine, defined as this kind of teaching, also has an ethical goal. It is not given to us merely for intellectual contemplation.

Doctrine, or theology in this sense, comes to us in all parts of Scripture, not in formal propositions, but also in narratives, poetry, prophecy, letters, and apocalyptic. In Col. 3:16, Paul says that we teach one another in song. What distinguishes doctrine, then, is not an academic style or an intellectually rigorous approach, though the academic approach should not be despised. What rather distinguishes theology is its ethical goal, to bring the biblical message to bear on people’s lives. That indeed is the goal of Scripture itself (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

In this brief look at four terms important to theological epistemology, we have seen that knowledge has an ethical goal, and that therefore God’s regenerating and sanctifying grace is active in the processes by which we gain and deepen such knowledge.

### **Intellectual Knowledge and Ethical Knowledge**

We have seen that the knowledge of God, together with wisdom, truth, and doctrine, is an ethical knowledge. But the same is true even of “intellectual” or propositional knowledge, such as the knowledge that there is a bookstore on the corner. There is, indeed, no propositional knowledge without ethical knowledge. Let us look at this matter from two perspectives.

### 1. *The ethical presupposes the intellectual.*

It is common to hear Christians of various traditions (especially the Reformed) say that life is built on doctrine.<sup>383</sup> This statement is based on passages like Heb. 11:6 and 1 John 4:2-3. To live the Christian life, it is necessary (at least in the case of reasonably intelligent adults) to believe certain propositions: that God exists, that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, that Jesus died for our sins, that he has risen from the dead (1 Cor. 15:17-19).

The statement that life is built on doctrine misleads us, I think, by equating doctrine with a set of propositions. See the previous section to the contrary. But the intent of this slogan is biblical. Even if we define doctrine in a more biblical way, it is true that propositional beliefs are part of doctrine, that God calls us to believe those propositions, and that belief in those propositions changes our lives.

If the intellect is the organ that evaluates, believes, and disbelieves propositions (and I shall question that definition also at a later point), then it follows that Christian ethics presupposes intellectual beliefs. Certainly, as we saw in Chapter 16, Scripture regularly motivates us to obey God's word by a narrative, a set of historical facts. And we can receive that motivation only if we believe that the events of that narrative actually took place.

### 2. *The intellectual presupposes the ethical.*

But the opposite relationship also exists between obedience and propositional belief. It is also true that propositional belief, in the context of the Christian life, presupposes obedience. That is, it is not only true that life is built on doctrine, but also that doctrine is built on life.

Rom. 1:18-32, 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16 and other passages indicate that when people make an ethical decision to suppress the truth of God (Rom. 1:18), that leads them to believe lies (verse 25). So unbelief is defective, not only ethically, but intellectually as well. According to Rom. 1:19-20, God makes himself clearly known through the creation. Those who refuse to acknowledge him are "without

---

<sup>383</sup> "Life is built on doctrine" was a slogan of J. Gresham Machen and his movement to restore biblical orthodoxy to American Presbyterianism. This needed to be said, over against the liberals of the day (taking their cue from Friedrich Schleiermacher) who maintained the opposite. However, neither the liberals nor the Machenites, in my view, presented the full biblical picture, though the Machenites were, in their overall theology, far closer to the truth than the liberals. The present chapter is an attempt to restore balance.

excuse" (verse 20). That response to revelation is stupid. Even Satan, who appears in Scripture to be intellectually superior to human beings, is a model of irrationality, when, knowing God's power, he seeks to supplant God's rule. Satan's disobedience infects his intellect, and the intellects of all who follow him.

But if disobedience leads to stupidity, the opposite is also true: obedience leads to knowledge, to understanding. Jesus says, "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (John 7:17). Here Jesus teaches that an obedient disposition can lead to intellectual assurance. So begins a general theme of the Johannine writings that to know God we must keep his commandments (1 John 2:3-6, 4:8, 5:2-3). Those who do not love their brothers are in darkness (1 John 2:9-11), a metaphor of both moral and intellectual privation. 1 Cor. 8:1-4, 13:7, 11-13, 1 Tim. 1:5-11 also make knowledge dependent on love. Jesus makes knowledge of the glory of God to rest upon faith in John 11:40.

So the knowledge of God, even in its intellectual dimensions, requires the same work of the Spirit that brings ethical transformation (1 John 2:20-27, 4:2-3, 13-17, Eph. 1:17-18, 3:14-19).

In DKG<sup>384</sup> I discussed three passages that use the word *dokimazein*, meaning to approve through testing: Rom. 12:1-2, Eph. 5:8-10, and Phil. 1:9-11. In these passages it is clear that we come to know the will of God, not only by reading the Bible or otherwise receiving propositional information, but through the process of ethical discipline: the sacrifice of our bodies (Rom. 12:1), nonconformity to the world, transformation by the renewal of our mind (Rom. 12:2), walking as children of light (Eph. 5:8), abounding in love (Phil. 1:9). In the Philippians passage, we learn again that love produces discernment.

Heb. 5:11-14<sup>385</sup> makes a similar point, though it does not use the word *dokimazein*. Deep doctrinal discussion (in context, the Melchizedek priesthood of Jesus) can be appreciated only by those who are ethically and spiritually mature, "who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." Theology is most helpful for people on the front lines of the spiritual warfare, people who see in actual moral combat how important the doctrines are.

So sanctification presupposes knowing our duty; but the reverse is also the case.

So we can see that the intellect is part of life. Its health depends on the health of the whole person, both physically and ethically. As with all other human actions, intellectual actions are subject to the effects of sin and of regeneration-sanctification. Thinking, like everything else we do, may be done in two ways: to

---

<sup>384</sup> 154-55.

<sup>385</sup> See discussion in *Ibid.*

the glory of God or to the glory of an idol. So thinking, like every other human act, is subject to God's norms, should seek the glory of God, and should be motivated by faith and love. The intellectual is ethical, and epistemology may be seen as a subdivision of ethics.<sup>386</sup>

Regularly, we use practical tests to determine if someone understands a concept. If someone has the right concept of a triangle, for example, we expect him to be able to draw one. Having a concept entails a disposition to action. This fact is especially, though not exclusively, important in religious knowledge. One does not fully understand who God is unless he regards God as the most important person in his life, unless he is prepared to sacrifice his own pleasures for the overwhelming blessing of knowing God in Christ. Here, concepts and passions are not easily separated. Life and doctrine are interdependent.

### Moral Discernment

So we are prepared to look more closely at ethical epistemology, at the process by which we learn God's will for our actions. This is the process that we often refer to as ethical guidance.

We saw in Chapters 9-13 the importance of Scripture as the law of God. I argued that we gain knowledge of God's will by applying that law to our own circumstances, circumstances that I focused on in Chapters 14-17. Here I focus on the process of application, the subjective experience of applying God's word to circumstances.

To apply the word of God to circumstances requires a kind of moral vision. Such applications require the ability to see the circumstances *in the light of* biblical principles. In moral quandaries, we often ask questions such as "is this act murder?" or "is this act stealing?" For Christians, this is the challenge to give biblical names to human actions. Sometimes it is obvious: taking money out of a friend's wallet without authorization is what the Bible calls stealing. Sometimes it is less obvious: is it murder to remove this terminal patient from life support?<sup>387</sup> Is it fornication for unmarried people to engage in intimacies short of intercourse?

Although Scripture is sufficient as a source of God's words concerning our ethical life (Chapter 11), it does not speak directly to every situation, especially to

---

<sup>386</sup> Cf. DKG, 62-64.

<sup>387</sup> In Chapter 11, I discussed moral syllogisms, in which the first premise is a moral principle, the second a factual statement, and the conclusion an application of the moral principle to the factual statement. Example: Stealing is wrong, embezzling is stealing, therefore embezzling is wrong. In the present context I am referring to the same sort of application, but focusing on the capacities we have to formulate the second premise. We ask here, for example, how do we come to believe that embezzling is stealing, that abortion is murder, or that violating a speed limit is disrespect for ruling powers?

situations distinctive to modern life. It does not mention nuclear war, or internet pornography, or even abortion. So much of the work of application lies with us, led by the Spirit and by the general principles of Scripture. We also receive help, of course, from the church's traditions, the preaching of the word, parents, teachers and friends. As we mature in the faith (Heb. 5:11-14, again), we are better able to make such judgments.

The process of learning how to apply the word is somewhat, as the workings of the Holy Spirit are always difficult to describe (John 3:8). But one crucial element is learning to see *patterns* in our experience that can be compared with similar patterns mentioned in Scripture. Hijacking airplanes, for example, is different from stealing oxen, but there is a common pattern between these two kinds of events. Common patterns create *analogies* between the virtues and sins mentioned in the Bible and the various actions and moral qualities of people today. For example, we should ask how our dispositions compare with biblical characters that are positively or negatively exemplary: to what extent am I like King Saul? Like David? Like Judas? Like Peter?

In the last paragraph I have mentioned "seeing" as the source of our knowledge of analogous moral patterns. But this seeing is not the same as physical sight. Rather I am here using physical sight as a metaphor for the moral sensitivity described in Phil. 1:9 ("discernment")<sup>388</sup> and Heb. 5:11-14 ("powers of discernment").

Even in non-moral cases, there are forms of perception that transcend the powers of physical sight. In DKG<sup>389</sup> I referred to the "duck-rabbit," a set of lines which can resemble a duck or a rabbit depending on one's mental focus. One can have 20/20 vision, see all the lines in the diagram, without being able to identify it as a picture of a duck, or a picture of a rabbit, or both. Indeed, it is possible to look at the lines without seeing them as a picture of anything.<sup>390</sup> So "seeing as" is different from seeing. One can look at the lines without noting the pattern or the analogy.

The same is true in moral contexts. People with healthy sense organs may not be able to "see" moral patterns and analogies. Someone may be very much aware of something he has done, without being able to make the right moral evaluation of his act. For example, someone may assault another person, seriously injuring him, without understanding the wrongness of what he has done.

---

<sup>388</sup> This is the Greek term *aesthesis* from which we get English words like "aesthetic." In the Hebrews passage, the word *aistheterion*, from the same root, occurs in verse 14.

<sup>389</sup> 157.

<sup>390</sup> One can imagine such a response from members of a tribe that did not know about rabbits or ducks, or that did not use drawn lines to represent objects.

Even for believers, our inability to “see as” can lead to moral difficulty. Let’s say that I have a feeling of rage. I know how I feel, and I know what actions that feeling has impelled me to do. But what is the moral evaluation of that feeling? That may not be obvious. In part, I resist any negative evaluation of my own actions because of my pride. But there is also ambiguity in the concept of rage itself. Scripture says that rage, or anger, comes in two forms. One is righteous indignation, such as Scripture attributes to God and to Jesus when he cleansed the temple (John 2:17). The other is an outworking of murderous hatred (Matt. 5:22). How should I evaluate my own rage? Is it righteous indignation, or murderous hatred?

These questions cannot be answered by simple factual perceptions, in the usual sense. I may be aware of all the relevant passages of Scripture (such as the two mentioned above) without knowing how they apply in my case. Further, I may be very much aware of my own feelings and actions, and of the circumstances of those actions, without being able to make the right moral judgments. These judgments, therefore, are not merely the result of sense-experience or intellectual reasoning. Again, one can know the facts, without seeing the relevant patterns and analogies.<sup>391</sup>

But it does often happen that moral discernment comes upon us, that we are compelled to note that something is good or bad, right or wrong. Sometimes that discernment does happen simultaneously with a factual discovery: a Scripture text or a relevant fact, even though the discernment is not identical with such a discovery.

But sometimes moral discernment occurs in unexpected ways. In DKG<sup>392</sup> I referred to David’s adultery with Bathsheba, followed by his murder (in effect) of her husband Uriah (2 Sam. 11). After these events, David went through a period when he was complacent, unrepentant. We wonder how that can be. David, after all, was not ignorant of God’s law (see Ps. 19:7-13, for example). And he certainly was not ignorant about what he had done with Bathsheba and Uriah. But somehow David did not make the connection between God’s law and his own actions, in a way that would impress upon him the wrongness of his actions and his obligation to repent.

What did bring David to repentance was not the revelation of some fact about Scripture or the situation of which he was previously unaware, but an emotional shock. The prophet Nathan told him a story of a poor man who had one ewe lamb that he raised as a family pet. A rich man, who owned many sheep, stole the poor man’s lamb and killed it to feed a guest.

---

<sup>391</sup> This discussion is related to that of the naturalistic fallacy in Chapter 5. Moral values are mysterious in that they cannot be sensed, nor can they be simply deduced from factual premises. Attempts to derive them from non-moral premises are fallacious.

<sup>392</sup> 156-57.



Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity. Nathan said to David, "You are the man!..." (2 Sam. 12:5-7)

That story, with Nathan's application, drove David to repentance. Nathan presented no new facts, but he told a story that made evident the ethical pattern of David's actions. David had behaved as the wicked rich man, as one who took what was not his and who had no pity. Now David could see. Now he was able to apply the principles of God's law to his own actions.

Ethical discourse, therefore, is never merely a matter of setting forth facts and Bible passages. It is also a matter of wise counseling, of dealing with the subjective issues that stand in the way of moral insight. Scripture, therefore, teaches ethics in many ways: through laws and through narrative as we have seen, but also by Proverbs, parables, songs, personal address (as in both the Old Testament prophets and the letters of the New Testament), eschatological promises (see Chapter 16), apocalyptic vision.

We can also learn from such considerations that spiritual maturity plays a major role in ethical understanding. Two people may know the same Bible verses and the same facts, but they may disagree on the application of the former to the latter. That sort of disagreement may have many sources, but one may be simply that the one person is more mature spiritually than the other. The one, more than the other, may have his "powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 11:14). Such maturity comes through experience in fighting the spiritual warfare, availing oneself of God's means of grace in the word, the sacraments, worship and fellowship.

Some ethical arguments can be resolved by Bible teaching, or by learning more about relevant circumstances. Still others cannot be resolved until one or both parties develop more spiritual maturity. So perhaps the best way to deal with some ethical controversies is benign neglect: set them aside until one or both parties gain more spiritual maturity, that is, until God gives more resources for dealing with the problem.

So it is wrong to suppose that we must get all the answers to ethical questions before we fight the spiritual warfare, as if the intellect were in every respect prior to life. Rather, there may well be some ethical questions (like the theological questions of Heb. 5:11-14) that we will not be able to answer (or even fully appreciate) until we have been in spiritual combat with the forces of darkness.

### **The Doctrine of Guidance**

In John 8:12, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Here and elsewhere Scripture promises that God will guide his people. We have seen that Scripture is an important aspect of that guidance, as it is applied to natural revelation. If my previous discussion is correct, he also guides us subjectively, to enable us to apply Scripture to the circumstances of general revelation. This is part of the nature of "existential revelation" (Chapter 9).

This view of divine guidance contrasts with two others that are generally thought to be opposite to one another. One is an intellectualist view, that guidance is an academic affair, the process of intellectually studying the Scriptures. This view is often found, in practice if not in formulation, in Reformed circles. The other view is the view that God guides us by whispering in our ears, by giving us special revelation over and above the canon of Scripture. That view is sometimes found in the charismatic movement, though I do not believe it is held by all charismatics.

The interesting thing is that both of these views are intellectualist. Both agree that God guides mainly through revealing propositions and commands. On the first view, these are limited to Scripture; on the second view, they give knowledge beyond Scripture. Both views suppose that when we need guidance what we need is more information.

But if I am right, then guidance also requires a subjective competence, the ability to recognize analogous patterns and to apply those to oneself. Scripture is a great help to us in this respect: after all, Nathan's parable is in the Bible. But the Spirit also operates on us from within, giving us new eyes and hearts, giving us spiritual perception.

So God's ethical guidance of his people does not add new sentences to the canon of Scripture. But neither is it necessarily an academic or intellectual process. God deals with us personally, even inwardly. His operations within us are mysterious also, not to be simply described or categorized. He can work through the subconscious, through dreams, through memory and intuition, as well as through what we usually call the intellect.

## Chapter 21: The Organs of Ethical Knowledge

When we think of ethics as a subjective process of decision-making, we often consider various ethical “faculties,” aspects of the mind that play important roles in ethical knowledge, decisions, actions, and character. In a Christian context, these capacities are ways in which God enables us to make the right choices. In Chapter 20, we considered the process of gaining ethical knowledge in general terms. Here I shall become more specific and look at ethical capacities, faculties, abilities that function in ethical thought and action.

It is sometimes thought that reason, emotion, conscience, imagination, will, etc. are more or less autonomous units, battling one another for supremacy in each human life. I believe it is more scriptural to say that the whole person is the one who makes ethical decisions, and that the ethical faculties are ways of describing the person as he makes those decisions. In my view, reason, emotion, and so on are not conflicting voices within us, but are rather different ways of characterizing and describing the whole person. Reason is the whole person reasoning, emotion the whole person feeling, etc. Further, each of these is dependent on the others: reason is dependent on emotions, will, imagination, etc., and vice versa. The best model, in my judgment, is perspectival. All these faculties are perspectives on one another and on the whole person.

I made the same argument in DKG, Chapter 10<sup>393</sup> in regard to theology. But on my definition (Chapter 2), theology is ethics and ethics is theology. So what can be said about theological knowledge can also be said about ethical knowledge, with, again, some difference of perspective.

### The Heart

In general, the heart is the “center” of man’s being. It is what we are most fundamentally, as God sees us. It is what we are when all the masks are off. The heart is committed either to God (Deut. 6:4-5) or to an idol, “hardened” (Ex. 4:21, Deut. 15:7, 1 Sam. 6:6, 2 Chron. 36:13, Psm. 95:8, Mark 6:52, 8:17, Rom. 9:18, Heb. 3:8). That heart-commitment governs the fundamental direction of human life. In Luke 6:45, Jesus teaches us,

The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

---

<sup>393</sup> 319-346.

The heart is the seat of honesty and goodness (Luke 8:15), as well as evil lusts (Matt. 5:28). When the heart is hardened, the result is not only wickedness, but also ignorance (Isa. 6:10, John 12:40). The hypocrite may profess allegiance to God, but his heart is far from him (Matt. 15:8). Yet God knows the heart and will judge it (Jer. 11:20, Rom. 2:5), disclosing its inmost secrets (1 Cor. 4:5).

As we have seen, God writes his word upon the hearts of the regenerate. This means that we not only know God's word, but also that our deepest inclination is to obey it.

So the heart is the chief organ of moral knowledge and of our moral will, our desire to obey. As we have seen throughout our discussion of the existential perspective, knowledge and obedience are inseparable. In the heart, God places knowledge and obedience, and these nourish one another.

To say that the heart discerns God's will is to say that the whole person discerns it. That being the case, we should not press too hard the various divisions of the human mind into faculties such as reason, will, emotion. These distinctions are only aspects of the whole person as he thinks, decides, acts, and feels. Nevertheless, if the human person as a whole is the organ of ethical knowledge, then all aspects of that person are somehow involved in ethical knowledge. Thus there is some value in making further distinctions to see in more detail how that knowledge arises and functions.

## Conscience

Conscience is our God-given ability to discern good and evil.<sup>394</sup> Conscience convicts of sin (John 8:9) and commends us when we do right (Rom. 2:15, 2 Cor. 1:2). A "good" or "pure" conscience is one that generally approves one's behavior and does so accurately (Acts 23:1, 24:16, 1 Tim. 1:5, 19, 3:9, 2 Tim. 1:3, Heb. 13:18, 1 Pet. 3:16, 21), an "evil" conscience one that condemns in some important way (Heb. 10:22).

So conscience is a source of ethical knowledge, of existential revelation. We may identify it with that moral sense (*aisthesis, aistheterion*) we discussed in connection with Phil. 1:9 and Heb. 5:14. It enables us to see the patterns and analogies we discussed in Chapter 20.

---

<sup>394</sup> Scholastic philosophy distinguished between *synteresis* (or *synderesis*), our natural tendency toward good, and *conscience* (sometimes designated by the Greek *syneidesis*), which applies that moral sense to practical actions. In terms of the moral syllogism, *synteresis* determines the major premise, and *conscience* deduces the conclusion. (The minor premise comes from "an inferior sort of reason.") However, *conscience* certainly functions in other ways than in the production of syllogisms. In my vocabulary, and, I believe, that of Scripture, *conscience* includes *synteresis* and broadly indicates the source of all moral knowledge.

Nevertheless, conscience is not infallible. Paul speaks of some who have “weak” consciences (1 Cor. 8:7, 12). These have moral scruples (in this case against the eating of food offered to idols) that are not based in God’s word. Compare also Paul’s discussion in Rom. 14. I discussed both these passages in Chapter 11.

Conscience can be even more deeply perverted. In 1 Tim. 4:2 (cf. Tit. 1:15), Paul speaks of false teachers “whose consciences are seared.” A seared conscience is nearly destroyed,<sup>395</sup> no longer a reliable moral guide. When people refuse again and again to follow God and indulge in worse and worse sin, they may reach a point at which they have almost no consciousness of the difference between good and evil.

The perversion of the conscience leads to an ethical problem: should we always obey conscience, or should we sometimes disobey it? We might say that if conscience is weak or seared, we ought sometimes to disobey it. The problem, however, is that conscience defines for a person what is right. For a theist, conscience defines the will of God. So if we disobey conscience, even when conscience misleads, we see ourselves as doing what is wrong, even as violating the will of God. So if we violate a seared conscience, our action may be ethically right, but in our hearts, our intentions, we are choosing what is wrong. So the “strong” of Rom 14 must not induce the weak to act against their conscience, even though the consciences of the weak are misleading them. When you have a weak conscience, you can sin in one way by rejecting its dictates, and in another way by accepting them. I call this the paradox of ethical decision.

The only solution is a practical one: we need to train our consciences, so that they will rejoice in what is really good and condemn what is really evil.

Translations of the Old Testament rarely use the term conscience. But in 2 Sam. 24:10, after David has sinfully conducted a census of the people, we read that his “heart struck him.” Here, David’s heart serves as what the New Testament calls conscience. Cf. 1 Sam. 24:5, 1 Kings 9:4, 15:3, 14. So there is no metaphysical difference between heart and conscience. The two are perspectives on one another. The heart is the center of human personality. The conscience is the heart in its function as a moral guide. As we make moral decisions as whole persons, so we gain moral knowledge as whole persons.

## Experience

---

<sup>395</sup> I don’t believe that conscience can ever be totally destroyed. God always maintains his moral witness against sinners, as Rom. 1:18-32 indicates.

In the history of philosophy, *experience* usually refers to knowledge gained from the senses. An *empiricist* (taken from a Latin word for experience) believes that all human knowledge is based in sense experience.

English translations of Scripture rarely use the term *experience* or the various forms of *empirical*. But they do mention the sense organs of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Scripture sometimes speaks negatively of sensation, as when it contrasts faith with sight (see Chapter 19). But for the most part, it regards the senses positively, even with regard to the knowledge of God. Hear the excitement of the aged apostle in 1 John 1:1-3, as he recalls the apostles' experience of Jesus:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life- <sup>2</sup> the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us- <sup>3</sup> that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

Of course, we do not have today that kind of sense-experience of Jesus. But it is biblically important to understand that our faith is based on eyewitness testimony. As Peter says, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16; cf. Luke 1:2, 1 Cor. 15:1-12). Though Jesus commends those who believe without seeing, he offers to Thomas the opportunity to believe through sight (John 20:27). So, although we should not demand of God that he provide us with evidence of the senses, he has provided that to some people. And our faith rests upon the sense-experience of those God has chosen to be eyewitnesses.

Although we today cannot be witnesses in the same sense, nevertheless God continues to use our senses to communicate his truth. We could not read the Bible, for example, without sense organs. And the sacraments are, as the Reformers called them, "visible words," revelation given by God to the eyes, and to the touch, smell, and taste as well. The Lord's Supper fulfills in literal fashion the invitation of Ps. 34:8, "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"

Further, it is through the senses that we encounter natural revelation and learn of the situations to which we must apply the word of God. So the senses are not to be despised. God has given them to us as means of receiving his revelation, including moral revelation.

Of course, to deduce moral laws from sensations alone would be a naturalistic fallacy. But sensation is never alone. It is part of an epistemological complex. Critics of empiricism are right to say that we never learn anything from the senses by themselves. For one thing, there are such things as optical and aural illusions. To determine where the truth lies in the sensory world, we need minds, logical capacities, as well as sense organs. The senses provide data, but that data must be interpreted.

When I perceive a cow in the pasture, I not only experience an image on the retina of my eye. I also relate that image to a package of mental concepts, of which one is "cow." "Cow," as an abstract universal concept, does not come from sense experience alone, but by a combination of sensation and other mental capacities. So perceiving a cow is an act of the whole mind, not only of the sense organs. Indeed, whenever we speak of "seeing" or "hearing" something, we are usually referring, not to the sheer physiological process of receiving sensory data, but to an interpretive action involving all the faculties of the mind.

So we can understand further how experience has dimensions beyond the merely sensory. Seeing a cow in the field is an experience. But it is also an experience to observe one's own thinking processes, to sense God's presence in worship, to feel convicted of sin.

So experience is an important perspective on ethical knowledge. Like conscience, experience is a concept that refers to the whole process of gaining ethical knowledge. As a perspective on this process, it focuses on one's introspective awareness of things that are happening within himself and his (particularly sensory) apprehension of his environment. But that awareness in turn presupposes all other aspects of knowledge.

The obvious implication is that, as Heb. 5:14 tells us, experience is important for ethical discernment. Believers learn to make the right decisions by wrestling with such decisions day by day. They learn to defeat Satan by engaging in spiritual warfare.

A respected teacher of mine once described a Sunday School program in which five-year-old children sang "We are more than conquerors." Cute, my professor said, but somewhat laughable: they hadn't actually conquered anything. Well, I disagreed somewhat. As members of the body of Christ, these children had already conquered Satan, sin, and death, as surely as had the apostle Paul in Romans 8. Our conquest is not first an item of personal experience, but a conquest accomplished by Christ and by ourselves in him. Still, my professor's point was not entirely wrong. "We are more than conquerors" (Rom. 8:37) means a lot more coming from Paul than coming from five-year-old kids. Paul actually went through experiences of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword (as verse 35). When a man goes through such experiences and emerges victorious in Christ, that is deeply edifying to other

believers in a way that the testimony of inexperienced children can never be. Experience confers a degree of authority, to which Paul appeals often in his writings.

Experience, then, does not add to the canon of Scripture, but it does perform many positive functions in the Christian life. We can benefit greatly from the experiences of other believers and of ourselves.

So experience is another way to describe the complete process by which we learn to discern good and evil. As such, moral experience is virtually identical to conscience. And there is the same paradox with regard to experience that we saw with regard to conscience, the “paradox of ethical decision.” We ought always to act according to our experience, as we ought always to act according to conscience, because experience, like conscience, identifies what we regard as right or wrong. On the other hand, just as conscience can be defiled by sin, so our experience can be inadequate, misinterpreted, or misused. We sometimes make decisions, claiming that we have sufficient experience when in fact we do not. Or we make decisions based on an inadequate portion of experience, as when we ignore our experience of God’s word. Or we wrongly interpret and use our experience, because of our bent toward sin. Only God’s grace can give us adequate experience to make right moral decisions. In this regard also, experience and conscience are the same.

### **Reason**

Reason, or intellect, is the human capacity to make logical inferences and to judge the logical consistency of ideas and behavior. We have seen that in ethics reason plays major roles: (1) formulating and evaluating moral syllogisms, (2) determining relations between means and ends, (3) exegeting and applying Scripture, (4) analysis of situations to which Scripture applies, (5) understanding metaethics, the nature and methods of ethics.

Indeed, every aspect of ethical decision making uses reason in some way. We saw above that even perception is a rational process, not merely a sensory one. In perception, we connect our sense-data with rational concepts from the mind. So perception is dependent on reason.

However, the reverse is also true. Reason cannot accomplish anything unless it has an object—something to reason about. There can, for example, be no moral syllogisms without premises. And those premises require sensory knowledge; they cannot be derived from reason or logic alone. There can be no reasoning about means and ends without situations to analyze. There can be no reasoning about Scripture without Scripture.



So reason is dependent on the whole complex of factors within human knowledge. As sense-experience depends on reason, the reverse is also true. True perception involves reason, and true reasoning involves perception. So reason and experience are in the fullest sense the same, and both the same as conscience. These are three perspectives on our acts of ethical knowing. Reason may be described as the normative perspective, experience the situational and conscience the existential.

Again, with reason as with the others, the paradox of ethical decision enters the discussion. In one sense, we should always follow our reason (as with experience and conscience), for reason identifies what we consider to be right. We have an ethical obligation, of course, not only to do what is right, but also to do *what we think* is right. But like conscience and experience, reason is not infallible. Sometimes it guides us wrongly. Sin infects our reasoning, as Paul teaches in Rom. 1 and 1 Cor. 2:14. In Scripture there is an antithesis between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world. So even though we are obligated to obey reason, we sometimes sin when we do so.

So, like conscience and experience, reason requires God's grace to function rightly. God made our reason to function rightly only on the presupposition of the truth of his word. The authority of God's revelation is the highest of the laws of thought. By saving grace in Christ, God enables us to think according to that revelation.<sup>396</sup>

## Will

Will is our capacity for making decisions. So, by definition, the will is involved in all moral decisions and acts. Traditionally, will is contrasted with intellect (=reason) and emotions. So in some accounts, it almost seems as though will, intellect, and emotions are little beings up in our heads who vie for supremacy. Arguments have been made both about which of these three faculties is superior to the others and about which one *ought* to be superior. Philosophical movements have been identified by views of this alleged conflict: Aquinas has been called an intellectualist, Scotus a voluntarist, Kierkegaard an emotionalist.<sup>397</sup>

My own view, however, is that we make decisions as whole persons, and that intellect, will, and emotions are perspectives on the whole persons, not subsistent entities. The intellect is the person's ability to think, the will his capacity to decide, the emotions his capacity to feel. We are talking about three abilities that people have, not three independent entities within them. That I think is a more biblical perspective, for Scripture never distinguishes these three

---

<sup>396</sup> DKG argues this point at great length. That is the main theme of the book.

<sup>397</sup> Not to mention Hume, who taught that reason should be the slave of the passions.

capacities or makes any general statements about the superiority of one or the other.

On my view, the three abilities are interdependent. You can't make a decision (will) unless you judge (intellect) that it is the right thing to do. On the other hand, you cannot make the right judgment (intellect) unless you choose (will) to make it. The will is certainly involved in our intellectual judgments. As Paul teaches in Rom. 1, people *choose* to disbelieve in God, despite the sufficiency of the evidence for his existence. And, of course, God's grace enables them to choose otherwise. But in both cases, belief is a choice. The intellectual decision is a decision of the will. That is one reason why I have emphasized that the intellectual is moral, that there is an ethics of knowledge.

So will and intellect are dependent on one another, likewise choice and reason. They are not independent entities, but perspectives on the thoughts and choices of human beings. In everything we do, there is thought and choice. And we think about what to choose, and we choose what to think. And we choose what to think about what to choose, etc. We accept reasons because we choose them, and we choose them because we find such choices reasonable.

We do sometimes think and do things without making *conscious* choices. Note a couple examples: (1) In many cases, our choices are habitual, the product of choices made many years ago, which we follow today without reflection. I don't, for example, make a conscious choice to type the letter "y" at my computer with the second finger of my right hand. But at one time I did make such a choice, and I make a choice even today not to break that habit. (2) Some of our beliefs come upon us unbidden and virtually force themselves on us. I could not choose to believe, even with great intellectual exertions, that I am now on Mars. But even those beliefs can be resisted, as by people who choose to take hallucinogenic drugs. Most of us have made a contrary choice, to accept in general the world that our senses and reason present to us. So even our most ordinary forms of knowledge are not independent of choice. That is even more obviously true with regard to ethical knowledge.

Will too, of course, must be purified by God's regenerating and sanctifying grace, just as conscience, experience, and reason. God must teach us and enable us to choose good over evil, right over wrong. And as he does this, he also enables us to choose right reasons over wrong ones, good feelings over bad (see below), and good conscience over bad.<sup>398</sup> The paradox of ethical decision here is that on the one hand we must follow our will (here I am inclined to say, we can't help but follow the will); but since the will (as a perspective on the whole human personality) has been corrupted by sin, we must seek God's grace to point our will in different directions.

---

<sup>398</sup> It should be evident here that people (Arminians, Hyper-Calvinists, and confused souls) who think that Calvinism denies the importance of human choice don't know what they're talking about. In Calvinism, all behavior is chosen and therefore responsible.

## Imagination

Imagination has gained a bad reputation in some Christian circles, especially the Reformed, because of a focus on negative uses of the term in Scripture. In the KJV translation, the word occurs in Jer. 3:17, 7:24, 9:14, 11:8, and elsewhere, to designate the origin of false worship. Significantly, modern translations avoid that translation. In Jer. 3:17, the KJV reads, “neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart.” But the ESV says, “and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.” The term translated *imagination* in the KJV is uniformly translated *stubbornness* in the NIV and ESV. So these texts should not be taken, as they have in the past, to condemn imagination in some general way.

Nevertheless, Scripture does teach that idolatry is a product of the human mind or heart, and so it involves imagination even in our common modern sense of the term. This connection with idolatry does indicate that there are dangers in the human imagination.

But the biblical data does not forbid positive uses of the term. I find it helpful to define imagination as our ability to think of things that are not. In a typical example, an artist conceptualizes a statue before he creates it. That conceptualizing is a work of imagination. The artist imagines something that is not, before he brings something into being. Similarly, imagination has many applications to the arts, science, and technology. As such, imagination is a near-synonym of creativity, a reflection of God’s own creative work, also the working out of an imaginative plan.

But when you think about it, imagination has even broader functions. All of our thought and activity is a response to the past. But the past is no more. We remember it to some extent; but our overall conception of it is imaginative. Similarly, our thought and actions point toward the future, seeking to influence it. But the future, like the past, does not exist. Our knowledge of the future, such as it is, requires imagination. And what of the present? If the present is, as some have believed, a knife-edge between past and future, a moment that we cannot meaningfully respond to until it is past, then the present is non-being as well, to some extent a construction of the imagination. I don’t mean to press this point as a philosophical position, but there is enough truth in it to warrant the conclusion that imagination functions in all knowledge, not just the arts, sciences, and technology. And it appears that we cannot know anything without it. As such, imagination is a further perspective on knowledge. It presupposes reason, experience, and conscience, and they presuppose it.<sup>399</sup>

---

<sup>399</sup> As with conscience, I consider imagination part of the existential perspective on knowledge.

As imagination fills in the temporal sequence, so it extends our spatial reach. Our knowledge of places far away is limited, but imagination takes the data we have and arranges it into a coherent mental picture of those locales.

And in ethics, it is especially important to note the importance of imagination in forming ethically significant patterns and analogies (see Chapter 20). Further, imagination enables us to conceive of alternative courses of action as we ponder what to do in the future. And as we consider the validity of ethical principles, imagination helps us to form examples and counter-examples, case-studies that may validate or invalidate the principles under consideration. Such illustrations are often useful in the teaching of ethics.

Scripture does not say in so many words that the imagination is fallen and must be redeemed. But clearly what we call imagination is an aspect of all ethical thinking and decision making. If the intellect and will are fallen and in need of redemption, so the imagination. The paradox of ethical decision making exists here as well: we should follow our imaginations, but we must also correct our imaginations by God's word, under the influence of God's grace.

### **The Emotions**

Scripture does not discuss the emotions as an independent item of concern, any more than it discusses the intellect or the will in such a way. Yet it speaks a great deal about particular emotions: griefs, joys, anxieties, awe, terror, woe, lust, and also about concepts that have a large emotional component such as love, hate, and happiness.

Like intellect and will, the emotions are fallen and must be redeemed by God's grace. Unregenerate emotions are quite different from regenerate ones. As unregenerate people, we love wickedness and hate goodness. Through the Spirit, God gives us new dispositions, so that we feel very differently. We learn to love God and to hate evil, to rejoice in what is good, to be content in the face of difficulty, and so on.

Regeneration does not necessarily make us more or less emotional,<sup>400</sup> any more than it makes us more or less intellectual or more or less decisive. Like IQ and the quality of decisiveness, one's degree of emotion is a function of personality and gifts. The difference regeneration makes, however, is that a

---

<sup>400</sup> Charismatic Christians tend to think that regeneration makes a person more emotional, so that he is more inclined to yell, weep, and jump up and down. Reformed Christians tend to think, on the contrary, that regeneration makes one less emotional, so that he becomes calmer and makes his decisions through study rather than feeling. The Reformed like to sit still, the charismatics to dance around. These are, of course, on either side, traditional attitudes, rather than confessional positions, probably influenced by personality differences more than anything else. In my judgment neither attitude is biblically warranted.

believer's emotions (like his intellect and will) now belong to the Lord. Whether our emotions are strong or weak, or whatever distinctive traits they possess, they are at his disposal, not our own.

When God gives us, upon regeneration, a new set of emotional dispositions, he commands us to develop them in the course of our sanctification. We need to grow spiritually in our emotional life, as in our intellectual life and volitional decisions, to conform more closely to the image of Christ. So in the realm of the emotions as in others, there is both gift and task, both divine grace and human responsibility, both already and not-yet. The Bible actually commands us to feel differently about things, as in Phil. 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice," and in verse 6, "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Hegel, in his *Early Theological Writings*<sup>401</sup> said that Christianity was even more reprehensively authoritarian than Judaism, because while Judaism commands actions, Christianity even commands feelings.<sup>402</sup> But of course even the Old Testament (and therefore Judaism) commands us to rejoice, to be calm in the face of difficulty, to fear and tremble (in some cases), to fear not (in others), and to love God with all our heart which, as I have indicated, implies affection (Chapters 12 and 19).

But can we really control our emotions? Like beliefs, emotions often seem to come upon us unbidden. I cannot choose to hate my children, or to delight in the memory of Idi Amin. But Scripture assumes that in many cases, at least, we can play some role in changing our emotions. As with intellect and will, our emotions will not be perfectly pure until glory. But there are things we can do to better conform to God's standards in this area.

God's means of grace often have powerful effects on our emotions. When we read in Scripture of what God has done for us, we not only gain a better intellectual grasp of the events, but we come to feel as God feels about them. Scripture presents sin, not only as wrong, but also as something ugly. And it presents the new life (contrary to the way modern media typically present it) as something beautiful. When the angel tells the virgin Mary she is to bear God's child, for example, and she replies, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word," the believing mind perceives her response as beautiful, however much some feminists may despise her submission.

Moses tells us that when Eve was tempted, her emotions led her into sin: "the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (Gen. 3:6). Doubtless the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good, delightful, and desirable in these ways. But Eve imagined that the beauty of the

---

<sup>401</sup> Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.

<sup>402</sup> I am using *emotions* and *feelings* interchangeably in this chapter.

tree would be hers if she took the fruit in disobedience. Scripture shows the true ugliness of the results of that action.

The sacraments, worship, fellowship, and prayer also deeply affect our feelings. Even in secular society, people's emotions are deeply influenced by other people, by literature, institutions, arts, and media. Certainly the same thing happens as we fellowship in the body of Christ. In community, we develop affection for one another and loyalty to the Lord and his kingdom.

We cannot usually change the way we feel instantaneously, any more than we can immediately change our beliefs or our habits. But we can adopt general patterns of behavior that over time will lead to emotional change. And Scripture tells us what those general patterns of behavior are.

Now in this chapter I am interested in how each of our faculties contributes to our ethical knowledge. Do the emotions make such contributions? I think so.

I realize that we often say to one another, "Don't follow your feelings." We often give such advice especially to young people. But the intent of such advice is not to communicate a theory of human faculties, but rather to encourage reflection, especially on God's word. What we mean to discourage is not reference to feelings in an abstract or general way, but making decisions on the basis of *momentary* feelings, rather than patiently waiting on God.

But certainly there are positive ways in which emotions can, do, and should influence our conduct. As I argued earlier that conscience, intellect, experience, and imagination are perspectives on the moral decisions of the whole person, I will here argue the same for emotion.

Emotions, like conscience, reason, and experience, have a hermeneutical component. That is, they discover and express meaning in the situations of life. When I am angry, afraid, or delighted, I am responding to my situation and my understanding of it. But the emotion may hit me before I engage in any conscious interpretation or understanding.

It is possible to say in this case that the emotion is based on some subconscious form of reasoning. Certainly, emotions ought to be rational, as opposed to irrational. But it is hard in such cases to identify any rational process, conscious or otherwise, that precedes the emotion in time. Rather, the emotion itself often seems to be the first reaction (rational or otherwise) to the experience. Often the emotion is our initial interpretation of the facts, the beginning of rational evaluation, rather than an outcome of rational evaluation. When I am angry, I thereby interpret the situation, rightly or wrongly, to be deserving of anger. When I am sad, I thereby judge that the situation warrants sadness, etc. If the emotion is rationally justified, it is part of the rational process leading to its own

justification. If it is not rationally justified, then it involves a preliminary assessment that may be refuted by later reflection.<sup>403</sup>

So emotion includes within it implicit rational activity. But the reverse is also true: reason presupposes emotions. For reasoning always involves evaluation. In reasoning, we try to evaluate ideas as true or false, adequate or inadequate for a task, profound or superficial, clear or unclear, interesting or dull, productive or inconsequential. Such judgments inevitably summarize, articulate and defend feelings about those ideas. The process of reasoning is a dialogue between thoughts and emotions. Evaluation begins with feelings about a certain subject matter. Rational analysis may lead to more adequate emotions, and those more adequate emotions lead to better analysis.<sup>404</sup>

When do we know that we have completed our analytical task? When do we know that the job is done, that we have reached a conclusion, that we no longer need to research and analyze? The task is over when we have a sense of conviction within ourselves, and, at least in some cases, when we feel that we can defend the conclusion to others. But note the words “sense” and “feel” in the last sentence. That is the language of emotion. We know we have reached the conclusion of a rational inquiry when we *feel* satisfied. In DKG, I called this feeling “cognitive rest.”<sup>405</sup>

So reasoning is an aspect of emotion, and emotion is an aspect of reasoning. That fact suggests that we should not draw a sharp line between the two, but should regard them as perspectives on one another, and of that larger complex including conscience, experience, will, and imagination, centered in the heart. If we wish, we can see the emotions as the existential perspective of a triad including reason (normative) and will (situational).

It should not surprise us, therefore, that Scripture never says, as some Greek philosophers did, that reason should rule the emotions, or, as Hume did, that reason should be the slave of the passions. There is no hierarchical relation between the two. Both reason and emotions are equally aspects of the image of God in which we are created. Both are equally fallen, both equally redeemed in Christ’s people.

---

<sup>403</sup> When we speak of “rational” activity, sometimes we are referring to activity of the mind as such, that may or may not lead to knowledge. Other times, we are referring to mental activity that leads to knowledge. I am arguing that emotion always involves a rational element, at least in the first sense, and sometimes also in the second sense.

<sup>404</sup> Note my illustration in DKG, 337 concerning the writing of book reviews. Although such writing is usually considered an intellectual task, emotions play a central role in the process. The reviewer usually begins by having certain feelings about the book, then refines those feelings by rational analysis, which refines the feelings, which refines the analysis and so on. If the reviewer had no feelings about the book, certainly there would be no review.

<sup>405</sup> 152-53. Note the context of this discussion to page 162.

When we warn young people against fornication, we often tell them not to follow their feelings, for obvious reasons. But their problem is not just a problem of emotion. It is also a problem of reasoning. They are tempted to act according to unsanctified emotions, but also according to unsanctified reasoning. If they reasoned right, they would put a higher priority on glorifying God and a lower priority on their present gratification. So they are wrong, not only in following their wrong emotions, but also in following their wrong reasoning. The remedy is not (as Plato thought) to bring emotions under the rule of reason, but to bring both emotions and reason under the rule of God's word.

Sometimes, of course, it appears that rational processes can straighten out wayward emotions. A man who craves another drink may respond to rational arguments about the dangers of drinking and driving. But the opposite is also true. Sometimes we reject purportedly rational arguments because we *feel* that there is something wrong with them. When someone presents an elaborate rational argument for strange conclusions, such as alien abductions, the nonoccurrence of the Holocaust, Dwight Eisenhower's membership in the Communist party, we may not be able to refute all the evidence given, but we feel that something is amiss, and that feeling guides our rational process. That is a good thing.

Consider a believer, attending a service of worship of a denomination other than he own, predisposed to criticize and deprecate. To his surprise, he finds himself feeling positively toward the experience, delighting in the fellowship of the people and the presence of God. It is possible that in such a situation his emotions have illegitimately suppressed his critical faculties, that he has wrongly "followed his feelings." It is also possible that at this point his regenerate emotions have outpaced the sanctification of his intellect. He may have felt something that should lead to changes in his intellectual view of things. His emotions may be supplying him with new data that he needs to take account of.

To summarize, emotions are aspects of our God-given ethical sensitivity, our *aistheteria* (Heb. 5:14). We dare not neglect them as we "try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord" (Eph. 5:10).

### **The Pathos Game**

In this section I would like to follow up on the last with some homiletical observations, since I am very concerned that evangelical theology, and especially Reformed theology, develop a more positive view of the emotions. Since this section makes some concrete applications, it will also serve as a transition to the next portion of the book, which focuses on the actual content of the Bible's teaching concerning ethics.



Is it wrong to hurt people's feelings? Most of our mothers thought so. But where does Scripture address this issue?<sup>406</sup>

I recently had an email exchange with another teacher of theology, and I mentioned in a particular context the importance of being sensitive to the feelings of others. He replied to me that he didn't want to get into that. He said, "I am not equipped to play the pathos game."

This particular theologian is well-known for his insistence that the Gospel is objective, not subjective: that it is a message about what happens outside us, not what happens inside us. He criticizes the evangelical church for being focused on inwardness, on feelings. My own approach, in contrast to this, is that salvation (and therefore the Gospel in the broadest sense) is both objective and subjective. It proclaims objectively that Christ has atoned for our sin, granting to us divine pardon, and it also proclaims that by trusting Christ we become new creatures. Christ grants to us what John Murray called a new "dispositional complex." We come to love righteousness and hate wickedness. We come to delight in God's law. We pant for God like thirsty deer for the water brooks. We gain new affections, new emotions. This is my "existential perspective."

### 1. *Negative Lessons from History*

But this message has not always been accepted in Christian circles; hence my dialogue about the "pathos game." Christian theologians, following Plato and other Greek philosophers, often saw emotions as something dangerous. Greek philosophy was hardly monolithic, and theologians have often exaggerated the agreement among the thinkers of this movement. But the one thing all the Greeks agreed on was that the good life is the life of reason. Reason should dominate human life, including the emotions. When the emotions rule, all goes askew. When reason rules the emotions (in some views, virtually extinguishing them), human life gets back on an even keel.

Music is particularly dangerous in this respect, since it rouses the emotions to such a degree. Plato warned us about it. Ulrich Zwingli, arguably the founder of the Reformed branch of Protestantism, eliminated music from worship, turning the weekly service into a teaching meeting. In this, it should be noted, he differed from Martin Luther, who said that music is the greatest thing next to theology.

---

<sup>406</sup> I have given some thought to discussing this issue in connection with the Decalogue. But under which commandment would I place this topic? Probably the Fifth or the Sixth, which have to do with respecting and enhancing human life. But the connection between this topic and the preceding methodological discussion makes this the ideal location.

We can be thankful that the other Reformed leaders, such as Bucer, Bullinger, and Calvin, did not follow Zwingli in this decision. But they were much more restrictive than Lutherans were about the type of music deemed appropriate for worship. Calvin had his congregations sing *mostly* (not exclusively) Psalm versions, and that became the rule in the Scottish churches (though not in the church of Cologne, for example).

The Reformation in general was a movement of scholars. Luther's view of justification began as a scholar's insight, a new view of the meaning of *righteousness* in Rom. 1:16-17. The event we celebrate on Oct. 31 was Luther's invitation to an academic disputation. This academic emphasis is one that Lutheran, and, even more, Reformed theology continues to the present. Reformed worship continues to be centered on preaching, and often the preaching is of a rather academic sort. To supply churches with pastors able to preach with such academic rigor, Reformed theology has emphasized the importance of a "learned ministry." Pastoral candidates must have college degrees and at least some post-graduate training, though Scripture never hints at such educational requirements for pastors. They must know the original languages of Scripture and the fine distinctions of technical theology. The Reformed Confessions are not basic summaries of faith like the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, but closely argued miniature theological treatises, to which aspiring clergy are expected to subscribe in some detail, if not exhaustively.

The result is that Reformed churches have appealed mainly to those who have had some university or college study, and who therefore come from families economically able to provide such education. So Reformed church members tend to be educated and relatively wealthy.

Among Reformed theologians, including J. Gresham Machen<sup>407</sup> and the authors of *Classical Apologetics*,<sup>408</sup> one often hears the view known as "the primacy of the intellect." What this seems to mean is that God's revelation addresses first of all the human intellect. The intellect, in turn, applies the truth to the will and to the emotions. At least this is what God, on this view, originally intended. One result of the Fall, however, is that the hierarchy of intellect, will, and emotion was overturned, so that the intellect is now dominated by the will and the emotions. Salvation, then returns human nature to its proper balance. The Christian life is, like the ideal life of the Greek philosophers, a life of reason, though of course it is a reason based on God's Word rather than on autonomous philosophy.

---

<sup>407</sup> *What is Faith?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

<sup>408</sup> John Gerstner, Arthur Lindsley, and R. C. Sproul, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). See my review of this book, published as appendices to my *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994) and *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), also my discussion of the primacy of reason in DKG, 331-32.

I disagree with Machen on this point, but I do sympathize with him. In the period following the Scopes' trial, American evangelicalism went through a period of rather extreme anti-intellectualism. Many rejected scholarship in general, particularly science, as contrary to Scripture. Machen wanted to affirm that Christianity was rationally defensible, that it had nothing to fear from learned detractors. They were right to affirm intellect, but not, in my judgment, at the expense of the will and the emotions.

I evaluate similarly contemporary Reformed attempts to repress the passions. Feelings do play a positive role in the Christian life, as we have seen.

Other traditions have thought the Reformed emphasis to be one-sided. Anabaptists, Arminians, and Charismatics of different stripes held a more positive view of the emotions and a less positive view of academic attainment. This gave them a greater appeal to the poor, the uneducated, the minorities of society.

## *2. Scripture on the Emotions*

Scripture does warn us against being driven back and forth by waves of immediate emotion. Paul tells us to be anxious for nothing, but to pray (Phil. 4:6-7). Psalm 1 tells us to meditate in God's Word day and night, rather than being blown around like the chaff.

But Scripture does not warrant "the primacy of the intellect." For one thing, Scripture does not even distinguish between intellect, will, and emotions, as distinct "faculties" of the mind. It talks about our thoughts, our decisions, and our feelings, but it never presents these as the products of three competing organs. Therefore, it never exhorts us to bring our decisions and feelings into conformity with the intellect.

For another thing, Scripture teaches that we are totally depraved, and that includes our intellectual, as well as our volitional and emotional aspects. Yes, our feelings sometimes lead us into sin, but the same is true of our intellects. If we seek to remedy our emotionalism by bringing our emotions into line with depraved intellectual concepts, there is no net gain.

Similarly, Scripture teaches that God's grace saves us as whole persons. Our thinking, acting, and feeling are all changed by regeneration. God's grace leads us to seek conformity with God's Word. The important thing is not to bring the emotions into line with the intellect, but to bring both emotions and intellect into line with God's Word.

I have set forth here and in DKG a "perspectival" model of intellect, emotions, and will: that these are three ways of speaking of the whole person thinking, acting, feeling. I have argued that each of these presupposes and

influences the others, so that the three are not really separable or even distinguishable. If it is important to bring our feelings into line with godly thinking, it is also important to bring our thinking into line with godly passions: our passion for God, his Word, and his righteousness.

So Scripture also tells us that we should care about our own feelings and those of others. On the broadest level, Christian faith is a grand passion. If our faith embraces all of life (“Whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do,” 1 Cor. 10:31), then it embraces the emotions as well. If we are to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, that covenant commitment will certainly be our greatest passion, as well as our most basic intellectual commitment and the dominant motivation for our will.

The Bible appeals to all these aspects of personality. It presents reasoned arguments to the mind, but it also exhorts the will (“Turn! turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?” Ezek. 33:11) And it is full of godly passion. That’s all through the Psalms. Hear this from Psalm 42:

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. <sup>2</sup> My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? <sup>3</sup> My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?” <sup>4</sup> These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. <sup>5</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation <sup>6</sup> and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

The Psalmist’s grief at being away from the presence of God is an example to us. We too should pant, thirst, cry for the presence of the living God. It is not enough to make intellectual theological observations about the different senses of his proximity and his absence. Nor is it enough to express voluntary resolution to seek God’s presence again. Rather, our emotions should desire God’s nearness. If we don’t desire him with such passion, there is something wrong.

The Psalmist’s anguish anticipates and reflects the agony of Jesus. As Warfield wrote in “The Emotional Life of Our Lord,”<sup>409</sup> Jesus was and is a man of passion. He felt deeply about the Jews’ desecration of his Father’s house, about his rejection by Jerusalem, about the cup of suffering that the Father had set before him. And he felt compassion on the multitudes (Matt. 15:32, 20:34), reflecting God’s own “tender mercies” (*splanchna*, bowels) to his people (Luke

---

<sup>409</sup> In Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 98-145.

1:78). He expresses a “strong desire” that his disciples will eat the Passover with him before his death (Luke 22:15). This language is highly emotional.

The apostle Paul speaks often of the “affection” (*splanchnon*) he bears to the churches. In Phil. 1:8, he says, “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.” Like God himself, the apostle has “bowels” of compassion and affection for his brothers and sisters. He calls them to have the same compassion toward one another (2:1, also *splanchna*). Compare Col. 3:12, Phm. 1:7, 12, 20.

Hear him again:

For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you. (2 Cor. 2:4)

1 Thessalonians 2:7, 8 but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

1 Thessalonians 2:17 But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.

1 Thess. 3:6-10 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you... How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of the Lord because of you?

Philemon 12 I am sending him (Onesimus)--- who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.

Again and again, Paul pours out his heart, expresses his own emotions and expresses his deep care for the emotions of the people. Surely this is a model for us. Paul is playing the pathos game, if we are even permitted to so trivialize what is happening here. He feels deeply for his people and wants them to feel deeply for one another.

Paul is grateful for those who “refreshed his spirit” (1 Cor. 16:18). He rejoices when a church longs to see him as he longs to see them (2 Cor. 7:7, 11). He rebukes the Corinthians at another point for being “restricted in their

affections" (2 Cor. 6:12), and he counsels them to open their hearts wide (verse 13).

The apostle John also urges emotions of compassion:

But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart (*splanchna*) against him, how does God's love abide in him? (1 John 3:17)

He addresses the will: meet your brother's needs. But the lack of will is rooted in a lack of compassion, a lack of feeling.

Emotions also enter into the *theology* of the Bible in important ways. Consider Paul's hymn of praise to God's incomprehensibility:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
 How unsearchable are his judgments,  
 And his paths beyond tracing out!  
 Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
 Or who has been his counselor?  
 Who has ever given to God that God should repay him?  
 For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
 To him be glory forever! Amen.

Can you feel the emotion pulsing through that passage? That passage is not meant only to inform you, but to make you *feel* differently. The emotional content is part of the meaning of the text. If a preacher doesn't communicate that feeling, that emotion, he's depriving his congregation of an important element of the text. Imagine somebody reading this text in a monotone. That is a distortion of the text as much as a theological error would be.

Again and again, Paul pours out his heart, expresses his own emotions and expresses his deep care for the emotions of the people.

So the Reformed community needs to look at emotions much more positively, as the Bible does. We need to play the pathos game. There is no reason for us to disparage or try to dampen emotions in the Christian life, or even in worship. And if we don't have the resources in the Reformed tradition to express the *extreme* emotions found in Scripture itself, then we should be humble enough to go beyond the Reformed tradition to use resources from our non-Reformed brothers and sisters.

We should counsel people not to act on *momentary* emotions. We should also counsel them not to act on every *idea* that pops into their heads, or on every volitional desire or impulse. But ideas that are tempered and refined and prayed over to the point of cognitive rest (an emotion!) ought to be acted on. And

emotions refined by thought, maturity, and good habits of decision-making may well be reliable guides.

### *3. Hurting People's Feelings*

And it is wrong, as your mother said, to hurt people's feelings. That is true in many cases, at least. I grant that often it is impossible to avoid bringing grief to someone. People are often offended emotionally by the righteous actions of others. Not all emotions are regenerate. People are often too thin-skinned, too self-centered to respond with proper emotions to the events of their lives.

Paul knew that he would have to cause some pain to some members of the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 2:1-5). In context, the "pain" is clearly emotional. But he is very reluctant to cause such pain, and he speaks of his own emotional pain in carrying out this duty. The duty was to discipline a member of the church. But in the passage, the offender has repented, and Paul calls the congregation to forgive. But not only to forgive, also to "comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow," verse 7. Paul wants the church to carry out its work so as to guard the feelings of one another.

The writer to the Hebrews urges his readers to obey their leaders (13:17) "so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you." There are, of course, a variety of reasons why we should obey the leaders of the church. But the reason mentioned here is emotional. We obey our leaders for the sake of their emotional well-being, so they will be joyful, happy. And, of course, their emotions are contagious. The writer implies that when they are unhappy, we will be unhappy too, and similarly when they are happy. A church with happy leaders is a happy church! To many that sounds like a trivialization of the work of the church; but that is what the text says.

God wants us to care about how other people feel. He wants us to weep when others weep, rejoice when they rejoice (Rom. 12:15). He sends us, as he sent Jesus, to bind up the brokenhearted (Isa. 61:1).

