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Editorial

This issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology* addresses our evangelical conscience. I have been surprised at how little has been written on conscience by evangelicals in recent years. We have included in this number an interesting reflection on [Romans 2:15](#) written 20 years ago against the background of Egyptian mythology. There are, of course, a number of short articles in more recent dictionaries of theology. A Grove booklet, *Conscience*, published in 1977 has a good discussion on, among other things, Sigmund Freud's criticism of the devastating effect of guilt in his patients resulting from the tension between *super ego* (conscience socially produced) and the *ego*.

At the same time, there are good books and numerous articles on Christian ethics written from the perspective of Old Testament and New Testament theologies. Three such articles are included here. But the issue confronting us today is: how do we understand the functioning of human conscience (as reflecting our creation in the image of God) in relation to the natural law of God's general revelation? At least two-thirds of the people alive today are either secular with no knowledge of biblical ethics or are followers of other Faiths, each with their own system of ethical values. How does conscience function among these people since, as Paul tells us, all of humanity is 'without excuse'? When so many of our present ethical predicaments have no direct parallel in biblical times, we are confronted with problems of judging and reeducating conscience in conformity with God's revealed law. If we argue on the grounds of biblical principles, how are these to be applied in issues such as genetic engineering or nuclear power or in the context of 'the good of the community', such as in the traditional Melanesian tribal society? Evangelicals have hardly begun to reflect theologically on these issues.

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From Guilt to Awareness: Gospel and Culture, Conscience and Mission

John Roxborough

An animated discussion of conscience and mission on the Fidonet Mission Echo in late 1993 provided the starting point for some of these reflections. The stimulus of those contributors is gratefully acknowledged, particularly Stan Nussbaum and Richard Fairhead of Global Mapping International, Mark Brand in Paris, Steve Hayes in Pretoria and Galen Currah, Western Seminary (Division of Intercultural Studies), Portland, Oregon. I am also grateful for the comments of John Hitchen, David Crawley and Chris Marshall of the Bible College of New Zealand.

INTRODUCTION

The application of conscience to the mission of the Church is a particular application of Gospel and Culture thinking. This article is suggestive rather than an attempt at a fully

systematic analysis. It seeks to bring together Gospel and Culture, Mission and Conscience in order to raise questions about the mechanisms by which we make decisions about the mission of the Church in different times and circumstances. If in the Western theological tradition conscience has been associated primarily with guilt and carried the temptation of undue introspection, in a world Church concerned with mission, conscience needs to be also seen not simply as the accuser which tells us we need salvation, but the voice of God calling people to awareness of issues and needs of the Kingdom which we have been slow to recognize.

The common concept of conscience is that it is a personal and community sense of right and wrong. Issues surrounding conscience include where this sense of moral principle comes from, how communities handle conflicting perceptions of right and wrong by minority groups and individuals, how conscience develops personally and p. 197 socially, and how it may be better informed.

There are of course many questions. Mindful of the way in which the Evangelical conscience has changed its mind historically over issues such as slavery, alcohol, apartheid, the obligations of the Sabbath and the role of women in church leadership, what things are 'on our conscience' in terms of mission today and what things ought to be, but are not? Is ecology a matter of Christian conscience—likewise peace, abortion, and the situation of those who do not know or follow Christ? Does God speak in this sort of way? Is this the residue or the renaissance of the image of God? If conscience is the voice of God, why does God tell people such different things? Does that mean we should give up on conscience because it is unreliable, or should we learn to understand its function in a different way?

This article wishes to suggest that even if conscience is better at asking questions than answering them, it continues to be a meaningful experience which encourages Christians towards awareness of what God may be saying to them in their time and place. Although to be reliable it needs to be informed, and it can be oversensitive as easily as insensitive, it is to be respected. A better understanding of the power and limitations of conscience is essential in a world of complex decision making. We need to learn not only from our own conscience but also from the consciences of others. It is possible to do so without leaving ourselves awash in a sea of relativity.

VOICE OF GOD VOICE OF MAN?

The popular understanding of conscience as an inner voice reminding a person of standards of right and wrong and whether they have acted in accordance with those perceived standards, arises out of human experience. It is common for people to argue with themselves and sometimes do what one side of their personality suggests rather than another. Is one side of this struggle the voice of God and the other side the voice of self-interest, the flesh and the devil? If Christians with Paul and other New Testament writers say yes, they are also willing to say that people with different ideas about what conscience requires have to find ways of living together. Christians also note that others attribute the experiences of conscience to mundane sources, Freud to an internalized and frequently oppressive parent, Jung to a subconscious ideal, others to the expectations of society.

It should not be assumed these perspectives are totally contradictory. Explaining things does not explain them away. Where things come from in terms of conditioning from family and society does not tell us whether or not God is behind and in that process any more than awareness of biological sexual reproduction detracts from the proposition that we are created by God. At the same time awareness of human and social origins of conscience, or any other aspect of our physical or psychological makeup, is important for

understanding the limitations and possibilities of what we are talking about. If it is a faith perception that God is [p. 198](#) dealing with us in and through these things in a holistic way, then we take seriously that there are personal and social dimensions both to the reality of conscience and to the effects of sin. The voice of conscience, internal, external, only has to have the *possibility* of being the voice of God to take it seriously. The fact that it may not be the voice of God, or that it may be distorted is also to be recognized, but the presumption is that the operation of conscience is likely to come from God. In such a way it contributes not only to the agenda of ethics, but also our agenda of mission.

CONSCIENCE IN THE BIBLE

In terms of the actual word, it appears that ‘conscience’ appeared first in the New Testament in relation to the situation in Corinth. From Paul’s efforts at judging the abuse of appeal to conscience, he then took this essentially Greek sensitivity to an inner constraint and applied it more widely in his theology.¹ In the Old Testament the strict meaning is not used in a single word, although associated ideas exist so that the NIV refers to Abraham having a ‘clear conscience’ ([Gen. 20:5–6](#)) and where Job refers to his heart not reproaching him ([Job 27:6](#)) translates this as his conscience. David’s sense of guilt and his prayer for release is located in his heart ([Ps. 51:10](#), [1 Sam 24:6](#), [2 Sam 24:10](#)), a situation which could easily be described in terms of the operation of conscience.

Colin Brown in the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, explains part of the shift in thinking between the Testaments in terms of a difference between self-consciousness and God-consciousness²—and that in the Greek understanding, it was self, rather than God which was seen as the other in internal conversation over moral behaviour. The Romans spoke of a good or a clear conscience, Greeks most often a bad conscience. These distinctions are then applied by Paul to the Christian experience of making religious and moral choices—an issue which was acute because of the changed role of law in religious life. The rules have been changed. In the confusion over what it means for non Jews to come in to the community of faith without keeping the law, and yet clearly needing principles of behaviour, conscience was bound to have a greater and at the same time less certain role. Law was no longer a principle of justification, but what law was to guide life was not clear. There were debates over this within the Christian leadership. Belief in the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit may have given confidence that some process was going to lead to greater certainty, but it did not eliminate conflict over appeals to different understanding from different consciences speaking in different ways.

On the one hand this contributed to explanations of the importance and limitations of conscience. Hence while a conscience can be ‘clear’ or ‘good’, it can also be ‘guilty’ or ‘weak’ or ‘corrupted’. Different [p. 199](#) people see things differently. Decisions have to be made about which issues can be left to individual conscience, and which are by collective or other authority regarded as matters for which there can be no acceptance of alternative standards. The Corinthian church had problems where there were conflicting consciences over food offered to idols and inadequate consciences over sexual morality. In relation to the first of these problems Paul notes how valid theological principles can support contrary practices. There are situations where one conscience cannot dictate what another person should do privately. In public and in shared situations each has a further test of their conscience—whether or not to modify their behaviour for the sake of the

¹ C. Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Paternoster, 1975, 1, p. 351f.

² C. Brown, *ibid.*, p. 348.

other. And for that there seems to be no rule except that of being prepared to do so. Other Pauline writings distinguish between things like these where Christians have to learn to accept and tolerate difference and matters about which there should be no argument whatever the differences of culture or conscience.

Both these situations have parallels in an age when the Church worldwide is seeking to do justice to both the particularity of local theology and the universality of Christian faith and belief and make judgements about what differences actually matter. The abandonment of Western philosophy and theology as the framework of all true theology is the equivalent of the loss of the Jewish law as the normative basis of behaviour for all believers in Yahweh. Like those in the New Testament involved in translation of Christian Faith out of one culture into another, we are now in a profound 'Gospel and Culture' exercise. The liberation of theology involves new rules and principles so that it is not liberation into anarchy. What Paul and others had to say about conscience applies not only to issues of ethics in brave new worlds of bewildering power and choice, it also applies to the formulations different cultures make of their understanding of Jesus, his relationship to God, the nature of church, and the scope of its mission.

In Romans Paul again deals with conflicting understandings of what conscience requires ([Rom. 14](#)), but he also tackles the role of conscience in God's dealings with Gentiles. [Romans 2:15](#) is part of an important but debated passage for considering the knowledge and responsibility of those who have never formally heard the gospel. These verses are frequently seen as carrying the meaning that there is a universal human experience of struggle with intuitively perceived standards of behaviour. How much God's law may be read into that intuition is not a factor in the universality of the type of experience. The conscience of 'Everyman' declares every person guilty from their own experience. Culture affects what elements of behaviour cause this sort of experience, and some cultures will focus more on guilt, and others on shame (being found out or exposed more than feeling bad for having done something), but the essence of the experience will remain. Do we need experience and acknowledgment of failure in order to seek God, [p. 200](#) or do we need experience and acknowledgment of guilt? It is common in the Evangelical tradition to say that awareness of guilt before a holy God is what is properly needed, yet shame and failure should be enough to point in that direction.

The Pastoral Epistles contain references to consciences which no longer function as they are meant to ([1 Tim. 4:2](#), [Tit. 1:15](#)). Paul himself knew that a clear conscience was important but it was God who would judge true innocence ([1 Corinthians 4:4](#)). Conscience was thus a necessary guide to behaviour, but not always a sufficient one. Hence just as conscience was not the only principle which Paul drew on to guide Christians in the heady freedom of the apostolic church, so it cannot afford to be the only principle which contemporary Christians draw on. In seeking to be true to our deepest and best spiritual instincts, we must be open to those who see things differently, and willing to be corrected from all sorts of directions. As a principle which focuses on what is believed to be right rather than wrong, it requires us in respecting others, to seek to understand what they are at their most principled. Other bases must always include appeal to Scripture and how it has been responsibly interpreted. Conscience is not about floating free from Scripture, it is about discovering more truly what is there to be obeyed as the fruit of a relationship with God in Christ.

In the letter to the Hebrews conscience comes into the arguments about the ways in which what Christ has done leaves behind what was possible in the old religion. The sacrifices of the Old Testament needed to be repeated in part because of their inability to deal with conscience ([Heb. 9:9-14](#)). Hebrews is relevant to mission as a constructive model of the relationship of old and partial perceptions of God compared to what is

definitive in Christ. While people are not to go back to the old, they are still to remember it and imitate the faith of those who went before. It is not just in Judaism that there were sacrifices intended to point to reconciliation, but whose effectiveness in dealing with conscience is surpassed by Christ. It should surely be a characteristic Evangelical contribution to a broader sense of mission and an awakened social conscience that Christ takes away guilt and gives the energy to work towards a more just and righteous future.

ACROSS CULTURE; ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

To examine the operation of conscience in different cultures and to examine it back through history are comparable activities. In both there are challenges of coming to terms with the way in which other Christians have responded to what they thought God wanted done in their time and place.

Conscience with respect to guilt for past activity with which mission has been associated needs to be readdressed. Two historical areas still affecting mission today are the Crusades and colonialism. While it is possible to overstate the case, it is important that Christians have no illusions about the way these events compromised mission. It is also p. 201 important that a false sense of responsibility does not produce a paternalism of guilt instead of a paternalism of conquest. The danger is not always avoided that it is the conscience of one party, the Western Church, which dominates the agenda of relationships. Whether in the past it was an absence of conscience about these events, or latterly a disturbed and guilty conscience for events over which present living people had no control, it is still a one-sided reflection of a complex interaction between more than one party. The responsibility of the beneficiaries of the injustices of history is neither to defend one's ancestors nor to disown them, but it is to find appropriate ways of creating justice in the present and future. Issues of justice with respect to land need consciences informed by history and alive to the different and conflicting perspectives involved, but guilt by association—one's own or other people's—is not going to produce the sort of partnership and respect out of which justice can arise.

What should also be learnt from history of mission is that conscience may be inert about issues which later generations judge harshly. Attention to the details of history will usually produce evidence that there were other voices saying other things. Some did speak against slavery, apartheid, the ambiguities of colonialism and the motives of the Crusades. Not all thought that abstinence and abolition were the cures for the social and personal abuse of alcohol. We may not always agree with the decisions of other generations, but it is unfair and untrue to presume that they characteristically ignored conscience and acted irresponsibly.

It is not surprising that when the conscience of a previous generation appears to have been so inadequate in recognizing injustices which are now taken much more seriously, that efforts are made to systematically inform the Christian conscience of viewpoints they need to consider. It is difficult to argue with the need to inform and shape conscience and to go on testing whether what we are concerned about is what God is concerned about. Yet the process has hazards. Forms of 'Political Correctness' can move from useful consensus positions on social ethics, to slogans which can no longer be discussed. Forcing conformity of conscience, or anything else, is not the same as training it to be more perceptive and obedient to the Spirit of God. Liberation theology speaks of 'conscientization'—of helping people to become aware of their situation and the reasons for it so that they may act to do something about it. Where this is seen as stimulating and informing Christian understanding and sensitivity, it is a model which deserves to be followed. Where it goes beyond that, caution is justified. Governments of the left and of

the right have sought in a calculated way to change the consciences of their peoples, and it is still a common human response to grab solutions which seem immediate and adequate. Yet even totalitarianism can produce a response in terms of heightened respect for conscience and in some Western countries at least the sufferings of Conscientious Objectors was not totally in vain in [p. 202](#) alerting society to the fact that not all shared the view of the majority whatever the pressures. Roman Catholics appear to have cultivated awareness of the importance of following conscience as a way of enabling people to live with disagreement, an almost invited disobedience to the teachings of the church over birth-control. Whatever one may think on the particular issue, it has provided a model of loyalty, cohesiveness, respect for individuals and provision for diversity.

THE MISSIONARY CONSCIENCE

The cross-cultural missionary is acutely aware that while in the sense of guilt before Almighty God, or in the sense of personal failure against a known and accepted standard, conscience appears universal, when it comes to providing a guide to personal ethics there are cultural differences which are not easily resolved. One American missionary working in Paris candidly expressed some of the personal difficulties he experiences as follows.

Some of the thorniest real-life issues that I deal with as a resident foreign missionary stem from the ethical contrasts between the teachings of the church in my home culture and the teachings of the church in my target culture. As an American, I am a product of my home culture. There, the church I was raised in made applications of Biblical principles to its culture. Here in France, the church applies some of those same principles differently. Now, the question is not at all whether or not I would require converts in France to apply Biblical principles in the way that my particular church has done in America! But, rather, I wonder how obedient I personally should continue to be to the applications made by my church in my home culture while living here in my target culture. If conscience is culturally dependent, where does one draw the line between cultural adaptation and searing the conscience? The issue is complicated further by the fact that as a missionary or 'sent-one' I am sponsored by Christians and congregations from my home culture that would be highly shocked, offended, disappointed, hurt, and even angry if I were to live in conformance to the applications the French church makes of certain Biblical principles!

Perhaps this does no more than put ourselves back in the situation Paul faced at Corinth. Some would say that what is needed is to separate 'your God given conscience from your cultural conscience.' The difficulty here is that while we can distinguish the conscience that makes us aware of need of salvation from the conscience which guides our behaviour, one is no more or less cultural or more or less God-given than the other. The missionary dilemma is a real one, but the solution lies in overcoming the lack of understanding between different parts of the church. In this situation both are in need of a greater appreciation of Gospel and Culture.

CONCLUSION

The universal experience of conscience is a point of witness and is an aspect of the gospel which is widely translatable, though it may need to be thought through differently. Beyond conversion Christians individually and together need to be [P. 203](#) taught and encouraged to do what they know to be right, to check further if something troubles their conscience, and to learn how to respect and learn from the consciences of others. Recognizing and respecting sincerity is part of this. In a multicultural world we need to

be positively seeking out what is on the consciences of Christians in different cultures if we are to apply the concerns of Gospel and Culture not only to ethics, but also to mission.

Conscience remains an important principle of Christian decision making and of analysis of Christian self-understanding. It is the nature of the case that it is involved in tensions and differences. Out of those come new possibilities. Sensitivity to our own conscience makes us alert to things we would prefer to ignore. Sensitivity to the consciences of others is the more necessary in a multicultural world where people who are different have to live together. It is also one way in which we are obliged to ask at points of tension whether a particular culture is helping or hindering the understanding and the living of the gospel. If it is better at asking questions than answering them, it is still essential those questions are asked. And if the questions keep coming back, perhaps indeed the voice of conscience, and the voice of the people, is the voice of God. Christ will have taken away our guilt, but the ongoing work of his Spirit through others and ourselves will continue to sharpen our awareness. This is the true conscientization of which we should be happy to be part.

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The Objective Witness to Conscience: An Egyptian Parallel to Romans 2:15

Ramez Atallah

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Although this article was written 20 years ago, it introduces insights on the 'heart' (conscience) of a culture outside of Hebrew religion. It raises the tantalizing question, 'Did Paul have any knowledge of the Osiris myth?' The author argues that the role of conscience in [Romans 2:15b](#) is that of an objective witness on the day of judgment rather than as an inner arbiter between conflicting thought.

Since the works of B. Gärtner and of C. A. Pierce (both in 1955) little attention has been given to this important subject.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago the writer undertook a detailed study of [Romans 2:14–15](#). One of the unresolved problems encountered in these verses is the meaning of the phrase in v. [15b](#) which is usually translated: ‘while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them....’¹ Though I came across some very interesting parallels in other literature of the period, I was still not satisfied with the explanations which were given.²

During a recent study of Ancient Egyptian religion I came across what appeared to be a most convincing parallel to [Romans 2:15b](#). It not only helped to explain the meaning of the phrase in question, but it also gave a different view of the interpretation of the whole of this difficult section of the Epistle to the Romans.

The purpose of this paper will be to demonstrate how an Ancient Egyptian concept may provide some help in interpreting a difficult New Testament text. To my knowledge this particular interpretation has not [p. 205](#) been advanced before. Indeed, scholars have traditionally neglected Egyptian backgrounds to NT thinking. The implications of this exegesis for the understanding of [Romans 1–3](#), in particular, and New Testament theology in general, will also be considered.

I. AN HISTORICAL EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 2:15B

Before attempting to interpret the phrase under consideration it is important to study the context in which it occurs. One of the most pressing questions in many of the first century churches was the matter of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the same congregation.³ It is in this context that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. The doctrinal statements he makes must be understood against this background. In the first three chapters of Romans Paul deals with the question: ‘How is it possible for a Jew and Gentile to stand on the same level of advantage before God?’⁴ Paul answers this question by demonstrating that Jews and Gentiles stand on the same level of disadvantage before God. They have rebelled against God by not obeying his law and are, therefore, condemned.⁵ It is only by faith that either Jew or Gentile can be justified. Paul amply demonstrates that the Jew’s standing helps only in gaining access to God’s Law but not in obeying it.

Thus chapters [1](#) and [2](#) serve the purpose of preparing for the statement that ‘none is righteous, no, not one ...’ ([Rom. 3:10](#)). ‘What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already (ie., chs. [1](#) and [2](#)) charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin ...’ ([Rom. 3:9](#)).

¹ RSV. The Greek of the phrase is difficult to translate.

² See parallels discussed below, section II.

³ For this insight I am indebted to Barker, Lane and Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York, 1969), p. 200.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ In the case of the Gentiles the ‘law’ seems to be some moral principle inherent in the universe to which they have access. Cf. B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala, 1955), p. 77.

It is clear then that [Romans 2:15b](#) occurs in a context where Paul is accusing all men of having disobeyed God. In the immediate context Paul makes the negative statement that 'All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law' ([Rom. 2:12](#)). In v. [13](#) he explains that it is not *hearing* which justifies but rather *doing*. The question immediately comes to mind: 'By what standard will the Gentiles be judged since they do not have the law of Moses?' It is in answer to this anticipated question that Paul writes vs. [14](#) and [15](#). It must be remembered that his purpose is to establish grounds for the *condemnation* of the Gentiles.

The main point of debate in the exegesis of [Romans 2:14](#) revolves around the meaning of Φύσει ('by nature'). It seems that Paul is saying that even though Gentiles do not have the Law of Moses, when they instinctively (Φύσει) act in accordance with this Law, this very action, or these works, become the standard by which they are judged.⁶ It is very likely that Paul is here depending on [p.206](#) the Jewish missionary apologetic which taught that the Noachian commandments were available to Gentiles.⁷ These were universal laws which did not necessitate a special revelation.⁸

The main points of debate in [Romans 2:15](#) are concerned with the role which συνείδησις (conscience) plays in the text. Most scholars have approached this problem by first making a word study of συνείδησις and then interpreting the phrase (v. [15b](#)) on the basis of their understanding of this word.⁹ This procedure is complicated by the fact that the background and meaning of συνείδησις as used in the New Testament are themselves greatly debated.¹⁰

To what is conscience bearing witness? Who is accusing whom? Where did Paul obtain this idea of the inner dynamics of a Gentile's soul? when and how does this process of accusing and excusing take place? These and other questions remain unresolved in relation to [Romans 2:15b](#).¹¹

Attempts have been made to find parallels to this passage in other Jewish literature. One of the most helpful of these is to be found in the *Testament of Judah*:

Know therefore, my children, that two spirits attend man, the spirit of truth and error, and in the midst is the spirit of the understanding of the mind (= conscience?), whose

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ H. J. Schoeps, *Paul* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 224, claims that in the writings of the Jewish missionary propaganda it was an accepted fact that the heathen sometimes unwittingly fulfilled the law. This is interesting because most commentators had found Stoic backgrounds for this thinking (Cf. C. K. Barrett, *Commentary on Romans* (New York, 1957), p. 52). Both Schoeps and Gärtner, p. 77, find a relationship between Noachidic laws (which were seven in number and were used as a summary of the law for proselytes) and this context, especially the prohibitions in [Rom. 2:17ff](#). It is quite likely that Paul, as a Jewish missionary, was familiar with this teaching before he became a Christian.

⁸ Schoeps, p. 224.

⁹ Cf. Barrett, Bruce, Hodge, Pierce, etc. Gärtner is one exception to this; he seriously struggles with the meaning of the whole phrase.

¹⁰ Cf. Kittel on συνείδησις, and the excellent study by C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (Chicago, 1955), which is probably the most comprehensive work available in English.

¹¹ The difficulty in the language of the phrase will probably always leave some questions unresolved. The grammatical structure of the phrase is confusing. It is often thought that there are three witnesses: (a) the Gentiles themselves (b) their consciences, and (c) their inward thoughts. A plausible approach is to view each clause as a further interpretation of the preceding one: [14b](#) expands on [14a](#), [15](#) explains [14](#), and so also [15b](#) is an amplification of [15a](#). If this is so then the 'conflicting thoughts' are very closely related to the conscience.

prerogative it is to turn it where it will. And both the works of truth and the works of error are written on man's heart.... And the spirit of truth testifies and accuses all things, and the sinner is smitten in his heart and cannot raise his face to the judge.¹²

Both in content and vocabulary the parallel with [Romans 2:15b](#) is quite impressive.¹³ 'The spirit of the understanding of the mind' seems to play a role in this text similar to that [p. 207](#) played by συνείδησις in [Romans 2; 15b](#).

A somewhat similar parallel appears in the *Manual of Discipline* 3:18–4:26. A detailed explanation is given of the spirit of truth and the spirit of perversity which contend for the mastery in man. Both these spirits 'were assigned him (ie. man) by God, to walk in them' (3:18). 'Dependent on these are the families of all mankind' (4:15). 'And he has put enmity between their divisions.... And passionate hostility pertains to all their practices, for they do not walk together' (4:17ff). 'In the present state of things the spirits of truth and of error are at war in a man's heart' (4:23). 'For God has set them in equal parts until the time of that which is decreed' (4:25).¹⁴

These passages seem to reinforce the interpretation of [Romans 2:15b](#) in terms of a struggle between a good and an evil force which reside within the heart of man.¹⁵ Paul seems to use the word συνείδησις very much in the same way as the Rabbinic literature makes use of 'the heart'.¹⁶ *Ha-yêtzet ha-tôb* (the good impulse) and *ha-yêtzet hâ-râ* (the evil impulse) are both lodged in the heart according to Jewish dogma.¹⁷ The heart has to decide which impulse to follow.¹⁸

There can be little doubt that some form of this tradition was familiar to Paul.¹⁹ It would, therefore, seem legitimate to understand [Romans 2:15b](#) as a description of the struggle in the heart of man between the impulse to do good and the impulse to do evil. Most commentators, while not necessarily using this line of thinking, conclude that Paul is describing the inner struggle of the soul of man.²⁰ The following paraphrase of [Romans 2:15](#) is representative of this interpretation:

The fact that Gentiles sometimes instinctively do what the Law requires is clear proof that these requirements are written on their hearts. Their conscience upholds this inner 'law'

¹² *Testament of Judah* 20.

¹³ Gärtner, p. 832, points out that in Greek the wording is remarkably similar to that of the Romans text.

¹⁴ Cf. T. H. Gaster, *The Scripture of the Dead Sea Sect* (London, 1957), p. 52ff. Gärtner arranges the verse in the order given here, p. 84.

¹⁵ While this would be a Western reader's most logical conclusion, it does not follow that this is the only or even the most likely interpretation—see section IV below.

¹⁶ Cf. Romans 1:21—Gärtner, p. 84, argues for this.

¹⁷ For a discussion and sources on this topic see W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1949), Schoeps, p. 184, and Gärtner, p. 83.

¹⁸ Gärtner, p. 84, feels that Paul was definitely dependent on this tradition.

¹⁹ See W. D. Davies for a discussion of Paul's relationship to Rabbinic Judaism.

²⁰ The principal commentators on Romans take this view. It should be noted that this does not necessarily follow from the preceding point. That is, the fact that Paul may have been dependent on this tradition does not mean that our interpretation of the tradition is correct.

by condemning them when they break it (evil impulse prevails), and acquitting them when they occasionally keep it (good impulse prevails).²¹

Thus Paul has made his case that the Gentiles also have a standard by which they will be judged. It is because they *disobey* the law which p. 208 their conscience upholds that they are sinners.²²

II. THE OSIRIS MYTH

The cult of Osiris was one of the oldest and most influential religions in Ancient Egypt.²³ The teachings of this cult provide some of the earliest backgrounds for concepts of judgment and resurrection relating to the afterlife.²⁴

Osiris was an Egyptian king who was murdered by his brother Set. Through the intervention of his wife Isis and their son Horus, Osiris was brought back to life again (there are different versions of how this took place).²⁵ Instead of coming back to earth he became the 'King of the Dead', in which capacity he now controls the destiny of men in the afterlife. His resurrection is the model for all other resurrections of the dead. The Ancient Egyptian ritual of mummification and burial is a rehearsal of what happened to Osiris. The hope is that as Osiris was able to achieve eternal bliss, so will the dead man. To emphasize this identification the dead man was referred to by the use of 'Osiris' before his name.²⁶ In early Egyptian writings such as the *Pyramid Texts*, only kings and nobles had a hope of resurrection and could identify with Osiris. In later times there was a democratization of the Osiris myth so that its benefits became more generally applicable and available as can be seen in the *Coffin Texts*.²⁷

One of the most characteristic features of the Osiris myth is the depiction of the Judgement Scene. This scene occurs in the *Book of the Dead* which is an illustrated guidebook to the afterlife.²⁸ A copy of this 'book' was placed in the dead man's tomb to

²¹ 'Conscience upholds' = 'conscience witnesses to.' Since there is no object it is legitimate to take the law as the implied object. Barrett, p. 53, understands the phrase in this way.

²² This larger context must always be kept in mind as an attempt is made to interpret a specific phrase within it.

²³ It might even be said that this was one of the oldest and most influential religions in the Ancient World. Cf. the study of A. E. Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection* (London, 1911).

²⁴ Many claim that the Osiris myth is the basis for all other concepts of judgement and resurrection. See S. G. F. Brandon, *The Judgement of the Dead* (London, 1967); J. G. Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris* (New York, 1907); Budge.

²⁵ Some of these accounts are difficult to reconcile with one another. The myth changes with time and the locality. Cf. H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York, 1948).

²⁶ This was first done only for kings but was later to become a general practice for the dead. It is interesting to speculate whether this has some parallel to Paul's teaching about identifying with Christ in his death and resurrection. As one studies the Osiris myth one is left with the distinct impression that New Testament theology is somehow related to it. Osiris is very much a Christ figure.

²⁷ H. Frankfort demonstrates how changes in the Egyptian state were paralleled by changes in Egyptian religion. Thus as the state became more democratized, so did the afterlife!

²⁸ Many copies and versions have been preserved. Chapters 30 and 125 of the *Book of the Dead* are of particular interest for this study, inasmuch as they deal with the judgement scene.

help him face the judgement. The following is a description of this scene as it is found in the *Papyrus of Ani*:²⁹

The scene, which is beautifully drawn p. 209 and coloured, is charged with dramatic tension. Ani and his wife, dressed in festal attire, are seen on the left, watching in attitudes of humility and apprehension, the transaction that is taking place in the middle of the scene. By the postures of the dead man and his wife the artist has eloquently suggested that, whatever may have been a person's status and achievement before death, when he enters the Hall of the Two Truths (*Maati*) for judgement, he can only abide in fear and trepidation the assessment that will then be made of his life. The impersonal nature and the ominous solemnity of this assessment is vividly conveyed by the great black balance that dominates the centre of the scene. From its beam are suspended the two scales: one contains the hieroglyphic sign of the *Ib* or heart; the other a feather, the symbol of *Maat*. The heart of Ani is being weighed against Truth (*Maat*). Kneeling close by, the jackal-headed mortuary god Anubis adjusts the plummet of the balance, to ensure absolute exactitude. To his right stands the ibis-headed Thoth, the god of wisdom and the divine scribe. Holding his scribe's palette and reedpen, he records the fateful verdict of the scales. Behind him crouches a fearsome hybrid monster, made up of the parts of a crocodile, a lion, and a hippopotamus. It is named Am-mut, the 'eater of the dead'; its function is obvious.³⁰

There are many other interesting details in the scene which are not immediately relevant to the present study.³¹ There are several hieroglyphic texts in this scene, however, which are very important. The text written before and above the figure of Ani, is that of Chapter 30 of the *Book of the Dead* in which the deceased implores his heart not to witness against him on this awful occasion. It is a prayer which was to be uttered by the deceased at the fateful moment of the weighing of his heart against *Maat*:

Heart of my mother, heart of my mother, my breast, the heart of my transformations! Rise not up as a witness against me, turn not against me before the tribunal. Act not as an enemy against me in the matter concerning the balance.... Cause not my name to smell evil in the nose of the tribunal. Speak no lie against me before the good gods. Let thy hearing be good.³²

There are several other texts which are basically Declarations of Innocence in which the deceased denies having committed sinful acts.³³ In others he declares (to the gods) the good deeds which he has done:

I did that of which men speak, that in which the gods rejoice ... I have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, a boat to him that had none.... Save me, therefore, and protect me! Make no report against me in the presence of the Great God.³⁴ p. 210

²⁹ Ani was a scribe who held important ecclesiastical offices at Thebes and Abydos. The *Papyrus of Ani* dates from the beginning of the Nineteenth Dynasty (c. 1320 B.C.).

³⁰ Brandon, p. 28.

³¹ Cf. Brandon, p. 29ff.

³² *Papyrus of Ani*, II (quoted in Brandon, p. 37).

³³ Some of these are quite long and clearly demonstrate that the Egyptians had a very clear concept of right and wrong.

³⁴ J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, 1955), p. 36a. This is remarkably similar to [Matt. 25:35](#). The Egyptian ideas of righteousness seem to be closely related to Jewish and Christian concepts.

Thus the Egyptians believed that they would be judged on the basis of the kind of life they had lived. If their life was free from evil *and* characterized by good works it was likely that they would be acquitted at the postmortem judgement. The heart, which was thought of as the seat of conscience ('the god which is in man'³⁵) was capable of acting as an independent witness against its owner at his trial after death. That is why there were prayers 'to cause that the heart of man does not oppose him in the next world'.³⁶ The prayer to the heart quoted above was often inscribed on a scarab-shaped amulet and laid on the place of the heart during the ritual of embalmment.³⁷

In summary, it can be said that the Egyptians came to think of judgement after death as a weighing of the heart, which represented a man's conscience, against truth, personified as *Maat*. A man's conscience could excuse or accuse him on the day of judgement. The basis of judgement was the quality of life of the deceased. There was an implied standard to which he had to measure up.³⁸

It now remains to see if this Ancient Egyptian concept of judgement and the afterlife sheds light on the interpretation of [Romans 2:15b](#).

III. AN INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 2:15B BASED ON THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN JUDGEMENT SCENE

An attempt will now be made to interpret [Romans 2:15b](#) in the light of the Ancient Egyptian understanding of the role of the conscience on the day of judgement.

The role of conscience on the day of judgement as depicted in the *Book of the Dead* bears striking similarity to its role in [Romans 2:15b](#). The conscience is thought of as a witness with the possibility of either accusing or excusing its owner. This seems to be a much more straightforward parallel than the alternative proposals discussed above. This interpretation provides a plausible solution to the much debated question of the role of v. [16](#). Most translations of the text have a break between v. [15](#) and v. [16](#).³⁹ Commentators have debated at length the relation between these two verses.⁴⁰ Some have concluded that v. [16](#) follows logically from v. [13](#).⁴¹ If one understands v. [15](#) as referring to the role of conscience at a given time (ie., the day of judgement), rather than as a description of the continuous inner struggles of the soul, then there is a very natural and logical link with v. [16](#) which starts with, 'on the day when ... God judges...' The RSV would then be correct in placing no punctuation [p. 211](#) marks between v. [15](#) and v. [16](#): 'while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.'

³⁵ Brandon, p. 37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁷ There is very little question as to the fact that the Ancient Egyptians feared that their heart would witness against them on the day of judgement. This provides a very interesting and illuminating parallel to [Romans 2:15b](#) as discussed below, section IV.

³⁸ Very much like the 'law' which the Gentile in [Romans 2:14](#) followed 'instinctively'.

³⁹ The writer is curious as to why the RSV and the NEB depart from the traditional punctuation and link verses 15 and 16 together.

⁴⁰ Cf. C. K. Barrett, M. J. Lagrange, and W. Sanday, *ad hoc*.

⁴¹ Cf. Barrett, p. 53.

It immediately becomes obvious that this interpretation is quite different from the one which is generally accepted.⁴² It makes the role of conscience objective rather than subjective. *It moves the whole scene from the continuing struggle between good and evil within the soul of man to the moment of accountability of a man before God on the day of judgement.*

The question which must immediately be raised is whether or not there is any justification for this kind of interpretation from the context. The first part of [Romans 2](#) is centred around the basis for judgement:

But by your *hard and impenitent heart* you are storing up wrath for yourself *on the day of wrath* when *God's righteous judgement* will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and *immortality*, he will give *eternal life*; but for those who are factious and *do not obey the truth*, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who *does evil*, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for every one who *does good*, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality ([Rom. 2:5–11](#)).

Several things are clear from this context: (a) the focus is on what will happen at the day of judgement (b) the text is related to thinking concerning the afterlife (c) judgement is based on what a man *does*, and (d) the judgement will be completely just.

With this context in mind it becomes quite legitimate to interpret [Romans 2:15b](#) as referring to what will happen on the day of judgement, rather than what is happening within the soul of man.

The natural tendency to interpret ancient texts in a way that would make them relevant to contemporary man has the danger of reading into them concepts which may have been quite alien to the original writers. This may be true in the commonplace assumption that Paul was plagued by an introspective conscience. Krister Stendahl challenges this popular assumption as follows:

The Reformers' interpretation of Paul rests on an analogism when Pauline statements about Faith and Works, Law and Gospel, Jews and Gentiles are read in the framework of late medieval piety. The Law, the Torah, with its specific requirements of circumcision and food restrictions becomes a general principle of 'legalism' in religious matters. Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the [p. 212](#) quest for assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament.⁴³

Thus when Paul speaks about the Law being a custodian of the Jews until Christ came, the Western minds of the KJV translators added a different dimension to this thought by rendering it 'Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us into Christ' ([Gal. 3:24](#)). The Law is now thought of as the means by which *all* men come to Christ. The purpose of the law is to make man see his desperate need for a Saviour in the light of demands which he knows he cannot attain. Stendahl continues:

Paul's argument that the Gentiles must not, and should not come to Christ *via*, the Law ... has turned into a statement according to which all men must come to Christ with consciences properly convicted by the Law and its insatiable requirements for righteousness. So drastic is the reinterpretation once the original framework of 'Jews and

⁴² Sanday is typical in saying, 'St. Paul is describing an internal process ...' (p. 60) Hodge says that conscience is '... an inward monitor ...' *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1882), p. 86.

⁴³ Stendahl, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', *HThR* 56 (1963), 205.

Gentiles' is lost, and the Western problems of conscience becomes its unchallenged and self-evident substitute.⁴⁴

This may explain how commentators, without any evidence to the contrary, find it natural to interpret [Romans 2:15b](#) as referring to an inner struggle of the soul, even though the context is one of objective external judgement.

[Romans 2:14–16](#) could therefore be paraphrased as follows in the light of the Osiris myth:

The fact that Gentiles sometimes instinctively do what the law requires is clear proof that they have access to the demands of God even though this is not through the Law of Moses. Depending on the kind of life they lived their consciences will either defend them or accuse them on the day of judgement when, according to my Gospel, God will judge the things that men have tried to hide (but which were known to God and to their own consciences). Jesus Christ will be the agent of this judgement (he is Truth—the standard by which men will be judged!)

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

To recapitulate, [Romans 2:15b](#) has been understood by most commentators as referring to the role of conscience in the struggle between good and evil within the soul of man. This interpretation, although supported by some parallels in Jewish literature, scarcely suits the context of the text, which is one of final objective judgement rather than inner subjective conflict.

This study has attempted to present an alternative understanding of [Romans 2:15b](#) based on the role of conscience in the Judgement Scene of the Osiris myth. In that scene the 'heart' (equivalent to conscience) of the man being judged testifies either on behalf of or against him. It presents evidence from the life of the one being judged which [p. 213](#) determines whether he is to be condemned or acquitted. The Ancient Egyptian myth thus unfolds the possibility of understanding the role of conscience in [Romans 2:15b](#) as that of an objective witness on the clay of judgement rather than as an inner arbiter between conflicting thoughts.⁴⁵

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Ethical Responses to God the Creator

Chris Wright

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁴⁵ The present study has raised two questions which must remain for a later study: (a) Did Paul or any other New Testament writers have access to Ancient Egyptian thinking (regardless of the channels through which this was communicated)? If so, how can this dependency be determined? (b) Are there other texts in the New Testament which could be illuminated by parallels from Ancient Egyptian religion?

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In this first section of an extended article on Ethical Issues in the Old Testament, the author gives a clear and cogent analysis of ethical actions for all humanity as well as for Israel as an obedient response to the one God who created the universe. The order and completeness of creation affirms that moral choices have predictable moral consequences. Yet ethical decision-making also demands responses to evil and chaos in a world disordered by humanity's fallenness. The author appeals to the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament for a theology grounded in creation.

INTRODUCTION

It is something of a truism to say that biblical ethics is theistic. That is to say, it assumes the existence of one living personal God and sets the whole of human life in response to him. Ethics is not an agenda, a means to an end, an inflexible law, self-fulfilment or any of the other terms that may secondarily describe various human formulations of it. It is primarily response to God, who he is and what he has done. In the Hebrew Bible that response is first set in the context of God as creator, so that is where we begin. Secondly, we meet the revelation of the God of covenant purpose whose commitment to bless the human race leads him to initiate a special relationship with Israel within which their ethical response is a central feature. Thirdly, we find that purpose given concrete historical form as we meet the God of redemptive action who delivers his people and then gives them land to live in and law to live by.

I. RESPONDING TO THE GOD OF CREATED ORDER

'The fear of the Lord ...'

The assumption of monotheism in the opening chapters of the Bible is **p. 215** so obvious that we easily miss its ethically revolutionary character. The creation narratives almost effortlessly exclude polytheism and dualism, and the pervasive ethico-cultural edifices that go with them. Only one God created the heavens and the earth. Human beings are answerable only to that one God. Whether walking and talking with him in the garden in Eden, or fleeing from him in the restless land of Nod, east of Eden, it is one and the same God with whom we have to do. This immediately introduces a fundamental simplicity into biblical ethics. Commitment to love and obey the one living God rescues one from the fear of offending one god by trying to please another, from the confusion of moral requirements, or from the moral cynicism that arises when people feel that it doesn't really matter in the end how you live because you can't win. The gods will get you in the end.

For Israel, the fear of Yahweh alone was the first principle not only of wisdom, but of ethics. 'Fear him, you saints and you will then have nothing else to fear.' In [Psalm 33](#) the thought moves directly from the sole creative word of Yahweh to the universal challenge to all human beings to fear him ([6-8](#)), since he is the moral adjudicator of all human behaviour ([13-15](#)). The same universal ethical thrust is found in some of the Psalms celebrating the kingship of Yahweh (e.g. [96:4f.](#), [10-13](#)).

To say that ethics in the Old Testament was simple is not to say obedience was easy or that ethical decision-making was a matter of black and white choices. It is to say that the task of living in this world is not complicated by divided allegiances to competing gods, or

obscure philosophies which demand religious or 'expert' elites to interpret them for us. Sometimes this essential simplicity is referred to by way of encouragement to act in accordance with God's will. 'Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach', says Moses, '... No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it' ([Deut. 30:11-14](#)). 'He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' ([Mic. 6:8](#)). Although these texts were spoken to Israel, they can be relevant to humanity at large inasmuch as Paul generalizes the requirements of the law as something written on the hearts even of those who never heard it ([Rom. 2:14f.](#)).

'The earth is fixed ...'

Another unmistakeable feature of [Genesis 1](#) is its presentation of the creation as a place of order, system and structure. We live in a cosmos, not a chaos, and we do so because of the creative word and action of God. This is not only affirmed in [Genesis 1](#) but celebrated in Israel's worship and used by prophets to exalt the power of Yahweh as over against the gods of the nations ([Isa. 45:18ff.](#)). This created order has two effects on biblical ethics.

i) As a bulwark against relativism

The most important effect of this truth as regards ethics is that it provides the objective basis and [p. 216](#) authority for the exercise of moral freedom, while exposing the wrongheadedness of moral relativism. Oliver O'Donovan has reinstated the importance of the creation basis for evangelical ethics in his programmatic study *Resurrection and Moral Order*.

While it is clear that biblical ethics is very securely tied to the action of God in history (which we consider below), it is important that we give adequate attention to the Hebrew Bible's creation doctrine with all its implications for our world-view. An emphasis on history alone, without the safeguards of the biblical creation faith, could deliver us into the kind of historical relativism which puts all things, morality included, at the mercy of the historical process. This is a danger which O'Donovan also warns us of, insisting that the only proper protection from it is the biblical affirmation of a given order of creation which, though disturbed by the fall, is still the order within which we live, and which will finally be restored to its perfection and glory through God's redemptive action, which has already been achieved on the resurrection of Christ and will be complete at his return.

That which most distinguishes the concept of creation is that it is complete. Creation is the given totality of order which forms the presupposition of historical existence. 'Created order' is that which is not negotiable within the course of history, that which neither the terrors of chance nor the ingenuity of art can overthrow. It defines the scope of our freedom and the limits of our fears. The affirmation of the psalm, sung on the sabbath which celebrates the completion of creation, affords a ground for human activity and human hope: 'The world is established, it shall never be moved'. Within such a world, in which 'The Lord reigns', we are free to act and can have confidence that God will act. Because created order is given, because it is secure, we dare to be certain that God will vindicate it in history. 'He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth' ([Ps. 96:10, 13](#)).¹

Whatever the culture or whatever the juncture of history, we all have to live in God's created world as his human creatures. There is a basic shape to that world which we did

¹ O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, (IVP, 1986) p. 61.

not invent, and therefore a corresponding shape to the moral response required of us if we are to live within it with the kind of freedom which, by God's so ordering, it authorizes. Morality, in biblical terms, therefore, is preconditioned by the given shape of creation, which underlies the relativity of cultural responses to it within history.

The biblical authority, then, for our ethics in a world of moral relativism, is based on its twin affirmation of creation and history: creation as the fundamental order that shapes our existence in history, and which is destined for restoration in the new creation of the kingdom of God; and history as the stage on which we observe the acts of the God whom we are commanded to imitate by 'walking in his ways'.

ii) As a basis for legitimate consequentialism

In Christian evaluation of different ethical stances, 'consequentialism' [p. 217](#) usually gets a bad press. It is the view that moral choices should be evaluated in terms of their likely consequences, not in terms of *a priori* moral principles which are regarded as absolute and necessary (the latter view being termed 'deontological'). The most influential secular brand of consequentialism is Utilitarianism, which at its simplest argues that the correct ethical choice in any matter is that which is likely to achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. This is not the place to enter into a critique of it.² What I would like to show is that among the effects of the biblical teaching on the established order of creation is a degree of confidence in the reliability and predictability of life in this world. This is not, of course, to suggest that nothing untoward ever happens unexpectedly (see the discussion of Ecclesiastes below), still less to endorse an unbiblical fatalism. It is simply to note that the Hebrew Bible does move from the observation of regularity, consistency and permanence in creation itself (e.g. in [Jer. 31:35ff.](#)), to affirmations of the same characteristics in God, and thence to the assumption that certain consequences will always follow from certain actions. There are causes and effects in the moral realm, as in the physical, and it is part of wise living in this world to take note of them and behave accordingly.

It is interesting that a consequentialist view of ethical decisions is found precisely in the Wisdom literature, which tends to be grounded in a creation rather than a redemption theology. Much of the advice and guidance given in Proverbs is prudential. 'Think what will happen if ...' Behavioural cause and effect are repeatedly linked. Hard work produces wealth. Lending and borrowing will lose your friends. Careless words cost lives. And so it goes on.

Possibly the most interesting example concerns the Wisdom tradition's sexual ethic. It is in full accordance with the law, of course, but it is not explicitly sanctioned by law. Whereas the law simply says 'Do not commit adultery, on penalty of death', the Wisdom teacher says, 'Do not commit adultery because of the appalling consequences that you will expose yourself and your whole family and property to.' It isn't worth the risk. Common sense itself warns against what the law prohibits. Moral rules and moral consequences actually reinforce one another in this way of thinking (e.g. [Prov. 5](#); [6:24-35](#); [7](#)). We need to remember however, that the Wisdom tradition's consequentialism is thoroughly personal and theistic. It is not impersonal fate, or *karma*. Behind all the prudential advice of the sages stands their own foundational axiom, 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. Whatever results follow from our actions are not mechanical cause and effect, but the outworking of God's own order in his world. The consequentialism of Wisdom is thus based on what we would theologically call God's sovereign providence and justice.

² A very lucid account of it is to be found in R. Higginson: *Dilemmas: A Christian approach to moral decision-making* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), chs. 2 and 8.

In the narratives we come across a kind of empirical consequentialism p. 218 when appeals to conscience are made on the grounds of likely outcomes. Abigail's warning to David takes this approach ([1 Sam. 25:30f.](#)). Conversely, the category of 'folly' is sometimes portrayed not merely as the absence of common sense (though it can be that, as Jonathan's reaction to his father's absurd prohibition on his soldiers eating on a day of battle shows, [1 Sam. 14:245–30](#)), but a failure to look beyond the pressure or emotion of the moment ([2 Sam. 13:12ff.](#)).

A desacralized world-view

Another dimension of the creation ethic of the Hebrew Bible is the way it desacralizes certain areas of life which in polytheistic cultures tend to be shrouded in mystique, taboos and risk for mortal men and women. Death, for example, is not some external power or independent deity, but a fact decreed and controlled by God, and given moral and spiritual rationale in relation to human sin. It remains a horror and an enemy, but has no personal power to direct or guide how one lives here and now. For that you go to the living God and his express law alone and neither to Death itself nor to the dead. ([Isa. 8:19f.](#)).

With greater practical and ethical relevance, OT creation faith also desacralized sex. It played no part in the process of the creation of the world, but is simply one feature internal to creation. Human sexuality is part of the image of God, but not in itself part of God. It is a gift within creation, to be enjoyed with God's blessing, but not a means of manipulating either God or nature, as it is within the fertility cults that usually exist symbiotically with polytheism. Thus it is that in the Hebrew Bible strict laws on the proper context for the exercise of our sexuality coexist with the unrestrained freedom of the Song of Solomon's exaltation of the joy of sex under God's blessing. In this case, the Wisdom tradition adorns what the law protects.

This desacralizing of important areas of life in the Hebrew Bible actually increases the scope of personal freedom. Old Testament law can sound restrictive because of its negative tone. But on reflection it is actually the case that negatively framed law is much more liberating than positive or directive law. It is more liberating to be told you may do what you choose, with specified limits and exceptions, than to be told what you must choose or do in all circumstances. The park which allows you freedom to do what you like, but has a notice which says 'do not pick the flowers' is a better place to be than the safari park where you must follow the prescribed route and stay in your car. Even in the garden of Eden it was thus. 'You are free to eat of any tree of the garden—except....' This gave to humanity a range of freedoms in the world which so many 'religions' would have hedged much more restrictively.

Yet, having given to humanity such freedom to act within the created order, and having entrusted to us dominion over creation, one route to achieving mastery was prohibited—magic and the occult. The creation narratives themselves exclude any magic dimension to the way in which God created and ordered the world, and likewise the p. 219 task of working out our appropriate ethical task in the world is not to be short-circuited or bypassed by magical mechanisms. The fact that magic as it is practised in many cultures can be 'white' or 'black' shows that it is in fact an amoral force. It attempts to evade the responsibility of making the moral choice which expresses personal response to our personal God and instead yields up to other forces and means the mastery that God entrusted to us.

The image of God

Perhaps the most familiar of all the implications of the creation material for biblical ethics is the affirmation that God made human beings in his own image. This has been explored

in great depth by many scholars, biblical and ethical. I would want to pick out just two main results of it as regards ethical decision-making in the Old Testament.

i) The sanctity of human life

As early as the texts of the Noah covenant the principle was stated that human life was to be treated as inviolable on the grounds of the image of God. Even animals would be held to account by God for the killing of humans. The influence of this principle can be seen in Israel's law. Laws about domestic animals that injure or kill humans are common in ancient Near Eastern legal *corpora*. All of them prescribe various degrees of compensation and punishment of the owner. Only the Hebrew law prescribes also that a 'guilty' ox was to be stoned to death ([Ex. 21:28ff.](#)). It seems most likely that this was because of the religious influence on the law of the principle of the sanctity of human life, as crystallized in [Genesis 9:5](#).³

Empirically, this high value shows itself in the narratives in several places where there is an abhorrence for the shedding of innocent blood (e.g. [1 Sam. 19:4–6](#); [25:26](#); [2 Sam. 2:22](#); [3:28](#), [37](#)).

The equality of human beings

The Old Testament did not eliminate all social distinctions, such as, for example, the social and economic inferiority of the slave. It did, however, go a long way in mitigating the worst effects, by a theology of essential human equality based on our common createdness. In its law, the Old Testament knows nothing of the graded penalties for crimes against different ranks of victim, as is common in ANE law. There was equality before the law for native and alien. The slave was given human and legal rights unheard of in contemporary societies. This is reflected in Job's great ethical self-defence in which he bases his claim to have treated his slaves with justice in any case they brought against him upon an unambiguous statement of created human equality between master and slave: 'did not he who made me in the womb also make them?' ([Job 31:15](#)). Once again it is in the Wisdom literature that we find the broadest outworking of this creation theology into the social ethos [p. 220](#) of Israel. There are several texts in Proverbs which affirm the equality before God of rich and poor ([22:2](#), [29:13](#)), and others which so identify God with every human being, regardless of status, that what we do to them we do to God himself ([14:31](#); [17:5](#); [19:17](#)). This is not the only place where we can hear distinct echoes of the Wisdom tradition in the ethical teaching of Jesus.

Disordered creation

All the points above flow from Israel's understanding of the world as a place created and ordered by God. But of course it is also a place spoiled and disordered by humanity. Ethical decision-making, therefore, has to respond to the presence of evil and apparent chaos within human society and the world itself. It could be said that the whole Bible from [Genesis 4](#) on is the deposit of that struggle. But as regards specific ethical behaviour, the main thrust of the Old Testament is that a person must persevere in his commitment to upright behaviour in the sight of God, even in the face of contradiction from fellow human beings or from adverse and inexplicable circumstances. I would point to two significant areas.

³ This is not universally accepted among scholars of Israelite and comparative ancient Near Eastern Law, but it is a view with strong supporters. I have discussed the issue, with full bibliography in *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 156–60.

First, in the Psalms there is a remarkable reflection of Israel's ethical value, struggles and endeavour, scarcely matched at all in Christian hymnody. It is noticeable how often the Psalmists affirm their intention to continue to pursue righteous behaviour in spite of a surrounding climate of evil, to speak and do the truth when engulfed in lies, to keep clean hands in a dirty world. The cost of this stance is considerable and is also reflected in the anguish of the Psalms. The person who keeps his word will sometimes find that he ends up hurting himself, but it is a qualification of acceptable worship that he still does so ([Ps. 15:4](#)). Surrounded by prosperous, complacent evildoers, the believer is tempted to think his own moral efforts are futile, and can find respite and perspective only in worship ([Ps. 73](#)). The world is a wicked place, but the only path to happiness in it, as the deliberately prefatory [Psalm 1](#) makes unambiguously clear, is the committed, systematic choice of the way of the Lord. Such a stance is wise and good and godly. That is to say, the ethics of the Psalmists bind together, in one inclusive world-view, the intellectual, the moral and the religious spheres. For, conversely, the opposite stance is foolish, evil and ungodly: The *fool* says in his heart '*There is no God*', because he has chosen the way of *corruption* ([Ps. 14](#)). If the ethos of a people's worship is a good guide to the ethics of their society, then the strong ethical character of the Psalms is very revealing of the moral climate among devout Israelites.

Secondly, the Wisdom tradition, for all its commitment to a consequentialist view of the world in which moral causes and effects are broadly predictable, so that ethical decisions can be made with reasonable confidence, is aware that it does not always work out like that in real life. Ecclesiastes is often regarded as in a sense Wisdom's own self-criticism, as a counterbalance to the broad optimism of Proverbs. It refuses to ignore the brutal realities [p. 221](#) of life in this world (some have said it is the Hebrew Bible's best commentary on [Genesis 3](#)), the absurdities, the injustices, the way the unexpected disaster can ruin our best endeavours, the unpredictability of life (how a tree will fall or the wind will blow) and above all, the menacing enigma of death. Yet in the midst of these, Ecclesiastes remains both a theistic believer—this is still God's world and we are accountable to him—and a committed subscriber to the essential moral stance of Yahwism—to fear Yahweh and keep his commandments ([12:13](#)), for that is what it means to 'remember your Creator' ([12:1](#)).

In conclusion to this first main section, then, we have seen that ethical decisions in the Old Testament were made first of all in response to God as creator. That includes: a monotheistic stance which both excludes the moral degeneracy of polytheism and also simplifies ethics to a fundamentally single choice—to love and obey Yahweh, or not to; basic confidence in the world as a place created and ordered by God in such a way that moral choices matter and have predictable moral consequences that can be known and anticipated; a high degree of 'secular' freedom in how we live in the earth, unfettered by the bondage of occultism, sacral taboos and the fear of manipulation of magic; a primary regard for the value of human life as made in the image of God, which both sets the shedding of innocent blood near the top of the list of ethical negatives and sets the equality of all human beings near the top of the list of ethical positives. And we have seen that the ethical values that flow from these sources are to be preserved and lived out, even in the midst of a cursed earth and a fallen humanity which constantly undermine, deny or reverse them.

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The Use of Scripture in Ethics

Christopher Marshall

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This is the first part of an extended paper presented at a symposium on 'The Church, State and Justice' at Victoria University of Wellington, 19 November 1993. The symposium was a follow up reflection on a document jointly prepared by leaders of ten denominations in New Zealand as a Christian response to disturbing social and economic developments in the nation, and read in the churches earlier in 1993.

In this article the author seeks to show how Scripture can function in the process of ethical reflection. He outlines five interrelated sources of Christian ethics and why sola Scriptura is inadequate for dealing with complex contemporary ethical issues such as genetic engineering, nuclear weapons and New Right economics. He discusses the problems of historical distance and pluralism within the canonical text, in theological reconstruction and in modern idiom and concepts. He emphasizes the role of the Church as a hermeneutical community committed to the social embodiment of the text it reveres and the need to use the method most appropriate to each situation. In the second part of the article (not printed here) the author explores the prescriptive, the illuminative and formative use of the Scripture.

I. THE COMPONENTS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

For the purposes of this discussion, ethics may be understood as the systematic study of the moral principles, values, and obligations that guide human behaviour. While 'morality' concerns the *evaluation* of such behaviour as right or wrong, good or bad, 'ethics' is the *theoretical analysis* of the major ingredients that shape and validate these moral judgements. 'Christian' ethics is the **P. 223** attempt to understand and justify moral obligation in relation to the will of God, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all. This makes Christian ethics a distinctive enterprise.¹ That is not to say that the *content* of Christian moral values is radically different from the content of non-Christian values. There *are* important differences,² but Christian attitudes to what is right and wrong are often widely shared by non-Christians. The distinctiveness of Christian ethics lies primarily in the way Christians understand the ultimate origin and sanction of these values. At the heart of Christian ethics lies an appeal to *revelation*; Christian ethical judgments are governed ultimately by belief in the self-disclosure of God's own moral character and will, not by the dictates of human reason, affections, volition or environmental conditioning.

¹ Cf. Alister E. McGrath, 'Doctrine and Ethics', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34/2, 1991, 145–56; Jochem Douma, 'The Use of Scripture in Ethics', *European Journal of Theology* 1/2, 1992, 113f.

² Certain demands are made of Christians in the New Testament that go beyond natural human prudence or philosophically justifiable morality—preference for the outcast, costly service even unto death, helping others with no expectation of recompense, loving one's enemies, taking others more seriously than oneself. Christian ethics does not just require us to love our neighbour, but to love in the way specifically modelled by Jesus in the Gospels. On the love commands, see the stimulating discussion by Paul Ricoeur, 'The Golden Rule: Exegetical and Theological Perplexities', *New Testament Studies* 36, 1990, 392–97.

In the attempt to clarify the ethical corollaries of divine revelation, Christian ethics draws on five main sources of guidance.

- (i) *Scripture*: The Bible serves as the primary record of God's self-disclosure in the events of salvation-history, as apprehended by the community of faith. Inasmuch as it presents God as a righteous Being who demands righteousness of his creatures, the Bible is profoundly concerned with ethics. According to biblical tradition, ethical behaviour stands in a two-fold relationship to God's self-revelation. On the one hand, it is a *response of gratitude* for God's saving acts in history, while on the other hand, those saving acts themselves provide the *pattern and standard* for human conduct. The people of God are enjoined to model their behaviour on the actions of God; the covenant requires nothing less than the 'imitation of God' ([Lev. 11:45](#)). The meaning of 'justice', for instance, is arrived at not by contemplating some abstract norm of justice, but by remembering how God delivered his people from oppression, and then acting accordingly.³ For Christian ethics, the imitation of God centres on the imitation of Christ, whose concrete manner of living and acting is known to us only through the biblical record.⁴ p. 224
- (ii) *Theological Tradition*: Revelation, including biblical revelation, is received, reflected on, and interpreted by the people of God, down through history. This interpretation and application of revelation constitutes the theological and moral tradition of Christianity, which serves as a second source for discerning God's will. It is not only the Catholic church that so uses tradition; all branches of Christianity have appealed to historical precedents and experience in formulating moral and doctrinal teaching. We cannot separate ourselves from our traditions and heritage. We enter into life in the midst of tradition; we are fundamentally shaped by tradition; and even our ability to question and change tradition comes from the tradition itself.
- (iii) *Moral Philosophy*: The great moral traditions of Western philosophy, which have appealed principally to the exercise of *human reason* for the determination of right and wrong, have also had a profound impact on both the content and methodology of Christian ethics (the very word 'ethics' is the legacy of Greek philosophy). Of particular significance has been the concept of *natural law*, which has been very influential in Catholic moral theology. The extent to which natural law considerations should shape Christian ethics is much contested, but some concept of a 'natural' revelation of God's moral will accessible to all humanity in virtue of creation has played a role in most expressions of Christian ethics, including New Testament ethics (e.g., [Matt 5:46f](#); [Rom. 1:28](#); [2:14ff](#); [Ac. 17:16-34](#); [1 Cor. 11:13ff](#)).⁵

³ Cf. [Micah 6:3-5](#), [8](#); [Exodus 20:1-17](#). [4](#).

⁴ The precise meaning of the *imitatio Christi* motif in the New Testament is debated, but it seems clear that the early Christians believed that by imitating Jesus, they were learning to imitate God (note, for example, the use of 'perfect' in [Matt. 5:48](#) and [19:21](#)). For a survey of later uses of the motif, see Margaret R. Miles, 'Imitation of Christ: Is It Possible in the Twentieth Century?', *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 10/1, 1989, 7-22.

⁵ It is noteworthy that the first Christians were not specially concerned to maintain an 'ethical distance' between themselves and their non-Christian environment, except in areas where contemporary values clashed with those of the gospel. Recent studies have shown that in their paraenesis, New Testament authors draw upon well-established *topoi*, and in so doing align themselves with ethically enlightened members of wider Jewish and Greco-Roman society. This is not to deny a genuine distinctiveness about certain Christian values, nor to weaken the oft-repeated call to Christian non-conformity in the New Testament (e.g., [Rom. 12:1-2](#)). It is to rather to discern two complementary themes in early Christian ethical

- (iv) *Empirical Data*: Christian ethics is more than a speculative exercise; it also requires attention to the full range of contextual factors that bear on each ethical situation. Indeed the first task of moral analysis is to clarify the decision-making situation and identify the range of available options. The data furnished by the social sciences and by other empirical analyses thus has an indispensable role in ethical discernment, not least in the complex moral dilemmas posed by developments in modern technology.
- (v) *The Spirit-in-Community*: The New Testament places great emphasis on a twofold role for the Holy Spirit in Christian [p. 225](#) ethical life—that of bringing about inner moral renewal in believers so that they spontaneously manifest ethical virtues,⁶ and of guiding them in ethical decision-making.⁷ It is crucial to recognize that in the New Testament the Spirit's work is expressed in the context of the Church⁸ 'Paul knows nothing of solitary religion or individual morality', explains W. D. Davies, 'but rather sees the Christian firmly based in the community.'⁹ The gathered community provides the necessary checks and balances which prevent the Spirit's direction degenerating into individualistic subjectivism.

This list of the main sources of Christian ethics invites two immediate observations. The first is that while the five components may be conceptually distinguished, they are in practice inseparable. Scripture cannot be entirely distinguished from tradition, since Scripture is both the product of tradition and the shaper of tradition. Empirical data does not exist in isolation from the moral values and ideological commitments that govern the gathering and interpretation of data (a point not to be overlooked in the current economic environment). The Spirit's guidance of the community is not merely intuitive but often employs the text of Scripture and the wisdom learned from ecclesiastical tradition or scientific discovery. The five sources, then, are intertwined. Yet there is still value in notionally distinguishing them, for in different Christian traditions different constituents have the dominant role, although in *all* traditions ethical arguments gain in persuasiveness by employing all five in a coherent way.

Secondly, our delineation of several sources of ethical guidance shows that the catchcry *sola Scriptura* does not really apply in Christian ethics. 'Scripture *alone*', contends Gustafson, 'is never the final court of appeal for Christian ethics'.¹⁰ By itself the Bible is not enough to tell us what to do. Arriving at moral judgments entails a dialectic between scriptural and non-scriptural factors, between the considerations based on circumstance and rational inquiry and those which appeal to the biblical witness. The Social Justice

teaching, one that recognizes the common humanity of Christian and non-Christian in virtue of creation, the other that stresses the eschatological distinctiveness of Christian lifestyle.

⁶ See, for example, [Gal. 5:16–26](#); [6:1](#); [Rom. 8:13](#), [28](#); [9:1](#); [14:17](#); [15:13](#), [30](#); [2 Cor. 3:18](#); [6:6](#); [Col. 1:8](#).

⁷ See, for example, [Jn. 14:25–31](#); [15:21–16:15](#); [Ac. 15:28](#); [Rom. 8:4–6](#), [14](#); [Gal. 5:16](#), [18](#), [25](#); cf. [Rom. 8:13](#); [Gal. 6:8](#); [1 Cor. 2:12](#).

⁸ [1 Cor. 3:16](#); [6:19](#); [12:13](#); [14:29](#), [38](#); [1 Thess. 5:19–22](#); [2 Thess. 2:2](#); [1 Jn. 4:1](#).

⁹ W. D. Davies, 'Paul and the Law: Pitfalls in Interpretation', in M.D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson (eds.), *Paul and Paulinism* London: SPCK, 1982, 11.

¹⁰ James M. Gustafson, 'The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study', *Interpretation* 24/4, 1970, 455. Gustafson affirms that the role of Scripture is to inform Christian moral judgments, 'but it does not by itself determine what they ought to be. That determination is done by persons and communities as finite moral agents responsible to God' (455). So too Edward LeRoy Long, Jr. 'The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics', *Interpretation* 19/2, 1965, 451; Allen Verhey, 'Bible in Christian Ethics', in J. Macquarrie and J. Childress, *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* London: SCM, 1986, 57, 60f.

Statement is itself evidence of this; alongside Scripture, reference is made to the tradition of the p. 226 church, the Treaty of Waitangi, political philosophy, and socio-economic trends. Such a dialogical interplay between Scripture and experience is unavoidable, for every claim to understand the Bible presupposes finite human interpretation, and every interpretation is invariably conditioned by a wide range of (extra-biblical) personal and contextual factors.

Having said that, for most Christians, including those who do not subscribe to a 'high' doctrine of biblical inspiration, Scripture is still felt to possess a unique authority in Christian ethical reasoning. The essential test of validity for ethical judgments is whether they are consistent with what is perceived to be scriptural teaching. Even if our understanding of that teaching is subject to change, Scripture *per se* has long been accorded, at least in theory,¹¹ a privileged role in adjudicating Christian moral teaching; indeed it is precisely as an *authority* that the Bible has chiefly been employed in Christian ethics.¹²

II. THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE

Much has happened over the past 200 years to undermine the privileged position traditionally accorded Scripture in determining Christian thought and practice. For many interpreters today, such considerations as the pre-scientific worldview of the biblical authors, their reliance upon primitive mythological language and apocalyptic symbolism, the alleged dependence of New Testament ethics on a discredited imminent eschatology,¹³ and the sheer, irreconcilable diversity of ethical perspectives in Scripture, make it impossible to ascribe a normative role to the Bible in ethical deliberations.¹⁴ And yet, as Marshall observes, P. 227 'there remains a lingering suspicion that the Bible is authoritative; sermons are still based on biblical texts, and if a preacher or scholar disagrees with what Scripture says, he usually feels compelled to produce some good

¹¹ According to Barnabas Lindars although the Reformers claimed to transfer authority in ethical matters from the pronouncements of the *Magisterium* of the church to the Bible, their moral traditions 'were largely prefabricated, and really only employed the Bible as the authoritative sanction for them', 'Bible and Christian Ethics', *Theology* 76/634, 1973, 181. Yoder similarly urges that 'Protestant scholasticism ... claimed that the Bible was the only moral authority and announced a fundamental suspicion of moral discernment ... [which] claims rootage in reason, nature, and tradition. Yet when this official Protestantism turned to the problems of administering its own society, there resulted at the time no profound difference between it and Catholicism on any practical moral issues: divorce, usury, war, or truth-telling', J. H. Yoder, 'The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood: A Protestant Perspective on Practical Moral Reasoning', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10, 1982, 45. See also idem, John H. Yoder, 'Authority of the Canon', in W. M. Swartley (ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* Elkhart, IN: IMS, 1984, 265–272.

¹² More ink has been spilled asserting *that* the Bible possesses authority than in reflecting on what is meant by 'authority' itself. For helpful discussions on this, see N. T. Wright, 'How Can the Bible be Authoritative?', *Vox Evangelica* Vol XXI, 1991, 7–32; Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture: the Politics and Ethics of Remembering', *Interpretation* 34, 1980, 356–70.

¹³ The particular model used to interpret New Testament eschatology, has been the most decisive consideration in determining how scholars have judged the contemporary relevance of New Testament ethics. See the survey in Robin Scroggs, 'The New Testament and Ethics: How Do We Get From There To Here?', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 11/4, 1984, 77–93 (esp. 84–89).

¹⁴ For brief surveys of those with such views, see I. H. Marshall, 'Using the Bible in Ethics', in David F. Wright (ed.), *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics* Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979, 45–49; W. M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* Scottdale: Herald Press, 1983, 203–11; David Cook, *The Moral Maze* London: SPCK, 1983, 46–50; V. P. Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* Nashville: Abingdon, 1985, 18–23.

reasons for his disagreement'.¹⁵ Whatever the problems in appropriating Scripture today, and they are considerable, there remains a widespread conviction, across confessional lines, that Scripture can, does, and should shape Christian moral life. And there remain strong historical, theological and practical arguments for according the Bible such a decisive or normative role.

Historically, the Bible has significantly shaped the moral ethos of western culture. In the past, considerable knowledge of the Bible was transmitted through general culture, and biblical authority was almost universally accepted in the West. This is no longer the case, so that comparison with the Bible provides one yardstick for measuring changes in the moral values of contemporary society. Such a comparison is evident in the Social Justice Statement.

Theologically, the Christian community still affirms, with a fair measure of confidence, that the Bible contains or bears witness to divine revelation. Most important in this respect is the fact that it provides our only access to God's self-disclosure in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, to which Christians are directly accountable. In the final analysis, it is because Christian believers discover themselves to be directly encountered by Christ in the text of Scripture that they continue to listen to Scripture.

Practically, the Bible provides an indispensable framework for understanding the human situation in general, and the task of the Christian community in particular. The biblical story offers a perspective on the human condition that carries the conviction of truth. It attests, as Gustafson observes, both to the limitations and the potentialities of human action in the world.¹⁶ It affirms the existence of moral evil; the temptations to pride and arrogance in human achievements; the capacity for people to rationalize destructive behaviour by appealing to noble ends; the finitude of moral judgments. It provides, on the other hand, a vision of the possibilities of human life. It affirms that the unfulfilled future is in the hands of a compassionate and just God; it gives insight into God's ultimate intentions in history; it describes actions and events that are seen to be consistent or inconsistent with God's aspirations for humanity; it gives voice to the longing of oppressed people for peace and justice; and it depicts the creation of a special people to serve as co-workers with God in bringing these about. All this has profound ethical significance.

This scriptural faith disposes the Christian community toward moral seriousness, toward profound dissatisfaction with those events that are destructive of human life and value, p. 228 toward aspirations for a future which is more fulfilling for all God's creation; and thus toward negative judgment on events which are not consistent with the possibilities that God is creating for man.¹⁷

Thus, while Scripture is not, and cannot, be the an *exclusive* source of guidance for Christian ethics (even within the New Testament, written Scripture does not fulfil such an exclusive role),¹⁸ there is good reason to regard it as the *primary* or *normative* authority for Christian morality and identity. And, as George Linbeck notes, the 'instinct of the

¹⁵ I. H. Marshall, 'Using the Bible', 39f.

¹⁶ Gustafson, 'Place of Scripture', 448f.

¹⁷ Ibid., 449.

¹⁸ In Paul's paraenesis, written Scripture serves primarily to confirm, reinforce or illuminate ethical demands that are derived from other considerations; see V. P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968, 28–43; idem, 'Belonging to Christ: A Paradigm for Ethics in First Corinthians', *Interpretation* 44/9, 1990, 151.

faithful' is still to invest such worth in Scripture, even if popular knowledge of the actual content of Scripture is in noticeable decline, inside as well as outside the church.¹⁹ Despite this, the Christian community is still more ready to accept ethical judgements that run counter to theological tradition or philosophical morality or contemporary scientific judgment or the advice of their clerical leaders than those that are plainly inconsistent with Scripture.

But none of this takes us very far. It is one thing to assert the unique authority of Scripture for Christian morality; it is quite another to demonstrate *how* the Scriptures can most appropriately function this way, and to decide precisely *what* Scripture authorizes and denies. The fundamental issue is not *whether* the Bible is authoritative for ethics but *how* we move from biblical ethical judgments to present problems. Using an ancient religious text, even an inspired one, for ethical guidance today is fraught with hermeneutical difficulties, and the Bible itself 'does not give us clear instructions on how to reason from its moral imperatives to their application in every problem of real life'.²⁰ Consequently ways of interpreting both the ethics of Scripture, and the use of Scripture in ethics, vary enormously.²¹

III. SOME HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEMS

A great deal could be said about the hermeneutical hurdles that confront the Christian ethicist in turning to Scripture. The most obvious is the problem of *historical distance*, the fact that we face ethical dilemmas today of which the Bible knows nothing. How can the Bible be a lamp for our feet in matters such as genetic engineering, *in vitro* fertilisation, nuclear weapons, world hunger, or New Right economics? Even in areas of current concern to which the Bible does apparently **P. 229** speak (e.g., politics, war, labour relations), it presupposes a radically different socio-political reality, with a different range of options open to actors. How can advice given in one context be reapplied in another, totally different context, even if the topic under discussion is the same? Just because the topic is the same it does not mean the issues are the same.

Now the problems of historical distance are certainly weighty. But they are perhaps not as serious as some allege,²² since most pressing ethical issues, even those peculiar to modern life, usually turn on perennial questions of power, wealth, violence, class or gender, and about such matters the Bible speaks extensively.²³ Although the Bible cannot

¹⁹ George Lindbeck, 'Scripture, Consensus, and Community', in R. J. Neuhaus (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, 74–101.

²⁰ L. B. Smedes, 'Ethics: Moral Problems', *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, II. 191.

²¹ Gustafson observes that 'the study of the ethics in the Scriptures ... is a complex task for which few are well prepared; those who are specialists in ethics generally lack the intensive and proper training in biblical studies, and those who are specialists in biblical studies often lack sophistication in ethical thought', 'Place of Scripture', 430.

²² There is truth in Fowl & Jones' assertion that 'the most important discontinuities are not historical, but moral and theological. That is, the important discontinuities between Scripture and our contemporary settings are more likely found within us, specifically in our inability and unwillingness to provide and embody wise readings of the texts, than in gaps of historical time', Stephen E. Fowl, and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion* London: SPCK, 1991, 61, also 81. See also Hauerwas, 'Moral Authority of Scripture', 369f.

²³ I. H. Marshall, 'How Do We Interpret The Bible Today?', *Themelios* 5/2 (1980), 10; J. Packer, 'Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics', in D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (eds), *Scripture and Truth* Leicester: IVP, 1983, 331f.

function as a direct guide with respect to many modern problems, particular courses of action can still be evaluated in light of the central commitments of the biblical text on matters of power, wealth, justice and the like.

More serious than the problem of cultural distance is the many-sided phenomenon of *pluralism* that confronts us in the interpretation of Scripture. There is, firstly, the pluralism in the *content and expression of biblical morality itself*. There is no shortage of ethical material in Scripture. But it comes in a huge diversity of literary forms—commands, laws, warnings, exhortations, prohibitions, wisdom teaching, proverbs, allegories, prayers, parables, visions of the future, narratives, living examples, dialogues, vice and virtue lists, and more. Different forms of moral discourse require different modes of interpretation. More than this, there is diversity in the ethical perspectives presented on particular themes, such as the handling of wealth. In some places, the biblical writers endorse a prudential morality accessible to everyone; in other places, they propose an ethical absolutism that defies every canon of common sense or social pragmatism.²⁴ As the record of God's interaction with people over a long historical period, and in a wide range of cultural and social situations, there is development as well as variety in biblical ethics. Scripture is a historical document, not a legal constitution in which all parts can be treated as equally important for all generations. There is both intracanonial *dialogue*, with one part of Scripture interpreting and complementing another; and intracanonial *critique*, with some perspectives being relegated to p. 230 preparatory and accommodating roles.²⁵

Now the sheer quantity, variety and historical conditionedness of ethical material in the Bible makes sustaining any 'objective' authority for Scripture problematic. It poses the problem of how we do justice to the variety of perspectives Scripture offers without imposing our own agenda? How do we determine the continuities and moral priorities of Scripture? How do we bring some degree of organization and integration to biblical teaching? Is such secondary organization legitimate, or is it an arbitrary imposition on a heterogeneous range of texts? Is it admissible to set up a canon within a canon? Can we in fact avoid doing so?²⁶

Such internal canonical pluralism is matched, secondly, by a pluralism of *historical and theological reconstructions* of the biblical message. There has always been a diversity of

²⁴ For a recent discussion of this with respect to the ethics of Jesus, see A. E. Harvey, *Strenuous Commands. The Ethic of Jesus* London: SCM, 1990.

²⁵ Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*, 217–218.

²⁶ The practice of setting up a canon within a canon is usually rejected in principle by most interpreters. But in practice it seems unavoidable, for the moment we favour New Testament over Old Testament teaching, or differentiate between what is culturally relative and what is abiding revelation, we are effectively setting up a canon within a canon (so Robin Scroggs, 'Can the New Testament Be Relevant for the Twenty-first Century?', in idem, *The Text and the Times* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 273–75; also J. D. G. Jones makes a helpful distinction between a normative and functional canon within a canon.

* a *normative* canon within a canon is where certain texts are excluded from consideration on *a priori* grounds. This is to be rejected outright, for 'no text—no matter how "difficult"—should be excluded from the ongoing processes of communal discernment in relation to the whole witness of Scripture'.

* a *functional* canon within a canon is where certain texts are discerned by certain communities at certain times to be more appropriate than others. This is quite acceptable. 'Within a canon as diverse as the one Christians recognise, there is no reason to think that all of its texts will be equally relevant in any given situation. Some texts will be more appropriate than others in any given situation. This set up a "functional" canon within a canon.'

ways of construing the overall unity of biblical teaching—be it in terms of covenant, nature and grace, law and gospel, sequential dispensations, the kingdom of God, and so on. To this diversity has been added the results of modern historical criticism. Invaluable light has been shed on the biblical world by historical criticism, but it has also spawned an enormous diversity of explanations for the origin and meaning of the text, all of which are tentative and constantly changing. One result of historical criticism has been to convince the educated laity that biblical interpretation is a technical enterprise that requires prolonged specialized training, so that ‘it is now the scholarly rather than the hierarchical clerical elite which holds the Bible captive and makes it inaccessible to ordinary folk.’²⁷

Thirdly, there is a pluralism of *modern idioms and conceptions* that the biblical message is translated into, some philosophical, some political, some mystical. How do we decide what is, and what is not, a p. 231 faithful reinterpretation of the biblical message? The conscious attempt of modern interpreters to re-express biblical thought in the language of the day, while both helpful and necessary, has resulted in a ‘pluralistic cacophony’ of diverse and variable accounts that are often mutually unintelligible.²⁸ Indeed such is the diversity of modern approaches to biblical interpretation that it has become increasingly problematic to speak of the ‘meaning’ of the text at all. For a text can mean different things to different people, depending on the interpretive interests pursued by the reader, and there is no impartial way of determining the text’s ‘real’ or ‘true’ meaning.²⁹

Modern (more so post-modern) readers of Scripture are more aware than ever before in history of the hermeneutical dilemmas posed by this threefold pluralism. Sadly, for many ordinary Christians the Bible has become a closed book. Yet there is no magical way of avoiding such pluralism. The problem exists, it is real, and it has to be faced whenever we turn to Scripture for guidance in ethical decisions. What Richard Hays calls ‘bumper sticker hermeneutics’—‘God said it, I believe it, that settles it’—is clearly no solution, since it ignores rather than solves the problem.³⁰

But the alternative need not be total relativism or scepticism. Written texts always retain a certain independence of voice over against those of their interpreters, a capacity to challenge readings based on inappropriate or alien assumptions. If this is true of texts in general, it is even more true of Scripture, which, Christians confess, is used by the Spirit-in-community to convey the mind of God to God’s people. As long as we are prepared to consent to biblical authority, to be self-critical of our own handling of the text, to allow Scripture to be a ‘two-edged sword’ that can challenge our pre-suppositions and expose the interpretive filters of our social location, and be open to the possibility, even the necessity, of diverse yet equally faithful appropriations of the text today, the hermeneutical problems of using Scripture for ethics are not insuperable.

IV. THE SEARCH FOR A METHOD

²⁷ Lindbeck, ‘Scripture, Consensus, and Community’, 90. So too Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Crisis of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception’, *Interpretation* 44/4, 1990, 356f.

²⁸ Lindbeck, ‘Scripture, Consensus, and Community’, 88ff.

²⁹ See Fowl/Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 14–21.

³⁰ Richard B. Hays, ‘Scripture-Shaped Community. The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics’, *Interpretation* 54/1 (1990), 43.

If then the Bible *should*, and, despite the above hurdles, *can* be used as a normative reference point in ethical decision-making, it seems self-evident that a method must be devised for exploring the moral implications of Scripture in a systematic and not in a haphazard way.³¹ Most biblical interpreters have agreed on this for a long time. Yet despite their very best efforts, none have succeeded in [P. 232](#) devising a comprehensive method for moving from the text of Scripture to the current situation.³²

In view of this, there is a growing recognition that the quest for a single definitive method is misguided. It is misguided for at least two reasons. The first is that no single method can cope with the pluriformity of Scripture itself. Since there is a variety of materials in Scripture, there needs to be a variety of ways of construing its moral application. 'To reduce Scripture's moral requirements to any single category is to distort both morality and Scripture'.³³ Secondly, there is no one method that can straddle the diversity of contemporary contexts readers find themselves in. Fowl and Jones argue that past attempts to specify a clear and precise method have rested on the false assumption that ethical decisions are made by isolated individuals, who ought to follow a rationally-defensible method, the validity of which is independent of social and historical circumstances. But individuals learn to make moral judgments in particular historical communities; moral descriptions employ the categories and commitments of distinct social traditions; and even if it were possible to identify generalizable methodological principles, every attempt to apply them is context-dependent. Accordingly 'the search for a context-independent method is bound to fail'.³⁴

This is not to deny the value of systematic methodological reflection, nor to advocate a complete relativism where every interpretation is equally valid. It is simply to recognize the *variety* of ways Scripture can be used in ethics, and to insist that there is no neutral, transcendent, fail-safe method for evaluating specific appropriations of the text. Moral reasoning and justification are still of critical importance, but such evaluations can be made only by particular communities in particular situations, under the guidance of the Spirit and drawing on all the resources available to them at the time. These resources will include methodological principles appropriate to the character and vision of the community.

Various typologies have been suggested to describe how the Scriptures have been used in ethics. In what follows, I will employ a tripartite classification, with various sub-categories. It must be stressed that these categories are not distinct, mutually exclusive methods pursued in opposition to each other; in practice most biblical scholars and ethicists blend elements of all three (though often with one or other occupying the driving seat). It is not my intention to suggest that the three broad approaches form a methodological hierarchy, with the third approach superseding the earlier two. Each method has a valid and irreducible contribution to make. Therefore, [p. 233](#) after analyzing the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each way of using Scripture, we will reaffirm the merits of a methodological pluralism. But there is still value in teasing out the different assumptions and priorities at work in each distinct way of employing Scripture

³¹ So C. Freeman Sleeper, 'Ethics as a Context for Biblical Interpretation', *Interpretation* 22/4, 1968, 460; Gustafson, 'Place of Scripture', 439.

³² Cf. Scroggs, 'New Testament and Ethics', 90f.

³³ James F. Childress, 'Scripture and Christian Ethics. Some Reflections on the Role of Scripture in Moral Deliberation and Justification', *Interp* 34/4, 1980, 378. So too William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984, 3, 4, 5, 90.

³⁴ Fowl/Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 13.

in ethics so that we have some basis for understanding competing evaluations of the moral witness of Scripture in particular issues, such as those addressed in the Social Justice Statement.

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The Church as a Scripture-Shaped Community: The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics

Richard B. Hays

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In this excellent article the author discusses how the Church becomes a Scripture-shaped community in making ethical judgements on the issues of our time. In developing a framework for pursuing New Testament ethics as a theological discipline, he outlines the threefold task of the descriptive or exegetical, the synthetic or coherent-images and the hermeneutical or interpretative methods. He suggests a number of guidelines for both the synthetic and hermeneutical tasks and appeals to the Church to live under biblical authority rather than under the ambiguities of reason and experience. In a case study on homelessness he applies his method to an urgent ethical issue. By way of criticism, not all evangelicals will agree that the tensions in the text have to be left as irreconcilable contradictions.

‘The Devil can cite scripture to his purpose,’ so my grandmother used to say. Or, as we prefer to say now in the academy, ‘The text has inexhaustible hermeneutical potential.’ Either way we choose to phrase it, the problem is the same. Appeals to Scripture as a warrant for our beliefs and practices are suspect for two reasons: the Bible itself contains diverse points of view, and diverse interpretive methods can yield diverse readings of any given text.

This hermeneutical crisis is nowhere more acutely embarrassing for the Church than with regard to ethical questions. Our last national election offered a vivid illustration of the problem, as Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson, each appealing to the Bible as the ground of his convictions, championed widely divergent visions of Christian morality. This is an instance of a perennial difficulty: Christians of all sorts, even those who do not subscribe formally to a ‘high’ doctrine of biblical inspiration, [p. 235](#) have always deemed it essential that their ethical teachings stand in continuity with Scripture.

Under these circumstances, an outsider’s scepticism might be understandable. Is it not nonsense for Christians to pretend that the Bible can regulate moral understanding? Yet the dilemma is most poignant seen from within the community of faith: How can the Church become a Scripture-shaped community, even where it earnestly longs to do so? Those who can naïvely affirm, ‘God said it, I believe it, that settles it,’ are oblivious to the

question-begging inherent in the formulation. There is no escape from the imperative of interpreting the word. Bumper-sticker hermeneutics will not do.

Nor, sad to say, is more and better exegesis the way to a solution. Indeed, careful exegesis heightens our awareness of the theological diversity within Scripture and of our historical distance from the original communities (in ancient Israel and the earliest churches) to whom these texts were addressed. In other words, critical exegesis exacerbates the hermeneutical problem rather than solving it. That is why seminary students sometimes come away from Bible courses puzzled and alienated. As Oliver O'Donovan has remarked, interpreters who think they can determine the proper ethical application of the Bible solely through more sophisticated exegesis are like people who believe that they can fly if only they flap their arms hard enough.

Unless we can give a coherent account of our methods for moving between text and normative ethical judgements, appeals to the authority of Scripture will be hollow and unconvincing. It is my aim in the present essay, therefore, to articulate as clearly as possible a framework within which we may pursue New Testament ethics as a theological discipline.¹

I. THE THREEFOLD TASK OF NEW TESTAMENT ETHICS

The project of studying New Testament ethics is multiplex; it requires us to engage in three overlapping critical operations that we may designate as the *descriptive*, the *synthetic*, and the *hermeneutical* **P.236** tasks.² The three tasks interpenetrate one another, of course, but it is useful to distinguish them for heuristic purposes. Indeed, much confusion can arise from the failure to distinguish these operations appropriately.³

The descriptive task

The *descriptive* task is fundamentally *exegetical in character*. The first thing that we must do in order to understand the ethics of the New Testament is to explicate in detail the messages of the individual writings in the canon,⁴ without prematurely harmonizing them. When we read the texts in this way, we note distinctive themes and patterns of

¹ Wayne Meeks ('Understanding Early Christian Ethics', *JBL* 105 [1986], 3–11) suggests that the term 'New Testament ethics' confuses historical and normative categories and should therefore not be used. Several notable studies in recent years have addressed the methodological issues: Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970); James M. Gustafson, 'The Place of Scripture in Christian', *INTERP.* 24 (1970), 430–55; Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976); Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', *INTERP.* 34 (1980), 356–70; Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983); Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1984); Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1984); Robin Scroggs, 'The New Testament and Ethics: How Do We Get from There to Here?' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 11/4 (1984), 77–93; and Eduard Lohse, *Theologische Ethik des Neuen Testaments* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1988).

² Cf. the analogous description of the tasks of Christian ethics offered by Birch and Rasmussen (*Bible and Ethics*, pp. 82–83): descriptive, critical, and normative. Their categories, however, apply not to the interpretation of texts but to the analysis of moral actions.

³ For extended discussion of one instance of such confusion, see my article, 'Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of [Romans 1](#),' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14/1 (1986), 184–215.

⁴ As is done, e.g., by Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

reasoning in the individual witnesses: Luke has a special concern for the poor, the pastoral epistles emphasize order and stability in the community, and so forth. Likewise, whenever we ask a specific question, such as, 'What is the meaning of *porneia* in the exception clause that Matthew appends to Jesus' prohibition of divorce?' we are operating at the descriptive level.⁵

Our descriptive work cannot be confined, however, to the explicit moral teachings of the New Testament texts; the church's moral world is manifest not only in such teachings but also in the stories, symbols, social structures, and practices that shape the community's ethos. Thus, the work of the historical critic entails reconstructing a 'thick description' of the symbolic world of the communities that produced and received the New Testament writings.⁶

The synthetic task

If we are pursuing New Testament ethics with theological concerns in view, however, we must move on to ask this question, we move from the descriptive to the *synthetic* task. Is it possible to describe a unity of ethical perspective within the diversity of the canon?⁷

Often, the problem is addressed through attempts to reconcile apparent contradictions. Does Matthew's demand for a higher righteousness ([Mat. 5:20](#)) contradict Paul's gospel of the justification of the ungodly ([Rom. 4:5](#))? Does Luke's concern for an ongoing church in history betray [p. 237](#) the early church's radical eschatological ethic? How does the command for the people of God to 'come out and be separate' ([2 Cor. 6:14–7:1](#)) relate to Jesus' notorious preference for eating with tax collectors and sinners? How does the principle that 'in Christ there is no male and female' ([Gal. 3:28](#)) relate to specific pastoral admonitions that women should keep silent in churches ([1 Cor. 14:34–35](#)) and submit to their husbands ([Eph. 5:22–24](#))? Is the state God's servant for good ([Rom. 13:1–7](#)) or the beast from the abyss that makes war on the saints ([Rev. 13](#))?

Such particular intracanonial tensions can be handled (with something more substantial than *ad hoc* rationalizations) only if they can be located within a comprehensive characterization of the New Testament's moral concerns or themes. What we need, in short, is a cluster of master images to govern our construal of New Testament ethics. The unifying images must be derived from the texts themselves, rather than superimposed artificially, and they must be capable of providing an interpretive framework that links and illumines the individual writings.

The hermeneutical task

Even if we should succeed in giving some satisfactory synthetic account of the New Testament's ethical content, we will find ourselves—like Stephen Spielberg's Indiana Jones at the final stage of his quest for the Holy Grail—perched on the edge of a terrifying

⁵ This example contains a hidden complication that exemplifies the difficulty of doing N.T. ethics even at the descriptive level. My formulation assumes that the exception clause originates with Matthew (or his community tradition) rather than with the historical Jesus. This implies that the descriptive task must include an effort to trace the developmental history of moral teaching traditions within the canon.

⁶ See, e.g., Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986). Of course, the thicker the description, the more challenging will be the subsequent synthetic phase of the project.

⁷ The problem of unity and diversity has long been a central problem of N.T. theology. For helpful discussions, see J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977); Hendrikus W. Boers, *What Is New Testament Theology?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

abyss. The last critical task is the *hermeneutical* operation. How can we bridge the chasm between ourselves and the text? How do we appropriate the New Testament's message as a word addressed to us?

The problem was recently put to me in a striking way by a Methodist pastor in Kansas. In the course of conducting a three-day class on Romans for a pastors' school, I had insisted that Romans should not be read as a tract about personal salvation; rather, Paul's central concern in the letter is to explicate the relation of Jews and Gentiles in God's redemptive purpose, while insisting that the gospel does not abrogate God's faithfulness to Israel. On the last day, one of the pastors said, 'Professor Hays, you've convinced me that you're right about Romans, but now I don't see how I can preach from it anymore. Where I serve out in western Kansas, Israel's fate is not a burning issue for my people, and there's not a Jew within a hundred miles of my church.' The objection deserves a thoughtful answer.

The task of hermeneutical appropriation requires *an integrative act of the imagination*. This is always so, even for those who would like to deny it. With fear and trembling we must work out a life of faithfulness to God through responsive and creative reappropriation of the New Testament in a world far removed from the world of the original writers and readers. Thus, whenever we appeal to the authority of the New Testament, we are necessarily engaged in metaphor-making, placing our community's life imaginatively within the world articulated by the texts. p. 238

II. GUIDELINES FOR DISCERNMENT

For the purposes of this essay, I pass over the descriptive phrase, noting only that we must discipline our exegetical work by a rigorous intent to let the individual New Testament texts have their say, to speak a word that may contravene our own values and desires.⁸ (E.g., no matter how devoutly we might wish it otherwise, the Gospels of Matthew and John do express a theologically rationalized hostility towards Jews and Judaism.) The pivotal choices for New Testament ethics as a theological discipline are made, whether consciously or unconsciously, in our working methods for performing the synthetic and hermeneutical tasks. I offer, therefore, a preliminary list of normative methodological proposals for a church that seeks to be a Scripture-shaped community.

Guidelines for the Synthetic Task

Confront the full range of canonical witnesses. All of the relevant texts must be gathered and considered; selective appeals to favourite proof-texts are illegitimate without full consideration of texts that may stand on the opposite side of a particular issue. The more comprehensive the attention to the full range of New Testament witnesses, the more adequate a normative ethical proposal is likely to be. Beware of the interpreter who always quotes only the *Haustafeln* and never wrestles with [Galatians 5:1](#)—or vice versa.

Let the tensions stand. Do not force harmony through abstraction away from specific texts. Confronted with the diversity of New Testament witnesses, we are often tempted

⁸ Anyone conversant with recent hermeneutical discussion will realize at once how problematical such a recommendation is. 'We have learned to suspect that all interpretation serves the power-needs of the interpreter. Nonetheless, the claim that texts do have their own voices (i.e., that they do express meanings distinguishable from our own whims and predispositions, and that reasoned discussion can approximate consensus about these meanings) is an essential assumption for any discourse that attributes authority to the Bible; it is also an essential assumption for living daily life in a world where there are laws, street signs, and other 'texts' that are presumed to constrain our behaviour.

to dissolve the plurality of perspectives by appealing to universal principles (love, justice, etc.), historical-developmental schemes, or dialectical compromises. Such conceptual movements away from the text's specific imperatives are often escape routes from its uncomfortable demands. For example, [Romans 13](#) and [Revelation 13](#) are *not* two complementary expressions of a single New Testament understanding of the state;⁹ rather, they represent radically different assessments of the relation of the Christian community to the empire. We can not balance them against one another and arrive at a position somewhere in the middle that will allow us to live comfortably as citizens of a modern democratic state. If these texts are allowed to have their say, they will force us to choose between them—or to reject the normative claims of both. When [p. 239](#) we find ourselves caught between contradictory New Testament teachings, it is always better to choose one resolutely than to waffle and seek artificial compromises.

These first two guidelines serve to keep us honest by ensuring that our synthetic proposals respect rather than erode the texts with which we work. Taken by themselves, they might lead to disintegration rather than synthesis. Is it possible, however, to discern key images within the New Testament that provide firm common ground on which a New Testament ethics can be constructed? I propose three such governing images as guidelines for synthetic reflection.

Images for Synthetic Reflection

(1) *The church is a counter-cultural community of discipleship, and this community is the primary addressee of God's imperatives.* The biblical story focuses on God's design for forming a covenant *people*. Thus, the primary sphere of moral concern is not the character of the individual but the corporate obedience of the church. Paul's formulation in [Romans 12:1–2](#) encapsulates the vision: 'Present your bodies [*somata*, plural] as a living sacrifice [*thysian*, singular], holy and well-pleasing to God. And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind....' The community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world. Many New Testament images express this crucial point. The Church is the body of Christ, a temple built of living stones, a city set on a hill, Israel in the wilderness. The coherence of the New Testament's ethical mandate will come into focus only when we understand that mandate in *ecclesial* terms,¹⁰ when we seek God's will not by asking first, 'What should *I* do?' but 'What should *we* do?'

(2) *Jesus' death on a cross is the paradigm for faithfulness to God in this world.* The community expresses and experiences the presence of the Kingdom of God by participating in 'the *koinōnia* of his sufferings' (Philp. [3:10](#)). Jesus' death is consistently interpreted in the New Testament as an act of self-giving love, and the community is consistently called to take up the cross and follow in the way that his death defines. The death of Jesus carries with it the promise of the resurrection, but the power of the resurrection is in God's hands, not ours. Our actions are therefore to be judged not by their calculable efficacy in producing desirable results but by their correspondence to Jesus' example.¹¹ 'While we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that

⁹ Contra Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), who can speak of 'a fundamental unity in the valuation of the State' (p. 86).

¹⁰ See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹¹ The point has been argued compellingly by John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1972).

the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh' ([2 Cor. 4:11](#)). That is the vocation and job description of the church. Common sense protests this account of Christian faithfulness, just as Peter did when scandalized by Jesus' passion prediction ([Mk. 8:31–38](#)), but the New Testament [p. 240](#) texts witness univocally to the *imitatio Christi* as the way of obedience.¹²

(3) *In the present time, the new creation already appears, but only proleptically; consequently, we hang in suspense between Jesus' resurrection and parousia.* 'The whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' ([Rom. 8:22–23](#)). The eschatological framework of life in Christ imparts to Christian existence its strange temporal sensibility, its odd capacity for simultaneous joy amidst suffering and impatience with things as they are. We can never say, 'It doesn't get any better than this', because we know it will; we are, like T. S. Eliot's Magi, 'no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation'. The Church is, in Paul's remarkable phrase, the community of those 'upon whom the ends of the ages have met' ([1 Cor. 10:11](#)). In Christ, we know that the powers of the old age are doomed, and the new creation is already appearing. Yet, at the same time, all attempts to assert the unqualified presence of the Kingdom of God stand under judgment of the eschatological reservation: not before the time, not yet. Thus the New Testament eschatology creates a critical framework that pronounces judgment upon our complacency as well as upon our presumptuous despair. As often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's *death ... until he comes*. Within that anomalous hope-filled interval, all the New Testament writers work out their understandings of God p. will for the community.¹³

Taken together, these three images of *community*, *cross*, and *new creation* provide a matrix within which we can speak meaningfully about the unity of New Testament ethics. But can these images serve as norms for us?

Guidelines for the Hermeneutical Task

Hermeneutical appropriation of the New Testament requires us to make decisions about the *mode* of ethical discourse in which biblical warrants may function authoritatively and about the relationship between the New Testament and other authorities. What sorts of work does Scripture do in ethical discourse? What sorts of affirmation does it authorize? We may distinguish four different modes of appeal to the text.¹⁴ Scripture may serve as a source of (a) rules or law, or (b) of ideals or principles, or (c) of analogies or precedents for action. Or (d) it may posit a symbolic universe that creates the perceptual categories through which we interpret reality. We might subdivide this [p. 241](#) last mode by distinguishing between the New Testament's representation of the human condition on the one hand and of God on the other.

Each of these modes of discourse may be found *within* Scripture as well as in secondary theological reflection about Scripture's ethical import. For example, the rule/law mode is illustrated by the New Testament's prohibition of divorce; the ideal/principle mode is exemplified by Jesus' linking of [Deuteronomy 6:4–5](#) with [Leviticus 19:18](#) to form the double love commandment ([Mk. 12:28–31](#) par.); analogical reasoning

¹² See Richard B. Hays, 'Christology and Ethics in Galatians: The Law of Christ,' *CBQ* 49 (1987), 268–90.

¹³ The formulation of this guideline, of course, owes much to the work of Ernst Käsemann, J. Christian Beker, and J. Louis Martyn. See now also Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, 2 Vols. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Here I follow Gustafson, 'Place of Scripture,' though I have modified his categories slightly.

undergirds the entire argument of the Letter to the Hebrews, as the story of Israel in the wilderness is converted into a paradigm for the present experience of Christians called to endurance; [Romans 1:19–32](#) offers a diagnosis of the fallen human condition without explicitly articulating any moral rules; and [Matthew 5:43–48](#) proffers a characterization of God (who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust) in order to establish a framework for ethical discernment.

Correlating ethical norms with Scriptive

The presence of all these levels of discourse within the New Testament suggests that all of them are potentially legitimate modes for our own normative reflection.¹⁵ The hermeneutical task is—in part—the task of rightly correlating our ethical norms with the modes of Scripture’s speech. Towards that end, I suggest the following methodological guidelines.

Texts must be granted authority (or not) in the mode in which they speak. The interpreter should not turn narratives into law (for instance, by arguing that [Acts 2:44–45](#) requires Christians to own all things in common) or rules into principles (e.g., by suggesting that the commandment to sell possessions and give alms [[Lk. 12:33](#)] is not meant literally but that it points to the principle of inner detachment from our wealth). Legalists and antinomians are equally guilty of hermeneutical gerrymandering to annex New Testament texts to foreign modes of ethical discourse. Christian preachers, at least since the time of Clement of Alexandria, have preached hundreds of thousands of disastrous sermons that say, in effect, ‘Now the text says x, but of course it couldn’t really mean that, so we must see the underlying principle to which it points, which is y.’ Let there be a moratorium on such preaching! The New Testament’s ethical imperatives are either normative at the level of their own claim, or they are invalid.

This hermeneutical guideline has a couple of corollaries. First, we should guard against falling into a habit of reading New Testament ethical texts in one mode only. If we read the New Testament and find only laws, we are obviously enmeshed in grave hermeneutical distortion. Likewise, if we read the New Testament and find only timeless moral principles, we are probably guilty, as Karl Barth warned, of evading Scripture’s specific claims p. 242 upon our lives.¹⁶ Secondly, we must be wary of attempts to use one mode of appeal to Scripture to overrule major explicit teachings of the New Testament in another mode. A classic example of this is to be found in Reinhold Niebuhr’s essay, ‘The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal’.¹⁷

Narrative texts in the New Testament are fundamental resources for normative ethics. The character and values of our communities are most decisively determined by the stories that we tell and remember;¹⁸ the stories told in the Gospels and Acts subliminally form the Christian community’s notions of what a life lived faithfully might look like. No secondary process of abstraction is required in order to make the ethical ‘content’ of these stories accessible to the community; rather, the stories themselves become the framework in which we understand and measure our lives. One grave flaw in Niebuhr’s

¹⁵ Contra Verhey, *Great Reversal*, pp. 176–77, who would exclude appeals to the N.T. at the ‘moral-rule’ level.

¹⁶ *Church, Dogmatics* II/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 661–708.

¹⁷ The essay, originally published in 1935, appears in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 62–83.

¹⁸ In very different ways, Stanley Hauerwas, Wayne Meeks, and Dan O. Via, Jr. (*The Ethics of Mark’s Gospel—In the Middle of Time* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985]) have emphasized this point.

treatment of the ethic of Jesus is that he isolates the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount from their narrative context and ignores the story of the passion. Anyone who reads the gospel all the way to the end will see that nonresistant love of enemies is not an 'impossible ideal.' It is, rather, a horrifyingly costly human possibility.

III. GUIDELINES TO BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

The other major hermeneutical issue that New Testament ethics must confront is the question of the authority of the New Testament's ethical vision in relation to other sources of authority for theology. These other sources are often characterized under the rubrics of tradition, reason, and experience. The Reformation fought its hermeneutical battles over the relation of church tradition to Scripture; the Enlightenment wrestled with the relation of reason to Scripture, a battle that continued into the twentieth century. Now, however, we have passed into an era in which the urgent question is the relative authority of Scripture and experience. Many feminist and liberation theologians are willing to assert explicitly that the authority of Scripture is in principle subordinate to the authority of the critical hermeneutical insight conferred by the experience of the oppressed or of women. For instance, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes,

I would ... suggest that the *revelatory* canon for theological evaluation of biblical androcentric traditions and their subsequent interpretations cannot be derived from the Bible itself but can only be formulated in and through women's struggle for liberation from all patriarchal oppression.... The personally and politically reflected *experience* of oppression and liberation must become the criterion of appropriateness for biblical interpretation and evaluation of biblical authority claims.¹⁹ p. 243

In contrast to such views, the community that seeks to live under the authority of Scripture must assert another hermeneutical guideline.

Extrabiblical sources for theological insight stand in a hermeneutical relation to the New Testament; they are not independent counterbalancing sources of authority. The Bible's perspective is privileged, not ours. However tricky it may be in practice to apply this guideline, it is in fact a meaningful rule of thumb that discriminates significantly between different approaches to New Testament ethics. Scripture is not just one among several 'classics', not just one source of moral wisdom competing in a marketplace of ideas, experiences, and feelings. Scripture is the wellspring of life, the fundamental source for the identity of the Church. This guideline by no means excludes exceedingly serious consideration of other sources of wisdom, but it assigns them an explicitly subordinate role in normative judgments.

Right reading of the New Testament occurs only where the word is embodied. We learn what the text means only if we submit ourselves to its power in such a way that we are changed by it. The sequence of the verbs in [Romans 12:1-2](#) is significant: 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.... Be *transformed* ... that you may *prove* what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.' Knowledge of the will of God *follows* the community's submission and transformation. Why? Because until we see the text lived, we cannot begin to conceive what it means. Until we see God's power at work among us

¹⁹ *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1983), p. 32, emphasis mine.

we do not know what we are reading. Thus, the most crucial hermeneutical task is the formation of communities seeking to live under the word.²⁰

IV. A TEST CASE: HOMELESSNESS

For communities seeking to live under the word, the presence of increasing numbers of homeless ‘street people’ in the United States poses a challenge. Some churches and Christian groups have addressed the emergency by setting up night shelters and soup kitchens. At the same time, many Christians urge the government to adopt policies that will provide affordable low-income housing for the poor. One hears much talk of decent housing as a basic human right. In the midst of this situation, however, one hears surprisingly little discussion about how the New Testament might inform our understanding of the problem. Presumably, the moral imperative is taken to be so obvious that there is neither time nor need for hermeneutical deliberation. I venture in conclusion, however, some observations to demonstrate how the New Testament might shape the Church in response to this crisis. These sketchy reflections are intended merely to illustrate—in relation to a relatively clear issue—my methodological proposals. The value of these proposals, of course, will ultimately be tested by their capacity to clarify our thinking about the hard issues.

When we seek to confront the full [p. 244](#) range of relevant texts, a wide variety of New Testament passages comes into view. Perhaps we think most readily of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in [Matthew 25:31–46](#), where those who have cared for the hungry and homeless are commended, and those who have failed to do so are condemned. Similarly, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in [Luke 16:19–31](#) strikes uncomfortably close to home for Christians who live in fine houses in cities where sick and hungry derelicts litter the streets. The implicit hortatory force of these parables is made explicit in passages such as [Luke 14:12–14](#): ‘When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.’ Similarly, [James 2:14–17](#) and [1 John 3:17–18](#) urge those who have the world’s goods to share freely with those who are in need. All these texts seem to be addressed to communities that have material resources and power to act to help the poor, but as we continue our survey, we stumble across a disconcerting text: ‘As they were going along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” ’ ([Lk. 9:57–58](#)).

Here Jesus depicts himself not as one who helps the homeless, but as a homeless one himself. His homelessness is presented as an obstacle to potential followers: They had better not follow him unless they are prepared to renounce everything, including home, and join the Son of Man in the way of dispossession. Of course, many more texts of this sort could be adduced here (e.g., [Lk. 14:25–33](#); [Mk. 10:28–31](#)).

Alongside these passages should be placed another body of texts that depict the church as a community of ‘aliens and exiles’ ([1 Pet. 2:11](#)) who have abandoned earthly security to wander in the wilderness, seeking a homeland ([Heb. 11:13–16](#)). Some of this language may be metaphorical description of the community’s spiritual state rather than

²⁰ See Wayne Meeks, ‘A Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment,’ *HTR* 79 (1986); and Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 125–31, 149–53, 191–92.

a literal account of their social situation,²¹ but passages such as [Hebrews 10:32–36](#) speak of loss of property and suggest a literal situation of suffering (partly because of ‘compassion on the prisoners’). Similarly, Paul describes his apostolic vocation in terms of the loss of everything ([Phil. 3:2–11](#)) for a life of uncertainty, suffering, and poverty ([2 Cor. 6:3–10](#)).

This quick survey shows that there are significant tensions within the New Testament between texts that call upon affluent believers to do good to the homeless poor and texts that either call them to *become* homeless or assume that they have already done so out of obedience to God’s call, following the example of Jesus. There is no way to meld these texts together into a single mandate. Rather, we must let the tension stand and consider how we might construe [p. 245](#) the implications of the New Testament as a whole in light of our proposed duster of governing images.

Community. It never occurred to the early Christians to petition Caesar to provide affordable housing. The texts call neither for government action nor private philanthropy;²² instead, they summon the *church* to respond directly to the need of the homeless. For that reason the organization Habitat for Humanity represents an impressively faithful response to the New Testament witness: It mobilizes God’s people directly to do what (some of) the texts require. Thereby it forms a community whose corporate labours can be understood as a living sacrifice pleasing to God.

Cross. If the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head—if the paradigm of faithfulness to God is one who was homeless—we can hardly suppose, as we often unthinkingly do, that the aim of ministry is to secure a reasonable level of economic comfort for everyone. Rather, the aim of ministry is to engender communities that follow Jesus’ way of costly loving service. In our contemporary situation, that means at least that we must be willing to live and work among the homeless, amidst the growing chaos and danger of our cities, and to suffer whatever consequences may follow.

New Creation. In the midst of our frustrating powerlessness to transform the social pathology that causes homelessness, the Church is to live as a sign of God’s reconciling power, as a sign of the new creation, embodying the promise of the kingdom through communities in which God’s love breaks down fear and hostility, enabling Christians to share what they have, so that distribution can be made to each as any has need (cf. [Acts 4:32–35](#)). We should have no illusions about engineering utopian social programmes; rather, we assume that the powers of this age will continue to oppress the poor. The role of the obedient community is to live as a countersign, a prophetic witness against the ultimacy of that oppression. Thus, we are enabled to live with hope amidst empirical disappointments. At the same time, the presence of the homeless in our midst is a reminder of our true condition as strangers and exiles in this age, disciples of the homeless Son of Man. We must not be seduced by affluence into thinking that home is here or now.

Few of the texts actually command Christians to leave their homes; however, the majority of the passages that speak in the *rule/law* mode require those who have ‘the world’s goods’ ([1 Jn. 3:17](#)) to help those who do not. Such passages, of course, mean exactly what they say and should be heeded. Just as importantly, however, the Synoptic narratives about Jesus’ demands for radical discipleship and the account in Acts of the

²¹ John H. Elliot, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of I Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), is perhaps overly sanguine about our capacity to discern the community’s social composition and circumstances from the text’s theological metaphors.

²² Certainly some texts do call upon individuals to share their goods, but such calls are always to be understood in the context of Israel’s covenant community (e.g., [Luke 16:19–31](#)) or of the community of brothers and sisters in Christ (e.g., [James 2:15–16](#)).

Jerusalem church are powerful sources for *analogical* reflection about the church's vocation. We cannot read these stories without asking what it would mean for us to respond to the gospel with analogous abandon; thus, these stories [p. 246](#) stand as challenges to conventional wisdom about the appropriate form of our community life. The New Testament's open-ended stories of call, discipleship, and journey suggest that our vocation in the present time is to be sojourners; permanence and stability should not be our concern. Finally, our *symbolic world* is given an extraordinary twist by [Matthew 25:31–46](#): Jesus himself is mysteriously present in the homeless and hungry.²³ If that is the reality in which we live, what then?

Reason and experience as ambiguous guides

Christian tradition reinforces Scripture's mandate to care for the homeless, but reason and experience are more ambiguous guides in this matter. To be sure, reason can present good arguments to support humanitarian concern for the poor, but self-seeking capitalism also can be defended—and often is—on rational grounds. For the Church, Scripture is the touchstone that discriminates between competing rational conceptions of justice. In any case, the ubiquitous appeal to a rationally-grounded notion of human rights is without warrant in Scripture. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any hint that housing—or anything else—is a 'right'. Those who fail to respond to the homeless are not castigated for violating a human right; rather, it is suggested that they have disregarded 'Moses and the prophets' ([Lk. 16:27–31](#)) or that they culpably failed to recognize Jesus himself ([Mat. 25:45](#)). This last image cannot be adequately translated into the Enlightenment idiom of human rights and dignity. Something more mysterious is here: God in Christ reveals himself through emptying himself, becoming one with those who suffer and thereby providing simultaneously a warrant for caring for the poor and a model for his disciples to follow. Insofar as the Church's discourse replaces these powerful images with pallid rationalistic notions of rights and equity, we as a community have lost our bearings and our identity.

Similarly, experience can teach divergent lessons, depending on whose experience is proposed as normative. Some who work with the homeless affirm joyfully that their experience confirms the testimony of Scripture: Jesus is present in the midst of poor. For others, however, the experience of working among the homeless leads to cynicism and burnout. Experience can cause some to seek rootedness in the world and to look out primarily for their own interests: The student radical becomes the corporate lawyer. Reason and experience can hardly serve as warrants sufficient for the self-sacrificial service to which the New Testament calls the Church; the commonsense counsels of reason and experience need to be disciplined by the foolishness of Scripture.

The full import of Scripture's word [p. 247](#) to us concerning the homeless will begin to come clear only in communities where they are treated not as social problems but as brothers and sisters, where we not only feed them in soup kitchens but also sit at table with them to share the supper of the Lord. The Scripture-shaped community is a *koinōnia* of the homeless.

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²³ I am not able here to discuss the difficult exegetical problem of whether the phrase 'the least of these my brethren' refers restrictively to Christians. See the discussion in John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 109–25.

Alternatives to Bribery: Philippines

Richard Langston

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*The author distinguishes between transactional bribes, variance bribes and extortion. A **transactional** bribe is a payment made to a public official so that he will accelerate the performance of his duty; for example, to speed-up the process of granting a visa. In the Philippines this is called 'grease money'. A **variance** bribe is payment to an official to secure the suspension or non-application of a norm; for example, granting a visa to a person who is not qualified to receive. **Extortion** is the action of an official to extract from a person what he has no legal or moral right to; for example, an official refuses to grant a building permit unless money is given. It is similar to robbery and the complement of bribery.*

In the earlier chapters the author discusses Old Testament and New Testament perspectives on bribery and extortion but makes no reference to the relationship of conscience to moral law. We suggest that more attention needs to be given to the relationship of Natural Law to Revealed Law in discussing moral issues with people of other Faiths, especially those who have no knowledge of biblical law.

Editor

BRIBERY IN THE PHILIPPINES

Bribery became deeply embedded in the Philippines during the Spanish colonial rule and continues to be tolerated today. The continued toleration of bribery can be explained in part by the conflict in values in a society in transition from a traditional way of life to a modern one. Although most Filipinos believe bribery is wrong, many either practise it or have **P. 249** a fatalistic tolerance of it. They tend to distrust the government and rely more on *family* ties, intermediaries, and reciprocal relationships than on the prescribed procedures.

Several cultural values, including a fatalistic acceptance of the status quo, work against resisting bribery and extortion and favour following the path of least resistance. An array of social problems and inequities continues to provide an atmosphere conducive to corruption. The government has progressively increased its intervention in the domestic economy, requiring Filipinos to interact with governmental agencies more than ever before. It has taken some steps to reduce corruption, but the efforts to reduce bribery and extortion have for the most part been ineffective.

I. VARIANCE BRIBES ARE CONDEMNED

In applying the scriptural teaching on bribery to the Philippine context, let us first consider which practices fall under the condemnation of Scripture and which do not. Variance bribes are often initiated by the briber to evade a Philippine law. However, sometimes a government official takes the initiative offering to suspend the law in a particular case in exchange for money, even though the merits of the case do not warrant it. Most Philippine laws are generally fair and just. So it would be unusual that a variance bribe would actually support or uphold justice as might be the case in a society with

grossly unjust laws. These types of variance practices distort justice, are often motivated by greed, and clearly fall under the condemnation of Scripture as bribery.

Although most Philippine laws are fair and just, some laws are unrealistic. This is especially true of custom fees which may place duties, taxes, or fees of 100–200 percent or higher on some imported products such as electrical appliances or electronic goods. Customs officers accept bribes to overlook these items or else greatly undervalue the item. For example, a new television that sold for \$250 in Hong Kong might be valued at \$50 and the appropriate customs charges levied on that basis. Information about customs duties is not published in a form readily available to those who come and go from the Philippines. So the traveling public is often unaware of what the precise fees are supposed to be. Because of this uncertainty and because of the lack of uniform enforcement of these laws, many people take their chances and resort to bribes if it looks as if they will be charged too much.

Laws which are unrealistic and open to uneven enforcement provide more opportunity for bribery to occur. Therefore, in seeking to reduce bribery, it would be helpful if these kinds of laws were modified to be more realistic, clearly communicated to those effected by them, and evenly enforced.¹ However, although p. 250 these laws may provide an opportunity for bribery, they do not provide a legitimate excuse for it. Scripture stands opposed to those who offer or receive bribes in relation to laws of this kind. For while these laws may be somewhat unreasonable, they are certainly not grossly unjust. The primary motivation of the bribe receiver in these cases is personal gain, and the primary motivation of the bribe giver is to escape paying what is legally due.

II. EXTORTIONERS ARE CONDEMNED

Much of the crime committed by policemen or soldiers in the Philippines involves extortion. 'For example, traffic policemen extorting motorists for unauthorized, on-the-spot "fines" are a common sight on Manila's busy thoroughfares.'² This may occur when a motorist violates a traffic law and a policeman uses his discretionary powers to extort a variance bribe for his own personal gain rather than justly enforce the law or issue the appropriate warning. A policeman may resort to overt extortion, threatening greater adverse consequences than what is just under the law or extorting money when no law has been broken. All these practices clearly fall under the condemnation of Scripture. The Old Testament condemns extortion in general, and John the Baptist specifically condemned extortion by soldiers. These types of practices involve the unjust use of authority, oppress the victims, and undermine the public confidence in those sworn to enforce the law.

Another common practice in the Philippines occurs when an official requires a person to make an unauthorized payment to ensure the official does what he is supposed to do in the first place. This is extortion of a transactional bribe. While Scripture does not categorically condemn transactional bribes, those who extort them are guilty of extortion

¹ Myrdal cites a study in India which recommended reducing to a minimum the discretionary powers of civil servants in their dealing with the public as a short-term means of reducing bribery. It also recommended 'simpler and more precise rules and procedures for political and administrative decisions that affect private persons and business enterprises.' Myrdal, 'Corruption: Causes and Effect,' 543. Gorospe adds, 'Law is not the main problem in the Philippines, but the unwillingness or inability of corrupt officials to enforce the law equally for all.' Gorospe, 'New Morality,' 361–362.

² 'Crimes in Philippines,' *Orange County Register*, 04.

and are thus condemned. Both the extortioner of transactional bribes and the extortioner of variance bribes are condemned by Scripture.

The extortioner of transactional bribes is guilty of oppressing the one who is entitled to his services. He is also guilty of failing to carry out his official duties without inducements other than what is prescribed by law. For many years the Philippine Penal Code has classified bribery and extortion as 'crimes committed by public officers'.³

In bribery both the giver and receiver are guilty. In extortion the guilt falls primarily on the extortioner. John Ting says, 'In the Bible, the greater condemnation seems to be leveled against those who exploit their power to demand bribes than those who give under pressure.'⁴ Philips states, 'Moral justifications and excuses for complying with the demands of an extortionist are easier p. 251 to come by than moral justifications and excuses for offering bribes.'⁵ According to Joseph Farraher, moral theologian of Gregorian University, giving a bribe to an extortionist 'may be tolerated ... if it is the only practicable way to obtain a decision that should be made'. But Farraher adds that 'efforts should be made to change the system which permits such action'.⁶

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to distinguish extortion from bribery in the Philippines. The distinction between bribery and certain forms of extortion is often not clear. This is because the official may be very subtle in his solicitations from the petitioner. He may deliberately set aside the petitioner's papers to continue reading the newspaper or say, 'Oh, it's time for *merienda* [coffee break].' These cues tell the petitioner that if he wants his request attended to without delays and problems, he should give something to the official. The petitioner, not wanting problems or delays, often slips the official some money. He may even say, 'This is for your *merienda*.'

Another contributing factor to the blurring of the distinction between bribery and extortion is the Philippine cultural value of maintaining smooth interpersonal relations. Filipinos often anticipate and read subtle cues in order to maintain smooth interpersonal relations. The petitioner would usually rather pay than cause a scene, as long as the amount is not too great. The petitioner is a victim, but not exactly a reluctant victim. He has come to expect this and quickly complies.

Although the government might not approve of this practice, it is not likely to do much to stop it, as long as it receives the payment due under the law. One Cabinet under-secretary stated,

The bureaucratic nature of government lends itself to extortion of bribes. If a petitioner for any sort of favor wants to receive timely attention to his request, he must be prepared to pay a bribe.⁷

Unless extortion is overt, habitual, and the victims are willing to testify against the extortioner, it is hard to gather evidence and prosecute such crimes even if there is a desire to do so.

II I. TRANSACTIONAL BRIBES ARE QUESTIONABLE

³ Abueva, 'What Are We in Power For!' 203.

⁴ John Ting, 'Biblical Ethics in a Fallen World', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7 (October 1983): 329.

⁵ Philips, 'Bribery,' 630.

⁶ Joseph Farraher, 'Bribery', *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, 1979:1:524.

⁷ Bernard Wideman, 'Cracking Down on the "Backsliders",' *Far Eastern Economic Review* 86 (November 29, 1974): 24.

What about the transactional bribe in which the petitioner freely offers a bribe in exchange for speedy service? Some might look at this as a 'tip' given for fast service. Many people would tend to look at this as a bribe rather than a tip, since they regard a tip as something offered after the service is performed. However, in some cultures a pre-service tip is extended in anticipation of prompt service. My experience in the Philippines and interviews with Filipinos indicate the appropriate time to tip in the Philippines is after the service is rendered. Tips are given openly and encouraged in P. 252 the Philippines, while transactional bribes are usually given subtly. Almost all the Filipinos whom I interviewed made a clear distinction between a tip and a bribe. Two out of every three people I interviewed indicated it is not appropriate to tip a government worker. It should also be noted that it is more than timing that differentiates a transactional bribe from a tip. The transaction bribe is given to 'a public official, and a sanction, though often mild [such as delays], is often imposed for nonpayment.'⁸

In examining transactional bribes from a scriptural viewpoint, we discovered they were bribes if they resulted in partiality in the administration of justice. It was suggested earlier that we ask key applicational questions including, 'Is it undercutting impartiality and promoting favouritism?' But the answer to this question is not always clear. To time-oriented people with a 'first come first served' mentality, serving a person who came later before one who was there earlier, would show favouritism. Many Filipinos would not view it this way.⁹ As long as his request is approved, he would not necessarily feel that he was treated unfairly if someone's request, submitted after his request, was approved before his.

Furthermore, in many instances in the Philippines it is not a case of giving the official something so that he will attend to your request instead of someone else's; but rather that he will attend to your case instead of leaving the office early or taking a long coffee break. The net short-term result may be that he processes more requests than he would have if no grease money had been offered.

However, studies indicate the long-term results are less than desirable. Francis Lui used a queuing model to test the results of customer service when bribery is permitted in order for the server to receive more bribe revenue and thus speed up work output. The results were compared with those when bribery is not allowed. Lui's abstract states, 'None of the customers are [sic] better off with bribery.'¹⁰ Gould and Amaro-Reyes report on findings in India that show 'the practice of giving "speed money" was actually the cause of administrative delays because civil servants got into the habit of holding back all papers from the clients until some kind of payment was made to them.'¹¹ Uzobeyi Anigboh reports similar results in Nigeria where the expectation of bribes is 'directly responsible for causing' administrative delays.¹²

⁸ Reisman, *Folded Lies*, 70.

⁹ Although the average Filipino may not be as time-oriented as the average American, those whom I interviewed indicated time is an important motivator in relationship to transactional bribes. The most frequent response I received to the interview question 'Why do Filipinos sometimes offer bribes?' was 'to speed things up.'

¹⁰ Francis T. Lui, 'Essays on the Economics of Corruption (Queuing, Bribery, Deterrence, Crime, Punishment)' (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1985), abstract.

¹¹ Gould and Amaro-Reyes, *Effects of Corruption*, 33.

¹² Uzobeyi A. Anigboh, 'The Extent to Which Corruption Has Hindered the Effective Implementation of Economic Development in Africa: A Case Study of Nigeria from 1970 to 1983' (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1984), 289.

After discussing the arguments p. 253 given by those who point to the benefits of corruption versus those who point to the negative effects of corruption, Gould and Amaro-Reyes conclude with the following statement:

The available data suggests that corruption has a deleterious effect on administrative efficiency and political economic development. Even under circumstances of benign corruption, the costs incurred in administrative and political performance far exceed the benefits derived from relative gains in economic efficiency.¹³

Alatas shows that those who claim to see some positive aspects of corruption do so on the basis of theoretical models or deductive theories rather than actual instances.¹⁴

The actual negative effect of bribery in less developed countries boggles one's mind.¹⁵

Earlier we acknowledged that asking the Key Applicational Questions previously stated may show that a transactional bribe is not really a bribe in certain cases. However, there are dangers in offering transactional bribes even under the 'purest circumstances'. Transactional bribes tend to foster greed and lead to more extreme forms of bribery and corruption.¹⁶ This in turn perpetuates the cycle of corruption that tends to exclude the poor, who cannot afford a bribe, from 'many public services designed for their benefit'.¹⁷ The missionary who gives transactional bribes may unwittingly be contributing to the oppression of those people at the lowest end of the socio-economic scale, those for whom the Scripture tells us God is especially concerned. Because transactional bribes fall into the category of doubtful things, this problem needs to be examined thoroughly by the Filipino Christian community.

Filipino Christians and missionaries as the people of God need to be careful not to perpetuate the cycle of bribery and corruption in the Philippines. Instead they should model the ideal behaviour as the apostle Paul did with Felix. In the Philippines the ideal behaviour is not to give or receive bribes. By avoiding even transactional bribes whenever possible, missionaries and Filipino Christians reinforce ideal values and help break the cycle of bribery.

This does not completely rule out showing appreciation to an official for his assistance in the form of a gift. But to avoid the dangers we have discussed money should not be given. Also, it would be better to give the gift sometime after the service has been completed, to give things that are not very expensive, and not to give something every time. For example, after a customs official has inspected a shipment of Christian books or Bibles, it might be appropriate to give him one. Or you p. 254 might give a clerk with whom you regularly deal a small gift at Christmas or on his/her birthday. Gifts like this can be given openly, show appreciation, and are unlikely to create favouritism or encourage corruption.

IV. A CALL TO PREACH AND TO TEACH

¹³ Gould and Amaro-Reyes, *Effects of Corruption*, 28.

¹⁴ Alatas, *The Problem of Corruption*, 30.

¹⁵ Summaries of some of the negative effects of bribery are found in Rafailzadeh, 'Economics of Bribery,' 240, and in Alatas, *The Problem of Corruption*, 25-26, 92-97.

¹⁶ Alatas affirms, 'The type of bribery alleged to promote efficiency has the tendency to develop and extend the habit in areas where it is difficult to promote efficiency.' Alatas, *The Problem of Corruption*, 18.

¹⁷ John S. Nichols, 'The Real Victims of Foreign Bribery', *Revista del Desarrollo Internacional*, 18 (1976): 39.

Filipino pastors and foreign missionaries need to teach what the Scripture says concerning bribery. During the eight years I lived in the Philippines I never heard a sermon or message that addressed the subject. Only a few of the Filipinos whom my wife or I interviewed concerning bribery could recall having ever heard a priest, pastor, or missionary speak on the subject. Yet, all expressed that bribery was a significant problem in the Philippines. It seems strange to me that a 222-page book entitled *Philippine Social Issues from A Christian Perspective*, written by six authors from the Philippine context, says nothing about bribery. Although the book addresses many important social issues, only one page is devoted to 'The Public Servant' with only a few sentences related to providing impartial treatment to the people.¹⁸

Rodney Henry indicates that in the Philippines Christianity in general and Protestant Christianity in particular has answered many of the ultimate questions in life, but has often not seriously addressed many of the questions of everyday life. Henry applies this to the spirit world, but it also applies to many other areas of life.¹⁹ Nacpil make a similar charge when he states, 'The churches do very little to equip their people for life in the real world; they train their laity mainly for participation in the activities of the church.'²⁰ Jacano charges that Protestants on the island of Panay have often failed to teach the Bible in such a way that the people grasp how it relates to their everyday life.²¹

This is a crucial time to address this subject. One reason is because of the transition taking place in Philippine values. The dilemma of conflicting values during the present period of transition helps create a hunger to know what is right and why it is right. Teaching what the Bible says about bribery can help solve this dilemma by reinforcing those values that work against corruption.

In addition, the shocking corruption under Marcos and the sad state of the Philippine economy has set the stage for Filipinos to seriously consider the subject. It illustrates the truth of [Proverbs 29:4](#), 'The King gives stability to the land by justice, but a man who takes bribes overthrows it.' The systematic tearing down of the Philippine economy and the resulting devastation brought p. 255 upon countless Filipinos provide a powerful illustration of the destruction that bribery brings to the nation. It should be used to help jar people out of a complacent attitude toward bribery. In addition, the betrayal of Jesus by bribery and the bribery associated with the 'cover up' story about the resurrection should serve as strong illustrations in the Philippine setting where Good Friday is the most sacred and faithfully observed holiday of the year. It would be wise to point out the progressive escalation of bribery in that account and compare it to what has happened in the Philippines.

In the past it has largely been the press and politicians who denounced bribery. The press wrote about corruption, at least in part, to sell newspapers. Many politicians denounced bribery largely for political reasons—to attract attention, or cover their own corruption, or increase their own power base by getting rid of public officials from the opposition party. It is time for the people of God, who have purer motives for denouncing bribery, to address this issue.

¹⁸ Richard P. Poethig, ed., *Philippine Social Problems from a Christian Perspective*, (Manila: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1963), 135–136.

¹⁹ Rodney Henry, *Filipino Spirit World*, (Manila: OMF Publishers, 1986).

²⁰ Nacpil, 'A Gospel for the New Filipino', 120.

²¹ F. Landa Jocano, 'Conversion and Patterning of Christian Experience in Malitbog, Central Panay, Philippines,' in *Acculturation in the Philippines: Essays on Changing Societies*, ed. Peter G. Gowing and William Henry Scott (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publisher, 1977), 65.

Simply teaching that bribery is wrong is insufficient. Long-standing practices change slowly unless the values behind them change.²² Values change by instruction and example which demonstrates a better way. Instruction on the character of God is foundational. The natural tendency of man to think he can manipulate God needs to be effectively counteracted. Gorospe states, 'Many Filipino Catholics make novenas to obtain favors from God. They feel they have done something for God and expect Him in turn to reciprocate.'²³ Confession, praying to Mary, attending Church or Mass and doing good deeds replaced former animistic sacrifices and rituals as ways of gaining God's favour. Teaching on 'God who cannot be bribed' and to whom we owe 'a debt of gratitude' brings the character of God into clearer focus for Filipinos in both Christian nurture and evangelism. From the foundation of God's character, we should give specific application showing why we are not to show favouritism or offer or receive bribes. It should be shown that bribery contradicts God's impartial character, distorts justice, tears down the nation, and is a form of dishonest gain.

Paul's experience with Felix in [Acts 24](#) should be employed when teaching concerning bribery because it contains many parallels to the current Philippine setting. Illustrations from people in the Philippines who resisted extortion and solicitations of bribes and who refused to accept bribes should be incorporated into the instruction. The biblical teaching on contentment should not be overlooked.

The giving and receiving of variance bribes and other practices which distort justice, such as the use of one's office to extort transactional bribes, should be strongly condemned. Since transactional bribes do not clearly fall within the scriptural boundaries of a bribe, and [p. 256](#) given the history of bribery in the Philippines, the foreign missionary should not be too quick to condemn those who submit to extortion or those who give or receive transactional bribes. An understanding approach of suggesting and demonstrating alternatives would be more appropriate. If Filipino Christian leaders determine a more vigorous approach is appropriate, then it would best for them to take the lead in advocating it.

Instruction concerning bribery needs to be related to Philippine cultural values. Gorospe believes that many Filipinos are not consciously aware of the conflicting values present in their lives. Therefore, he calls for helping people to become aware of the 'two inconsistent norms of morality' which are operating in their life. One norm he calls 'the ideal Christian norm of morality'. He calls the other 'the actual Filipino norm of morality'.²⁴ Bringing people to an awareness of this conflict of norms in their own life is an important initial step to reconciling the conflict.

Bulatao thinks one reason why Filipinos are often unaware of the inconsistency of values in their 'Split-level Christianity' is because they have not seen 'actual models in whom the split has been overcome'. He believes if Christian authority figures get closer to the people and the situations they face, they will be better able to translate the 'Christian system of thought and action' into the everyday life of the people.²⁵

Gorospe acknowledges certain Filipino values have contributed to corruption. But he advocates integrating Filipino values with Christian values rather than discarding Filipino

²² Mydral points to changes in moral values as a key long-term solution to bribery. Mydral, 'Corruption: Causes and Effects,' 543.

²³ Gorospe, 'Filipino Values,' 211.

²⁴ Ibid., 196.

²⁵ Bulatao, *Split-Level Christianity*, 10-14.

values 'as altogether evil'.²⁶ He believes, 'We should accept and preserve whatever is positive and good and reject what is exaggerated, corrupt or evil.'²⁷

Espiritu and other Philippine sociologists also recommend this approach. They suggest exploring, understanding, accentuating, and reinforcing the 'positive aspects' of Filipino cultural values while discouraging 'their negative aspects'.²⁸ For example they advocate balancing the desire for smooth interpersonal relations, which may sacrifice 'truth, accuracy, and precision, ... with the value of sincerity and authenticity so that the Filipino individual can become tactfully truthful, considerate but firm, kind and consistent'. Concerning *utang na loob* they emphasize it 'reflects deep gratitude, thoughtfulness, and appreciation for any act of kindness received and in turn a willingness to be of help when needed'. However, 'when abused it can be manipulative and a hindrance to freedom of decision'.²⁹ Therefore, it should be balanced by teaching *utang na loob* toward God in response to Christ's voluntary sacrifice for us. That truly is a debt that we can never repay but one which demands our highest allegiance and commitment. Gorospe also refers to Jamie Bulatao's suggestion p. 257 to modify *utang na loob* to apply not only to individuals but also the people of the community in order to foster a loyalty to what is best for the community as a whole.³⁰

Likewise, *hiya* (shame) has positive aspects, but it can be a problem when it is given a higher place than honesty, impartiality, and responsibility. One possible correction is to expand *hiya* to include *hiya* toward God to avoid being ashamed before him. Passages such as [Mark 8:38](#) can be utilized to instill a desire to avoid being shamed before God as an even higher priority than avoiding being shamed before other people.

V. A CALL TO DEMONSTRATE ALTERNATIVES

In addition to teaching on bribery and reforming cultural values into harmony with Christian values, foreign missionaries and Filipino Christians can help break the cycle of bribery by demonstrating alternatives. For example, when I moved back to the Philippines in 1981, I was careful to abide by the Philippine customs laws in shipping my household effects. The broker handling my shipment told me that he would need some extra money to facilitate the release of our shipment through Philippine customs. I responded that I was willing to pay any customs and duties owed to the government, but that I would not pay grease money. He said in that case I had better go to customs with him, because the customs men would think he had been given 'grease money' and would expect him to give them some. Even though it meant I had to make a long trip to Manila when our shipment arrived (probably costing more than a transactional bribe would have), I went to customs with my broker. I sought to be pleasant and patient with the customs officials. Although, it usually takes a day or more to get through port customs, we finished in a few hours with no problems. When we were almost finished the broker leaned over to me and whispered, 'God is with you.' My actions were not only a powerful witness to the broker, but also demonstrated an alternative to a transactional bribe.

²⁶ Gorospe, 'Filipino Values,' 208.

²⁷ Ibid., 209.

²⁸ Espiritu and others, *Sociology Philippine*, 75.

²⁹ Ibid., 76.

³⁰ Gorospe, 'Filipino Values,' 223.

I can imagine the impact that a Christian government official would have, if when offered grease money, he would graciously decline it saying, 'Don't worry. I will help you. Use that to help some needy person.' Indeed, during the course of interviewing Filipinos, I came across a former university professor and lawyer who is now a government employee who does this. He indicated that when he is offered a bribe he turns it down. But to soften the impact of repudiating the person's offer he suggests the person give the money to the church. In doing so he does not compromise his convictions or office, but he also maintains smooth interpersonal relations and does not shame the one making the offer.

[Luke 14:12-14](#) and [Ephesians 6:7-9](#) are helpful passages from the perspective of the official who turns down bribes. Both passages establish the principle of divine reciprocity i.e., God pays for the poor ([Lk. 14:14](#)) and God rewards for good service ([Eph. 6:7](#))—if not now then [p. 258](#) at the future resurrection. Officials who refuse to use their office for personal gain should receive praise and encouragement from the Christian community and be regularly assured that God will reciprocate in his time.

The example of the widow's persistence with the unrighteous judge in [Luke 18:1-8](#) demonstrates another alternative to bribery applicable to the Philippine context. Persistence and prayer go a long way in obtaining appropriate action in the Philippine context if you treat those in authority with respect. The standard reply for a request at many Philippine government offices seems to be 'Come back tomorrow.' My standard reply is 'It's okay—I'll just wait here.' But such a reply should be given graciously with a smile on the face and a prayer in the heart. Getting angry, losing patience, or telling off the clerk are not only a poor witness, but are often counterproductive. While waiting it is important to keep visible. 'Out of sight, out of mind,' is an adage which should not be forgotten.

Jose Rapanut, an officer in the Baguio City Department of Local Government and Development, suggests another alternative to bribery. Rapanut says that it has become customary for Filipinos to file their transactions with the government at the last minute which produces an atmosphere of bribery. Bribery occurs because a person wanting to beat the deadline is willing to pay a bribe so that his papers will be attended to immediately. A Filipino attorney whom my wife interviewed also pointed to the habit of waiting until the last minute as one reason why Filipinos sometimes offer bribes. Rapanut believes that bribery could be diminished if people would file the papers well in advance.³¹

However, not all situations will be easy. A Filipino under the threat of extortion may face far greater pressure than a missionary would face, because the missionary often has a relatively high status and more resources upon which to draw. Just as the Psalmist prayed that God would preserve him from oppression ([Ps. 119:121-122](#)), so missionaries and national Christians can pray that God would preserve them from those who seek to extort bribes. While in the midst of the pressure to offer a bribe, they need to cling to God's promises, remembering God promises life to those who hate bribes ([Prov. 15:27](#)) and justice to those who ask and trust him for it ([Luke 18:7-8](#)), and remembering that the righteous who refrains from bribery 'will never be shaken' ([Ps. 15:5](#)).

Resisting extortion and refraining from bribery in the Philippines may result in suffering. [1 Peter 3:13-17](#) brings God's perspective to that situation. Blessing results for those who suffer for doing what is right (v. [14](#)). The believer need not fear the threats of corrupt men; but he should remain steadfast to Christ and be ready to give an answer in

³¹ Jose Rapanut, comments made in class on Christianity and Social Issues, International School of Theology—Asia, Baguio City, Philippines, 1987.

defence of his conduct (v. [14-15](#)). In the Philippine context, he may be asked such questions as 'Why don't you give me something to take care [p. 259](#) of it for you?' An answer given 'with gentleness and respect' (v. [15](#)) which upholds God's standards is likely to have a significant impact in that setting. The missionary or national Christian who does not give grease money will probably spend more time, effort, and even money in dealing with officials than those who give grease money. But he will probably have more opportunities to witness and demonstrate genuine Christian character in places where compromise and corruption have become common.

Sometimes in our eagerness to carry out our 'mission' we may overlook those opportunities God gives us in unpleasant or routine situations to carry out an 'unanticipated mission'. The unanticipated mission may at times have a greater impact than the announced mission because it demonstrates true Christian conduct in the kind of everyday situations with which Filipinos can easily identify. The gospel has been lived out far more in the hospitals, schools, and churches in the Philippines than in government offices. Yet, an authentic Christian lifestyle and witness in those offices may have the greater impact. This conclusion is reinforced by Alatas. After an extensive study of corruption in Asia from a historical and political viewpoint Alatas states, 'Saintly and charismatic religious personalities have been the most important single factor mitigating corruption throughout Asian history.'³²

Missionaries and national Christians should also remember the consequences when King Asa, under pressure, sought to work things out by a bribe, rather than relying on the Lord ([1 Ki. 15:18](#)). Although the bribe accomplished the short run objective, which it often does, the long range consequences were disastrous ([2 Chr. 16:9](#)). Conversely, we should remember how Paul withstood Felix's solicitation for a bribe for two years. This provided Paul with the opportunity to give a strong witness for Christ to Festus and King Agrippa. It should also be recalled that God used the foreign King Cyrus to free the exiles and rebuild Jerusalem without giving Cyrus any payment or bribe ([Isa. 45:13](#)).

Filipino pastors and Christian leaders need to help their fellow countrymen as well as foreign brothers forge ways of dealing with these difficult situations and encourage and help those who suffer for their stand. 'It may not be easy to conform to Biblical standards in our fallen world and if a member of the community suffers in doing so, the community needs to support him.'³³ Remember God is looking for people to intervene on behalf of those who are unjustly oppressed.

The Christian community should support government actions to clean up corruption, to provide an adequate wage for civil servants, and to modify unreasonable laws which provide much latitude for corruption. Appropriate prophetic denunciation of gross injustice may also be called for although it would be wiser for national Christians rather than foreign missionaries to take the lead in matters of civil action and prophetic denunciation. [p. 260](#)

Finally, mission boards need to devote more attention to helping missionaries deal with this issue. Special attention should be given to the new missionary because it is often when the new missionary first arrives that he faces these situations at customs or immigration. Just as God alerted the young nation of Israel to the problem many years ago, mission boards today need to alert new missionaries to the bribery problem and to suggest ways to deal with it. Ready or not, many young missionaries will come face to face with the solicitation of a bribe.

³² Alatas, *The Problem of Corruption*, 54.

³³ Ting, 'Biblical Ethics,' 333.

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Traditional and Present Day Values and Ethics in Melanesian Society

Ennio Mantovani

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This anthropological study of traditional Melanesian value systems and ethical practices and the new alternatives being created with the introduction of a money economy is of significance in understanding how conscience operates in societies without any knowledge of the gospel. It shows how motives and actions are good or evil depending on whether or not they advance the community, for the health and relationships of the community (based on blood marriage and land) is the supreme and final value for living. While the author does not discuss the issue of conscience or Divine Law, we are given insights on how conscience is shaped by the experience of pagan communities over the centuries.

We suggest that those engaged in church planting among such changing cultures will need to understand both the continuity and discontinuity between the Church as a new and alternative community and both the traditional community and the emerging secular communities. In the development of Christian values and biblical ethics, Christ as Saviour and Lord will become the determinative factor in reeducating conscience. The well known metaphor of the exchange of a 'peace child' is but one attempt to relate the gospel to traditional ways of re-establishing broken relationships within and between communities. Readers are invited to contribute their reflections on these issues.

INTRODUCTION

Often after a course on Melanesian Values and Ethics I am asked by the participants, both Melanesian and expatriate, for something in writing on this topic. As a matter of fact I have written an article on 'Traditional Values and Ethics'¹ but since then I **P. 262** further developed the theme to include present day Melanesian Values and Ethics. In this article I shall follow and quote the former one² and add what is new.

What I present here is a bare outline of my lectures and it is geared primarily to those who took part in the courses and asked for something in writing to remind them of what has been said. On the other hand this article might help other Melanesians, or expatriates

¹ Darrell Whiteman *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures*, Point Series No. 5 1984, 195–212.

² The original article has been published again by the organisers of the 17th Waigani Seminar: *The Ethics of Development, The Pacific in the 21st Century*, by Susan Stratigos and Philip J. Hughes ed., UPNG, Port Moresby, 1987.

with Melanesian experience, to better understand and to order their daily (Melanesian) experiences.

What I write is the result of many years of observations and reflections. It represents the opinion of an outsider, but even the outsider's view has its value.³ I write and share my reflections on the Melanesian Value System for two reasons: to encourage Melanesians to find again pride in their past, help them understand the present, and to make the system known to other cultures as part of an enriching cultural dialogue.

Expatriates have a responsibility towards Melanesian cultures. Out of ignorance many expatriates misunderstood Melanesian cultures and confused Melanesians as well. To say 'sorry' is not enough, one must dismantle the western barriers which have been erected. It is necessary and fair that somebody from the same group undertakes to present an alternative view based on a different understanding of the Melanesian Value System. It might liberate the Melanesians to follow what they always felt to be right.⁴

Before going any further let me explain what I mean by culture and what I regard as the function of values within a culture.

Culture is what distinguishes a human from an animal. The animal has instincts which tell it how to answer its needs for survival. Humans have culture to perform the same task.

Culture is not just a bundle of customs but a system of ideas, an ordered whole, inherited from and shared with a group, through which people are taught how to answer their physical, social, and spiritual needs.

What one can see of a culture are the exterior forms, but what gives meaning to those forms are the underlying values. There cannot be true understanding and appreciation of a culture without knowledge of the value system.

Often there are customs in a culture which might have a high emotional content but which do not seem to make much sense today. Take the custom of shaking the right hand in western societies. These elements are often survivals from a past where they had a very practical purpose. One gave the right hand to [p. 263](#) show that one did not hide a knife, that one was not an enemy but a friend. Today nobody thinks about hidden knives when we shake hands but westerners feel that giving the left hand to somebody is not proper, that it is 'wrong'.

In Melanesia one might encounter similar customs which do not seem to make sense. Before passing judgment one should try to find out the history of that custom if at all possible.

It is not easy to find the meaning of the different customs. People themselves do not know the reasons for what they do. It is like asking many westerners why in the past we forced children to write with the right hand when nature had made them left handed. It had very important cultural reasons in the past but not everybody knows them. The same is in Melanesia. 'When asked about the reasons for certain actions and reactions, people would only say: "That is the way we do it", or "That is the way of the ancestors." People felt strongly about certain things but never had the time, it seemed, to analyse their behaviour and expose its underlying rules.'⁵

³ The jargon for insider and outsider view is emic and etic. See an Anthropology manual on the topic, e.g., Conrad Phillip Kottak: *Cultural Anthropology*, Random House, NY, 1987, 4th edition.

⁴ This has been a common experience during my courses to Melanesians. As one put it once: 'Today, for the first time, I feel Melanesian and Christian at the same time.' Whether this written outline will have the same effect on Melanesians, I doubt. No written word can substitute for the oral communication and interaction.

⁵ Mantovani, 197.

One might ask what guarantee I have not to have read into the customs what is not there. I am very well aware of this danger in my observations and especially in my interpretations. My answer is a parable. 'If one gives me a key, I try it: if it opens the door it was the right one. If it opens it, but with difficulty, then I know it is the right one but needs further filing.' It is the same with this system: 'If the principles I present clarify the ... Melanesian... actions and reactions, if they help to link apparent contradictions in behaviour, if they show logic and consistency, then it is supporting evidence that I am accurately describing objective interpretations of the situation.'⁶

One last clarification. What do I mean by values? Value is a quality in something which motivates people to acquire that object, to defend it if they already possess it. It motivates people to make sacrifices in order to obtain or keep it. Once they possess it, people, everything else being alright, feel relaxed and happy, but if they did not obtain it, people feel restless and tense.

Ethics is understood as the principles and rules of behaviour. The values give the motivation for the behaviour and the ethics present the way people usually act when motivated by these values.

TRADITIONAL VALUE SYSTEM

Community

One of the key values in Melanesia is the community. 'The shape and size of the community varies from society to society in Melanesia, but the group of people which is necessary for biological survival, for emotional support and for meaning is always of the greatest importance for Melanesians. In fact, the community seems to take precedence over individual personal likes and dislikes.'⁷

One of my lasting experiences regarding the community as a value [p. 264](#) came the first year of my presence in PNG. One day I visited a place in the back of Gumine in what is now the Simbu Province. There I met a young lady who had a friend she wanted to marry. The community however wanted her to marry another man from Gumine, a man she had not seen. She had a chance of winning her case with the help of her brother who supported her, but she gave up her friend to marry the other man saying that if she did not, the community would suffer from the payback of the man she refused. She decided to marry the man she had not seen hoping that eventually she would find happiness. For her the community was the top value and to care for the community was the way to find eventual happiness and well-being.

For many years I was convinced that the community was the top value in Melanesia. But then I realized that the community was only a way, the only known way to a higher value. That higher value was the mainspring of all the community's activities. One could define it as the sum of everything positive the Melanesian heart desires and the absence of everything a Melanesian heart rejects. A Pidgin term for this value could be '*Gutpela Sindaun*' and it comprises security, health, wealth, growth, prestige, good relationships, meaning, etc. Negatively it implies lack of sickness, decay, barrenness, death. For the lack of a better English term I call this value 'life', the fullness of life.

Community over thousands of years was experienced as the only safe way to '*Gutpela Sindaun*'. To anticipate what I shall say later on, *experience* is here the key word. Community was not chosen for ethical reasons but because there was no other viable

⁶ Mantovani, 197.

⁷ Mantovani, 199–200.

choice! Those who tried other ways are not here to tell their story. They paid for their wrong choice.

Relationships

Looking at the community I realized that the western concept and the Melanesian concept were not identical. Melanesian community consists in a web of relationships. The principal factor of these relationships is that of blood, marriage, and land. Besides, the relationship to the relatives comprises both the living and the dead. The relationships to the dead relatives are very important.

These relationships build the community. The community consists of all of them. A Melanesian community consists of living relatives, of dead relatives, and of land: garden, bush, river, sea. This explains for instance the big problems PNG experiences with land. It is not primarily a question of money, it is an ethical question. In the same way as one cannot 'sell' one's mother, one cannot sell one's land. The land can be used but not sold.

Relationships mean much more than simple biological or legal links. They mean rights and duties, expectations and obligations. When a Melanesian says father he or she might or might not mean the one who gave the physical life to the one who is called his child, but for sure he or she means the one who has precise obligations to the one called child, who has clear expectations from the child, expectations which give physical and emotional security, p. 265 which give meaning to life. A 'brother' is not necessarily a sibling but a friend, somebody who is not going to let one down no matter what comes, the one who is going to stand by in time of trouble, the one a person can trust.

The same goes for the ancestors and the land: relationships mean expectations and obligations going both ways.

'In Pidgin, the term for this kind of relationship is "lo" and is obviously not synonymous with "law".⁸ Because proper relationships mean a healthy community, which in turn is the way to "life", "lo" can be taken to mean "life" itself. In Christian terms, "lo" can be taken to mean salvation for the same reason. Primarily it means "proper relationships". In the Solomon Islands, the concept of "custom" seems to have a similar meaning.'⁹

If all these relationships are well the community is well and so everybody can enjoy 'life', but if any of these relationships is broken or strained then the community is sick, the individuals experience a loss of 'life'. There will be strife, misfortune, sickness, death of people or domestic animals, failure of gardens, no catch of fish or game. All these are signs that something is wrong with the community, that some relationships are broken.

Exchange

If a community comes to that stage then the relationships must be mended. What establishes, mends, strengthens the relationships is the **exchange**: the giving and receiving of visible, tangible gifts.¹⁰ Relationships can be established and mended only through the exchange. Words do not suffice.

This is true not only about the community in the strict sense but of any relationship. If one wants to become the friend of somebody, that person must express his or her

⁸ See Ahrens (1974a, 1974b, 1978) and Fugmann (1977).

⁹ Mantovani, 203.

¹⁰ See: Forster, Robert J., 'Value Without Equivalence: Exchange and Replace in Melanesian Society.' *Man* 25 (1990): 54–69. Gregory, C. A., *Gifts and Commodities*, New York: Academic Press, 1982.

intention with a gift. If the other responds with another gift, one knows that the relationship has been accepted and established.

Gratitude follows the same rules. Any gift establishes a relationship. One cannot answer the first part of an exchange with words. One must **do** something. One must return a gift and that closes the process and establishes the friendly relationship.

If one offends a friend, i.e. breaks the relationship, it is not enough to say 'sorry', one must **do** sorry and give a gift. Eventually a gift will be returned and that is the final sign that peace has been made.

What has been said so far can be captured in the following diagram:

'life'

the way to it is the

community

blood

which consists in a web of

relationships

in-laws ancestors land

which are established,
mended, and strengthened
through

exchange

Sickness, crop failure, accidents, p. 266 etc., as we already said, are signs of lack of 'life'. If somebody gets sick, people will try to cure him or her. If the cure does not work then people will check the relationships. If a child is in hospital, for instance, the parents will say that they must go home to 'straighten out things'. The community will check every relationship to find which one has been broken. It is at this time that a 'general confession' could take place: who stole from whom, who slept with whom, etc. The community will check not only the relationship to the living but to the dead and to the land as well.

If one discovers the broken relationship one must mend it through an 'exchange'. One usually prepares a meal. Whether the broken relationship is with the living, the dead or the land, the remedy is always the same: an exchange. In the past, when Melanesians gave a meal to the ancestors or the land (the *masalai*: the spirits of the land), Christianity labelled it 'sacrifice' which means an action attributing to the dead or spirits a power which belongs only to God. Actually, seen from the value system, it is not a 'sacrifice' at all. It is an exchange aiming at mending a broken relationship with the community. According to the system I presented, what the Melanesians used to do is not a profession of faith in supernatural powers but a statement about the nature of the community, which comprises the living, the dead and the land handed down from the forefathers, and about the nature of sickness and misfortunes, which are seen as the consequences of a broken relationship.

As an example and explanation of the relationship to the bush let me recall an experience of one of my friends, *Mary MacDonald*. She was in the bush ready to go back to the main station the following day. In the house of the catechist they had eggs which Mary cooked. When she offered them to the people in the house they refused to eat them, because next day they had to go through the bush from which the eggs had been taken. The eating of the eggs would have broken the relationships because they would have enjoyed something from the bush without reciprocating. They fear exploiting part of the community because that would have meant a broken relationship ending in a fall and a broken ankle of some similar misfortune.

At the time, when Mary told me what happened, I did not understand the meaning of it and I would have said something like: 'Do you not believe that God is stronger than all the spirits and that he will protect you?' The real question actually is not whether God can protect us but whether God is pleased with egoistic exploitation and will protect us from the consequences of it. The ignorance of the value system hindered me from understanding the deep cultural issues of human egoism, of exploitation, of guilt. My reference to God would have tried to justify what cannot be justified. Christianity does not aim at liberating us from the fear of committing sin but from the slavery of sin, which is not the same.

The understanding of the Melanesian value system a century ago would have enabled Europeans to understand that the exploitation of [p. 267](#) the environment could lead only to sickness and misery. Unfortunately our ignorance of the Melanesian value system created problems of identity among the Melanesian Christians and prevented the Europeans from avoiding great damage to their whole life back in Europe. Wisdom does not have to be expressed in Aristotelian concepts: poetic imageries can be equally powerful if understood.

ETHICS

The law which directs the behaviour of the Melanesians seems to be: 'What helps the community is ethically good, what harms the community is ethically bad and what is indifferent to the community is indifferent.'

To understand this law one must remember that the community, for all practical purposes, stands for 'life', the absolute value. The only absolute seems to be the 'life' and what leads to it. Every human action takes its ethical value from the relationship to it. To kill, to steal, to lie are not bad in themselves. It depends on the motivation, on the aim of the action. If one kills an enemy to serve the community this is ethically good. If one steals for the community this also is good and so is lying to help the community and its members. But if killing or stealing, even if it is done for the community indirectly harms the community, this is ethically bad.

This explains many things which otherwise are difficult to understand. The chaplain of a jail once told me of an (very nice) educated young man who was serving a term for perjury. According to the story of the young man, there had been a robbery in town and the police were investigating and coming close to making an arrest. He went to the police and admitted committing the crime. He was sent to jail but the police were not fully convinced that he had committed the crime. Eventually they captured the real thief who turned out to be the brother of this young man. He had committed perjury to cover up for his brother and did not feel any guilt about it. Once I told this story to a group of people and a Melanesian church worker was overheard saying: 'That young man acted like Jesus who gave his life for us his brothers.' That the young man had committed perjury to save his brother seemingly did not bother the church worker.

A classical example comes from the recent history of Goroka. Goroka was raided pretty regularly by a group of people living in the mountains overlooking Goroka. The raiders brought the stolen goods home and distributed them to the community. The elders in the community kept quiet. The police from the helicopter could see people going around with some stolen uniforms but were not strong enough to be able to do anything about it. Eventually the Government sent a message to the people saying that if they continued to raid Goroka the Government would cut all the bridges leading to their place, take all the nurses and teachers out and stop them coming to the hospital. Suddenly the elders ordered the youths to give themselves up. 110 young people with their firearms and banners proclaiming who they were, marched peacefully into Goroka and gave themselves [p. 268](#) up. Up until the threat of the Government the raids were helping the community, but once the threat to cut the bridges and pull the nurses out was made, the raids became unethical because they were harming the community.

This shows the weak point of the traditional ethical system: the system cares only for one's own community. That the others must suffer for it, does not count. **It is communitarian egoism.**

Often Melanesians are said to have two standards of ethics: one for the 'big man' and one for the 'little man'. Actually, there is no double standard but a consistent application of the above mentioned principle of the good of the community. The big man is by definition the one who is **experienced** at helping the community in an outstanding way. The 'little man' is the one who does not do anything special for the community. When somebody harms the community, once the heat cools off, everything is weighed: the good deeds for the community as well as the harm. The real big man, who by definition is the great benefactor of the community, will pass the test most of the time, while the little man who never did anything outstanding for the community will be found wanting and will be punished for the harm done. It is not a double standard but the application of the principle of the good of the community.

If the big man persists in harming the community the community will punish him as well. History has a few classical examples of this. *Kawagl*, the big man who led the first whites into the Simbu, was such a person who had to run away to save his life from his community. His credit with the community had run out. When he met the missionaries he saw his chance to make up for the harm done to the community and without fear marched back from Bundi leading the missionaries into his territory and was recognized once more as a 'big man', a benefactor of the community.

The same goes for the members of the community. The community will defend them from punishment from outside but there is a limit beyond which the well-being of the community demands a strong action. One of my co-workers told me that one of his relatives was a person that got his community continuously into trouble. The community defended and fought for him but after the fights they beat him up for the harm done indirectly to his community. One day they had enough: they tied him up and brought him down to the border of their territory and called out to their enemies who came and finished him off. The wellbeing of the community is more important than the well-being of one individual member of the community.

ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS

Experience was the strongest motivation for keeping the value system. People experienced the help of the community, believed in that value and therefore were ready to serve and to suffer for the community.

If that positive attitude was not sufficient there were negative measures.

The most common mechanism in a face to face society i.e. in a society p. 269 where everybody knows and meets everybody else, was 'gossip': people talked about the behaviour of the deviant and that pulled people back into line. The result of this type of 'gossip' was shame and the fear of shame kept people toeing the line.

The fear of getting sick if one broke the laws was another ever present motivation.

If the fear of shame or of sickness was not enough there was always the possibility of violence: either physical violence or black magic.

One should not sleep with the wife of one's brother. I remember a case in the Salt-Nomane area where I was working. Neither gossip nor explicit threat was able to stop a certain man from bothering one of his sisters-in-law. The husband one day saw the man entering his wife's house. He sat before the house with a bow and arrow and when the adulterer emerged shot him through the heart. The first 10 years I spent in the bush I hardly ever heard of cases of adultery. It was not a question of people being successful in hiding the fact: one did not want to risk one's life.

People should not steal either. Once two women found hospitality in a house in the area I was working. In that house, hanging from the rafters there was some pork. The temptation proved too strong for the two women who got up very early, took the pork and ran away. When the theft was discovered the men went after the women, found them, cut their hands and threw the women into the Wahgi river.

All these sanctions were not able to stop people completely from acting against their value system and their ethical principles, but were very effective in preserving order in the society.

PRESENT DAY VALUE SYSTEM

The present day situation is determined by the introduction of a new value into Melanesian societies. There are new values linked with Christianity and others linked with the new nationhood. I shall focus on only one: cash.

Cash in itself does not destroy the traditional value system. Money as a matter of fact can support the traditional value system. What cash does is to offer a feasible alternative (in the eyes of those who choose it) to the community as the only way to 'life'. The value is of too recent introduction for people to know whether in the long run it works or not.

In order to understand this ambivalence of cash let us briefly look at its nature and qualities and compare it with the traditional valuables.

THE NATURE OF VALUABLES

Melanesians had many valuables even before the coming of the Europeans but the valuables became such when they were distributed. A traditional valuable was effective only if given away. This gave a necessary communitarian dimension to a valuable. One needed a community to possess valuables.

Pigs in traditional societies became effective valuables when they were entered into an exchange which bound people together. The pig is valuable because of that function p. 270 within society: it is community building. (Community means not only the living but the dead and the land as well!)

Plumes and shells are very much sought after as decorations for the singsings. But, beside the decorative and aesthetic value, they are part of the exchange which binds people together: they symbolize and express new relationships. At marriage, for instance, the plumes which probably were the pride of the father of the bride in the last singsing might become the much admired '*bilas*' (ornament) of the new husband at the next

singsing. But beyond their aesthetic value they are efficacious signs of the new relationship between the two lines and it is through that function that they become truly valuables. It is that communitarian sign character which makes them into valuables.

THE QUALITIES OF VALUABLES

If one looks at the qualities of valuables one discovers that they are perishable and in limited supply. Many of the traditional valuables were perishable. One preserved them by giving them away in an exchange. To keep a pig for oneself is to lose the pig: eventually one must kill it and that's the end of it. To enter the pig into an exchange keeps that pig 'alive' and moving around, binding people together.

Food, very much part of every exchange, is perishable, but once entered into the exchange it will keep. In the big exchanges in the Highlands, the amount of food and especially of pork which entered the exchange was unbelievable. Once I witnessed the slaughter of over 1,700 pigs in less than an hour. Not a single morsel was lost in spite of the heat and lack of refrigeration. The pork enters the exchange and comes back eventually. In traditional society one could never store that much food: it would rot away!

Cash on the other hand has its value independently of whether it is shared or not. As a matter of fact if one does not give money away, money will increase! Cash lacks the inherent communitarian aspect. It can be used very individualistically. Money does not perish if one hordes it: it brings interest. Cash seems to have no limits: the banks seem to be full of it. The more one asks the more one gets: see the compensation claims. They go higher and higher: Kaindi Teachers College, Okuk Highway, Panguna are examples from our daily experience.

Traditional Valuable

Modern Cash

communitarian in nature

can be used individualistically

must be given away to have value

if not shared brings increase

perishable

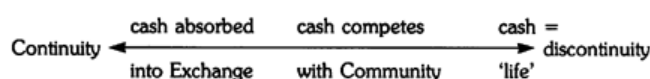
unperishable

limited in number

unlimited in supply

MODELS OF CHANGE OF THE VALUE SYSTEM

Cash can be used as a valuable and distributed to establish or strengthen relationships but can be hoarded egoistically to enrich an individual. The result is a continuum where on the one extreme one finds the traditional value system still working and on the other extreme one finds the total individualistic capitalism. Let us describe a few models. **P. 271**



CONTINUITY

The system continues without big changes

When the cash came into the bush where I was working, the notes (pounds then!) were used as part of the valuables in the various exchanges together with other western items such as axes and bush knives. One often used to barter to get what one needed but used the money in the exchange. The traditional system absorbed the new value,—cash—, reinterpreting it to fit the system which, for all practical purposes, was not changed.

Later on money became the means of access to all the goods of the West which were considered part of 'Gutpela Sindaun' and, as a consequence, people tried to get money. However, money was still used for the well-being of the whole community.

Changes within the system

Slowly, the well-being of the community was not seen primarily in the good and stable relationships, but in the possession of cash.¹¹ The ethical principle remained the well-being of the community, but money became the way to it. Ever so slowly, money took the place formerly held by the relationships. This had very serious consequences. **The money was not used anymore to establish relationships, but, on the contrary, relationships were used to get money. The money was not used for the exchange but the exchange was used to get money.** This represents a radical change.

DISCONTINUITY

The traditional system is given up and replaced by another one

The next shift came when individuals saw in cash the '*gutpela sindaun*', broke relationships, and forgot the community in order to get and keep money. Their security and meaning in life was not based on the community and its relationship, but on the steady flow of cash. Here we have reached the other extreme of the continuum.

A few examples to exemplify what we just said. The exchange at the time of marriage (bride wealth) was used not so much to establish and strengthen relationships, but to get cash as much as one could get. Bride wealth skyrocketed. Now people for the first time can really talk about Bride-price, about **buying** a wife.

The same happened with peace making (compensation). The exchange at peace making was not used to re-establish good relationships, but to get as much cash as one could get.

I witnessed a tragic example of this 'paradigm shift' in culture. In a certain locality in PNG two relatives [p. 272](#) went as labourers to a plantation. There they got involved in a game of cards. A dispute arose which deteriorated into a fight and one of the 'brothers' was killed. The immediate relatives of the one who died demanded compensation from the immediate relatives of the one who survived. The amount, as they were 'brothers', was set rather low (so they said) at only 12 000 Kina. If within a given time the money was not given they would fight to kill (not as brothers!). The community of the surviving labourer could not raise the money in the normal way so the women who did not want to see either their sons, husbands or brothers being killed, decided to prostitute themselves. Later I met the big man who had forced that situation. He had received the money and

¹¹ I am talking about a logical process and not necessarily a historical one. I witnessed behaviour which makes sense and is best explained in terms of this logical process. However, every community and every individual within that community have their own pace of change which makes them unique.

bought a Land Cruiser with it. His words pointing to the new Land Cruiser were: 'This is the fruit of my business.' The exchange for him had degenerated into an economic business.

Still, in spite of this radical shift the community remained at the centre and the cash was used for the community. The next shift came when individuals used the money for themselves and not for the community. They used the exchange for individualistic gain. Here we see the other extreme of the continuum.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLE

The example of the prostitution seems to show a possible shift in the ethical principle as well: 'what helps my community to **money** is ethically good, what deprives my community of money is ethically bad....'

The new value, cash, has contributed to the change of the composition of the community as well. It would lead too far to go into this aspect at the moment. One might be even more aware of the quotation marks around the terms 'community'. The traditional 'community' is often shrinking, as we saw in the example I just gave, but new 'communities' are developing: political ones (constituencies), economic ones (companies), social ones (wantoks). The traditional ethical principles seem to be applied to all of these new types of communities.

This partly explains the present day scene in PNG. To appropriate funds for one's community, whichever way that community is defined today, is ethically good. Several court cases for sacked high provincial officials seem to prove this principle. They did not feel guilty: 'The money was not stolen, it was used for their community.'

VALUES AND SOCIETY

One role of any society is to make sure that the values are not abused individualistically but serve the whole society. The traditional values were rather well protected and therefore society was well served by them. Even the big man had to serve the community or he would be eliminated.

Like any other value, and maybe more than many other value, money can be used egoistically either for one's 'community' or for individualistic purposes. It is the responsibility of society to make sure that cash is not abused to destroy society but is used to strengthen it. Legislation and [p. 273](#) policing is needed. However, when the new value of cash was introduced no protective system was erected against its abuse and therefore a whole village, as we just mentioned, could be forced to prostitute itself.

A few years back some Upper Simbus came to realize that they had to do something to prevent the abuse of money from destroying their society. Compensation was completely out of hand and was creating many problems in Highlands' societies. They discussed the matter in the mens' houses and then they decided to draw up some legislation which would bind all the clans in the Simbu. They called for the help of some of their young people who had studied Law at University of Papua New Guinea and drew up a set of 'laws' which were discussed by all and then approved. Unfortunately the Provincial Government was not ready to move and so the effort has not brought as yet all its fruits. Even so it remains a testimony to the insight of unsophisticated villagers who realized that society had missed out on a great responsibility and tried to remedy it.

The question one can raise is: if the Simbus were right, what can we do in supporting them and making others aware of their responsibilities in this regard? Should the church not stand up and in a prophetic voice remind society of its responsibility?

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The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and the Church

John R. Brinsley

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With great sensitivity the author shows how the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous often work effectively in a Christian atmosphere despite the fact that many of its members have never entered a church. The author suggests reasons why alcoholics often find the Church the most difficult place in which to find understanding and healing. He suggests how pastors who also suffer from dysfunctional behavioural characteristics, might learn by attending an open meeting of AA! He calls evangelicals to an awakened conscience on this widespread and crippling disease.

Editor

There is today a growing, seemingly secular ministry of healing and restoration to broken, addicted and alienated human lives which challenges my evangelical conscience.

THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

Since the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, many groups, each with a different recovery focus, have requested permission to use the Twelve Steps.¹ Examples include ACoA (Adult Children of Alcoholics), [p. 275](#) Alateen (Teenage Members of an Alcoholic Family), Gain-Anon (for compulsive gamblers) and NA (Narcotics Anonymous). George G. Hunter III of Asbury Seminary writes,

If many secular people are addicted and not in control of their lives, then the '12-Step Movement' is here to stay and has a growing future. Indeed, there is evidence that the 12-Step Movement is the 'underground revival of the 1990s,' that more people are now

¹ The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: (1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable. (2) Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. (3) Made a decision to turn our will and lives over to the care of God as we understood Him. (4) Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. (5) Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. (6) Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. (7) Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings. (8) Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. (9) Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. (10) Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. (11) Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out. (12) Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practise these principles in all our affairs.

experiencing the empowering grace of God in 12-Step groups than in all of the more visible evangelism programs combined ... Art Glasser contends that 'addiction' is the dominant form that possessive and destructive Evil has taken today in our culture. The Church is called to represent the compassionate power of *Christus Victor* to millions of addiction-possessed people of this generation.²

Bruce Larson, pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington, believes that relational goals for people, supported by a Relational Theology, liberate churches from much parish stagnation and move them from a maintenance to a mission-oriented mentality.³ Also, in a world where the United States has become the largest mission field in the western hemisphere and most of the countries of Europe are almost secular wastelands, relational goals help shape and equip them to be the kind of churches which reach secular people for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Bruce Larson sees Alcoholics Anonymous as a fellowship which practises a relational theology that informs the way members love and care for one another in ways that release power, new life and hope for the future. He writes

AA, though doctrinally questionable by Christian standards, is relationally sound. The Church ought to be both! It is tragic that we in the Church are forced to choose between doctrinal soundness and relational soundness.⁴

After articulating what AA and the Church can learn from each other Psychiatrist John White and Pastor Ken Blue comment:

AA members confess their faults to one another, occasionally with, though more usually without, prayer. Christians pray but don't confess to one another. What would happen in the churches if we were to divide up p. 276 in pairs once a month (or even once a year) for Fearless Moral Inventory Sunday?⁵

Have practitioners such as George Hunter, John White, Ken Blue and Bruce Larson who reflect evangelicalism and are committed to reaching unchurched people for Christ, caved in before the onslaught of increasingly popular 12-Step programmes? Are they at ease with the often sloppy theology under-pinning such programmes in which the Lord Jesus Christ is rarely mentioned, and, in which the sovereign-revealing-creator God of the galaxies is diminished to 'a Power greater than ourselves' and 'God as we understand him'? In this scenario has theology been replaced by an integration of sociology, psychology and psychotherapy? Has Christian pastoral theology and praxis been hijacked by another contemporary expression of Gnosticism or another version of New Age Selfism?

Or, is God really in this seemingly 'new thing'? Does such a pastoral challenge to my evangelical conscience merely illustrate Hans Küng's conviction that God 'is at work not

² George G. Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* Abingdon Press, Third printing 1992, pp. 63f.

³ Larson argues that the first relational goal involves a person's relationship to God ... The second relational goal involves a new relationship with our inner selves—characterized by honesty, acceptance and appreciation ... The third relational goal involves a new relationship with the 'significant others' in our lives—characterized by openness, vulnerability and affirmation ... The fourth relational goal involves a new relationship with the world—characterized by identification, involvement and service....

⁴ Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne, *No Longer Strangers* (Waco: Word Books, 1976) p. 21.

⁵ John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p. 177.

only in Christianity but where He wills: in the whole world’?⁶ And, do the words of Jesus, ‘For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of light’ ([Lk. 16:8](#)) throw more light on the reality that God is the source and initiator of *all* healing?

In answering these questions at least four issues need to be addressed: Theological issues, Pastoral issues, Issues of honesty and humility, and Issues concerning credibility and healing.

I. THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Alcohol is described in AA’s ‘Big Book’ as ‘cunning, baffling, and powerful’. This sounds very much like sin! Perhaps this is why Patrick McCormick, a seminal thinker among Roman Catholic moral theologians, has titled his latest book *Sin as Addiction*.⁷ He uses the addiction model for sin because it ‘and its “twelve step” programs offer a more realistic grasp of the process of conversion which repentance from sin involves. The therapeutic approach of the “twelve steps” calls us to enter into open and trusting relationships with God, our neighbour, creation and ourselves.’⁸

A Theology of Addiction in the Light of Relational Goals

From the perspective of self. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul describes the desperate powerlessness and unmanageability of his life. He states, ‘I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out’ (7.18). Here he gives a plausible biblical under-pinning of Step One of AA’s Twelve Steps—that alcoholics are ‘powerless over alcohol’ and that their ‘lives had become [p. 277](#) unmanageable’. To acknowledge that there are areas of our lives, whether they be ‘acts of sinful nature’ as listed in [Galatians 5:17](#) or specific addictions over which we are powerless is a challenge to our pride and self-sufficiency. Paul continues by saying that these areas of our lives ‘are in conflict with each other so that you do not know what you want’. Admitting our powerlessness, and accepting the unmanageability of our lives involves a very painful and humbling act of surrender. It means admitting that we are in the grip of an addictive process that has rendered us powerless over our behaviour; that our lives will continue to be unmanageable until we renounce our insistence on living by our own will, and come to that place where all we can say is, ‘Nothing in my hand I bring ... helpless come to Thee for grace.’

From the perspective of God. The theological foundations of evangelical Christianity have always rested on the twin pillars of human powerlessness and divine grace, human chaos and divine order, human helplessness and divine enabling. As Richard Mouw notes,

That is what the disease and addiction models are picking up on. At the worst they are secularizing our doctrine of grace. But at best they are expanding, extending the notion of grace to areas we have ignored. It is a move toward the gospel rather than away from it.⁹

To attend a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous is to be immersed in an atmosphere of profound gratitude and often but not always, cigarette smoke! For the Christian alcoholic

⁶ Quoted by Ray S. Anderson, *Theological Foundations for Ministry* (T & T Clark/ Eerdmans, 1979) p. 473.

⁷ Patrick McCormick, *Sin as Addiction*, (New York, Paulist Press, 1989).

⁸ *ibid*, pp. 173f.

⁹ Richard Mouw, in *Christianity Today*, December 9, 1988, p. 41.

some AA meetings can be very frustrating and even boring. At worse, it can be little more than a meeting of mutual navel-gazers, whose concept of fellowship amounts to little more than a soulless celebration of 'drunk-a-logues', and whose Higher Power is no 'higher' than the group consciousness, all of which is not very comforting in the light of Jeremiah's diagnosis of the human condition: 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?' ([Jer. 17:9](#))! And yet when AA is 'good AA', it works better than any other form of human fellowship in helping the alcoholic to stay sober and grow in sobriety and serenity. Participants even discover 'a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline' ([2 Tim. 1:7](#)). I find it quite mind-boggling to see the way in which God is at work in AA meetings; in the lives of people who speak with grateful conviction about the power and miracles of God, and yet who would never dream of entering a church.

What is happening then in this phenomenon called AA? How does it help us to understand addiction from God's perspective? I believe that what we are seeing, again and again in AA, is a re-enactment with many variations, of the parable of the Prodigal Son ([Lk. 15:11-32](#)). 'Virtually all the basic spiritual dynamics of alcoholism are present in the events and relationships of this story.'¹⁰ The sadness is that the [p. 278](#) Church is often the most difficult place for alcoholics to find understanding and healing. The Church often acts like the offended 'older brother' in the parable, while AA acts more like the gracious 'waiting father.'

When confronted by such brokenness and integrity in the prodigal, God, the Divine Physician who initiates all brokenness and honest repentance, responds with such an outpouring of his grace, that the prodigal can rejoice in being 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven'.

From the perspective of significant others. The alcoholic intuitively manipulates significant other people such as spouse, children, parents, friends, pastor, doctor, workmates to help ease his or her progression down the track of addiction. Are there biblical principles which address both the self-centredness of the alcoholic and the misguided collusion of the co-dependents? Paul's exhortations in [Galatians 6:1-5](#) provide such principles. The key lies in the apparent contradiction between 'Carry each other's burdens' (v. [2](#)) and 'each one should carry his own load' (v. [5](#)). In fact there is no contradiction, because the Greek word for burden is different: *baros* (v. [2](#)) meaning a weight or heavy load, and *phortion* (v. [5](#)) being 'a common term for a man's pack' (Lightfoot). We are exhorted to bear one another's 'burdens' which are too heavy for one person to bear alone. But there is one burden which we cannot share:

indeed we do not need to, because it is a pack light enough for every man to carry himself and that is our responsibility to God on the day of judgement. On that day you cannot carry my pack and I cannot carry yours. 'Each man will have to bear his own load.'¹¹

In applying these biblical principles to the mutual responsibilities of both the alcoholic and the significant other people in the alcoholic's life, it is appropriate to expect:

(i) That significant other people should help carry the alcoholic's burden—not by condoning the alcoholic's behaviour, nor by offering either sympathy or the co-dependent's crutches, but by initiating intervention procedures and making available the necessary tools for recovery, such as medical aid, therapy, the fellowship of AA, the Twelve Step programme, a Church Addiction Support Group.

¹⁰ Vernon E. Johnson, *I'll Quit Tomorrow* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1980) p. 116.

¹¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, (London, Inter-Varsity Press, 1968) pp. 150f.

(ii) That the alcoholic must 'carry his own load' of personal responsibility. That is, the alcoholic must accept full responsibility for his or her own recovery. This can be achieved when the alcoholic feels comfortable and at ease with the self-diagnosis of alcoholism, and is unconditionally committed to following the steps of recovery.

II. PASTORAL ISSUES

The basic reason why the Church is often the hardest place for the alcoholic to get help is because both the Church and the alcoholic share many of the same dysfunctional behavioural characteristics. The main difference between the two is that while the recovering alcoholic is **P.279** getting better, the Church does not even know that it is sick. As we were leaving a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, one of those present, a committed Christian and faithful church-attender, said to me, 'John, this is where people are getting better, not in the Church. The Church is full of angry people.' I was deeply saddened because I knew that for both of us 'getting better' meant being 'restored and healed' as well as being 'ransomed and forgiven', and I wondered and later wept about whether or not the Church, my Church which I deeply love, is really the kind of fellowship where 'broken and alienated human lives' discover 'liberating and healing power'.¹²

Most dysfunctional ramifies, whether they are nuclear families, extended families, church families or clearly dysfunctional (e.g. alcoholic or violent), function on the basis of unwritten laws: Don't feel, Don't trust, Don't talk about the family secrets. Family members are programmed into roles in order for the addiction (e.g. drugs, alcohol, workaholism, helping others at the expense of one's own health and sanity) to function. Such roles are those of the addict, the enabler, the hero, the scapegoat, the lost child, the mascot, and so on.

Disfunctional behavioural characteristics include low self-esteem, external referenting, difficulty in setting functional boundaries, rescuing others, depression, substance abuse, stress-related physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, and psychiatric symptoms, family violence and physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual and intellectual abuse in the family.

If George Hunter is right in claiming that addiction 'is the dominant form that possessive and destructive Evil has taken today in our culture', and because alcoholism impacts one third of New Zealand's population, then one of the first priorities the Church must embrace is to provide recovery programmes for those ensnared by alcoholism and other family dysfunctions. This implies that the Church must first of all be aware of, name, and seek recovery from its own dysfunctions.

Areas of Sickness in the Church

Low self-esteem. The Adult Children of Alcoholics' (Acoa's) unmet needs of childhood for affection and affirmation of self-worth easily get transferred to the pastor. Conversely, the pastor's unmet needs, values, and expectations, past and present, can inadvertently be triggered in working with parishioners. The bottomless pit of clinging, emotional dependence can quickly frustrate and discourage the pastor, who may eventually end up with burn out. If pastors tend to blur their boundaries and they take too much 'care' of others, then they could learn a lot by attending open meetings of AA.

¹² Ray S. Anderson, *A Case Book for Theological Reflection* (Fuller Theological Seminary). See the Introduction.

External referenting. As ACoAs keep looking to others for approval, security, and thus identity, so the unsuspecting pastor can unwittingly reinforce that dysfunctional lack of autonomy by making ethical and spiritual decisions for others.

The pastor whose self-esteem is [p. 280](#) based not on his or her own clear self-assessment but on the approval of others and external standards of personal success soon loses himself or herself in the church institution. The resulting loss of identity, and a growing inability to handle personal criticism and conflict, very quickly catapults the pastor from ministry to a performance-orientated life-style of workaholism.

Difficulty in setting functional boundaries. The dysfunctional family (alcoholic and church) can be either enmeshed or disengaged. Those that are *enmeshed* are so involved in one another's lives that growth is stifled. Because of their difficulty in setting functional boundaries Acoas and pastors develop skills in manipulating people with whom they are enmeshed.

The *disengaged* family functions in isolation. The rules become walls to keep each member in his or her proper place. Feelings in emotionally repressed homes become so chaotic and threatening that members keep emotions stuffed down by busyness, maintaining rigid schedules, and withholding appropriate feelings from co-workers and those to whom they minister. This dysfunction can powerfully militate against the effectiveness of team ministries which, above all, require transparent cooperation and clear communication. Because Acoas were brought up not to talk, they play their cards close to the chest, placate people in conflict, and hide family secrets. The same can happen to a pastor. Some churches place so much emphasis on activity and programming that qualities of warmth, encouragement, and integrity give way to performance as the basis on which we accept and affirm one another. Gradually, members accept the lie that victorious Christian living depends on how well and how often we perform in the church programmes.

When 'salvation by grace through faith' is preached from the pulpit but performance-based acceptance is practised in the church family, confusion abounds, legalism flourishes, and the church family ceases to be therapeutic community in which the sick and hurting find healing and hope.

Control taking. Issues of control and authority are almost always problems for church members living in, or coming from, dysfunctional homes. I once worked in a team ministry with a pastor whose preferred leadership style was always control-taking. Then I learned that he was an Acoa. How easily we pastors can be unwitting catalysts in promoting codependent behaviour in the church family! Because of the often violent and inconsistent use of authority in their alcoholic homes, ACoCs may react angrily even to necessary and legitimate authority and/or structure in the Church. They may also isolate themselves from the pastor, no matter how kind and reasonable is his attitude.

Process addiction. Anne Wilson Schaef states, '*Anything* can be addictive when it becomes so central in one's life that one feels that life is not possible without the substance or the process.'¹³ She divides addictions [p. 281](#) into two major categories: Substance addictions such as alcohol, drugs, nicotine, caffeine and food and process addictions when one becomes hooked on a process such as sex, accumulating money, pornography, gambling, work, religion, worry, television or jogging.

When the church as an institution or organization becomes obsessed with one thing which is so central in the life of the leaders that life is not possible without it, then it has

¹³ Anne Wilson Schaef and Diane Fassel, *The Addictive Organisation* (Why we overwork, cover up, pick up the pieces, please the boss and perpetuate sick organizations) San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.

become an addiction. Christian leaders can become centred on the Church as a rewarding or punishing institution rather than upon God.

III. ISSUES OF HONESTY AND HUMILITY

The New Testament describes the Church as a healing community in which prisoners find freedom, the blind receive sight, the oppressed experience release, the burdened recover rest and the despairing find hope. And yet the Church is often the hardest place of all for an alcoholic to find help and healing. Also, whereas some see alcoholism as a disease requiring healing, others see it as a sinful behavioural problem requiring discipline and/or punishment. During the past forty years genetic research and studies into the socio-economic and psychological dynamics of both dysfunctional and healthy family systems have focused and intensified the debate concerning alcoholism as a sin or as a disease. My own conviction is that alcoholism is a disease which involves sinful choices and sinful behaviour.

One fact about the Church in New Zealand that challenges the reality of our humility and honesty is that its influence upon the culture of Aotearoa New Zealand is very minimal. A realistic insight into the New Zealand condition comes from Felix Donnelly, a Roman Catholic priest, lecturer in sociology in Auckland's Medical School and founder of the Youthlink Trust for disturbed teenagers. He writes,

The new clerics to whom people go for solace or encouragement, or for guidance as to what they should do, are doctors, lawyers, psychologists and similar professionals working in the area of human suffering and need.¹⁴

In 1959 every pastor in New Zealand received a copy of the booklet, *Alcoholism: a Guide for the Clergy* by the Rev. Joseph Kellerman. The author begins by quoting the statement adopted by the General Board of the National Council of Churches in New York, February 26, 1958:

Alcoholics are persons in need of diagnosis, understanding, guidance and treatment. They are especially in need of pastoral care and the divine love which the church can bring them. There need be no condoning of their behaviour, but neither should a church permit its antagonism to alcohol to prevent its offering an effective ministry to alcoholics and their families. Ministers and churches should not be content merely to direct alcoholics to treatment centres.

He concludes his study by commenting:

The vital question is not whether to p. 282 drink or not to drink, but whether the ministers of our churches will assume leadership with sufficient courage and strength to help resolve the problems of the disease of alcoholism, or whether they will continue to try to escape from this responsibility as completely as the alcoholic escapes his responsibilities of life by use of the bottle.

Christian alcoholics face special problems. Because of the widely-shared attitude of moral condemnation in the Church towards alcoholism, Christian alcoholics experience more intense guilt feelings about their addiction than other people. As James Balmer says,

¹⁴ Felix Donnelly, *The World Upside Down* (New Zealand, Penguin Books, 1988) p. 57.

Because the Christian's church environment disapproves so strongly of alcohol abuse, he or she will often hide the problem with even greater determination than a non-Christian.¹⁵

Thus, the road to recovery for Christian alcoholics is made just that more difficult. At the heart of this pastoral problem is, I believe, a fundamental theological issue which can be described as a Pelagian philosophy of ministry in which the imperatives of the Christian ethic are emphasized and the indicatives of biblical theology ignored to such an extent that we end up with a new legalism, a boring moralizing, a humanistic 'works' religion.

Where charismatic renewal lacks agape love, it tends to emphasize law and power to the exclusion of grace. It takes us from Mt Sinai to Pentecost and bypasses Calvary.

Derek Tidball writes,

Every congregation has within it those who are burdened with sin and guilt. There are those who have engaged in dishonest acts, those who have committed adultery, those struggling with homosexuality, those who feel deserted because of a marriage failure or who are angry or violent, those who feel worthless and depressed. The agonies come in all shapes and sizes. For them, the Davids of our churches, it is vital not only that we preach a message of grace but that we experience relationships of grace within the fellowship of the church. Non-threatening, non-judgemental honesty must be the prevailing atmosphere. At the same time discipline must not be forsaken and a concern for holiness must be maintained, for only as it is will many have the courage to face the sin and the failure instead of trying to hide from it.¹⁶

The extent to which we as the Church are truly the Body of Christ through which he, by his Spirit, continues to minister to the sick, lame, weary, the captives and the poor, that will be the extent to which we will be channels of God's grace to the alcoholics and drug addicts, the sick and unemployed, the rejected and abused, the broken and alienated human lives.

IV. ISSUES CONCERNING CREDIBILITY AND HEALING

Is there a Christian 'quick cure' for alcoholism? The quick answer is 'Yes' and 'No'—very rarely 'Yes' and nearly always 'NO'.

Yes, some alcoholics have been miraculously and instantly delivered from addiction—probably as many p. 283 as have been instantly cured of cancer, heart disease, or diabetes. God is sovereign. He can heal any disease, in any person, at any time. Our own daughter was healed of a very severe debilitating back problem which left her completely crippled. I can only describe her healing as an example of 'power healing' through prayer, the laying on of hands and anointing with oil.

I am also sure that God's converting power through the pastoral programme of 'Alcoholics Victorious' would bring an unshakeable sobriety to many. But there are very few churches where alcoholism is understood and where such a programme would be given a high priority.

Another area of potential instant healing concerns the demonic, in which a demonic 'spirit of alcoholism' has taken hold of the drinker and has hooked into some specific

¹⁵ James Balmer, 'The Christian Alcoholic' (Ann Arbor, M.I., USA (*Pastoral Renewal*, May 1985, Vol. 9, No. 10), p. 156.

¹⁶ Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherd*, (England, IVP, 1986) pp. 227f.

weakness. Release and recovery from such spiritual bondage may be triggered only by the appropriate exorcism ministry.

On the other hand the incurability of alcoholism can be a stumbling block for some Christians. One recovering alcoholic said to Dr. Spickard:

I move in Full Gospel circles and I believe in healing because I've seen God heal. But whenever I tell my friends I'm a recovering alcoholic, they say that's a 'bad confession'. They try to convince me that I'm not *recovering*, I'm *healed*. Sometimes I'm tempted to believe them and have a little glass of wine—after all, other Christians drink socially, why can't I? Then I remember. I *am* an alcoholic. God has healed me from my burning compulsion for alcohol, but all my life I'm going to be just one drink away from a drunk. These friends mean well, but without knowing it, they pose one of the biggest threats to my sobriety.

If only Christian alcoholics could appreciate that a disciplined commitment to working their recovery programme far from being a denial of God's power to heal is a grace-given expression of 'the perseverance of the saints', thus protecting the alcoholic from being diverted from recovery by unrealistic expectations of instant healing.

CONCLUSION

I rejoice in the effective healing, recovering and restoring ministries of AA and related 12-Step programmes. But where in all this is the Christian Church with the full Gospel of God? Have we forgotten that by its very nature, calling and divine equipping, the Church exists to carry out the ministry of Jesus Christ of revelation and reconciliation through his Word and Spirit. The New Testament describes the Church as a healing community in which prisoners find freedom, the blind receive sight, the oppressed experience release, the burdened discover rest, the despairing find hope.

In Luke chapter fifteen the three classic parables of God's searching and redeeming love expressed through the life and ministry of Jesus challenge us to be seen to be the bearers of the good news of compassion and salvation for the sinner rather than in the role by which we are so often caricatured, one of condemnation and judgement.

The ministry mandate of Jesus ([Lk. 4:17-19](#)) and the Parable of the Good Samaritan ([Lk. 10:25-37](#)) focus the concerns of our ministry on 'broken and alienated human lives'. Can the Church become, and be seen to be, a healing and credible community in which alcoholics and others from sick family systems will 'stand tall' in Christ because they have been 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven'?

The Rev. John Brinsley is a Presbyterian minister in New Zealand with wide pastoral and counselling experience. [p. 285](#)

Book Reviews

NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY SURVEY (4TH ED.)

by D. A. Carson

(Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993 Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993 pb. 92 pp.)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

The fourth edition of this popular reference work, brought out earlier than intended because of the large number of commentaries now being published, has been enlarged to 92 pages and re-printed in attractive modern type. The introductory section on commentary sets has been up-dated to include new publications and slightly reset.

As before, the book is intended for theological students working in English, so few volumes of a highly specialized nature or in other languages are mentioned; devotional books are also generally excluded. Information given includes publishing details (including British American publishers) and prices current to about mid-1992.

In the main part of the volume where commentaries for each NT book are listed and evaluated, Carson, who is a well-known and prolific evangelical scholar from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, includes his own works. But as he points out, they are now prudently excluded from the final section which recommends 'best buys' for each NT book.

The purpose of this manual is first of all to provide an accurate listing of available volumes together with publication and pricing details so that students can know what to look for; older out-of-print works are also included to provide guidance when using library collections or purchasing second-hand.

The comments on the exegetical value of each book are usually sharp and to the point, for Carson wisely prefers 'to be a shade too trenchant than a good deal too bland'. He makes it clear that he does not intend to act as a doctrinal or scholarly censor, but he often points out the theological tradition of the books under discussion. Comments of this kind are bound to be somewhat subjective, but in general, commentaries of the class dealt with tend to fall into rather clear categories, so it is not too difficult to evaluate them; Carson's judgements are what might be expected from a competent [p. 286](#) teacher who knows the literature well.

The real value of the book for students, teachers and librarians lies in its comprehensive and up-to-date details. There are two similar books devoted to the Old Testament, but surely there is a market for companion volumes in other key areas of divinity studies such as theology, church history and pastoralia.

HEBREWS (2 VOLS.)

World Biblical Commentary 47A, 47B
(Dallas, Word, 1991, civil + 617 pp.)

(Reviewed by David R. Denton)

This is a new major commentary, based on the Greek text. As such, it fills a significant gap. It can, however, be used by those without Greek, since a detailed translation opens each section, and most phrases and key words are supplemented by an English translation in the exegesis. The writer has previously gained a reputation in the evangelical world for his commentary on Mark in the NICNT series.

Naturally this book follows the usual Word Biblical Commentary pattern. Each unit contains a bibliography, translation, notes, form/structure/setting, comment (detailed exegesis) and explanation.

The commentary begins with 20 pages of tightly-packed bibliography, encompassing works in eleven languages. The imposing introduction which follows covers 100 pages. Lane sees Hebrews as a sermon which was to be read aloud. The audience, almost certainly a house church, was living at or near Rome. It was an assembly in crisis; in fact, some members of it were in grave danger of apostasy.

The epistle was written between A.D. 64 and A.D. 68. It displays the finest Greek in the New Testament. Its conceptual background is informed by the early Christian tradition, particularly as transmitted in the hellenistic wing of the Church. The writer was a profound theologian who received his theological and spiritual formation in the same milieu. There is continuity with the theological tradition of the Hellenists.

The central theme of Hebrews is the importance of listening to the voice of God in the Scriptures and in the act of Christian preaching. Jesus' sonship is the central motif of the Christology of the epistle. Other images and descriptions relate to this dominant aspect. Lane emphasizes the writer's pastoral concern. This is seen, for example, in the introductory sections on key soteriological concepts (priesthood, covenant, sacrifice) and Christology (significantly headed 'Christology as Pastoral Response'). There are substantial sections in the introduction on Hebrews' literary structure and the author's use of the Old Testament.

Lane divides Hebrews into five sections. Each of these has a brief introduction, which he encourages us to read before the detailed exegesis. He draws attention to the way the author alternates exposition and exhortation through the thirteen chapters of the epistle.

Lane's translation is followed by comprehensive 'notes', which cover textual, linguistic and grammatical [p. 287](#) matters and explain the translation. The commentator makes good use of the 'structure' heading. He often shows the symmetry of the writing or the way in which the author advances his argument. He is not unwilling to disagree with the frequently accepted divisions of the epistle. The 'comment' and 'explanation' sections are longest on the last five chapters (i.e., vol. 2), above all on chapters 11 and 13. The exegesis is full and rich. I now find myself turning first to Lane on any passage in Hebrews.

This commentary is impressive throughout. Generally, it has more detail than Bruce's in the NICNT series, especially on introductory matters. It contains careful exegesis, interaction with scholarly writing, extensive knowledge of other literature and is totally up-to-date. It is an excellent example of scholarly, evangelical writing, and is essential for research, advanced teaching or thoughtful preaching on Hebrews.

HANDBOOK OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGIANS

by Walter A. Elwell (editor)

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993, hb. 465 pp.)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

Baker Book House has added yet another worthwhile volume to its list of reference books, making a total of six. The editor is again Walter Elwell, Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Wheaton College Graduate School, who has already given us *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, *Baker Encyclopaedia of the Bible* and *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*.

This latest contribution consists of essays on the life, work and influence of thirty-three prominent twentieth-century evangelical theologians. The entries are arranged in chronological order, and so the volume reads almost like a history. It commences with the American Baptist Augustus H. Strong and Scottish Presbyterian James Orr and ends with Canadian Baptist Clark Pinnock and English Anglican Alister E. McGrath. All others (except Berkouwer, Thieliicke and Stott) are North American, or at least worked there, although many were born or studied in the United Kingdom or Europe. The reference to 'theologians' in the title is taken quite literally—no biblical scholars or church historians are included. As the Preface indicates, the term 'evangelical' is understood in broad terms; it is not formally defined, but biblical authority, Christocentrism and an emphasis upon conversion and the personal life are obviously key elements.

According to the editor, several factors determined which theologians were chosen for treatment. One was their importance for the development of the evangelical movement, and this apparently includes not only those of creative, pioneering interest, but also inspiring teachers and those who could be regarded as exemplary exponents of their traditions. Denominational spread was also taken into account, as was a balance between people p. 288 from the earlier and more recent parts of the century. However, significantly, the third world is not represented in any way and no women are included. As to the final choice, the editor prudently concludes, 'There might be legitimate discussion about some theologians who have not been included in this volume, but we doubt that many would exclude those who have been.'

As well as those otherwise mentioned, the dominant Baptist, Reformed and Lutheran traditions are well represented by Warfield, Pieper, Mullins, Berkhof, Machen, Van Till, Murray, Clark, Hoekema, Preus, and Bloesch. The Anglican perspective is found in Griffith Thomas, and mainstream evangelical theology is presented by Thiessen and Erickson. The modern evangelical pioneers, Carnell, Henry, Ramm and Schaeffer are all given full treatment, while Dispensationalism is represented by Chafer, Walvoord and Ryrie and the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition by Wiley and Carter; Oden stands for post-modern orthodoxy and the Pentecostal/Charismatic stream is found in Williams.

The essays average fourteen pages in length (around seven thousand words), with the shortest being nine pages on J. I. Packer by Roger Nicole and the longest, Michael Bauman's twenty pages on McGrath. In articles of this length, there is enough space to give an outline of the life and ministry of each person, as well as a rather detailed exposition of their theology.

The theological contribution is mostly presented by means of detailed summaries of the subjects' major books, frequently without much extra comment. This method is useful for surveying the thought and publications of the various theologians, often in terminology that closely mirrors their own. However, it can be a somewhat mechanical process, especially for the lesser figures, and one that prevents adequate discussion of the subjects' essential theological dynamics and their significance within the wider context.

The authors include established scholars such as Noll, Ferguson, Nash, Lewis, Johnston and McKim, as well as a number of not so well known people. As a matter of editorial policy, those living theologians selected for treatment were not invited to be authors; instead, writers were chosen because of their association with their subjects—through personal acquaintance, institutional relationships or academic study. This allows for the presentation of authoritative information and authentic insights (much of it not readily available elsewhere), but in some cases the association seems too close, producing uncritical, even hagio-graphic results.

There is no index to the *Handbook*, although there is a detailed list of contributors and full documentation; in some places a popular style protrudes, reflecting a lack of editorial rigour. Recent developments in the work of some active theologians has not been covered, suggesting an over-long gestation period for the work. Yet, all in all this p. 289 is a useful handbook, especially for new generations of theological students, who will be much enlightened concerning the theological significance and personal lives of various people discussed; their achievements will likely provide a stimulating incentive for many readers.

But the book also has a more general and immediate value. When the material is taken as a whole, it presents a comprehensive picture of contemporary evangelicalism. The biographical details, for example, identify the connections, influences and institutions which have been most influential in the development of the movement, similarly, much can be learned about the personalities involved and many of the major issues they faced.

The theological exposition also creates a detailed catalogue of evangelical concerns, while the aggregation of book summaries and bibliographies not only introduces readers to a wide range of evangelical writing, but virtually establishes that body of literature as the authority for twentieth-century evangelical theology.

However, the emphasis is almost entirely on monographs, there being comparatively little reference to periodical articles. Furthermore, there is a regrettable lack of consistency between entries in the listing of the subjects' publications. It is also surprising that so few secondary works are listed, indicating a great need for a deeper analysis of these figures who are so important for contemporary evangelicalism. In its own way, this book has already begun to meet this need.

ENGAGING WITH GOD: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

by David Peterson

(Leicester, Apollos (Inter-Varsity Press), 1992 Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993, pb. 317 pp.)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

The sub-title of this book is important, especially for readers familiar with standard works in the theology and principles of Christian Worship such as those by Robert E. Webber, James F. White, William H. Willimon. The author has written specifically from the perspective of a conservative version of the Biblical Theology movement to give the 'substructure of worship theology' (p. 166) within a 'redemptive-historical framework' (p. 206). So he has covered the full range of the themes of biblical theology pointing out their relevance to worship, rather than focusing specifically on topics usually associated with the nature and principles of worship. In particular, he bases a great deal of his argument upon his many enriching word studies; he also treats covenant and cult in the Old Testament and in the teaching of Jesus before moving on to the early church and the theology of Paul, the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Revelation to John.

A strength of the book is the extended expositions of the biblical text, amounting to virtually paraphrases of whole books in some cases (such as the chapters on Hebrews and Romans); however, so broad is the theological treatment that much of this material may seem superfluous to readers who are well [p. 290](#) acquainted with the passages themselves and with the general flow of systematic and biblical theology. His approach to the Pentateuch is a conservative type of canon criticism in that his 'concern is with the [OT] text in its final form, as it influenced Jewish and Christian thinking in the New Testament era' (p. 50); similarly, he treats the gospels 'in their final, canonical form, without engaging in tradition-historical study of the text' (p. 103). However, he wisely warns against the all too common practice of simplistically assuming that early Christian practice as recorded in the New Testament is 'automatically prescriptive for later generations of believers' (p. 211).

Although there are copious references to a wide range of literature in the notes which follow each of the ten chapters, the text is not written in technical style. Unfortunately, this rich source of data has not been compiled into a comprehensive bibliography, but there are subject, author and textual indices; each chapter usually contains a succinct summary of the major points.

As the main part of the title of this book indicates, Peterson, who is on the faculty of the Anglican institution, Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia, holds a particular view of worship which differs markedly from many authorities in the area of worship and from the positions reflected by movements in the contemporary church.

He defines 'the worship of the true and living God' in functional terminology as 'essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible' (p. 20, 55). Hence, Peterson makes the nature of God and the terms of his relationship with humankind a prominent part of his explanation on worship. These topics would normally be treated in general theology, leaving the theology of worship to deal with specific matters related to the principles and practice of worship itself; these are topics which Peterson tends to omit and for which the reader will need to turn to other works to study in any detail.

A key issue for Peterson is that the transition from Old to New Testament eras shows how Jesus Christ himself becomes the replacement for the Hebrew sacrificial cult as the divinely-ordained means of access to God in worship and life. Hence, Peterson concludes, the presentation of Christ to the congregation through preaching and sound biblical teaching are essential for Christian worship and for the nurture of disciples.

But even more important for Peterson is the notion of 'transformed worship' which he finds throughout the New Testament. According to this concept, the centrality of the person Jesus Christ means that Christian worship is non-cultic, being expressed holistically in the totality of everyday life, not merely on liturgical occasions. This means also that there are no longer any 'holy places' in which God may be said to reside, but instead the focus is upon 'holy people' amongst whom his presence dwells.

This phenomenon is noticeable particularly by the way in which liturgical terms such as *sacrifice* and *priesthood* are used in the New Testament to refer to non-liturgical matters such as the dedicated life and the ministry of the Church in intercession and service. It was only later in the Christian era that this metaphorical language of the New Testament was taken literally and Christian ministers were referred to as priests, thereby losing a distinctive feature of Christian life and worship. It is also to be noted that the New Testament does not prescribe a definitive, detailed procedure for worship and indeed, according to Peterson, it hardly even refers to Christians as 'worshipping' when they meet together.

This concept of 'transformed worship' is particularly clear in [Romans 12:1](#) where Peterson translates *logike latreia* (spiritual worship—RSV) as 'understanding worship'; since it refers to 'the service rendered by those who truly understand the gospel and its implications'. He argues that the service called for in this text is 'the obedience of faith expressed by those whose minds are being transformed and renewed by God' (p. 176) which of course goes far beyond what happens in a congregational gathering for prayer or praise.

It is only from this perspective that Peterson discusses what Christians do when they meet together in 'worship'. He regards this activity as a special form of 'transformed worship' (p. 220), and finds that the biblical evidence points to the teaching of the Word of God and mutual edification especially through exhortation, prayer and other 'verbal ministries' (p. 196f) as the major functions of the Christian assembly.

In the course of surveying the life of the Pauline and other early churches, Peterson puts forward some stimulating views on such matters as the nature of fellowship (*koinonia*), the role of the local church, and the need for 'prophecy' and 'confession' in the Christian meeting. It is in the discussion of these issues that the author's ability to present the results of his extensive exegetical and background studies in a simple but comprehensive and compelling way stands out.

In striking contrast with many other contemporary books on worship which tend to be mere inspirational and anecdotal or devoted exclusively to procedures, most of Peterson's material consists of substantial biblical and theological exposition. Practical application to the conditions of modern worship is almost entirely restricted to short

comments at the end of major sections; however, they are usually so brief and arbitrarily related to his own church context that most readers will find themselves wanting to make their own applications instead.

If the Epilogue in which Peterson presents his description of an ideal Christian gathering is any guide, it is clear that he is dissatisfied with both the formal liturgical tradition and the contemporary renewal stream, preferring instead an informal service consisting of corporate prayer, readings, preaching, mutual ministry and a simple administration of the Lord's Table in the setting of an authentic fellowshiping community. However, while this book provides lively expositions of key themes in biblical theology relevant to Christian life and worship in their broadest sense, readers, whether they be church [p. 292](#) leaders or students of worship, will still need to spend considerable effort in working through the implications of 'transformed worship' for the day to day life of the Church.

MEDIA IN CHURCH AND MISSION: COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL

by Viggo Søgaaard

(Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1993, pb. 287 pp.)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

The value of a book like this one to those involved in any kind of Christian ministry, whether as fulltime professionals or as laypeople in a Church setting, is that it underlines just how important the principles and methods of communication are for their activities. As Dr. Søgaaard, who is Associate Professor of Communication at Fuller Theological Seminary, points out, God has communicated with humanity and he has commissioned his Church with the task of communicating the good news of the gospel to all people. It goes almost without saying that a proper understanding of the nature of communication is essential for all who are involved in the task.

But it does not take much investigation to find examples of poor communication—the author refers to several to make his point. The export of un-adapted North American television and radio programmes to countries with vastly different cultural and religious contexts seems to be his pet hate; he gives one example where a special Christmas television programme was broadcast months later with U.S. phone numbers still appearing on the screen! So books like this are still urgently needed, especially where the memory of the televangelists' scandals linger on, and promoters of Christian media ministries are less than accurate in their claims about the scope and effectiveness of their programmes and where others lack imagination and relevance.

The first part of this book gives the basics of communication theory adapted to relate to the context of Christian outreach and ministry. The author refers to acknowledged authorities, both Christian and secular, and makes use of many brief outlines, summaries and helpful diagrams; however, so concise is the treatment that relatively few examples are given, apart from ones deriving from the author's own work in an Asian-based audio cassette ministry.

This section covers theological considerations which characterise Christian communication in particular and then moves on to discuss the nature and principles of communication, followed by material on strategies and research required for effective communication. Dr. Søgaaard concludes this section by noting that communication in a Christian context must reflect dependence on the Holy Spirit, be person-centred, receptor-oriented and church-related; it must also be based upon quality research and be seen as a process rather than as a simple event and have an intercultural perspective.

The second section of the book offers some guidelines on the nature and uses of the major media types; it covers television, radio, video, audio cassettes, print, film, music, painting p.293 and drama, and finally computers. In just over 100 pages it is not possible to do more than describe the most basic features of these types of media, list their strengths and weaknesses and hint at the most effective ways of using them in evangelism and Christian ministry. But together with the extensive references given, there is enough in this section to indicate the extremely wide range of possibilities available and to provide a starting point for readers searching for fresh communication ideas.

The final section is devoted to practical guidelines on the use of media and church and mission contexts, covering strategy, production, pre-testing and evaluation. The book tends to lose its way in this section and there is a good deal of repetition of material given in Part I. Nevertheless, some useful guidance is given, with the emphasis on rational planning of projects, cultural sensitivity in programming, careful research into receptors' needs and honest appraisal of results. If these guidelines alone were to be taken fully into account by readers engaged in communicating the gospel, then the book would make a worthwhile contribution to the Church's mission today. The lengthy bibliography gives plenty of sources of further information. p.295

Journal and Book Information

Richard L. Langston, *Bribery and the Bible* (Singapore Campus Crusade Asia, 1991), pp. 127. This book is obtainable from Campus Crusade Asia Ltd., Alexandra P.O. Box 0205, Singapore 9115, Republic of Singapore.

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