Chapter One
The Story of God

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Christians read the Bible and take it to be authoritative on matters of ethics. But what does that mean? In what does that authority reside and how does it sit alongside other sources of authority?

What precisely it means for the Bible to be authoritative is a question that has received three broad kinds of answers.

1. Authority lies *behind* the text. In other words the text itself is not as important as the matters the text describes and records. The Holy Spirit was at work in those insights and events, and the text is an account of the work of the Holy Spirit. This can take more than one form.
   - The "conservative" form sees the true significance in the events the text describes. It sees the Bible as an accurate (sometimes infallibly accurate) account of the saving events of history and the precise words of God. It makes no distinction between the significance of the words and events and the accuracy of the record of those words and events. The latter is the inspired account of the former.

     One problem for this approach is that it finds it difficult to yield any ground on whether every single event recorded in the Bible actually happened, and happened exactly as recorded in the Bible, without fearing that this may jeopardize the entire *moral* authority of the scripture. The moral authority of scripture comes to depend on the historicity of the events the Bible describes. Hence the furor over whether the creation portrayal in Genesis 1–2 is a scientific account by contemporary standards. Because it is committed to seeing the events as both vital and described according to the conventions of modern historical writing, this approach finds it hard to envisage one without the other – i.e., saving events with a significance

beyond that described in the text, or inspired words that work more as poetry than as history.

- The "liberal" form sees the true significance in the forms and patterns of life represented in the scriptural record. For example it is often said that the essence of the New Testament is an ethic of simply loving one another. In some cases these forms and patterns could have been identified or established in other ways. But the Bible carries authority because it conveys the good and true ways to live, whether these ways could have been otherwise discovered or not. This view has been particularly attractive to those who have sought to derive from the Bible an ethic that can be authoritative for everyone, Christian or not.

  The advantage of this approach is that it makes it easier to accommodate apparent historical inaccuracies in the text. It sometimes also finds it easier to dialogue in secular conversations. However those of this view are often criticized for only respecting the authority of the Bible when the Bible says what they already believe. While this is a potential problem for all approaches, it is particularly an issue for those who seek to fit the diverse voices of the Bible into a pattern that can be recognized and endorsed without specific reference to the Bible.
- In between these two views is a more pragmatic approach that says the text has authority because it is the best (or the only) witness we have to the God of Jesus Christ. This approach is more inclined than the previous two to explore the findings of other ancient sources, not to prove the historical accuracy of the scriptural narrative, but to clarify our view of the social forms or communities that figure in the text or from which the text originated. It is more sympathetic than the conservative view to critical tools that investigate the way the text (and canon) as we now have it came to be composed. Because it is so subject to the rhythms of scholarly research, this pragmatic view is perhaps the one most associated with and debated in the academy, at least in the last hundred years.

2. Authority lies *in* the text itself. In other words the moment of inspiration was the moment the author of each book of the Bible was moved by the Holy Spirit to record these sacred words, and these sacred words have resonance wherever they are read and no matter who is reading them. Again this can take more than one form.

- In one view the writing of the scriptures was done through the power of the Holy Spirit, in such a way that the text genuinely is holy, and an incomparable source of truth. The assumption is generally made that the Bible is *perspicuous* – that is, that it has a single, plain meaning that is accessible to any reader in any context. For most of church history the majority understanding was a fusion of this view and the first view recorded above, although theologians often assumed the text had more than one meaning. Thus scripture was the inspired record of inspired words and events. The Reformation, with its emphasis on bringing the

Bible into the hands of the laity, enhanced the emphasis on the perspicuity of scripture.

The perspicuity of scripture is often challenged because it is pointed out that talk of a "plain" meaning simply hides the cultural and power relations lying beneath the meaning of "plain." (See Chapter Six for more of this kind of analysis.) Some also criticize this approach because they say it makes the Bible a focus of worship, rather than a book that directs people to the worship of God. If the Bible is a handbook of this kind, it is sometimes argued, a community of interpretation – the church – becomes unnecessary.

A second view arises in reaction to the historical criticism of the Bible that has tended to dominate Western academies in the last hundred years. After a century of research and speculation about the "original" text and the events and words behind the text, many scholars have come to regard the form of the text *as the church now has it* as the principal object of study. This approach is sometimes known as canonical criticism. One particular emphasis of this method is its interest in the way the books of the Bible were brought together into the canon ("rule") of 66 books around the late second century CE. One significant result of this is that, for example, the four Gospels are always read, not just in relation to one another, but in relation to the context of Israel recorded in the Old Testament and the situation of the early church described in the rest of the New Testament.

This "final form" approach is sometimes criticized by historical critics in whose view it seems to pick and choose among critical methods. Thus in their view it does not fully articulate a coherent and consistent method of reading the text.

- A connected philosophical move departs from assuming that the only valid way to interpret a text is to identify the author's original intention. In scriptural interpretation as in secular literary criticism it is now increasingly common to accept that a text may have several legitimate meanings and that it may take on a life of its own long after the author has composed it.

  Conservative readers fear this view risks giving up on the text having a precise and fixed meaning.

3. Authority lies in the reading and *embodying* of the text. In this view what matters most is not getting the text right or the history right or even the reading right, but *living* the text faithfully by following in its steps. This approach too has more than one form. The Holy Spirit is taken to act primarily in the community reading the text – and is quite capable of acting even through an imperfect text or even through imperfect readings of the text if necessary.

- In simple terms this view means that Christians must always remember they believe not so much in the Bible as in the one to whom the Bible witnesses, and thus what matters most to them is not to have access to a historically accurate text but to be members of a faithful community. This view tends

to arise out of misgivings with position 1 above, and suspicions about the perspicuity of scripture in position 2. It accommodates more easily than the previous approaches the fact that the exact form of the text is disputed in some places, for example those who see Mark's Gospel as concluding at 16:8 and those who continue reading to 16:20. Even the canon itself is viewed differently by Protestants, who generally recognize only the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments combined, and Catholics, who also recognize the Apocrypha (including such books as Maccabees and Ecclesiasticus).

- Proponents of this view point out that it matters *where* and *why* the text is being read. The text may be read alone or heard together, proclaimed in worship or studied in a library. Meanwhile it may be read for devotion, engaged for application, or analyzed for research. The method and the purpose significantly shape the outcome. There is a big difference between the questions "What must I do to 'do likewise?' " "Who is the Samaritan in our current context, and who is the man lying half-dead by the side of the road?" and "Did this story already exist in Greek literature before Luke put it in the mouth of Jesus in his Gospel?"

  Critics question why it is felt one had to choose between true text and true community when one might aspire to both. Many would seek a harmonization of all three of these general approaches and thus see the Holy Spirit at work at every stage – in events, text, and "performance" of the text.

It is common to bring scripture into a sequence, hierarchy, or shared pattern of authority with other sources such as tradition, reason, church leadership, or experience. These further authorities are sometimes seen as parallel authorities, sometimes as key interpreters, sometimes as subordinate authorities. Different parts of the church have throughout history given different weight to these different authorities. In practice any view that looks to scripture for moral guidance is going to have to work out whose voice counts the most when scriptural interpreters differ.

Even though scriptural authority takes a number of forms, it is cited more frequently than any other source in Christian ethics. Whatever form Christian ethics takes, it must always have a sense of how and to what extent it regards scripture as an authority.

The People of God

What Christians call the Old Testament is a collection of books that record the faith and the experience and the insights of God's people Israel from earliest times until around 300 years before the birth of Jesus. The Old Testament is made up of three largely distinct kinds of literature. The first is Law, in Hebrew *Torah*, which refers to the first five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers,

and Deuteronomy. The Law is not simply a series of injunctions, although there are thought to be 613 positive and negative rules spread across these books; instead the Law offers a foundational narrative that provides a context for the covenant made between God and Israel, of which these laws are an expression and symbol – rather as a wedding ring is an expression and symbol of a marriage covenant. The *Torah*, sometimes also known as the Pentateuch, begins with the stories of creation and fall, of flood and of Babel. It then introduces Abraham as the patriarch of Israel and bearer of God's promise that through his descendants many peoples will find a blessing. Abraham enters the Promised Land, but famine takes his descendants to Egypt, where God has already sent Joseph to protect them. Generations later, however, they fall into slavery, and God calls Moses to lead them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. They come to Mt. Sinai, where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and many other instructions. They wander in the wilderness for forty years. The Pentateuch ends with the death of Moses, just as he and the Israelites are on the brink of entering the Promised Land.

The second major collection of literature in the Old Testament is the Prophets. Just as the Law does not simply contain laws, so the Prophets does not simply contain prophecies. The "Prophets" includes all the books that take the story of Israel from the entry into the Promised Land under Joshua to the Exile in Babylon. Many of these are in narrative form – notably the so-called "Deuteronomistic history." The Deuteronomistic history traces how Joshua took the Israelites into the land, how a series of ad hoc rulers known as judges galvanized the twelve tribes at moments of crisis, and how eventually Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king. Saul was followed by David, and David by Solomon, during a period that marked Israel's zenith of power and prestige. The kingdom split after Solomon's death, with the ten tribes of the northern kingdom (Israel) ruled separately from the two southern tribes (Judah). The northern kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians (ca. 722 BCE), and finally the southern kingdom was invaded by the Chaldeans (586 BCE) around 300 years after Solomon. The history concludes with a great number of people being taken into exile in Babylon. This long history is "prophecy" because it identifies the action of God as a living influence in the present as in the past; God is an active participant in the story. The books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, together with the twelve shorter prophetic books, interweave pronouncements and declarations of God's role and purpose in these events, particularly the later ones, while generally presupposing the broad outline of the narrative.

The third main part of the Old Testament is the Writings. These include most notably the Psalms, which mix narrative incantation with praise and lamentation, and Proverbs, a distillation of the wisdom of sages. But they also incorporate several narrative books such as Ruth and Chronicles. The narrative books affirm that there is a future for Israel after the catastrophe of exile, and that the future lies in the reconstruction of Jerusalem (Ezra and Nehemiah), the wit and imagination to live under foreign rule (Esther), and the cosmic future plans of God (Daniel).

Approaches

Given that the central figure in Christianity is Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ does not appear in the flesh in the first 77 percent of the Bible known by Christians as the Old Testament, the ethical and theological significance of the Old Testament is always going to be a controversial question for the Christian tradition. There are three broad approaches to the Old Testament from the point of view of Christian ethics.

1. *Separation*. This view assumes the Old Testament should be considered independently of the New Testament. It comes in two quite distinct forms, resting on either the hearty embrace of Judaism or its outright rejection.
   a. One view regards the "Old Testament" as something of a Christian construction. It tends rather to use the term "Hebrew Bible" to refer to the books of the Law, Prophets, and Writings. It notes that for most Jews, this collection of 39 books has never had a fixed or settled character. The Law has a unique status for most Jews. But the Hebrew Bible as a whole comprises a relatively small part of what Jews today might regard as their sacred canon. It would also include the *Mishnah*, compiled around 200 CE, the *Tosephta*, recorded 100 or more years later, and the *Gemara*, which were found in Jerusalem and Babylon and were completed by around 850 CE. The whole corpus, known as the *Talmud*, is a significant part of Jewish tradition largely untouched by Christians. There is a huge body of moral instruction found in *Halakhah*, or classical Jewish religious law. The argument goes that if the point of consulting the Old Testament is to be listening to what God has said to Israel, then that listening has to include what God has said to Israel since Jesus, not just before Jesus. It follows that the Old Testament should be read not so much as part of the Christian Bible, in the context of the New Testament, but as part of the accumulation of Jewish tradition, in the context of the Talmud and *Halakhah*.
   b. The second view is a much less subtle, and much older view. It is that the God of the New Testament is fundamentally different from the God of the Old Testament. It is often supposed, for example, that the God of the Old Testament is a God of war, whereas the God of the New Testament is a God of peace; or that the Old Testament God is obsessed with law, whereas the New Testament God is full of love; or again that the Old Testament is largely concerned with rituals through which one can attain purity, whereas the New Testament is concerned with grace through which one can receive life. The earliest name associated with this view is Marcion of Sinope (ca. 110–ca. 160 CE). Marcion argued in the early second century that the creator God of the Old Testament was chiefly concerned with the law. Jesus came to displace the God of the Old Testament and inaugurate an era of love. Marcion's Bible had none of the eventual Old Testament and only parts of Luke and Paul in it. By rejecting Marcion's proposal (he was excommunicated in 144 CE) and agreeing on a canon of

66 books, including 39 that Christians call the Old Testament, the early church made a decisive move against the rejection of Israel's God.

Nonetheless, the tendency to assume the New Testament replaces the Old has never gone away. It often focuses on "wrathful" passages such as the dashing of babies' heads against rocks (Ps 137:9) or the ethnic cleansing of the settlement period (Joshua 6:21). It can be seen not too far from the surface in the work of Martin Luther (1483–1546), the great sixteenth-century Reformer. Luther describes Judaism in stark terms, identifying it with justification by works; the gospel, as he sees it, is utterly different, seeing justification as only by grace through faith. Here already we see one particular hesitation that Protestantism has always had with the whole notion of Christian ethics: it looks too much like letting law back in by the side door. When a person claims that they have no need for Christian ethics because "Jesus has always been enough for me," they are expressing an antinomian view – a conviction that faith abolishes the law.

2. *Seamlessness.* This view takes the opposite stance from the "separation" approach. It sees overwhelming continuity between the Old Testament and the New. The theologian most associated with this view is perhaps another great sixteenth-century Reformer, John Calvin (1509–64). It has two broad dimensions.
   a. The Old Testament offers a series of anticipations, prefigurements, and prophecies of the revelation to come in the New Testament. The relation of Old to New Testament is thus one of promise and fulfillment. This construal of the more widely held conviction that God does not change led proponents of the seamlessness view to argue that the great figures of the Old Testament may not have had a clear notion of what lay in store, but God did. The laws, the priests, the sacrifices, the Temple, the kings, and the prophets of the Old Testament were all fulfilled in Jesus. The "anticipation" view is often accompanied by an assumption that the Hebrew ethic was earthy and tangible whereas the Christian ethic was spiritual: for example the Old Testament looks on the Promised Land as the New Testament looks on heaven. Likewise it is sometimes suggested that the Old Testament offers a host of laws but no fundamental change of heart whereas with the New Testament comes the Holy Spirit and genuine repentance and conversion.
   b. When it comes to the more troubling passages, the Spanish Jewish scholar Maimonides (1138–1204) offered in his work *The Guide of the Perplexed* (ca. 1190 CE) what became a very influential distinction. He argued that the Torah laws were centrally about preserving Israel from its two main enemies: idolatry and ill health. The Italian Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) took up Maimonides' argument and distinguished between the moral laws and the ceremonial (and civil) ones. The moral laws were simply part of natural law, and thus remained binding. The ceremonial laws applied specifically to ancient Israel and had no abiding

authority. Thus circumcision ceased to be binding on Christians, and many of the severe punishments could be softened. This view dominated Reformation discussions, and is often quoted today. However it is not always clear where the line between moral and ceremonial lies: for example, is the Sabbath law moral or ceremonial – is it still binding or not?

3. *Tension*. This third view is inclined to take a more generous view of Judaism in general and the Old Testament in particular. It rejects false polarities such as law–gospel or material–spiritual. It sees significant continuities between the character of God revealed in the Old Testament – abounding in steadfast love (*ḥesed*), faithfulness (*emunah*), justice (*mishpat*), and compassion (*raḥmim*) – and the God of Jesus Christ. This approach covers a spectrum from the cautious to the more sanguine.
   a. The more cautious approach is to distinguish between precept and example. It is suggested that the Old Testament is of limited use as precept, or instruction. One can subdivide precepts between rules, such as the Ten Commandments, which apply in every situation, and principles, such as "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8), which provide general moral frameworks. But the primary value of the Old Testament in Christian ethics is as a collection of salutary stories, challenging prophecies, and distilled wisdom. These are sometimes called paradigms (narratives of exemplary or reprehensible conduct) or symbolic worlds (broad parameters for understanding the action of God or the human condition). This does not mean the stories merely illustrate truths found elsewhere: the Old Testament is still regarded as revelation. The real task involves taking the rich store of engagements with such issues as freedom for the oppressed, justice for the poor, compassion for the outcast, and regard for the whole earth, and interpreting them in a society that looks very different from ancient Israel.
   b. The more sanguine approach is to regard the New Testament as like a drama, and the Old Testament as providing the stage and setting for the drama. Here the difference between the two remains significant, but the Old Testament is regarded as indispensable in explicit ways: the New Testament is incomprehensible without the Old. A similar view employs a term such as "people of God" to underline the continuities between Israel and the church. This is always at risk of supersessionism, the assumption that the church has simply replaced Israel; nonetheless it focuses on the efforts of God's people to imitate the faithfulness of God as the single unchanging strand across both testaments.

Characteristics

The Old Testament presents a polyphony of voices, and it is a little dangerous to generalize too swiftly about its contents. We may, however, identify three

characteristics that cover the corpus as a whole, each of which has a significant bearing on Christian ethics.

1. The Old Testament is about *God*. There are books that notoriously keep God largely or wholly invisible (Esther and Ecclesiastes). However the most striking thing about the Old Testament is that it is always centrally about God. It is essentially a theological history of Israel, with God as the initiator, hidden hand, or engaged observer. God chooses Israel, not because Israel is great, but because God is gracious. The significance for Christian ethics is that an ethic that addresses the Old Testament must always be theological, that it must always see human flourishing in relation to the nature, purpose, and revelation of God. God is never to be regarded as a neutral observer, mere creator, or passionless demiurge. God is passionate, jealous, and often angry – totally involved in creation.
2. The Old Testament is about God's *people*. From Genesis 12 onwards, the Old Testament is a long conversation about Israel's freedom and flourishing, how it was attained, how it should be enjoyed, how it could be (and was) lost, how deeply God is involved in its achievement, shaping, maintenance, loss, and restoration, and how significant it is for the whole world. The key word here is holiness, because holiness names the unique character of God, which he bestows on Israel (Ex 19:6) and which is to be a blessing for the other nations. Holiness requires a certain separation between Israel and the nations, but this is for the sake of the nations, not just for the sake of Israel. The heart of the Old Testament is the covenant between God and Israel, definitively expressed at Mt. Sinai, and the events of liberation and law that precede and follow – and are inseparable from – that covenant.
3. The Old Testament is about the *story* of God's people. In recent decades increasing focus has come to be placed on the fact that, despite the idiosyncrasies of the Old Testament and its diversity of literature, it does tell a broad, coherent story in relation to which the rest of the material finds its context. Some have argued that this shows that the category of narrative has always been vital for understanding ethics. Others see the term narrative in a narrower sense, as an integral part of a single, particular narrative incorporating Jesus and the church, around which everything in Christian ethics must circle. Both of these views are kinds of narrative ethics, a term that is much in use in recent years and will be examined in Chapter Seven.

Themes

Because the Old Testament is such a rich and diverse collection of literature, the elucidation of themes is itself a significant act of interpretation. Relatively few writers in Christian ethics have shaped their models and theories from Old Testament foundations, wholly or even largely: thus the Old Testament has more often been used to illustrate, exemplify, or underwrite convictions formed on

other grounds. In other words, ethicists tend to find in the Old Testament what they go looking for.

1. *Kingship and Law.* For those writers assuming or aspiring to a settled hierarchical social model, the tendency has been to see David as the central figure in the Old Testament. All that precedes him leads up to him: Moses, Joshua, and Saul. All that follows him is decline: the kingdom's split, the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon. Despite all the turmoil described in the Old Testament, those interested in building or sustaining some kind of godly commonwealth have invariably seen the period of the kingdom in the united Israel as some kind of template. The ruler is seen as the key (anointed) instrument of God's rule, and the ideal is for a godly people to live holy lives subject to that rule. The degree to which Jesus and the New Testament might challenge conventional structures of authority is seldom discussed. Alongside this focus on the kingdom comes an emphasis on law. The Ten Commandments emerge as the epitome of Old Testament instruction: simple, transferable, and an explicit statement of what is required of lay Christians. Amongst the myriad of Old Testament laws, those concerning human sexuality and the family often come to prominence in these treatments.

2. *Liberation and Prophecy.* For those writers seeking to challenge settled hierarchical models of society, the focus has invariably been upon God's action in bringing Israel out of slavery and offering freedom through covenant. Liberation is the paradigm for all such readings of the Old Testament. The Exodus shows not just God's power but God's purpose. It is not just a moment in time: it comes alive whenever it is recalled, especially at Passover, but also in the agony of exile.

   The key question for the rest of the Old Testament is therefore, "Can Israel keep the freedom it has been so graciously given?" The Deuteronomistic history rests on this question. The prophets become highly significant, particularly Isaiah, Amos, and Micah, for they call Israel's attention to the way care for the poor, the alien, the orphan, and the widow embodies Israel's faithfulness to the covenant God made with Moses (for Israel was once a slave itself). The denunciations of the rich and the oppressors have a contemporary ring when placed in a context of extreme wealth differentials today.

3. *Worship and Community.* Those who see ethics as primarily about forming faithful communities, rather than shaping stable society or liberating the oppressed, tend to identify most quickly those parts of the Old Testament that are concerned with liturgy and common life. The Psalms are an important dimension of the Old Testament, for here law and history and reflection are turned into song and prayer and worship. The Psalms do not describe a society that has fixed boundaries between government and law and worship and private life. Those who see worship and ethics as integrally linked would begin here.

Just as it is possible to see the Old Testament as centrally about government and legislation, or centrally about freedom and social critique, so it is possible to see the Old Testament as a lengthy meditation on how to live as a faithful community under God. It is sometimes pointed out that individual salvation was not the obsession for Israel that it has been for many Christians: the salvation that Israel sought was inherently one that had to be shared. It is also noted that the Old Testament is based on a covenant, rather than a contract or rights in the way that many contemporary relationships assume.

God in Person

Jesus of Nazareth was a controversial figure in late Second Temple Judaism who was crucified on a charge of insurrection by the Roman governor in Judea around 30 CE. This is practically all the hard historical evidence available: the rest is largely dependent on sources within the New Testament, whose reliability it is not possible to assess conclusively. Nevertheless we can summarize Jesus' context, ministry, death, and resurrection as a preliminary to identifying his significance for Christian ethics.

Jesus' context was dominated by the occupation of the land of Israel by the Romans. It had been 600 years since the Jews had run their own affairs in Jerusalem. While the Persian king Cyrus had ended the exile in Babylon, the Jews had remained under first Persian, then Greek, then eventually Roman rule. Various parties within Israel took different approaches to these circumstances: some, such as the Sadducees, largely cooperated with the status quo; others, such as the Pharisees, saw renewal primarily in the common people keeping the Jewish law; others again, such as the Zealots, sought the violent overthrow of the Romans; and yet another group, the Essenes, withdrew to seek holiness in secluded community. There were outspoken prophets, such as John the Baptist, and some level of anticipation that the world might soon end. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are largely concerned to locate Jesus within this context of exile and expectation.

The ministry of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, begins with his baptism by John and his calling of twelve disciples, representing a renewed Israel (since Israel in the Old Testament had twelve tribes). While teaching his disciples in story and discourse, he also attracted and engaged with a second segment of society, a crowd of outcasts – rich tax-collectors, unclean lepers, shunned prostitutes, and those made poor by sickness, subjection, or circumstance. His teaching and his ministry of healing and miracle brought him into controversial interaction with the Jewish leadership of the time, and these conversations make up a third dimension of his career. Jesus announced that the kingdom (or reign) of God was at hand. God's inrushing justice would reverse the current assumptions of holiness and power, with the humble and faithful exalted and the regnant and rich laid low. Like the prophets before him, he pointed to God's deeper purposes and criticized those who were content with superficial appearances. His loyalty to the

Temple was strained when he saw activities in the Temple directing the energies of the people away from God.

Two factors led to Jesus' crucifixion. One was his relentless criticism of the Jerusalem leadership, by action and word, through cleansing the Temple and through healing on the Sabbath, through claiming to forgive sins and through comparing authorities to unfaithful keepers of the vineyard. The other was his refusal to take up the armed struggle. His presence in Jerusalem at the Passover festival was a provocation the Jerusalem leadership could not ignore and an opportunity they could not miss. Meanwhile his talk of the kingdom and dramatic miracles quite naturally led many to consider him as one who sought to be king. And when arrested, he refused either to fight or to proclaim his innocence.

And, the Gospels tell us, God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus appeared, mysteriously but tangibly, to his dispirited disciples. He forgave, recommissioned, and inspired them. He prefigured the recreation at the end of time, and the judgment and resurrection of all people. Very soon after his death, a vibrant movement known as the church began to spread with the conviction of his message and the power of his defeat of death.

Is Jesus Normative for Christian Ethics?

The Gospels present narratives of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. What is the relationship between the life that Jesus lived and the life that the Christian is to live? Is Jesus the *definitive* human, such that he is a model for human action, and if so, in what precise respect? Is Jesus the *exemplary* human, illustrative of all that human values might seek? Or is Jesus the *divine* human, unique in every way, such that the details of his ministry and passion are unrepeatable and significant largely or wholly for the new world they make possible? This is one of the most important questions in Christian ethics. There are broadly four answers to this question, depending on which aspect of Jesus one regards as most significant: his incarnation and birth, his ministry and teaching, his passion and death, or his resurrection and ascension.

Each answer can be seen in two ways. Jesus can be understood as illustrating truths also available elsewhere, such as the worthiness of equality, kindness, and justice. Or Jesus can be portrayed as establishing norms that could not and cannot be perceived without his unique person and/or work. For those that take the former, *illustrative* view, Jesus is an example of things that would have been right and good and true even if he had not come. For those that take the latter, *normative* view, all knowledge is subject to that which is only accessible in the new reality brought about in and by Jesus.

1. *Incarnation and Birth*
   a. **Illustrative.** Many writers and preachers have seen the incarnation as God's unconditional affirmation of humanity and of creation. It is good to party, because Jesus went to parties; it is good to be physical, to enjoy one's body, because Jesus came as a fully human being; it is good to strive

for the noblest human ideals and the highest human achievements, because in sharing our heart and mind and soul and strength Jesus affirmed the dignity of human aspiration. In short, he came that we may have life, and have it to the full. This is an illustrative conviction because it seldom deals with the specifics of the time and place of Jesus' incarnation: it is generally more concerned with God's broad affirmation of humanity, a conviction that might have been arrived at without Jesus coming to Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem.

b. **Normative.** Among those who have located Christian ethics in Jesus' inner being, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Karl Barth (1886–1968) stand out. For Schleiermacher, Jesus had a unique "God-consciousness," an immediate self-consciousness of absolute dependence. With Jesus there came into the world for the first time the intense experience of being saved. This was not a matter of incarnation, since for Schleiermacher Jesus was not unique in the sense that he was divine while we are not. Instead, with Jesus there came a new dimension of being human. (Again the details of Jesus' context and life are secondary.)

For Barth, ethics deals fundamentally with the *command* of God – creator, reconciler, and redeemer. Jesus is the declaration that God expects complete obedience from his people, and Jesus is the embodiment of that complete obedience. God's command is not an ideal – whether an obligation or a permission – but a *reality*. That reality is the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is not just the ground, not just the content, but also the *form* of God's command. The center of Christian ethics is not our action but God's action in Jesus. Barth's theology has a circularity about it because it always loops back to God's definitive action in Christ as the purpose and expression of all things. Divine *command* ethics will be treated in Chapter Five, and Chapter Seven will examine Barth's theology in greater detail.

2. *Ministry and Teaching*

a. **Illustrative.** It is frequently said that Jesus was a great moral teacher. For some, Jesus' principal significance lies in his ethical instruction, such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5). They appeal to summary passages such as his articulation of the greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37–40) or his words to the woman caught in adultery, "Has no one condemned you? … Then neither do I condemn you. … Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:10–11). It is not always clear whether Jesus said such things because they are binding, or whether they are binding because he said them.

A different way of putting this would be to say that the ethical significance placed on Jesus' moral teaching depends largely or entirely on the theological significance placed on his birth. Those who regard Jesus as the incarnate fully human, fully divine second member of the Trinity tend to

take the view that Jesus' words are true because Jesus said them: everything Jesus said was true because of who he was. Those who are more skeptical about Jesus' divinity tend to evaluate Jesus' teaching in the light of other ethical norms. This last is the context in which the phrase "great moral teacher" is invariably used.

Sometimes it is not so much Jesus' teaching but the quality of relationships he made that is highlighted. Attention is commonly drawn to the way Jesus related to women, for example. Jesus talked with a notorious woman in the open air in the heat of the day (John 4:6–9). He allowed himself to be corrected by a woman in the course of a disagreement (Mark 7:27–9). He mixed easily with women who were not members of his family (Luke 10:38–42) and was prepared to touch women whom others would shun (Mark 5:22–43). Meanwhile Jesus spoke easily with children, lepers, and prostitutes. And Jesus rejected relationships of domination in favor of servant ministry (Mark 10:35–45).

Some would put the emphasis not so much on the teaching or the relationships but more generally on the new community that Jesus brought into being. Most famously the New York Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) founded his understanding of the Social Gospel on a notion of the new society gathering around Jesus' earthly community. There was real hope that the society that Jesus had described could be translated into social and industrial relations in America and elsewhere. In the view of the Harvard Roman Catholic theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (b. 1938) the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry are windows into the life of the earliest Christian communities. She sees these communities as reformed elements within first-century Judaism, viewing God's reign as a present embodiment of a gathering of equals, incorporating all marginalized people, and anticipating a time beyond death, suffering, and injustice.

Those who concentrate on the quality of relationships and those who trace the emergence of an egalitarian community both have a broadly illustrative approach to Jesus' life. This is because each seems to be working with a model of relationship or community that is grounded in the highest aspirations of contemporary culture rather than the language and culture of first-century Palestine. Jesus is a key figure but his significance is that he is an outstanding example of wisdom that is available elsewhere.

b. **Normative.** The historical figure most associated with seeing Jesus' life as normative for ethics is the Italian friar St. Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181–1226). Francis encouraged his followers to imitate Jesus in every respect: to go barefoot, to have no fixed home, to keep a vow of poverty, to be with the poor, the sick, and the socially marginalized, and to engage in manual labor. Many aspects of Jesus' life and ministry have been presented since Francis as suitable for imitation: celibacy, the life of a carpenter, the drawing of illustrations from the life of peasants or fishermen, spending time in deserts or on mountaintops, the retreat period of forty days, the

gathering of twelve close followers, the use of parables. All have seemed to some to epitomize Jesus' ethic.

While accepting the normative status of Jesus' life and teaching, two notes of caution have been prominent and widespread. The first is the argument that Jesus' life and teaching made and make perfect sense for simple rural face-to-face relations, but that when it comes to more conventionally political contexts, the marketplace, the houses of government, and industry, a more complex ethic must prevail. This view is particularly associated with Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), long-time professor at Union Seminary in New York, in his work *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), which argues that when one transfers from the personal to the political, something beyond the ethic of Jesus is required.

The other cautionary note customarily directed at a wholesale imitation of Jesus is associated with the German-French theologian and humanitarian physician Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965). In Schweitzer's view Jesus' whole program assumed that the end of the world was coming very soon. Jesus expressed no interest in the careful work of establishing institutions and social practices and creating wealth because he assumed all was shortly to pass away: but in fact such institution-building and wealth generation are exactly what is required for a stable and healthy society. Thus Jesus' relevance for Christian ethics is very limited. Schweitzer's thesis has been criticized as implausible given that the Gospels were written down up to fifty years after Jesus spoke words apparently assuming an imminent end. But it has nonetheless been very influential.

3. *Passion and Death*

a. **Illustrative.** The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr strongly rejected the Social Gospel movement of the early twentieth century. He believed it had far too shallow an understanding of human sin. For Niebuhr the cross of Jesus illustrated the fundamental reality of the human condition. This reality was flawed by original sin. Humanity, according to Niebuhr, is caught between two rival forces, finitude and freedom – between the aspiration to reach great ideals and the inevitability of becoming knotted in sin. Even the "man without sin" had been cruelly executed, because human nature could not reach the impossible possibility of a life under grace. Niebuhr frequently quotes Romans 7:18–19: "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing."

b. **Normative.** The alternatives to Niebuhr are of broadly two kinds: those who see the cross as a cosmic victory over sin and death, and those who see the cross as a specific event whose place and time have vivid significance.

For many, the significance of Jesus is primarily that in his death he overcame all that separates humanity (or creation) from God. He vanquished the devil, or alternatively paid in his body whatever price was

necessary to restore fellowship with God. The importance of such a view for ethics is that overcoming sin makes it possible for Christians to live faithful lives in the power of the Spirit. No longer must one be resigned to being dragged down by the anchor of sin or naïvely to hoping in the power of education and effort to withstand human weakness. Now, through the grace of God, through repentance and forgiveness in the cross of Christ, new life is genuinely possible: the commands of God can be kept, and the church can live in the bonds of peace. Hence ethics means believing in the redeeming power of the cross, ceasing to try to find righteousness in one's own resources, and holding fast to the guiding hand of the Spirit through temptation and setback. The perennial danger in such a rendering of ethics is that it has relatively little connection with the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry and passion. Jesus simply came to die: why it had to be a cross, why it had to be first-century Palestine, why he called disciples, told parables, performed healings – these details remain unclear. Thus, vital as Jesus' death is, it yields little in the way of a specific ethic that makes Jesus normative.

The theologian most concerned to overcome the abstraction of the cross in ethics is the American Mennonite John Howard Yoder (1927–97). Yoder insists on the normative quality of Jesus' life and death. He makes the simple claim that the New Testament does enjoin the imitation of Jesus, but not in a general way. It commands the specific imitation of Jesus in relation to encounters with enmity and power. Jesus rejected the quietism of the Essene movement: he was not tempted to withdrawal. The other two key temptations for Jesus were on the one hand that of establishment responsibility, the collusion with the Roman army in the oppression of Israel, and on the other hand that of the crusade, joining the Zealot struggle in taking up arms against the occupying power.

What is required of the disciple, Yoder argues, is to follow the trajectory of Jesus' decision. The emphasis on Jesus' life and his journey to the cross only makes sense if Jesus is seen as not only the fully human, fully divine son of God but also the one who rose physically from the dead. In this case, cross and resurrection emerge as the "grain of the universe," the force that fundamentally shapes history in a way that armies and markets are usually taken to do. Thus the disciple who renounces the sword and the gun does so not because such weapons are too dangerous but because they are too weak. Yoder resists every method of making the cross an abstraction – such as the pastoral observation that we "all have our cross to bear" – and insists on the call to walk the way of the cross as the specific command that characterizes Christian ethics today.

4. *Resurrection and Ascension*

a. **Illustrative.** Once again the distinction between illustrative and normative approaches to Jesus' resurrection are doctrinal ones – that is to say, those who insist on Jesus' physical resurrection are inclined to a more

normative reading and those who maintain some form of spiritual resurrection tend to a more illustrative reading. The figure perhaps most associated with an illustrative reading of the resurrection is Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). For Bultmann, the resurrection is essentially found in the proclamation ("kerygma") of the apostles after Jesus' death. This proclamation called people from inauthentic existence (Bultmann's notion of sin) to authentic existence (a life resting on grace). Resurrection faith means obedience in which the self renounces its striving for self-righteousness, and its corresponding anxiety, and receives the good news of God's righteousness – making it free and open to the future. Bultmann's ethics are much more concerned with wresting the Christian's imagination free from anxiety than on specific engagement with the details of particular lives. They also remain somewhat detached from the precise details of Jesus' life (which is why they belong in the resurrection section). But they do emphasize in characteristically Lutheran style the sharp contrast between sin and grace.

b. **Normative.** If the physical resurrection is accepted as a historical event, albeit one without parallel, then its significance for ethics is enormous, perhaps definitive. The contemporary figure whose reading of ethics is most explicitly founded on the resurrection is Oliver O'Donovan (b. 1945). O'Donovan maintains that "Christian ethics depends upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The resurrection transforms hope for redemption from creation into hope for redemption *for* creation. "When the gospel is preached without a resurrection … then, of course, the cross and the ascension, collapsed together without their centre, become symbols for a gnostic other-worldliness."

O'Donovan's central contention is that the resurrection overcomes any false distinction between the "ethics of creation" – reflection on the natural order – and the "ethics of the kingdom" – reflection on the inrushing new life brought by Christ with the promise of a dramatic climax in the coming eschaton. "In the resurrection of Christ creation is restored and the kingdom of God dawns." He goes on:

> When the resurrection is distinguished from the ascension (as it is by Saint Luke and indirectly by Saint John – cf. 20.17) it looks backwards. It is a recovery of the lost. … Death, the enemy of mankind, is conquered. … From this aspect the emphasis of the resurrection narratives is on the physical reality of the restored body. … When, however, the resurrection is presented alone without the ascension (as it is by Saint Mark and Saint Matthew) it looks forwards. Already Christ is transformed. … Humanity is elevated to that which it has never enjoyed before, the seat at God's right hand which belongs to his Son.

The resurrection of Jesus is thus about overcoming sub-natural enslavement to sin and death and about anticipating supernatural destiny. Ethics is the same.

Following Jesus

The ethics of Jesus turn into New Testament ethics at the point where one recognizes that we know almost nothing about Jesus of Nazareth except what we are told by the records left by the early church. The New Testament canon represents those texts the early church regarded as comprehensive and authoritative.

The New Testament and Christian Ethics

The New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays (b. 1948) outlines four distinct tasks to be addressed in studying New Testament ethics: descriptive, synthetic, hermeneutical, and pragmatic.

1. *The descriptive task.* The student must first gain an understanding of the breadth and variety of the New Testament canon. Each of the books has its own particular preoccupation and emphasis: to understand their ethics one needs to gain some understanding of the communities in which and for which each book was written. Some scholars have concluded that the literature in the New Testament is so diverse that no overall ethic can or should be attempted. This diversity is on the structural level: the narrative Gospels are very different documents from the letters of Paul and others, and the book of Revelation may appear to defy ethical exegesis. But it is also on the level of particular instruction: for example the activity of women in ministry and worship seems in one place to be assumed, in another forbidden; divorce is excluded wholesale in one place, under certain conditions in another; the state seems to be God's servant in one place, God's enemy in another.
2. *The synthetic task.* This is the attempt to bring together the different New Testament writings and elucidate a distinctive and coherent ethic from them. As Hays notes, many interpreters have tried to isolate a single great principle, such as love, that holds together the whole of the New Testament's moral teaching. However the term "love" is notably absent from the Acts of the Apostles, and largely absent in other texts such as Hebrews and Revelation: thus to employ the term love as the epitome of the New Testament breaks the terms of the descriptive task described above. Similar criticisms could be made about the catch-all term "liberation": allusive as it is in its reading of the Exodus story and its attention to contemporary social and economic realities, it hardly does justice to Matthew's emphasis on obedience or the pastoral epistles' regard for order, and it is always in danger of prioritizing human action over the prevenience of God's grace. Hays himself distills the grand narrative of Christ's birth, ministry, death and resurrection, and the Spirit-filled life of the early church into three themes: community, cross, and new creation.
3. *The hermeneutical task.* This names the chasm between the political, social, economic, technological, and cultural circumstances of the first century CE

and those of today. Hays makes it clear that interpretation is always an act of imagination: "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." This has often been regarded as the primary task of the preacher: coining metaphors and painting pictures through which the text comes vividly alive in the contemporary circumstances of the church. But the issue is how to do this while being faithful both to the descriptive task – doing justice to the polyvalent voices of the New Testament – and to the synthetic task – hearing the New Testament speak with one clear voice.

4. *The pragmatic task.* The final task is to embody the text in the life of a faithful community. Attention to detailed exegesis, broad coherence, and imaginative correlation culminates in pragmatic application. "The value of our exegesis and hermeneutics will be tested by their capacity to produce persons and communities whose character is commensurate with Jesus Christ and therefore pleasing to God." Hays acknowledges that the hermeneutical and the pragmatic tasks cannot properly be separated. One is the conceptual application, the other is the enacted application: but "there can be no true understanding without lived obedience, and vice versa."

The Gospels and Christian Ethics

The remainder of this chapter will take up what Hays calls the descriptive task, and will seek to outline the variety and breadth of New Testament ethics, beginning with the Gospels.

1. *Matthew.* For Matthew, Jesus is primarily a teacher. The key figure whom Jesus fulfills is Moses. Matthew's Gospel is made up of five substantial teaching discourses interspersed by significant actions – rather as the Torah is made up of five books. Jesus fulfills the Law of Moses – he calls for his disciples not just to be holy, but to be perfect: not just to love Israelites but to love enemies, not just to avoid divorce but to avoid lust, not just to avoid murder but to avoid malicious anger. Jesus' teaching inspires awe (Matt 7:27); but it is not an explicit list of rules. Whereas the focal point of Moses' teaching is the Ten Commandments, the epitome of Jesus' teaching is the Beatitudes (5:3–12). "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" is allusive, profound, but far from specific teaching. In some ways Matthew's Gospel maintains a tension between the call to perfection and the call to compassion; but the overwhelming emphasis is that Jesus' compassion is his perfection. Twice Matthew quotes Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice," and constantly Jesus interprets this to mean the inclusion of sinners and a generosity in seeing mercy as the true heart of the Law.

   Instead of explicit rules, Matthew's Gospel offers a handbook for an aspiring community of disciples. Their common life of discipline and mercy is guaranteed by the promise that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am

there among them." The paradigmatic parable is the final teaching before the passion narrative begins (25:31–46): the true community finds in retrospect that it has ministered to Jesus in the face of the hungry, the sick, and the prisoner. It did not realize it was ministering to Jesus: it was concentrating more (if it was following the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5–7, and other similar passages) on putting aside violence, hypocrisy, anxiety over material possessions, as well as anger, lust, and pride, and on taking on the love of enemies, a readiness to forgive, and generosity in supporting those in need. Jesus' final parable is told in the context of final judgment. Matthew's Gospel is poised between the certainty of Jesus' return and its perhaps somewhat unexpected delay: thus Jesus counsels his disciples not just to be ready for the coming king but also to act justly and mercifully to foster faithful community in the meantime. Matthew is sustained by the presence of Jesus in the church – from the announcement in Joseph's dream that Jesus' coming means "God is with us" (1:23) to the final assurance from the ascending Lord that "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20).

2. *Mark*. Mark has almost none of Matthew's extensive teaching material. Mark's story is, in fact, three interwoven stories. First of all, there is Jesus' creation of a new community, based around the messianic hopes of his preaching. He calls around him twelve disciples and commissions them to spread the fire of his kingdom. The disciples falter and stumble, out of fear of the cross, lack of imagination, and cold betrayal. But in Mark's account of the resurrection there is promise of a restored community in Galilee. The second story is Jesus' mission to the crowd, the teeming mass of poor and oppressed whom Mark mentions 38 times in his Gospel. This is a ministry of healing, exorcism, and liberation, through story, announcement, and gesture. On Palm Sunday the crowd seem to have taken up the cause of liberation, but by Good Friday they have chosen the terrorist Barabbas instead. The third interwoven story is Jesus' confrontation with the powers that held Israel in a stranglehold. One by one Jesus takes on the Pharisees, the scribes, the Herodians, and the Sadducees. He dismantles their authority and challenges their control, but eventually the veil of pretense is pulled aside and behind emerges the real power in Israel, the power that toys with all other powers – the iron fist of Rome. It is the nails and wood of Roman execution that finally destroy Jesus – only for him to dismantle even Rome's control over life and death.

These three stories, of disciples, crowd, and authorities, are interwoven in Mark's Gospel like three strands in a rope. Each finds its climax in the account of Jesus' passion. The three stories in the end comprise one story. And that story is the sending of Jesus by the Father, crystallized in the Father's words at Jesus' baptism, "You are my beloved son" (1:11), epitomized in the Father's words at the Transfiguration, "This is my beloved son" (9:7), and climaxing in the centurion's words at the cross, "Truly this man was God's son!" (15:39). There is almost no mention of love in Mark's Gospel. Jesus' intimacy with the disciples, his mission to the crowd, and his confrontation with the authorities

are drawn together not in an abstract ideal but in a concrete command to follow – to the cross.

3. *Luke (and Acts, which was written by the same author, and forms a continuous narrative with the Gospel of Luke).* The Holy Spirit is a much more significant part of Luke's story than of Matthew's or Mark's. Jesus is blessed by the Spirit in baptism, led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor. Whereas Matthew's notion of prophecy is to predict the Messiah's coming, Luke's understanding of prophecy is to call for justice. Jesus' final words are "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46). The Acts of the Apostles portrays the Spirit as making Jesus present in the church. This is a sign of the "last times" as the events of Pentecost display. The Spirit is not just for the apostles but for all whom God calls. Those called become prophets, establishing communities of repentance, forgiveness, liberation, and justice. Their reward is to imitate Jesus: Peter does so in healing Dorcas as Jesus healed Jairus' daughter; Stephen does so in facing martyrdom; and Paul does so in going up to Jerusalem to be arrested. In the power of the Spirit, believers can do all things.

   The church, proclaimed in Luke and practiced in Acts, is at the center of Luke's ethics in a number of ways. As N. T. Wright (b. 1948) has insisted, Jesus' ministry of gathering in outcasts, sinners, and strays is a depiction of the renewed Israel, ending 500 years of exile stretching back to the destruction of Jerusalem six centuries before. This is the bold expectation set up by the birth narratives and by John the Baptist's preaching. And in the early chapters of Acts there are two descriptions of how the new community fulfills the covenant ordinances of Deuteronomy 15 ("there will be no need among you … open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be"). Luke's blessings and woes are specifically oriented to wealth and poverty in a way that Matthew's beatitudes are not. And Luke's sense of judgment on the hard-hearted wealthy who refuse to enter this new covenant community is epitomized in the parable of the rich man who is tortured on account of his neglect of the poor Lazarus at his gate. Zacchaeus offers a suitable contrast by distributing his tax-farmed earnings. But there is another dimension to the church: a society that stands as a rival to the empire, with its own king. On the surface the church appears respectful and courteous to its Roman governors; but in one city after another its quiet discipleship and subversive worship make the community ungovernable. The world is being turned upside down: one reversal follows another, from the upholding of the lowly Mary to the reappearance of the crucified Lord. The empire surely will be next.

4. *John.* The fourth Gospel has a mystical quality that sets it apart from the first three Synoptic Gospels. Jesus was with the Father in glory before the creation of the world. He is not *of* this world. And yet, decisively, the pre-existent word became flesh. He is *in* this world. John's Gospel has a different sense of time

from the other Gospels: judgment does not lie ahead, in the return of Jesus – it has already come, in the arrival of the light in the world, which shows up deeds of darkness. Eternal life has already begun for believers: those who live and believe will never die.

The Gospel repeatedly dwells on the identity of Jesus, particularly in the frequent "I am" sayings and the intimacy between Jesus and the Father. The heavenliness of Jesus is constantly in tension with his earthly surroundings throughout the Gospel. Sometimes it seems Jesus is simply supernatural: he performs telling signs and disappears from dangerous situations, and he paints a vivid contrast between the life of those who abide in him and those who are of the "world." At other times he appears very human, weeping over the death of a close friend, facing up to the dirt of his disciples' feet, and asking for a drink.

John's Gospel has little specific ethical instruction. The central command is to love one another, but there is no implication that this love extends to those outside the believing community. This love, enacted in washing feet, is the principal way the world will recognize Jesus' disciples. Love may lead to laying down one's life for the community. Believers are strengthened by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the community, which leads them into all truth. It is widely supposed that John's Gospel and the epistles of John were composed in a Christian community made up largely of Jews who had recently been expelled from the synagogue. This would account for the heavy emphasis on the disciplines of mutual care and the antagonistic relationship between the beloved community and the "world." It also provides a background for the castigation of the "Jews," particularly the Jerusalem leaders who claim before Pilate that they have no king but the emperor.

The Ethics of Paul and his Followers

The letters that immediately follow the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament are attributed to Paul the Apostle. Much research and speculation have gone into identifying whether, for instance, Ephesians or 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus belong to the same corpus, given their differences in style, vocabulary, and argument from the other letters. More important for our purposes is the significance of these letters for Christian ethics. We shall look in turn at their style, their theological emphases, and their ethical method.

The letters cannot be described as either a systematic theological treatise or a thorough ethical exposition. Instead they respond to crises in the early churches, discussing local problems in such a way as to bring together saving revelation with practical wisdom. Most representative perhaps is 1 Corinthians, sometimes known as the beginning of Christian ethics, where Paul proceeds through a sequence of pressing questions, including incest, lawsuits among believers, divorce, eating food previously sacrificed to idols, covering the head in worship, equal distribution of food at the Lord's Supper, and speaking in tongues. Paul engages with his readers in an intense and often deeply personal way, holding

himself up as an example for imitation but being honest about his trials and travails, often pleading with them to make personal and financial sacrifices or berating them for their foolishness. The parallel between Jesus' journey around the Holy Land to arrest in Jerusalem and Paul's own journey around the Mediterranean to captivity in Rome is not lost on Paul.

Paul's theological emphases can be outlined by describing where he perceives his readers to stand in relation to world history. In the (relatively recent) past lies the overwhelming event of Christ's cross; behind it lies the still very significant relationship of God to Israel. In the (perhaps near) future lies the completion of God's work begun in creation and fully expressed in Christ. In the present lies the church, a reality most fully emphasized and explored in Ephesians, but assumed throughout the Pauline letters. These three themes require closer examination.

1. *What God has done.* Unlike the Gospels, Paul's letters do not dwell on the historical circumstances surrounding Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. Instead, the cross is the definitive historical event without parallel. It has a number of meanings, of which perhaps three stand out. In the first place, the cross demonstrates that, however unfaithful his people may be, God is thoroughly true to his people even to the point of utmost agony. Nothing can therefore separate us from the love of God. Second, humanity's sin is not sufficient to overcome God's faithfulness: through his death on the cross, Christ atones for the sins of God's people and vindicates the righteousness of God. This is sometimes portrayed as a scene in a court of law, where Jesus shoulders the punishment due to God's people. The cross not only addresses past sin, but creates a new relationship between God and his people that makes it possible for even Gentiles to live according to the righteousness of God – a transition embodied in baptism. Hence Paul can say "I have been crucified with Christ: it is not I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." And third, the cross is a paradigmatic example of what it means to be dedicated to God. Christ's death not only demonstrates the life God requires of his people, it makes that life possible.

   This third dimension is perhaps the most significant for Paul's ethics. He consistently calls upon his readers to be obedient in the way Christ was obedient. The most vivid example of this appeal comes in Philippians 2, which describes how Christ made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, and humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross. Paul suggests that his readers follow a similar path of humility and self-offering, epitomized by the cross. He points out that this is exactly what he himself has done – for he renounced whatever claims he had as a Pharisee and a blameless law-keeper in order to place his destiny in "a righteousness from God based on faith." He goes on, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death" (Phil 3:10). He has no hesitation in asking his readers to imitate him – because he is imitating Christ.

2. *What God will do.* Paul describes himself and his readers as those "on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11). In other words, the church occupies the overlap between the "sufferings of this present time" in which the creation is in "bondage to decay" and "groaning in labor pains" (Rom 8:18, 21–2), and the coming "freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). Just as the sufferings of Christ came immediately before the wonder of his resurrection, so the hardships and trials of Paul and his readers presage the coming of the new creation.

   Paul steers a path between those who on the one hand hope in Christ "for this life only" (1 Cor 15:19) and those who on the other hand believe the new age is already in full swing (1 Cor 4:8). In one metaphor he describes the Holy Spirit as a "down payment," an instantiation of the new age, not a full realization of the new creation but a guarantee that it is coming (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5). Sometimes it seems the final eschatological revelation is wholly different from present circumstances and will come suddenly and overwhelmingly (1 Thess 4:16–17). In other places it seems the transformation is more gradual and incremental, and that it has already begun – indeed, today is the day (2 Cor 6:2).

   The new age comes about through *God's* initiative not human endeavor. Yet it is a transformation of *this* world not an escape to another. Its imminent coming *intensifies* the significance of faithful and sacrificial discipleship in this world – it does not negate it. Easy as it would be to imagine the hope of future glory disabling any commitment to godly living in this era, that is not the perspective of Paul. He stirs his readers to action that anticipates the final disclosure of God, and encourages his readers to withstand suffering that is preliminary to the coming of God.

3. *What God is doing.* Paul urges his readers to faithful living in imitation of Christ and in anticipation of his return. The essential environment for this new way of life is the church. The church is that community of people, filled with the Holy Spirit, alive with prayer, the use of spiritual gifts, and mutual upbuilding, which demonstrates the new unity between God and his people by embodying unity through reconciliation amongst its members.

   Perhaps most telling is Paul's discussion about speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14). He insists throughout that the Corinthians bear in mind what builds up the church. Gifts are not good in themselves – they are given that the whole church be edified. And why is the building up of the church so significant? Because the church has become the point of reconciliation between God and the world: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor 3:16). The "you" in each case is plural: this is a high claim for the corporate importance of reconciled Christian community. Such community is no less than the "body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:27). The key act that brings together Christ's death, the promise of his return, and the present life of the body of Christ, is baptism (Rom 6:3–11).

> Paul frequently talks about slavery. The transformation brought about by Christ's death and resurrection transfers the "ownership" of the Christian from sin to God. Those who were once slaves to sin now become slaves to righteousness. Meanwhile membership of the body of Christ is a similar endeavor – Paul tells the Galatians that they must use their freedom in Christ to become "slaves to one another" (Gal 5:13). Christian obedience fundamentally means imitating the definitive obedience of Christ in sacrificial obedience to one another in community. Theology and ethics are inseparable.
>
> The letter to the Ephesians is the high water mark of the New Testament understanding of the church. Christ's death has inaugurated a new humanity: the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been demolished, and the church embodies the reconciled destiny of the entire cosmos with God. Understanding its heritage, receiving gifts, and living a redeemed life synthesize to achieve one goal: equipping the saints for ministry, "for the building up of the body of Christ, until all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph 4:12).

So the church lies between the dying of the old era, identified in the cross, and the rising of the new era, anticipated in Jesus' resurrection and to be fulfilled in the coming eschaton. One feature of the Pauline letters that seems to fit less comfortably within this scheme is the lists of instructions that resemble Hellenic morality of the day, including the so-called *Haustafeln* or household codes. These occur in Eph 5:21–6:9, Col 3:18–4:1, Titus 2:1–10, and also later in the New Testament in 1 Pet 2:18–3:7. Other passages similarly incorporate contemporary moral expectations into spiritual instruction, for example the counsel on the conduct of an overseer (1 Tim 3:4–5), or appear to have negative messages for the role of women in the church (1 Cor 14:34–5). Such passages have been seen as troubling because they appear to harness New Testament ethics to a particular set of conditioned social norms. Such norms, while facilitating the life of the emerging first-century church, may not be fully appropriate either to the transformation brought by Christ or to the somewhat different social context of the twenty-first-century church.

These passages have evoked huge debate in the history of the church, especially in recent times. Some have seen them as grounds to exert far-reaching patriarchal control over the domestic and sometimes political sphere; others have viewed their apparent social conservatism as grounds for seeing the New Testament as irredeemably time-bound and thus for questioning its value for ethics; others again have sought through close textual analysis to establish whether some such passages (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34–5) were interpolations by a later author, or whether certain words might be translated differently from the way they traditionally have been; others again have pointed out that many of these passages (e.g., Eph 5:21–33) are deeply theological and have a profound understanding of human interdependence unknown in the Hellenic culture amidst which they were written.

The Diversity of New Testament Ethics

Besides the four Gospels and Acts and the letters from Paul and his followers, the New Testament canon includes a number of other books, each of which has a bearing on the ethics of the New Testament.

The book known as Hebrews is notoriously not by Paul, quite possibly not written to the Hebrews, and does not take the form of a letter. Hebrews asserts that the new covenant inaugurated by Christ fulfills and surpasses the old covenant given to Moses. Christ is the great high priest whose tradition stretches back to but surpasses Melchizedek. Hebrews enjoins hospitality to strangers, solidarity with those suffering, the sharing of resources, and obedience to leaders: but its emphasis is primarily on the inadequacy of the sacrifices made in the Jerusalem Temple, and on the sufficiency of the sacrifice made by Christ the great high priest.

The letter of James is rooted in Jewish piety, with counsel concerning prayer, particularly with the sick and those experiencing hardship, the life of Christians in community, and the need for control of the tongue and for humility in the face of God. One could see James lying in continuity with the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament: there is no explicit sign of its reasoning being shaped by the unique event of Jesus Christ. One noticeable feature is the explicit warnings against wealth, pleas for justice, and commendation of charity towards the poor.

First Peter is very different from James. It explicitly grounds a wide-ranging vision of faithful Christian discipleship in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. It has an important role for the church, which offers to an often hostile world a model of hope, generous social action, and integrity in spite of suffering. The church inherits the distinctive vocation of Israel to be holy, as God is holy. At the heart of the letter lie these words: "Even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. … Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (3:14–15). Second Peter and Jude are more concerned with internal dissent and false teaching than with withstanding threats from outside the church.

Perhaps the most controversial book in the whole canon is Revelation. Full of vivid symbolism and significant numbers (such as seven and twelve), Revelation is apocalyptic literature, which operates on the imagination like a cosmic parable. It is deeply concerned with the nature of current suffering and the promise that God will intervene to vindicate the saints. It claims that this climax of history will come soon. This world is in the hands of the enemy, and God will simply overturn the status quo by remaking reality – finally bringing a new heaven and a new earth. There is a stark and uncompromising contrast between good and evil, light and darkness, God and Satan, church and world. The argument addresses those facing persecution for their faith at the hands of the Roman Empire, and to shake those who are comfortable or affluent into facing the realities of their faith. There is no trace of engagement with – let alone compassion towards or love for – the enemy. Yet at the center of the book stands Jesus, described 28 times as the "lamb who was slain." There is much mention of war, and the expectation is that

the saints will face martyrdom, confident that the victory of the lamb will become theirs. Revelation abounds with songs, but those songs perhaps sound somewhat different depending on the social context of those hearing them.

Summary

In this chapter we have met the following key themes. First, the Old Testament is made up of Law, Prophets, and Writings. Some have seen it as less authoritative than the New Testament, others have seen it as equally authoritative, while many have seen the two testaments in a creative tension.

Second, the Gospels tell of the incarnation and birth, ministry and teaching, passion and death, and resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Those who draw on Jesus for their notion of ethics tend to focus on one of these four dimensions of who Jesus is. We have seen that there is a significant distinction between those who see Jesus (or the Bible in general) as *illustrative* of values that can be discovered through other sources, or as *normative*, that is, a unique display of information and example that is not available elsewhere and is ultimately without comparison to other sources of knowledge.

Third, the New Testament contains a significant diversity of viewpoints and perspectives. To hold to the "authority of scripture" is not to be able to read off an answer for every issue one faces; it is to regard the conversation already taking place within the pages of scripture as decisively shaping the conversation that continues around themes that subsequently arise.

References and Further Reading

In reference to the life of Jesus and illustrative ethics, Reinhold Niebuhr's key work is *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996).

Cited just below Niebuhr as an example of the way Jesus is normative for ethics is material drawn from chapters 1, 5, 7, and 12 of John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972, 1994).

The heart of Rudolf Bultmann's ethics may be found in his influential work *Theology of the New Testament* (Kendrick Grobel, trans.; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

Oliver O'Donovan's exploration of the significance of the resurrection is found in *Resurrection and Moral Order* (2nd ed.; Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994). Specific quotations are from pages 13, 15, and 57.

The fourfold typology for New Testament ethics listed above is distilled from Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), particularly pages 1–11. This work is a masterly analysis, but is perhaps not the place to begin for a basic introduction.

N. T. Wright's theology of the church is best found in *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of his multi-volume work *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992–).

Helpful introductory texts to the place of the Bible in Christian ethics include:

- John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and M. Daniel Carroll R. *The Bible in Ethics*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.
- Thomas W. Ogletree. *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics: A Constructive Essay*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.
- J. I. H. McDonald. *Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Bruce C. Birch and Larry Rasmussen. *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989.

Works that treat ethics in the Old Testament include:

- John Barton. *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. London: SCM Press, 2003.
- Bruce C. Birch. *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.
- Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward Old Testament Ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983.
- Christopher Wright. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

A basic introduction to NT ethics is Frank Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996). Some more advanced treatments, beside that of Richard Hays, include:

- Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, eds. *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*. Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1984.
- Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones. *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Brian Brock. *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Allen Verhey. *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984.
- Brian K. Blount. *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001.

Selections from the following works are quoted in the corresponding chapter of *Christian Ethics: An Introductory Reader*.

- Tertullian. *Adversus Marcionem*. Ed. Ernest Evans. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972. Accessed at www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_marc/evans_marc_00index.htm.
- Karl Barth. "Israel and the Church." *Church Dogmatics*. Volume 2, Part 2. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1949.
- John Howard Yoder. *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972.
- Oliver O'Donovan. *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. (Reprinted 2002.) Pages 21–9.
- *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2 vols. Ed. John T. McNeill. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. The Library of Christian Classics 20. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960. Excerpt from Vol. 1, Books II–III. Also available online at www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/books/institutes/.
- Stanley Hauerwas. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Cost of Discipleship*. London: SCM Press, 2001, 2004. Available online at www.crossroad.to/Persecution/Bonhoffer.html.