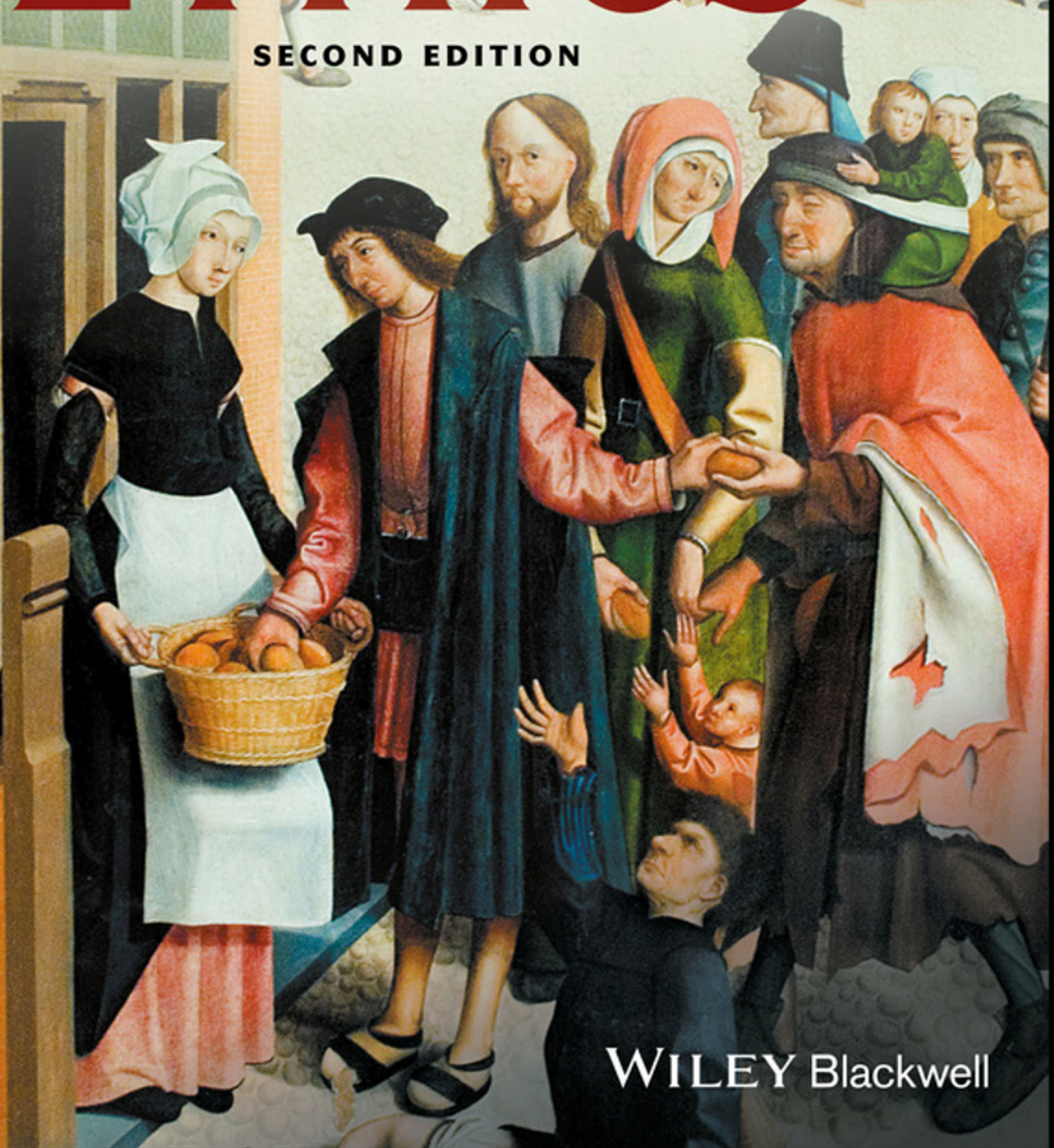


SAMUEL WELLS AND BEN QUASH WITH REBEKAH EKLUND

# INTRODUCING CHRISTIAN ETHICS

SECOND EDITION



WILEY Blackwell



## INTRODUCING CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Now in its second edition, *Introducing Christian Ethics* offers a comprehensive and engaging introduction to the field suitable for beginners as well as more advanced readers. The field is divided into three distinct approaches: universal (ethics for anyone), subversive (ethics for the excluded), and ecclesial (ethics for the church). These three approaches present a fresh understanding of the field of Christian ethics, whilst providing a structure for thoughtful insights into the complex moral challenges facing people today. The text encompasses the field of Christian ethics in its entirety, surveying its history, and mapping and exploring the differences in all the major ethical approaches.

This new edition has been thoughtfully updated. It includes additional material on Catholic perspectives, ethics and social media, further case studies and a stronger pedagogical structure, including introductions and summaries. As well as discussing ethical issues and key thinkers, *Introducing Christian Ethics 2/e* provides a significant foundation for students by setting them in a framework that explores scripture, philosophy and church history. The text is structured so that it can be used alongside a companion volume, *Christian Ethics: An Introductory Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), which further illustrates and amplifies the diversity of material and arguments explored here.

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# Preface

This is a textbook for entry-level students in Christian ethics. It is designed for undergraduates and seminarians, in some cases pre-college students, and the elusive but much-coveted general reader. It is intended to be used in lay ministry courses, and a variety of educational and training courses, at diploma and informal levels. It sets out to do a number of things that are seldom done together.

It seeks to offer an overview of the whole field of Christian ethics. Some treatments offer a sequence of great authors in the history of the discipline. Others try to provide a taxonomy or typology or simply a list of the sometimes bewilderingly diverse and complex assortment of theories quoted and employed in the discourse. Others again work their way through a grab-bag of controversial issues and endeavor to present both balance and wisdom. This book has the temerity to attempt all three. Like any mapping exercise, it cannot pretend to be wholly objective; the classification and selection of issues examined, approaches explored, and authors extracted will be insightful and constructive to some, arbitrary and partial to others. Nonetheless we hope that, for those many who may disagree on some of the details, many more will enjoy and embrace the overall organization and presentation of the field.

The book rests on a broad division of Christian ethics into three approaches: universal (ethics for anyone), subversive (ethics for the excluded), and ecclesial (ethics for the church). It needs to be said that this distinction is not by any means generally accepted and adopted in the field, being simply the usage of one of the authors of this volume. This book may therefore be read as an extended road-test for the durability and comprehensiveness of this threefold distinction. But newcomers to the field who expect all subsequent interlocutors to recognize these approaches are likely to be disappointed.

The threefold distinction is designed to achieve a number of things. It is a tool for getting a handle on a huge subject, treating protagonists sympathetically but not uncritically. It is a means of distinguishing between the loudest voices in the

field today, and the audiences and interests they perceive themselves as addressing. It is a way of showing unlikely correspondences between approaches that are sometimes perceived as opposites or antagonists. It is intended to balance description and critique, construction and analysis. It is not designed as a reductionist, watertight theory that diminishes the diversity and vitality of conversation across the discipline. There are many overlaps and anomalies in the field, as becomes clear in the last section of the book.

Not only does the book set out to discuss both approaches and issues (sometimes known respectively as theoretical and applied ethics), it is structured so as to bring the respective theories to bear on each issue. Once the threefold distinction of universal, subversive, and ecclesial approaches has been set out in the second part of the book, the third part examines fifteen pressing and abiding issues under each of these three headings. This not only amplifies the respective issues, it tests the respective approaches. The first part of the book may be read, among other things, as a long explanation of why the categories of universal, subversive, and ecclesial do not apply in anything like the same way before the era of Western modernity beginning around the early eighteenth century or even later. The birth of the discipline of Christian ethics as currently understood, and the plausibility of using these three categories, broadly coincide. They are both deeply related to the way ethics came to be pursued primarily in universities and only secondarily (and derivatively) in churches.

In addition to the three conventional kinds of introductions to Christian ethics cited earlier, a fourth kind presents a series of excerpts from significant works or on salient issues in the field, either in contemporary voice or across the historical tradition. Not content simply to synthesize the three earlier kinds of introductions, this project attempts this fourth kind as well. A sister volume to this one, *Christian Ethics: An Introductory Reader*, adopts exactly the same structure (not just in chapter titles but also in subheadings) and seeks to illustrate, amplify, and develop the diversity of material, voices, and arguments explored in this book. Thus, the companion volume deals with the tradition, the variety of approaches, and the range of issues, just as much as the textbook does. As far as we are aware, the bringing together of all four of these kinds of introductions to the field is unique to this project. The two volumes are carefully designed so that, while complementary and supplementary to one another, each can serve alone as an introduction to the subject, depending on the needs, opportunities, wishes, and budget of the student and teacher.

Any book that quotes ancient texts in English translation faces the difficulty of older conventions that used masculine pronouns for God and referred to people in general as men. We have decided to retain the original quotations without alteration, even where we might today have written “humanity” instead of “man.” All Scripture quotations are New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

It may be asked whether the authors have a particular agenda in setting this project before the academy and reading public, beyond the customary humble disclaimers of hoping to be of some service and participating in the honored process of education and formation in Christian ethics. There is no doubt we have a close interest in the strand of ethics we are calling ecclesial. Some proponents of this strand have been associated with abrasive, not to say dismissive, regard for the other two strands as we are presenting them. But ecclesial ethics is not a monochrome approach, in style or in content, any more than subversive and universal ethics are. Thus aside from simply offering an accessible introduction to the field, part of the purpose of this book is to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that ecclesial ethics, when not in the mode of polemical stridency, is deeply respectful of, open to lively conversation with, and indeed profoundly indebted to, other approaches to ethics, and on many issues shares evaluations and commitments that resonate with subversive and/or universal approaches. It is not necessary to adopt the assumptions of ecclesial ethics to seek here an introduction to the dynamics and prospects of Christian ethics as a whole.

This book arises and derives from a number of friendships and collaborations. Most obviously, it has been shaped by a friendship between the two initial authors, Ben Quash and Sam Wells. We have collaborated on various projects in the past, academically and pastorally, with happy results; we have found our respective research interests complementary and stimulating, but most of all we simply enjoy one another's company, in laughter and in grief. It is a change of style, for each of us, to write a book together, but we hope it is no less a book for having two authors rather than one.

For the second edition, we have been joined by Rebekah Eklund, a third partner in scholarship, dialogue, enquiry, and friendship, and the joy of collaborating has been only increased by the greater wisdom and breadth of insight that a third heart, and mind, and soul, has brought. Among other improvements, the second edition includes a general introduction addressed to the reader, offers revised introductions to each of the three parts of the book, gives greater attention to Catholic and Orthodox ethics, revises and expands the section on the ethics of race to include more recent thinkers, and updates the section on media to incorporate the rapidly changing field of social media.

We have all been greatly enriched by the encouragement, imagination, and wit of Rebecca Harkin, whose vision for this project and depth of understanding of the issues and questions involved makes her a remarkable editor and publisher, and a rewarding creative partner. We are grateful to many wise colleagues, notably Hans Hillerbrand, Michael Goldman, Ebrahim Moosa, Kishor Trivedi, James Ong, Ellen Davis, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, John Kiess, and Fritz Bauerschmidt for guidance in waters where our judgments were unsteady. Jo Wells and Susannah Ticciati, among others, have offered perception in times of clarity and companionship in times of mystery.

Christian ethics is done in the communion of saints, and in this context Christians learn that they have living relationships with Christians past and future, departed and yet to come. The obligations and the joys traced by ethics bind the generations, and in this bond the memory of what has been takes the form of praise, and the anticipation of what will be is called hope. Rejoicing in this communion that binds the generations, and full of hope, we dedicate this book to two nieces and a nephew who make our lives richer, deeper, and truer.

Samuel Wells  
Ben Quash  
Rebekah Eklund



# Introduction

We've written this book to give a student who is new to Christian ethics the ability to address issues and methods in the field in an informed and confident way.

To do that we believe a student needs three things:

1. a sense of what Christian ethics is, what its sources are, and how it has been practiced;
2. a framework for distinguishing between different styles of argument; and
3. discussion of the major topics that Christian ethics most frequently addresses, and an opportunity to apply the framework through exploring those topics.

These three elements constitute the three parts of the book.

The first part explores the four intertwining “stories” that contribute to the rich and complex story of Christian ethics today: the story of God as found in Christian Scripture; the story of the church from its origins in the first century through the present day; the stories of ethics in contexts outside Christianity, including in classical philosophy, in other religious traditions, and in present-day professional settings; and the historical development of Christian ethics as traced through its most influential figures.

In the second part of the book, we suggest that there are three major approaches to Christian ethics: universal, subversive, and ecclesial. (These terms, and the threefold division itself, are distinctive to this book and are not often found elsewhere in the field of Christian ethics.) The three chapters of Part Two describe in greater detail the origin and shape of these three major branches of Christian ethics. The first, universal ethics, assumes that ethics is for everybody. If it applies to one, it applies to all. Many of the conventional approaches to ethics fall into this category: deontological, consequentialist, natural law, and so on.

The second approach challenges this universal assumption by considering the role of social location in ethics, asking who is excluded from this so-called “everybody,” and focusing particular attention on questions of gender, race, and class. The branch of ethics we are describing as subversive is sometimes described as liberationist, since it is committed to the liberation of the oppressed and the empowerment of the voiceless or the dominated.

The third approach is a retrieval of the language of virtue, most associated with the classical Greek philosopher Aristotle, and also adopted in the thirteenth century by the Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas. It assumes that the primary context of Christian ethics is the church (the word “ecclesial” derives from the Greek word for church). It focuses on the shaping of character rather than on the moment of decision. Ecclesial ethics places Christian ethics into conversation with the church’s specific theological commitments and practices, including the creeds and the sacraments.

This three-part structure is intended to be illuminating and not restrictive. We believe that it offers a useful way to identify different tendencies and methods within the broad field of Christian ethics, but it does not imply that we think individual thinkers often or always fit neatly into only one category. Instead, our hope is that the reader of this book will be trained to discern the methodological underpinnings of the texts and authors with whom they interact. Thus, one might come to read a document such as a papal encyclical, a university honor code, or a newspaper editorial and recognize a mix of methods and commitments in that one document. We have a particular interest in making more widely known the claims and possibilities of ecclesial ethics, but in general we seek to present each approach as clearly and charitably as possible.

The final part devotes five chapters to exploring the key issues and challenges addressed by Christian ethics. Here we meet a conventional list of ethical trouble-spots (abortion, euthanasia, war) as well as more general questions (the role of the state, environmental crises). In each chapter, we explore how the three “branches” of Christian ethics might typically approach these central ethical questions.

To avoid cluttering the text with footnotes or references, we have included the sources used in each chapter at the end of the chapter, alongside suggestions for further reading. Links to online documents are included where they are available. A selection of primary texts paired with each chapter is also available in the companion volume *Christian Ethics: An Introductory Reader*.

People often begin the study of Christian ethics hoping to find the right answers. Our approach focuses more on asking the right questions. Sometimes there are no easy answers: if there were, perhaps we would not need the church, a company of pilgrims with whom to share in discernment and practice. We have shared innumerable good disagreements in writing this book together, from which we have, we trust, become wiser and more humble. We hope the reading of the book will be as rewarding as the writing has been.



# Part One

## The Story of Christian Ethics

Christian ethics has three key sources: the written word of Scripture, the prayer and practice of the church, and the distilled wisdom and experience of the ages.

The document that shapes the identity of Christianity is the Bible, and it is impossible to begin studying Christian ethics without an understanding of the nature and content of the Scriptures and their role in the discipline. Thus, our first chapter begins with a consideration of Scripture and the nature of its authority and place in Christian ethics. It then considers the Bible in three parts – the People of God (the Old Testament), God in Person (the four gospels), and Following Jesus (the remainder of the New Testament).

The New Testament was written by the early church, and it was likewise the early church that determined the shape of the Bible as a whole. Christian ethics does not primarily refer to a sequence of significant authors or a collection of influential texts: instead it concerns a historical series of attempts to embody the instructions of Scripture, the good news of Jesus, and the example of his first followers. This historical series of attempts is called the church. Our second chapter therefore develops the story of Christian ethics by exploring the history of the church, again in three eras – Minority Status (the era before Christianity became the norm in the Mediterranean world), Christendom (the era when Christianity was the norm, while the Mediterranean world expanded its influence across the globe), and the Church in Modernity (the era when Christianity had ceased to be the norm, at least in the Western world).

Before Christians began to try to translate the heritage of Israel and Jesus into the habits and norms of personal and communal life, there had already long been a tradition, stretching back to ancient Greece, of reflecting on how human beings should live. Christian ethics has always been developed in relation to a conversation about what a person should do, and who a person should be, that went beyond the culture of the church. In fact it is only in relation to such conversation partners that the discipline of “Christian ethics” emerges at all. Christian ethics becomes the place where

the heritage of Israel and Jesus, the practice and expectations of the church, and the disciplines and vocabulary of philosophical ethics, all meet. Hence our third chapter considers the emergence of “ethics” as a discipline in several key “non-Christian” contexts: in classical philosophy, in other religions, and in particular professional contexts.

Finally, these three strands – Scripture, history, and philosophy – come together to form the contemporary discipline of Christian ethics. Yet this discipline itself tends to trace its lineage less to the stories told in the first three chapters, and more to a story that emerges in relation to all three: that is, the sequence of great authors whose works form the canon of writings in this field. This fourth story is not so much the story of Christian ethics as a history of Christian ethicists. Many, perhaps most, of these figures did not explicitly think of themselves as ethicists (as distinct from theologians or philosophers), but it is in their tradition that most of those publishing work in the field of Christian ethics believe themselves to stand, as will become clear in the second and third parts of this volume.

# Chapter One

## The Story of God

Christians sometimes talk as if the Bible has all the answers to life's questions and problems. But a thorough reading of the Bible reveals various complexities. There are some ethical issues that the Bible does not specifically address. There are others where either the Bible seems to offer instruction (such as stoning wrongdoers) that is unpalatable to the contemporary world, or where the Scriptures seem to hold a worldview (such as ancient cosmology) that has since been largely abandoned. Finally, there are other issues where different verses or injunctions or stories seem to offer contradictory counsel.

For example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in the American South, both abolitionists and slaveholders appealed to Christian Scripture to support their respective positions. According to the latter, Scripture clearly upholds the right of masters to own and discipline slaves; for the former, the Bible's trajectory of liberation and love categorically rules out any person owning another human being. The Bible continues to be invoked as a witness on both sides of many ethical debates, including same-sex marriage and war. What's seldom in question is the centrality of Scripture to Christian ethics; what's more complex is how that relationship plays out in practice.

The question of the relationship between Scripture and ethics necessarily involves one's understanding of what Scripture is in the first place. Christians, in fact, do not completely agree on what constitutes sacred Scripture. Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican Christians include slightly different versions of the collection of books known as the Apocrypha in their Old Testament canons, whereas Protestant Bibles exclude the Apocrypha altogether. And then there is the nature of the text. Is the Bible a prescriptive code of conduct, a rulebook, a source of moral law? Is it a window into the heart of God, or a conduit through which the Holy Spirit shapes the moral imagination? Does it provide

patterns for emulation or a clarion call to mend our ways? Is it a love song designed to woo humanity closer to God or a dash of icewater meant to awaken a sleepy conscience?

When it comes to describing the place of Scripture in Christian ethics, therefore, challenges abound; we will describe two of the most pressing here.

1. *Historical and cultural distance.* Reading the Bible is sometimes described as reading someone else's mail: these texts were written to and for other people in other times and places, often radically different from ours. The Bible does not explicitly address pressing contemporary issues like stem cell research or climate change. "The world of Leviticus is not the world of I Corinthians, and neither of these is our world" (Joel Green).
2. *The multivocality of Scripture.* While it is commonplace to talk about the Bible as if it were one book, it is instead a collection of books written by multiple authors and compiled by various editors over the course of thousands of years. It encompasses a wide variety of genres, some of which relate less obviously to ethics: in what sense is a poetic text an ethical one? Thus, describing the ethics contained within Scripture is itself fraught with tensions. New Testament scholar Richard Hays notes that careful, critical exegesis only heightens the problem by sharpening "our awareness of the ideological diversity within Scripture and of our historical distances from the original communities." He cites Oliver O'Donovan, who writes, wryly, "interpreters who think that 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 they only flap their arms hard enough."

And yet Christian ethics generally operates under the conviction that the ancient texts of Scripture nonetheless have enduring relevance and even binding authority over the lives of Christians in the present. (Some exceptions to this rule are taken up in Chapter Six.) But in what way are these texts authoritative? That is, where does authority reside when it comes to applying the Bible to ethical matters? There are three primary options.

- Authority resides in the events *behind* the text of Scripture. That is, authority resides in God and in God's creating, saving, and liberating actions as narrated by the biblical books. For some, this has meant seeking to recreate as closely as possible the worlds and events described by the text, or to insist on the historicity of every event in the text (thus leading to long, heated battles over the historical character of the creation or the great flood in Genesis). For others, it has meant noting, more pragmatically, that Scripture is the best (or only) witness that we have to the Triune God. This leads to the next view.
- Authority is inherent *within* the text itself, a position often associated with belief in the inspiration of Scripture. In this view, the Holy Spirit inspired each author (and perhaps editor) of the sacred books, and therefore the recorded

words themselves are holy. In this sense the text has a kind of derivative authority, since its authority comes from its divine author; but critics worry that this position makes the Bible itself a focus of worship, rather than a book that directs people to the worship of God.

A subset of this view focuses on the “final form” of the biblical books as we now have them, rather than on a reconstruction of the “original” text or the events described by the text, as the proper object of study. This approach is sometimes known as canonical criticism, which is a method that seeks to read all the books of the canon, Old and New Testaments, in relation to one another. Canonical reading reflects Augustine of Hippo’s (354–430 CE) principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. Thus, the four gospels are to be read not only alongside one another, but in the context of Israel’s story in the Old Testament and the early church’s story in the rest of the New Testament as well.

- A third view locates authority *in front of* the text – that is, in the reader and the reading community. This view sometimes draws on postmodern literary theory, which proposes that texts themselves have no meaning until they are read and interpreted. Related to this is the view that sacred texts have no authority apart from the communities that interpret and adhere to them. Thus, authority resides in various interpreting communities: for Roman Catholics, this means the magisterium, or the apostolic teaching authority exercised by the bishops and the Pope; for some Protestants, authority is located in the local pastor or the local congregation. The approach sometimes known as liberationist ethics – described in this book as subversive ethics – tends to locate authority rather in the daily experience of the common people, especially the oppressed (more on this in Chapter Six).

One recent subset of this third view proposes that authority lies finally not in the reading of the text but in its communal embodiment – i.e., in faithfully “performing” or living out the Scriptures as members of a worshipping community. (This position is closely associated with ecclesial ethics, which will be taken up in Chapter Seven.)

Scripture also bears authority alongside what is typically called tradition, which includes summaries of Christian beliefs like the Nicene Creed and the ongoing teaching authority of the apostolic church. For Orthodox and Catholic Christians, Scripture itself is often viewed as an element of the church’s tradition and therefore not finally distinguishable from a separate body of writings called “tradition.” For example, in the Catholic Church, Scripture and tradition “flow from the same divine well-spring” and as such they both preserve and transmit the Word of God. For this reason Scripture and tradition are “accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence” (*Dei Verbum*). By contrast Anglicanism is associated with reading Scripture in creative tension with tradition and reason.

While most Protestants adhere to some version of the Reformation principle *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), almost every Protestant group uses written traditions such as the Augsburg Confession (the central statement of faith for the

Lutheran tradition), or unwritten traditions such as the perspicuity of Scripture (the idea that Scripture has a single, plain meaning), as important but less authoritative guides to interpreting Scripture. In practice any view that looks to Scripture for moral guidance must decide how to adjudicate differences in the interpretation of that Scripture – for example, when the slaveholder and abolitionist both appeal to the biblical text.

The diversity of the biblical material in relation to ethics can be a significant challenge. Yet it can also enliven the ethical imagination, if this diversity is taken as a gift rather than a problem – as a prompt to creative faithfulness in new situations. This depends on discerning an underlying unity threading through the complexity of the scriptural texts – a coherent story about God. We now turn to a brief account of that story, in all its diversity.

## 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 Abraham's great-grandson 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 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 the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king. Saul was followed by David, and David by Solomon, during a period that marked the zenith of Israel's 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, the empire known in the Old Testament as Babylon, around 300 years after Solomon (586 BCE). 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 – a future that 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 thirty-nine 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. 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. 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 sixty-six books, including thirty-nine 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 often 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. Perhaps the theologian most associated with this view is 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 earthly 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.
  - 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 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; the Ten Commandments remain in place. 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. *Creative 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 (*hesed*), faithfulness (*emunah*), justice (*mishpat*), and compassion (*rah-mim*) – 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, while still acknowledging the genuine newness of Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection.

### 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 God 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 there has been increasing focus on the fact that, despite the idiosyncrasies of the Old Testament and the diversity of its 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 explored 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. Instead, Jesus is seen as the true King of Israel and the fulfillment of God's covenant with David. 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.

Other ethical lenses could also be highlighted – for example, the overarching themes of creation (thus focusing on God's sovereignty over and care for all nations) and covenant (thus tracing the mutual obligations of God and Israel in their covenant relationship). Some ethical thinkers approach the text more critically, noting that the Old Testament poses a particular set of challenges for Christian ethics regarding violence, broadly conceived. First is the apparent sanctioning of violence by certain Old Testament texts, including the narratives

that describe the conquest of Canaan (the “Promised Land”) by the Israelites. Similarly, Christians have debated whether and under what conditions they ought to pray the imprecatory psalms, or the psalms that curse and wish violent retribution upon the enemy, in light of Christ’s commands to love and bless the enemy and the persecutor. Finally, and most specifically, feminist scholars like Phyllis Trible (b. 1932) point to the “texts of terror” in the Old Testament that describe violence against women – such as the rape of Dinah or the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. All these cases highlight further the apparent tensions between the two testaments. (The question of violence is discussed in relation to ecclesial ethics in Chapter Seven and in relation to war in Chapter Eight.)

## 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 by modern standards. 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, minus a brief period of independence after the successful Maccabean revolt (142–63 BCE). 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 group that later coalesced 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 about 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 armed struggle. His presence in Jerusalem at the Passover festival and his overturning of the merchants' tables in the temple 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 new creation 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 who 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 who 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.** "For He was made man so that we might be made God." So writes Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 293–373 CE), who represents the Eastern Orthodox view that in the incarnation God healed and restored sinful human nature by uniting with it, thus making humanity capable of taking on divine characteristics (a concept also known as *theosis* or divinization). Likewise, Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. 202 CE): "The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, ... did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself." For Orthodox ethics, the incarnation is the unique act by which God enables and invites people not only to be good but to take on the very likeness of God.

Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) presents another example of a normative approach to Christ's incarnation. For Barth, ethics deals fundamentally with the *command* of God – creator, reconciler, and redeemer. Jesus is the declaration that God expects complete obedience from God's 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 5–7). They appeal to summary passages such as his articulation of the greatest commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37–40) or his

words to the woman caught in adultery, “Has no one condemned you? ... Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (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 counter-cultural 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 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, 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 poles, 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 can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

- 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 to hoping naïvely 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 modern 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 rejected by Jesus were on the one hand that of establishment responsibility (the Sadducees), colluding with the Romans in the oppression of Israel, and on the other hand that of the crusade (the later Zealots), joining the struggle in taking up arms against the occupying power. Instead, Jesus took up the way of the cross.

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. We will discuss Yoder’s approach to ethics in more detail in Chapter Seven.

#### 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 New Testament and Christian Ethics

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.

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, allowed 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. The term "love," however, 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 (Matt 5:17–48). 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" (18:20). 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 in 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 thirty-eight 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, crowds, 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 Son, the Beloved" (1:11), epitomized in the Father's words at the transfiguration, "This is my Son, the Beloved" (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 the book of Acts, which 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. The gift of the Spirit 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 while forgiving his persecutors; 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, however, be no one in need among you ... open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be"). Luke's blessings and woes (6:20–26) 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 (16:19–31). Zacchaeus offers a suitable contrast by distributing his tax-farmed earnings (19:1–10). 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 exaltation 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 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.

John's 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 (19:15).

## The Ethics of Paul and his Followers

The thirteen 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 systematic theological treatises or thorough ethical expositions. 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 Israel may be, God is thoroughly true to Israel 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 Israel 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; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19–20). 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 the church, 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 “the 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 “first installment” or a downpayment, 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 humanity 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 building up the body of Christ, until all of us 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. Many modern scholars question the genuine Pauline authorship of all these letters (with the exception of 1 Corinthians), arguing that a later and more conservative author than Paul penned them. Others again have sought through close textual analysis to establish whether passages such as 1 Cor 14:34–5 were added later to the original letter, 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 the Letter to the 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, who now stands ready at the throne of grace to receive prayers and provide help in the time of need.

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 toward 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: “But even if you do 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.