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FOREWORD

In times of moral confusion, sensitive persons are tempted to denounce the perversity of their fellows. Some are tempted to nostalgia for bygone days; others, in despair, simply yield to hysteria. What the present unsettled age needs, however, is neither moralistic condemnation nor pious exhortation to the good. Rather, in the first instance, what is needed today is a clear vision of the good.

In many ways it was in a similar climate that the early Christian movement experienced rapid growth. Men like Justin, Tatian, and Tertullian indicate that the moral earnestness of Christians first commended Christianity to them. It may well be that in the present age that it will be the moral vision of Christian faith--and the faithful lives of individual Christians--that commend themselves to those whose lives are without meaning and direction. These essays are directed toward clarifying that vision and the situation which it illuminates.

A word of thanks is due to groups in Dallas, Houston and elsewhere who aided in the developing of the ideas here presented. Special thanks is also due to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, Faculty Secretary, for her invaluable aid in preparing these manuscripts.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS:
PLURALISM, MORALITY, AND THE CHURCH

By Michael R. Weed

Some time ago moral philosopher H. D. Aiken observed that morality depends upon the support of what he termed a "beneficent society."[1] In many ways the present confusion about morality in Western society is reflective of the loss of such a supportive context--a society adequate to sustain a coherent morality. Although there are a number of approaches to this complex problem, I want to address it by defining and sketching something of the impact of social pluralism on morality and the importance of this development for moral and particularly Christian identity. In spite of the risks of oversimplification, this approach enables us to locate several of the major problems facing both society and the contemporary church.

Social Pluralism

At the foundation of every society there are certain underlying and grounding values, beliefs, and goals which provide overall self-understanding to a people and

shape the network of institutions and social relationships within the society. The Declaration of Independence, for example, refers to certain basic truths held to be self-evident. But every society, as a society, holds some such "self-evident" truths which guide and shape the common life of its members.

In large part, the present situation is reflective of the fact that many of the traditional values and beliefs which have directed Western society have deteriorated to the point that they may no longer be taken to be self-evident. At the turn of the century German sociologist Max Weber described the emerging climate of modernity by saying that we are living in the <u>Götterdämmerung</u>--"the twilight of the gods." Weber saw moderns increasingly living in an era in which the old gods have disappeared and the new gods have yet to appear.

In this climate, marked by the loss of shared ultimate values and goals, we find the emergence of a number of sub-societies formed around different and contradictory centers of loyalty and value. Accordingly, we see a plurality of competing views of the ultimate meaning and purpose in life. This, in essence, is the development of social and moral pluralism.

American Civil Religion

A society can tolerate a wide variety of beliefs and lifestyles as long as there are some shared core values which provide a protective context for social existence, e.g., that all people should be tolerant. Now it is not necessary that such core values

be explicitly articulated in order for them to offer some basic shape and direction to the apparent variety of different social groups. Will Herberg, for example, noted in his classic study in 1955 that beneath the different belief systems found among American Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Jews there was an underlying value system common to all and supported by all.[2] This underlying "civil religion," a quasi-religious nationalism which Herberg designated the "American Way of Life," thus provided a framework of basic values and beliefs which held American society together.[3]

There are many indications, however, that since Herberg's studies American society has increasingly progressed toward becoming a more radically pluralistic society in which many of the shared values and beliefs of Herberg's civil religion have also eroded.[4] Insofar as such a society is held together, it is only on the basis of the very thinnest of tissues--a kind of "minimalist agreement" (e.g., the principle of noninterference) that cannot and does not shape and direct society as a whole.[5] In such a society no substantive common roots or foundations--religious, philosophical, or otherwise--exist to provide integration and direction. It is necessary in such a society to avoid--studiously avoid--the realm of ultimate claims and values; education, for example, must be "value free." "Public interest" no longer designates a shared vision of the polis but becomes an aggregate of individual desires and demands.[6]

Consequently, it is important to recognize that the designation "pluralism"

may not do justice to the seriousness of the present problem. Those living in a radically pluralizing society are not, for the most part, merely confronted with a plurality of alternative value systems and viewpoints More nearly, they increasingly find themselves surrounded by an "unharmonious mélange of ill-assorted fragments."[7]

The Impact of Pluralism

Social and moral pluralism have far-reaching effects on both society and its individual members. As the underlying values and beliefs which provide an integrative framework for society and her institutions disappear, society tends to fragment into disconnected and independent pieces. The various social institutions, for example, no longer work in concert, guided by a shared vision of the common good they all serve. Rather, they increasingly take on an independent status capable of standing at odds both with society's overall good and with the perceived interests of individual members of society.

Accordingly, persons living in a pluralistic society find themselves experiencing a sense of estrangement and alienation. The social institutions through which society is maintained "cease to be the 'home' of the self; instead they become oppressive realities that distort and estrange the self."[8] Persons find themselves dealing with institutions of society which not only are distant and impersonal but also are perceived to be actually against truly human interests. (Even

religious institutions may be viewed in this regard; with many persons finding themselves alienated from the bureaucracy and impersonalism of the so-called "institutional church.")

Further, with the erosion of foundational beliefs, values, and goals, civil law survives as the nearest thing to a universally accepted authority within the pluralistic society.[9] Loosed from its moorings in traditional values, however, the legal system no longer directs and regulates society according to traditional goals and aspirations of the people. The legal system itself simply becomes one more independent zone of society standing over and against the individual. Divorced from its philosophical and religious heritage, the law becomes mechanical, arbitrary, rigid, and increasingly based on force rather than on acknowledged authority; it is no longer perceived to be "our law" but is seen as an external and impersonal restraining order.[10]

In addition to alienation, a sense of being a "stranger in one's own land," we may note several further developments which seriously affect moral identity and popular morality within a radically pluralistic society. First, those values and beliefs which are still held are all held a bit tentatively. Increasing and regular contact with those who do not share our worldview and values leads to a lessening of the grip which our own values and beliefs have upon us. Values, rather than designating common shared commitments, are viewed as private and subjective matters. (Pluralism is thus closely and complexly interrelated with the uneven but relentless process of secularism.)

Second, individual character traits and attitudes necessary to survive and to function in the maelstrom of pluralistic society are those such as adaptability, assertiveness, acquisitiveness, and even cynicism.[11] Traditional virtues such as honor, modesty, and truthfulness are not only obsolete and irrelevant but are even dysfunctional.

Third, pluralism leads to a "de-listing" of certain kinds of behavior as immoral, deviant, or subject to censure or criticism. Our moral sensitivities are numbed as we learn to speak of "alternative lifestyles," "sexual preferences," or "open-ended commitments"--and who would presume to pass judgment on another's self-expression in areas so private or subjective as sexuality? Abortion, for example, becomes a "religious" and thereby not a moral issue--and everyone knows that religion is a personal, a-rational, and idiosyncratic affair.[12]

Finally, perhaps the most far-reaching and devastating result of radical pluralism is that persons living within a pluralizing society are not just confronted with a kaleidoscope of jarring values and beliefs, they actually become such a kaleidoscope themselves. That is, pluralism not only occurs around us; it also happens <u>within</u> us. The various sub-groups into which a radically pluralistic society splinters are hardly coherent and stable sub-societies. For the most part, they are not sustained by foundational and integrating values and beliefs. Rather, they are only loosely knit gatherings of autonomous persons, each possessing his or her own private, largely unexamined values and beliefs. And these ragbags of ultimate

significance are highly unstable collections taken from such disparate sources as popular psychology, Eastern religions, astrology, the latest health food craze--all mixed in with the debris of traditional values.[13]

In short, individuals living within and marked by a radically pluralistic society tend to possess unstable and even contradictory collections of values, beliefs, and goals. These eclectic congeries are simply unable to provide any coherent or consistent vision of life's overall meaning and purpose. Religion tends to follow suit and survives largely as a highly private, subjective, leisure-time pursuit leaving untouched and unexamined the greater portion of the individual's dealings with the "real world." Understandably, many of the traumatized victims of radical social and moral pluralism exchange the pursuit of the good life for the frantic acquisition of life's goods.

A Christian Response

Admittedly, the present situation is not without its celebrants, even among Christians. Some argue that radical pluralism is to be welcomed because it dethrones our idolatrous absolutes and forces us to reexamine our contradictory values and shortsighted commitments. Others even cheer the emergence of the "pluralistic church" as indicative of Christianity's relevance to the modern pluralistic world.

On the basis of the preceding analysis, however, there appears little reason to

be optimistic about the situation. Radical pluralism fosters a spirit of skepticism and cynicism by destroying all absolutes, not just false ones. Moreover, it fragments not only society but also individual selves within society. Nor does anxiety appear to be driving many in honest pursuit of ultimate values. And the appearance of the so-called pluralistic church suggests the degree that the church mirrors rather than transforms the surrounding pluralizing and fragmenting world. What then should be the church's response to the onslaught of radical pluralism?

The fundamental challenge the present situation offers to the church is actually an ancient one: How can we be faithful to Yahweh in an alien land? Implicit in this question is one of the most essential elements of any adequate response to the problem, viz., the difficult and painful but necessary task of recognizing that we are in fact pilgrims in an alien land. The people of God are today called to be what they have always been called to be--a community uniquely formed and guided by the transcendent claim of God.

To be sure, it is critical for the church in every age to resist costly misalliances. Through such alliances Christian faith has been dominated, compromised and taken captive by countless alien ideologies throughout the history of the Christian movement. Today, however, it is especially important for the church to resist the temptation to gain acceptability by acquiescing to a limited role as the "religious element" in the otherwise intact scheme of some alien worldview--whether it be laissez faire capitalism, socialism, or simple secularism.

With the rapid dissolution of traditional values and beliefs, it is especially important for the church to be a place where the gospel is spoken and dramatized in ways that offer individual Christians a clear and cohesive vision of reality. The church can no longer content itself with providing merely the "religious" portion of a much larger schema. Rather, it must offer a comprehensive vision of the whole of reality as created, sustained, and redeemed in Christ.

The church must resolutely and uncompromisingly maintain the importance of Christian faith not only for the sanctuary and for the home but also for the marketplace, the union hall, the classroom, and the laboratory. In this regard some would contend that it is especially important that the church renounce its unofficial concordat with the modern success credo and make it inescapably clear that Christians are not called to be successful; they are called to be faithful. And, to paraphrase Alasdair MacIntyre, individual Christians must understand that those skills which make for success in Philadelphia are not necessarily those virtues which inherit the kingdom of heaven.[14]

Such a stand as this will entail both a recovery of the roots and foundations of Christian faith and the articulation of Christian faith in a manner that illuminates all areas of human existence. It is precisely the transcendent dimension which must ground and give meaning and direction to the fragmenting world around us. In recovering its own roots, then, the Christian community will not only regain its integrity but also restore the very foundations of created humanity and of the human

community.

In closing, a word of clarification seems to be in order. The implication of this position is that the church should recognize and denounce its various misalliances with and accommodations to the modern temper. This entails a willingness to be a strange and perhaps even an unpopular presence in the world--to be a "sect." By this, however, I am not advocating a narrow sectarianism which seeks the survival of its own limited ranks. Rather, the strategic separateness of the church, coupled with the uniqueness of the faith lifestyle, is more nearly analogous to that of the ancient Levites--set apart in order that they might serve on behalf of the very ones from whom they were separated.

It is only by being a unique and peculiar people that Christians will be able to offer anything other than an echo to the surrounding din of confusion. It is only as a community that truly models its faith that the church points the way to values that are not merely "Christian" values but are also foundational human values. That is, the church must assist in the re-founding of those basic commitments and values which are necessary for existence of truly human community--trust, humility, compassion, self-denial--basic dispositions and virtues which at present glow dimly in the fast-falling twilight.

Notes

[1] H. D. Aiken, "Moral Philosophy and Education" in <u>Reason and Conduct</u> (New York: Knopf, 1962), 26.

[2] Will Herberg, <u>Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology</u> (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

[3] Herberg, 75.

[4] Peter Berger, <u>Facing Up To Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion</u> (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 156ff.

[5] British sociologist Bryan Wilson even goes so far as to contend that modern technological societies are held together by techniques and procedures and are not dependent on any consensus of values. Bryan Wilson, <u>Contemporary Transformations of Religion</u> (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 108.

[6] Daniel Callahan, "Minimalist Ethics," <u>The Hastings Center Report </u>Volume 11, Number 5 (October 1982), 21

[7] Alasdair MacIntyre, <u>After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology</u> (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 10.

[8] Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner. <u>The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness </u>(New York: Random House, 1974), 156f.

[9] See James Gustafson, "Authority in a Pluralistic Society"" in <u>The Church as Moral Decision-Maker</u> (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1970), 51.

[10] See Harold J. Berman, "Law, Religion, and the Present Danger," <u>Worldview</u> September, 1979, 46-51.

[11] "When men have to sell themselves, to assume dispositions that they do not genuinely feel . . . a process of widespread human prostitution occurs. New levels of distrust are reached, as men acquire the art of cynicism that is necessary for their very survival . . .. Cynicism learned as an art of survival is unlikely to remain con-fined to commercial relationships or to an appraisal of the mass media. It becomes a permanent posture in the face of all authorities and all belief systems." Wilson, 108.

[12] Callahan, 20.

[13] Sociologist Thomas Luckmann has done a thorough study of this phenomenon in his The Invisible Religion (New York: MacMillan 1967).

[14] MacIntyre, 185.

SECTARIAN LIFESTYLE: AN ALTERNATIVE MORAL VISION IN THE FIRST AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

by Allan McNicol

By now it is all too evident that something is desperately wrong with Western culture. The moral traditions of this country, heavily indebted to our Protestant heritage, have broken down. The Issue today is not so much what should a person do in a particular situation but how, in our pluralistic society, can we find a common basis to assess what is the difference between a moral and an immoral action?

All one needs to do is to walk around certain neighborhoods of any of our great cities and he will quickly know what I am talking about. The panorama consists inevitably of a strange collection of "gay bars, " massage parlors, and pornography shops. Drifting around on the streets among the general populace will be a considerable number of unwed teenage mothers, traumatized handicapped and elderly citizens, and addicts of all kinds. Morally sensitive persons cry out for an alternative to this disturbing state of affairs.

It would be comforting to say that in its congregational life the church offers

an alternative to this bleak situation. Honesty, however, compels us to question the level of moral growth and maturity of many Christians. To be sure, Paul reminds us that before the eschaton we do not attain perfection (Phil. 3:12). But all too often factors such as an increasing divorce rate, concentration on the accumulation of wealth, the pursuit of social acceptance rather than transcendental values, and a general disregard for the poor indicate that the maturity of many Christians is suspect. Christian lifestyle too frequently is not discernably different from that of the world.[2] In that more seekers than we suppose occasionally cast their eyes wistfully toward the Christian vision as a possible alternative to the current moral morass, it is doubly tragic that our moral performance does not match our rhetoric.[3]

The current crisis in Christian moral maturity poses a particular problem to the Christian witness. Congregations are filled with people who, sickened with equivocations, became Christians on the grounds that there was at least one community that adopted as normative a simple common sense rendering of the New Testament for all aspects of the Christian life. This was, and still is, a tremendous advantage when non-denominational Christians discuss, for example, matters such as baptism or the Lord's Supper. But, by and large, these issues are only peripheral areas of concern for a decreasing number of even the faithful today. In the church, the real issues are increasingly about the fundamental validity of the whole Christian enterprise. Questions being raised are more nearly, "How can I raise my children so they will choose to be Christians?" or, "Are the benefits that accrue from my belief

in Christ and the Christian vision enough to sustain the effort I have put into this enterprise?" The answers to these questions cannot be found simply by looking up the answer in the New Testament as we would look in the back of an arithmetic book for the answer to a problem. Given the shift of weight to such questions, how is our traditional plea--which tended to focus on the restoration of the Christian doctrines--relevant to the present moral crisis?

In this essay I wish to suggest a way out of the present situation. The thrust of this new focus is to change the metaphor with respect to our view of the New Testament. Given the present cultural situation which demands that Christians reclaim the moral power of Scripture, I propose that we change the metaphor for approaching the Bible from "blueprint" to "key."[4] The study of the New Testament as "key" opens the door to understanding the struggling first-century Christian communities' moral development after they took up the task of faithfully remembering what God had done in the history of Israel and in Christ. Based on the character of God acting in dynamic tension with the reality of their present world, early Christians strove against tremendous odds to live faithful and mature lives.[5] We may learn much from their struggles and achievements. In a formal way, Christians today are in a similar situation to those Christians in the first centuries. We constitute a remembering community which exists to live by and perpetuate what came to light in God's faithful care for his creation in Israel and in Jesus Christ. Materially, of course, our social circumstances are very different from those

of the first century. Nevertheless, to trace the course of how the early Christians left their old world and acknowledged the lordship of Christ can inform us as we struggle in our present situation to develop lives that are congruent with the character and purpose of God.

Early Christians Encounter a Hostile World

Much like ourselves, the earliest Christians existed in a pluralistic world. Churches throughout the Eastern parts of the Mediterranean existed in diverse cultures even though they came under the general umbrella of the Roman Empire. Any analysis of the setting of early Christianity must look at least briefly at the particular history and situation of various Christian groups in the different geographical areas of the Empire.

I intend first to examine the general pagan reaction to the morality of the Christians and the Christian response when it first became an important factor for them in the second century. Then I will more closely examine the moral problems of churches in the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia who received a letter we know as 1 Peter.[6] In closing, I will draw some conclusions relevant to our present situation.

In the first century, Christianity was of minor concern to the writers, historians, and artists of the Roman Empire. In fact, practically no non-Christian materials commenting directly on Christianity can be dated positively from the first

century.[7] In the early second century, however, a spate of writings appears among the Romans on the subject of Christianity. This probably indicates that steady growth in the church during this period increasingly forced Rome to come to grips with Christianity.[8]

The central problem arising between Christians and pagans in this period seems to be in the pagan perception that Christianity was a crude superstition (superstitio) undermining the received moral traditions of the culture.[9] It is important to note that to the Romans superstitio designated practices and customs foreign to Roman piety and good taste (such as Bacchic rites, Druid religion, and certain bizarre activities of the Egyptians).[10] According to Plutarch superstitio led to irrational belief in untrustworthy gods, undermined the trustworthiness of any religion, and ultimately produced atheism.[11] Thus among intelligent citizens of the Empire in the early part of the second century of our era, by labeling Christianity as superstitio, concerned thinkers were saying that the veneration of a crucified Messiah was a threat that would undermine the received religions and patriotism of the citizenry.[12] Inevitably, pagans equating Christianity with such sects as the Druids and the followers of Isis and Osiris led to suspicions about the lack of virtue among Jesus' followers.[13] As one writer has quipped, "The Romans not the Christians were the puritans."[14]

The Apologists for the second century responded to the taunts of adversaries. Clearly, if one placed himself in the sandals of a pagan in the second century as he

surveyed the level of moral virtue of Christians, an interesting picture comes into view. On the one hand, the pagan would see examples of extreme moral virtue among Christians superior even to that among the most ethical pagans.[15] On the other hand, there were those calling themselves Christian who participated in bizarre rites such as eating the Eucharist nude.[16] It is little wonder that the pagan reaction to all of this was some what mixed. To be sure, some were bewildered that such "virtues" as contempt of death, restraint in sexual expression, pursuit of justice, and concern for the outcast came from such a despised underclass as the Nazarenes.[17] Yet others considered Christians to be the scum of the earth and thought that the Empire would be better off without them.[18] Under these circumstances it is understandable that a crucial defense of the faith on the part of the Apologists is the commendation of Christianity as leading to virtue on the part of it adherents.[19] Bizarre moral practices, the Apologists argued, are those taken up and carried out among fringe groups on the edge of the faith. They do not represent genuine Christianity. Therefore it is invalid to draw conclusions about the genuine truth of Christianity through the expressions of behavior of these cults.

In summary, Christians were generally believed to belong to a social class that deserved only contempt on the part of patriotic citizens. In part, some Christians brought on these pagan evaluations by their bizarre manner of behavior. But this is not the whole story. Certain pagans noticed there was widespread concern for justice, the poor, and a humble lifestyle among the despised people called

Christians. Perhaps it was not virtue in the traditional pagan sense, but it had a beauty of its own. The Apologists seized upon this virtue, arguing that it was congruent with a people who followed a crucified Messiah. They charged that the pagans should encourage people with such virtues and not despise them. It was in fact the power of this suffering servant lifestyle that finally caused Christianity to supplant the tired and weary philosophies current throughout the Roman Empire.

Moral Advice in 1 Peter

The churches in Asia Minor that first received 1 Peter neither encountered as much organized opposition as Christians in the second century, nor had the benefit of the responses of the Apologists to defend their cause. However, it is clear that already the later conditions which later produced the hostile pagan attitudes toward Christians were already present in the first century.

In an exhaustive study of the literary form of the moral codes in 1 Peter, David Balch argues that the community which received the letter was facing pagan hostility to their practices and in need of an adequate apology against the charges of the general populace and the authorities.[20] According to Balch, 1 Peter, especially in its moral codes, exhorts Christians in Asia Minor to live such an exemplary moral life that the pagans would cease their slander and allow Christians to live in peace.[21] At the heart of this Balch sees 1 Peter 3:15b, "Always be prepared to give a defense (Greek-apologia) to anyone who asks you a word concerning the hope

which is in you."[22] Just as pagans of various groups and origins could give an account of their politeia (laws and customs), so the Christians must be prepared to give an account of their practices, especially since they were marked as troublemakers because they divided households through conversion.[23] The moral codes in 1 Peter thus not only exhort Christians to be prepared to answer hostile charges against them by a mainly uninformed populace, but they also supply ammunition for the defensive battle.

Recently, J. H. Elliott has refined Balch's conclusions.[24] Elliott correctly notes that the connection Balch makes between 1 Peter and other contemporary literature which contain a politeia as a defense of behavior of the household is strained.[25] Elliott argues that such materials as Against Apion were addressed to "outsiders" whereas 1 Peter is definitely to "insiders" (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:12) and is especially different in form and content to supposed parallels, produced by Balch, such as Against Apion.[26] As a point of refinement to Balch's observations, Elliott agrees that the real need of the community which received 1 Peter was to be able to face pagan ridicule and the attendant sufferings and persecutions which were beginning.[27] But he then observes that the exhortations in 1 Peter go beyond providing the faithful with ammunition for a defense against the pagans. Rather, 1 Peter is characterized by a spiritual appeal to Christians to maintain separation from pagan ways (1:14-16; 2:11; 4:25). The argument is made that believers through completely leaving their old matrix and developing a distinctive social existence as a moral community with

its own unique behavior and identity, check the threat of its disintegration through persecution, and create inner cohesion which is promoted by the power of social contrast with the Gentiles.[28] Thus the real tension in 1 Peter is between a "sectarian particularism and societal pressures for conformity."[29]

Elliott's insight that the central focus of 1 Peter is to stress the peculiar identity and behavior of the Christians in Asia Minor in order to maintain both inner cohesion and prevent social disintegration is very significant.[30] Put simply, Elliott views 1 Peter as saying that the moral life of the community in Asia Minor must comport with its faith. But I believe this analysis can be sharpened even further. Our clue to get to the heart of the matter comes from a point made earlier in this essay about pagan views of the Christian community in the second century. It was noted that in many cases the pagans had good reason to be skeptical about the virtue and moral worth of the Christian enterprise. Many Christians did conduct a lifestyle similar to the bizarre practices of the pagan sects. And, of course, we know that these practices were not entirely unknown in the first century as well. The example of the church at Corinth with which Paul had to deal comes to mind immediately. The New Testament is filled with examples of Christians who lived more in keeping with the licentiousness of the hoi polloi than according to either the ethical standards of a virtuous pagan, or the pious believers upholding the way of Christ (1 Cor. 5-6; 1 Thess. 4:3-8; 2 Tim. 3:l-5; Matt. 7:21-23). The community that received 1 Peter appears to have had its share of such people. From time

to time these believers suffered and went back to old habits and associations. The point, however, is not that such people suffered necessarily because they were virtuous,[31] rather they suffered both because they came from a persecuted social class and because in becoming part of a new community, they severed their old associations (1 Pet. 4:5). The temptation was for these believers to become discouraged, quit the faith, and go back to old habits and associations. Thus they were Christian in name only. They desperately needed guidance.

In 1 Peter the heart of the guidance may be said to be found in 4:14-19. There the community was told the difference in the ground of their reproach. One may suffer as a murderer, thief, or, for all sorts of other reasons (4:15).[32] Presumably there is little virtue in this area. But to suffer as a Christian is worthwhile as long as one does good (4:19; cf. 3:17). Judgment comes, even to the household of God, certainly, to those who do not do good (4:17, 18). Those who do good place their hope in a faithful Creator who keeps his promises and will give an imperishable reward in the hereafter (1:4, 9; 2:25; 4:19; 5:4, 10). Thus to suffer as a Christian will be productive only if one breaks entirely with the kind of life characteristic of the old pagan households and social groups (1:14, 18; 2:1-3; 4:2-4). Despite the fact that many in the community act in a way that is not visibly different from the pagans, the Christian household of God must have an ethically structured way of

life which comports with its foundational story. The heart of the matter is stated in the address in 1 Peter 2:9--to the community:

> You are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who have become God's possession, in order that you may declare his way by living the virtues of the character of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

The ethical purity that was expected of Israel (Lev. 19:2) now must be found in the household of God which has been reconstituted by the cross (1:3, 4, 19-21; 2:21; 3:17, 18). Shaped by this story, this community has the capacity to be virtuous in a way that correlates with the life of Christ. This produces a mode of conduct different from the Gentiles--even the ethical ones. Stated simply, the practices of the principle of subordination in the family, respect for the emperor, love, hospitality, unity of spirit, sympathy, compassion, and humility constitute the Christian vision of life and moral conduct. Such a vision only makes sense when it is carried out by a life informed by the Christian story (2:11-3:6; 3:8; 4:8, 9). It is not a universal ethic. It is not a primer about how to get along or justify one's manner of life in a pagan society. Rather it is a logical product of the lives of those who have left past associations and have heard a word from the eternal.

We conclude that the letter of 1 Peter constituted a demand for a group of Christians to form an alternative moral community which was congruent with the story of God's act in Christ. Certainly there is plenty of evidence that the community was facing harassment from the "outside" and needed appropriate

guidance. But the problem of this community went far deeper. Its lifestyle could not measurably be discerned as being different from the pagans. That being the case, there was little rationale for being a Christian. In the view of 1 Peter, without some purpose for virtue, only masochists would wish to endure constant suspicion from the authorities and the loss of old friends and acquaintances. Only when the community is viewed as a household with its own unique story, and its unique behavior and identity which grow out of that story, could its existence be made intelligible and it would have a hope for future perpetuation in this world and the world to come.

Conclusions and Application

First Peter, a monumental work of early Christian literature, produced some concrete lessons applicable to the current situation. Formally, there is a definite parallel between the "remembering" communities that comprise the churches today and the community that received 1 Peter in the first century. Furthermore, both communities face a hostile outside environment. Also, both communities have difficulty developing moral virtue among their adherents. Christians today exist in a society that cannot find a common basis for distinguishing between what is moral and what immoral. Many allow their lives to degenerate into the disgusting nostrum of emotivism and live by the maxim of "do your own thing." Conversely, there is considerable hostility expressed towards those who believe there are ultimate moral

standards and who attempt to live virtuous lives. We have seen the community that received 1 Peter faced a different situation, viz., suspicion from authorities and the misunderstanding of old acquaintances who did not believe or care whether the Christians could live virtuously. Our conclusion is that this had already led to widespread discouragement among the believers and a tendency to go back into the past habits of licentiousness, drunkenness, etc. Discouragement involving the threat of social disorientation and dislocation in such situations is another formal connection that links these first and twentieth century communities.

Under these circumstances the underlying thrust of the message of 1 Peter, brought to light essentially by Elliott, is as important for us today as it was for the church in the first century. The church today must become an alternative moral community. It is only through the cultivation of a distinctive moral identity, shaped by the cross of Christ, that the community today will find the means of survival. The siren is very attractive that comes from the world; "there are no ultimate objective moral standards, therefore do not waste your time searching for them, do your own thing." How can the resources be found to defeat this temptation? Only in a community such as the church can the ethos be founded and nourished to promote moral growth. The problem of the disintegration of our fellowship in this pluralistic world, both numerically and ethically, is a very real one. But perhaps the need for a common bond to promote inner coherence is even greater. The call in 1 Peter to an ancient community which was also coming apart at its seams was for

common allegiance to a style of moral life and behavior congruent with the Christian story. I suspect that this "key" to unlocking the door to the treasures of 1 Peter could well give us the entry into a vision of existence that will be the solution to many of our current problems.

As mentioned earlier, the challenge we face today is not for us to be sectarian in the traditional sense. We used to say, "Based on the blueprint of Scripture we have the one true view of baptism and it is only prejudice or ignorance that stops you from seeing that." In past generations such an understanding had mixed results. Many were converted and found spiritual security. We had a sectarian identity that did promote a form of social integration and inner coherence also supported by a broader quasi-Christian environment.

The situation now is different. In a post-Constantinian and even anti-Christian environment the issue is not what is the true perception of the doctrinal blueprint of the New Testament, but whether our children in the next generation will have a fellowship known as the church. One thing is sure, the fuel for the perpetuation of the church will come neither through the nostalgic repristination of a bygone era, or the current predilection of many to accommodate Christian faith to the "do your own thing" world through a frantic pursuit of wealth or education, a general acceptance of the lifestyle of the current elite, or just dropping out.

A watchword of our movement has always been "We are Christians only." First Peter defined as Christians those whose religious and moral identity became

congruent with the servant existence of Christ. To take this same message seriously today as a personal and a social ethic will mean that we must be sectarian equivalents of our brethren in the first century--strangers and aliens. This is the needed word for the current crisis.

Notes

[1] For an analysis of how we have arrived at the present moral crisis see Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism (New York: Norton, 1978); note also Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981),

[2] On the general religious scene a recent Gallup poll was able to distinguish selectively few differences in personal values between the churched and unchurched of America. Cf. George Gallup, Jr. and Daniel Poling, The Search for America's Faith (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980) Appendix H.

[3] Note for example the analysis of secularism in Dick Dabney, "God's Own Network," Harper's (August, 1980) 33-37.

[4] Everett Ferguson, "The Validity of the Restoration Principle," Mission (August, 1973), 7-9.

[5] As is the case today this is a Herculean task. Note that all the letters of Paul end in paraenetic advice about the need for growth and development of the moral life (e.g. 1 Thess. 4-5; Rom. 12-13); also Wilken notes that the bishop in early Christian thinking was viewed as much as an example of moral conduct as a teacher of doctrine (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Polycarp, Phil. 6:1). Thus literary evidence of the first two centuries indicates that Christian communities were defined as much by their character and type of behavior as through doctrinal teaching. Cf. Robert T. Wilken, "Diversity and Unity in Early Christianity," The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies, (1982), 108.

[6] Critical scholarship is divided over whether the letter is directly attributable to the Apostle Peter, or whether it is written by a later disciple (circa A.D. 70-100) who invokes the authority of the apostle. The latter view recently has been defended by Peter Stuhlmacher, "The Gospel of Reconciliation in Christ--Basic

Features and Issues of a Biblical Theology of the New Testament," <u>Horizons in Biblical Theology</u>,

(1979), 172. Also this position is advocated in the very significant recent monograph of John H. Elliott, <u>A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy</u>. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 84-87. In my judgment, what is necessary before the dating of a first century document can be computed is that we have an understanding of the ethos of the particular community addressed. It is to this task that I wish to direct attention in this essay.

[7] For an exhaustive analysis of the available evidence see Stephen Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries A.D." <u>Aufstieg und Niedergang der romischen Welt II</u>, 23:2 , (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1980) 1055-1118.

[8] This analysis runs counter to notions in the church that the first century was a time of unprecedented fervor, spirituality, and <u>growth</u> in the church. Yet the facts do not warrant this conclusion. Much of the New Testament, written from A.D. 50-100, is concerned with the problems of discouraged believers with the attendant problems of apostasy--hardly a situation indicating great growth (e.g. Hebrews, the Pastorals, Mark, etc.) Using the secondary sources, Elliott, <u>A Home for the Homeless</u>, (45, 63) estimates that the Christian population in the provinces that received 1 Peter was about 5,000 at the outbreak of the Jewish revolt in A.D. 70. In the early part of the second century, there was great growth in the church in Asia Minor. The numbers grew in excess of 80,000.

[9] Adolf Harnack, <u>The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries</u> (New York: Harper Torch Book, edition 1962) 267

[10] Robert L. Wilken, "The Christians as the Romans (and Greeks) Saw Them," <u>Jewish and Christian Self-Definition</u>; Vol. 1: <u>The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries</u> (3 vols.; ed. E. P. Sanders; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 1: 105-116.

[11] <u>Ibid.</u>, Wilken notes the evidence from Plutarch's <u>Concerning Superstition</u>, 169-170a; 168-b; 171 b-f.

[12] Of course, the response of Christian leaders was to reject the charge of superstition. Christianity was not another version of Druid religion. It was a new philosophy. We should understand philosophy in this era meant systematic ethical

teaching available for everyday living. This is the context for the production of the Apologies of such figures as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and others in the second and third centuries. These not only attempted to show pagans and Jews that Christianity was intellectually credible but also that a more virtuous person was produced as a result of becoming a Christian. Cf. Epistle to Diognetus 5-6.

[13] Tacitus, Annals: 15:44 relates that Christians were thought to be the type who may set fire to the city of Rome.

[14] Robert L. Wilken, "Collegia, Philosophical Schools, and Theology," The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity, (eds. Stephen Benko and John J. O'Rourke; Valley Forge: Judson, 1971), 270.

[15] Epistle to Diognetus 4-5; Tertullian, Apology 38-39; 42-: 1-3; Justin Martyr, Apology 1:16-17.

[16] Wilken, "Collegia" 270.

[17] Various references are found in Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity," 1100; see also Lucian, The Passing of Pereginus, 11-13.

[18] Tacitus, Annals: 15:44.

[19] A. Harnack, The Mission and Expansion of Christianity (147-198), has an entire chapter of references to the defenses of their virtues on the part of mainly second century Christians.

[20] David Balch, "Let Wives be Submissive..." The Origin, Form and Apologetic Function of the Household Duty Code (Haustafel) in 1 Peter: Yale Dissertation (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1974), 264-265.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 213.

[23] Ibid., 206-214.

[24] Elliott, Home for the Homeless, 213-233.

[25] Ibid., 216, 217.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., 217, 222, 231. On the point with reference to social contrast, the argument seems to be that if a sect reaches a certain point of distinctiveness from prevailing society in its doctrine and life it will be less or no longer susceptible to outside "evil" influences and thus may perpetuate itself through the dynamic resources of its own inner life. Thus, according to Elliott, 1 Peter is quite pleased to characterize his readers as "exiles and strangers" (1:1, 17; 2:11). It is precisely in the integrity of this type Christian existence that the raison d'etre of the community is found. A situation considered as a vice by the Gentiles is now transformed into a "virtue" since it leads to the maintenance and stability of the community.

[29] Ibid., 255.

[30] Ibid., 200-208; 220-233. It should be remembered that the term "household of God" is important in Elliott's view of 1 Peter (2:5; 4:17; cf. 2:5, 17, 18; 3:8; 5:9). For Elliott, the household codes in 1 Peter, unlike the view of Balch, are given for the purpose of strengthening the actual families inside the community, not as ammunition for a discussion with outsiders. By extension, the language of house, and households living with a special identity as family, in keeping with the Christian story creates its own metaphor for the Christian community: the oikos (household) of God. One should note further that the early Christian assemblies in Asia Minor, as else-where, were in houses and so the language of the structure of an ideal household could transfer quite easily to gatherings of people who assembled together in house churches because they shared in a common confession. It is also worthwhile to note that the Greek word ekklesia (assembly) which is used in other parts of the New Testament to describe the Christian community does not appear in 1 Peter.

[31] Elliott, Home for the Homeless, seems to assume this point with reference to the community of 1 Peter throughout his book. On p. 83 he makes an important point when he remarks, "what is proscribed in the letter (i.e., l Peter) was possibly current practice in the audience, and that what is prescribed had not yet been fully realized." But then he goes on to say that the failure of the community to live virtuously, as indicated by the moral exhortations in the letter, was due to conflict over policy to conform or not to conform to the general cultural ethos that needed to be adopted over against the pagans rather than the

individual moral virtue of the believers.

[32] Elliott, <u>Home for the Homeless</u>, 24-48, on the former point, does an excellent job of pointing out that the converts in 1 Peter, in the main, came from a sociological group in Roman Society known as the <u>paroikoi</u> (homeless non-citizens) and that the descriptions of them in 1 Peter 1: 1, 17; and 2:11 was as much about their actual social position as their religious position. In short, because of who they were, regardless of whether they were Christians, these people would be used to being harassed and persecuted.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS MORAL COMPASS

By Paul Watson

Elsewhere in this Bulletin are essays describing the moral confusion of our times and how the Church, by using the model set out in 1 Peter, might appropriately and effectively respond to this confusion. What will be urged in this study is that the Old Testament provided an orientation to the ethical life that was essential for the early Christians, including those addressed in 1 Peter. Furthermore, this sense of direction found in the Old Testament can and should be used by Christians today in our response to contemporary moral disorientation.

The ethic of Jesus and the early church both reinforced and expanded the patterns of behavior approved for ancient Israel.[1] This ethic was an intrinsic part of the gospel. Time and again Jesus chastised the Pharisees for misapplying an Old Testament standard (thus implying the validity of that standard for Jesus);[2] or else he extended to the limit the meaning of an old standard in the light of the in-breaking Kingdom of God.[3] When Gentiles were admitted to the Church, the moral instruction they received turned out to be in large part that of the Old

Testament, as brought to fuller meaning in Jesus Christ.[4]

It will not be argued that there were no changes at all from Old Testament ethic to New Testament ethic, since manifestly there were. Even in the Old Testament itself one can see such developments, as for example the shift from approval of marriage between an Israelite and a non-Israelite to later disapproval of such marriages.[5] What will be suggested is that the basic orientation for the ethical life as found in the Old Testament remained the same for the New Testament and should thus be ours today. That orientation can be compared to the points of a compass; and four fundamental compass points for the ethical life as found in the Old Testament will be sketched out in the remainder of this study.

The North Pole: Israel's Covenant with Yahweh as the Basis for Her Ethic

In examining any system of ethics a good place to start is with the question, what is the basis of this ethic? That is, how is it derived? What are its fundamental assumptions? It might be a philosophical ethic, derived from carefully reasoned conclusions as to what constitutes the "good." The ethic of the Old Testament, however, is not of this type. Nor is it an ethic based on prudence, even though adherence to the ethic will ultimately produce the "good life."[6] Nor, for that matter, is it fundamentally a legal ethic, consisting of a collection of more-or-less arbitrary demands made by an authority (i.e., God). The starting point for Israel's ethic must be sought elsewhere; and that starting point is the very nature and character of

Yahweh himself, as disclosed to Moses privately at the burning bush and subsequently to all the people in the exodus and at Sinai.

The God who so discloses himself is not Perfect Being or Ineffible Transcendence, let it be noted, but is the God who has been closely related to Israel from the beginning. He is "the God of our fathers," the God "of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." He is marked by his compassion for his people: "I have seen the affliction of my people . . . and have heard their cry" (Ex. 3:7). He is also "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . ." (Ex. 34:6). This is Yahweh; and by knowing who Yahweh is, Israel learns who she is and how she ought to act, <u>viz</u>. in ways that are congruent with Yahweh's nature and actions.

This can be demonstrated at many levels in the legal sections of the Pentateuch. Before the first of the Ten Words was ever spoken, God identified himself by saying, "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). In other words, these ten fundamental directions for Israel's behavior are inseparably tied to who God is and how he has behaved. And on this basis, the first three "words" to Israel call for absolute loyalty and submission to Yahweh: No other gods--no manipulation of God through visual images--no manipulation through the use of his name.

In the Covenant Code (Ex. 20:22-23:33) the basis for Israel's behavior is the same: Israel's own experience as "strangers" in Egypt whom God had delivered

should restrain Israel from oppressing foreigners herself (Ex. 22:21). God's own compassion for widows, orphans, and the poor is the reason why Israel must be compassionate to these same groups [Ex. 22:22-27). Israel is forbidden in the Deuteronomic Code to engage in pagan mourning customs. The reason? "You are a people holy to Yahweh your God, and Yahweh has chosen you to be a people of his own possession" (Deut. 14:1, 2). And in the Holiness Code in Leviticus, Israel is reminded time and again that Yahweh's specific instructions all stem from the fact that he is "holy" and wants Israel likewise to be "holy": "You shall be holy to me; for I, Yahweh, am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine" (Lev. 20:26).

A clear example of Israel's actions being determined by the nature and character of Yahweh is found in Joshua 9:1-27 in the story of the ruse used by the Gibeonites to obtain a mutual non-aggression treaty with Israel. When the Israelites discovered that the Gibeonites were near neighbors and not a clan from far away, they wanted to void the covenant and kill the Gibeonites. But the elders of Israel restrained them and called upon Israel to observe the treaty: "We have sworn to them by Yahweh, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them" (Josh. 9:19). In other words, since it was Yahweh's nature to keep his word, Israel must keep hers.[7] The other side of the ethical coin is that "wrongdoing" for Israel came not so much from breaking the rules as from violating the relationship with Yahweh and thus denying his nature. This is the essential condemnation of the

eighth-century prophets in both Israel and Judah:

> You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. (Amos 3:2)

> Call his name 'Not-my-people,' for you are not my people and I am not your God. (Hos. 1:9)

> Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken Yahweh, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. (Is. 1:4)

> Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil. (Mic. 3:4)

This is why the situation in both kingdoms was so desperate in the eighth century: Not merely because a few mistakes had been made, a few laws broken; but because the people had fundamentally repudiated their relationship with Yahweh.[8] Apart from this relationship Israel simply had no ethical ground to stand on. And this is why Jeremiah envisioned a new relationship--a "new covenant"--as the basis for the people's life in the future (Jer. 31:31-34).

The concept of the ethical life as one which accurately reflects the nature of God would seem to hold true for the New Testament as well, and thus for Christians today. Consider such passages as the following (and note that 1 Peter quotes directly from Leviticus):

> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5:48)

> Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. (1 Jn. 4:7)

> Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him. (Rom. 14:3)

> As obedient children do not be conformed to the passing of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct, since it is written, 'you shall be holy, for I am holy.' (1 Pet. 1:14-16)

For the Church as for Israel, therefore, <u>who</u> they were (as the people of God) determined <u>how</u> they were to act, and not vice-versa:

> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:10)

Thus their whole ethic grew out of their identity and had to maintain congruity with that identity. Furthermore, their relationship with God informed, shaped, and determined their relationship with others, as the remaining three compass points will illustrate.

Due East: Relationships Within the Family

As is true of any people, ancient Israel experienced a variety of what we today would call interpersonal relationships. One set of such relationships was defined by family membership. Within this set of relationships (parent-child, husband-wife, etc.) the over-riding concerns were the proper respect for each family position and the welfare of each family member.

Two family-related ethical definitions appear in the Ten Words. The first of these--"Honor your father and mother" (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; cf. Lev. 19:3)--applies of course to the parent-child relationship. Negative applications of this

principle appear in the Covenant Code, forbidding the striking of a parent (Ex. 21:15) or the cursing of a parent (Ex. 21:17; cf. Lev. 20:9). In an even broader application of parental respect, Deuteronomy 21:18-21 provides for the execution of a son "who is disobedient and out of control" (NEB).

Parents, on the other hand, were responsible for the proper rearing of their children, particularly their religious training (Deut. 6:7; Prov. 22:6). They were also to deal fairly with their children in matters of inheritance, not allowing sentiment to set aside the rights of the first-born (Deut. 21:15-17).[9] The picture of God as the tender, need-providing father of Israel in Hosea 11:1-4 could be said to be a role-model for all parents in Israel.

Jesus reinforced the command for children to honor their parents by denouncing the Pharisaic practice of "corban" (Mark 7:9-13; Matt. 15:4-6).[10] "Corban" was a legal fiction whereby a person's assets were tied up in a Temple-trust, thus making it impossible for that person to contribute to the welfare of a needy parent. This practice clearly shows, incidentally, that to "honor" one's parents meant more than showing them verbal respect; it also included financial support when necessary. Other passages in the epistles, such as Ephesians 6:1-3, Colossians 3:20, and 1 Timothy 5:4-8, underscore this child-to-parent responsibility. On the other hand, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21 and 1 Timothy 3:4 stress parental responsibility for children.

The second of the Ten Words dealing with familial relationships is, "Do not

commit adultery" (Ex, 20:14; Deut. 5:18). The marital relationship is to be marked and sustained by sexual fidelity. An interesting law exempting a newlywed from military service for one year (Deut 24:5) illustrates the relative importance of the family vis-à-vis national defense. While it is true that the previous paragraph in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 makes provision for divorce, the force of the provision would seem to be to make divorce hard rather than easy and to protect the wife especially.

> Divorce was an easy matter for the husband in the Semitic world. There is no law in the O.T. which institutes it because it is simply taken for granted as part of the age-old custom. What the law tries to do is to regulate it, usually in favor of the wife. We infer from this law that a man could divorce his wife (a) only for good cause; (b) the case must be brought before some public official; and (c) a legal document prepared and placed in the wife's hand. These formalities, involving time and money, would act as a deterrent to hasty or rash action, which end the present law would further serve.[11]

Malachi later condemned Israel for the marital infidelity of his day (Mal. 2:10-16); and Genesis 2:26 states in a positive way the inseparable bond marriage was intended to produce.

It is this passage in Genesis which Jesus invoked in answering the Pharisees' question about divorce in Matthew 19:3-9. Jesus allows for divorce in some cases here (and in Matt. 5:31, 32; Mark 10:2-12; and Luke 16:18); but the obvious intent is for the continuation of the marriage.[12] Paul underscores this in his instructions to Christians at Corinth not to initiate divorce proceedings against their pagan mates (1 Cor. 7:10-16). Elsewhere the husband-wife commitment is affirmed in such passages as Colossians 3:18-19, 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6, 1 Peter 3:1-7, and especially

Ephesians 5:21-33.

Other regulations in the Torah further promote respect and proper behavior among family members. For example, sexual relations between family members are ruled out in Leviticus 18:1-30 and Leviticus 20:10-21. Once again, the reason for such sexual propriety traces back to the very nature and character of Yahweh as shown in Leviticus 18:1-5:

> And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall do my ordinances and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live: I am the Lord.

Family property was to be kept in the family for the well being of future generations; and the sale of such property to an outsider was unthinkable, as the story of Naboth's vineyard vividly illustrates (1 Kings 21:3; see also Mic. 2:1, 2). The Levirate law (Deut. 25:5-10) allowed for the perpetuation of a childless brother's name through children conceived by the widow and the nearest surviving male relative. Finally, the institution of the go'el ("redeemer") provided the means by which the interests and welfare of a family member would be protected vis-à-vis outsiders, even when the family member was responsible for his difficulty (e.g., when he had enslaved himself to pay his debts).[13] While these specific family duties are not directly reflected in the New Testament, the general concern for the well-being of all family members certainly is. This high regard for the family is

echoed in the designation of the Church as "the family of God" (1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17).

Due South; Relations Among Fellow-Israelites

A second set of interpersonal relationships was that of one Israelite to another. This set could take an almost infinite variety of forms: landlord--tenant, buyer--seller, owner of an ox--victim of the ox, neighbor--neighbor, etc. The overriding impression from a wide variety of laws regulating neighbor-to-neighbor relations is that each Israelite was expected to be actively concerned for the well-being of his fellow citizens. Furthermore, these laws are often very specific and practical, perhaps too much so for modern tastes. Yet, as George Mendenhall has observed,

> The transcendent value of what may seem to us rather trivial and common experience is thus inseparably bound up with the equally trivial and common kind of morality which is nevertheless necessary for the existence of any tolerable social life: the security of persons from attack, the good faith and honesty between persons in all kinds of negotiations, the love and respect between the generations of humanity, the security of family relationships, and freedom from aggression against the structure of economic and social functions upon which all civilized man is dependent. Perhaps it is only when these fundamentals of social life become unpredictable that they can be properly valued. This is what Sinai meant; the community formed there accepted these not as God-given rights, but as God-given obligations to which they in effect pledged their lives as guarantees.[14]

Only a few of Israel's many specific neighbor-to-neighbor laws will be cited to demonstrate this ethic. A neighbor's physical well-being was safeguarded by the seventh of the Ten Words: "You shall not kill" (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17; cf. Lev. 24:17). The basis for this prohibition had already been established in the days of Noah: "He that sheds the

blood of a man, for that man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Gen. 9:6, NEB).

The so-called lex talionis--"an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"--as found in Exodus 21:23-25 and Leviticus 24:19, 20 sought to protect both potential victims (by assessing a penalty equal to the injury inflicted) and potential aggressors (by limiting the punishment and thus preventing excessive retribution by the victim's family.) Jesus, of course, deepened the concern for the neighbor's physical well-being to the point that not only murder but anger was prohibited (Matt. 5:21, 22); and the lex talionis became a positive, non-retributive response from victim to aggressor (Matt. 5:38-42).

The economic well-being of a fellow Israelite was also to be sought. The Ten Words prohibited both theft (Ex. 20:15; Deut. 5:19; cf. Lev. 19:11) and covetousness (Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21).[15] Even lost property, in the form of animals, clothing, etc., was to be returned to its owner or kept until the owner could be found (Deut. 22:1-3; Ex. 23:4). Borrowed property was the responsibility of the borrower (Ex. 22:14, 15). So also negligence which resulted in the loss of property must be appropriately compensated (Ex. 21:33, 34; 22:5, 6).

Wages were to be paid on the day they were earned (Deut. 24:14, 15; Lev. 19:13). Honest weights and measures were to be used in conducting business (Lev. 19:35-35; Deut. 25:13-16). That such economic fair play was not always practiced is evident from Amos 8:4 ("Woe to those . . . who make the ephah small and the

shekel great") and Hosea 12:7 ("False scales are in merchants' hands, and they love to cheat" NEB). The latter passage is particularly instructive in that such cheating is directly equated with repudiating Yahweh, "your God since your days in Egypt" (Hos. 12:9).

The <u>legal</u> status of each Israelite was likewise protected. This is the tone of the prohibition of perjury (the ninth of the Ten Words: Ex. 20:16; Deut. 5:20; cf. also Deut. 19:15-20). Exodus 23 further excludes conspiracy, partiality in judgment, and bribery (vss. 1-3, 6-8; cf. also Deut. 16:18-20 and Lev. 19:15). Note also the reason given for fair and impartial judgment: that is the way Yahweh judges (Ex. 23:7).

Finally, the <u>social</u> well-being of each Israelite, in the form of his/her reputation, was to be safe-guarded: "You shall not go up and down as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand forth against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:16). The summary of neighbor-obligations is found in Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." It is precisely this commandment, of course, which Jesus upheld as one of the pair of commandments which summarized the whole of God's will for man (Mark 12:28-34). Paul offered a similar summary in Romans 13:8-10:

> Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom. 13:8-10)

A final compass point directs our attention to some particular and special "neighbors."

Due West: Relations with the Disadvantaged

Of special concern to any society are those members of it who are in one way or another at some disadvantage vis-à-vis the rest of society. How are they to be treated? Are they "fair game" for the powerful? Are they to be "treated as equals" even though in fact they are less-than-equal? Israel's answer was that they were to receive preferential treatment, and that of a beneficent nature. The reason? Again, the fact that Yahweh was particularly concerned with their well-being.

The following specific examples may be cited as proof of this required concern for those disadvantaged ones often referred to simply as "the poor": No interest was to be charged on money lent to them (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35, 36). Any clothing taken as collateral for a loan was to be returned by sundown (Ex. 22:26, 27; Deut. 24:10-13; cf. Amos 2:8). Even if a poor neighbor asked to become a slave, he was to be treated as a hired man (i.e., not enslaved; Lev. 25:39, 40). The "leftovers" from harvest were reserved for the poor (Lev. 19:1, 10; Deut. 24:19-22). Justice in court was not to be denied the poor (Ex. 23:6). The positive, active concern for the poor is most eloquently expressed in Deuteronomy 15:7-11:

> If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any of
> your towns within your land which the Lord your God gives you, you
> shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor

brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take heed lest there be a base thought in your heart, and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye be hostile to your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and it be sin in you. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him; because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.

Of all the prophetic passages excoriating abuses of the poor, none is more instructive for our purposes than Isaiah 3:15: "What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord God of hosts." Who are "the poor," after all? None other than "_my_ people," says Yahweh. And note that in neither Torah nor Prophets is the question raised as to how or why these persons are "poor." Are they lazy? unlucky? dishonest? No qualifications are made. They are simply "poor"; and that is enough to command the beneficent attention of Israel.

Other special groups of disadvantaged persons are also singled out. Widows and orphans (i.e., those who have no family to protect them) are often mentioned in conjunction with "the poor" and are not to be "afflicted" (Ex, 22:22-24; Deut. 24:17). The elderly are to be accorded special honor (Lev. 19:32). Escaped slaves are not to be returned to their masters but are to be allowed their freedom (Deut. 23:15). The physically handicapped (specifically the deaf and the blind) are not to be abused (Lev. 19:14). Interestingly enough, the alien or sojourner (i.e., the non-Israelite who is residing in the community) is to be protected (Ex. 22:21, 23:9;

Lev. 19:33, 34) and is to enjoy the rest afforded by the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10; 23:12).

Why? "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:34; etc.).

The New Testament's concern for the disadvantaged is equally clear. Recall Jesus' sermon at Nazareth which underscored God's concern for the poor and the foreigner and which almost got Jesus killed (Luke 4:16-30). Also recall his words in Matthew 25:31-46, summoning his disciples to provide food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, etc., with the understanding that "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Paul likewise called for special concern for "the weak" (Rom. 15:1; 1 Thess. 5:14); and James said that one of the two marks of "pure religion" was "to visit orphans and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27).

Summary and Conclusions

We have seen that the foundation for Israel's ethic was the very nature of God himself. God was constantly, actively concerned for the welfare of his people, as shown most vividly in the Exodus:

> And Jehovah said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people that are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey . . . (Ex. 3:7, 8).

This concern continued in God's providing food and water for Israel in the wilderness, in his protection of Israel from her enemies, in his giving Israel a land,

etc. Thus, from her own experience Israel could say of God, "Thou hast led in thy steadfast love the people whom thou hast redeemed..." (Ex. 15:13).

Because God was like this, and because Israel was "his people," Israel understood that this was how she was to behave herself. Israelites were obligated to relate to and act toward one another in ways that were consistent and compatible with God's actions to-ward them. This included appropriate, respectful behavior within the family; fair, mutually supportive behavior between "neighbors"; and a going out of one's way to help those whom we have called "the disadvantaged."

We have also seen that this pattern of behavior was taken up in a positive way by the New Testament. Sometimes that pattern was reinforced, as in Jesus' declaration that the two great commandments are love of God and love of neighbor. Sometimes that pattern was modified, as when the lex talionis became "turn the other cheek" (Matt. 5:38-42). And sometimes that pattern was expanded, as when Jesus extended neighbor-love to include love of one's enemy (Matt. 5:43-48).[16]

All this should be of profound importance to the Christian facing the moral confusion of our own day. When faced with ethical decisions today, a person may hear various voices saying, "If it feels good, do it (as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, of course);" or "If it's legal, it's o.k.;" or "Let your conscience be your guide." The Christian, hopefully, will hear through this cacophony the voice that says, "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy."

Notes

[1]   "Jesus consciously accepted the ethical traditions of his people" and "The ethical teaching of Jesus is not only a reaffirmation of the ethical tradition of Judaism, but also is the concomitant of his overwhelming conviction that the kingdom of God was 'at hand'." So W. D. Davies, "Ethics in the New Testament," <u>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</u> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), vol. II, 168. Davies goes on in this article to affirm the continuity between the ethic of Jesus and that of the early church. Schrage says, on the other hand, that "it is not proper to speak of the NT ethic" and insists that we "treat the various NT writings and authors separately." W. Schrage, "Ethics in the New Testament," <u>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</u> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 281.

For a judicious appraisal of the ethics of Paul, see Victor Furnish, <u>Theology and Ethics in Paul</u> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968). Note especially "The Sources of Paul's Ethical Teachings," 25-67; and "The Assimilation of Traditional Material," 81-92.

[2]   See, e.g., Jesus' denunciation of the practice of "corban" (Mark 7:9-13), which is examined later in this study.

[3]   Thus, "do not kill" becomes "do not be angry"; and "do not commit adultery" becomes "do not lust" (Matt. 5:21-30).

[4]   Note such specific examples as honesty; chastity and marital fidelity; the avoidance of idolatry; and concern for a neighbor's welfare. Of course, other Jewish laws such as the observance of Jewish festivals and the dietary laws (kosher) were not made binding on Gentile converts to Christianity.

[5]   Moses and his Cushite wife are an example of the former (Num. 12:116); Nehemiah's laws, an instance of the latter (Neh. 13:23-27).

[6]   As the book of Proverbs particularly stresses.

[7] Note that this excludes other bases for honesty, such as prudence ("honesty is the best policy"), fear ("God punishes liars"), etc.

[8] Hosea expresses it as Israel's having "forgotten" God (Hos. 4:6; 8:14; 13:4-6) and no longer "knowing" him (Hos. 4:1; 5:4; 6:6) in a personal, relational sense.

[9] The place of "love" (in the sense of "sentiment") in interpersonal relationships deserves more extended treatment than is possible here. Suffice it to say that for the Old Testament sentiment is appropriate; but it is not to be the controlling factor in behavior, as Deuteronomy 21:15-17 clearly shows.

[10] Jesus' words about "hating" father and mother in Luke 14:26 would seem to contradict this. However, as most commentators note, Jesus is using a vivid example to underscore the radical decision in favor of the Kingdom which must sometimes be made. See the parallel saying in Matthew 10:37.

[11] G. Ernest Wright, "Deuteronomy," The Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), vol. II, 473, 474.

[12] For a fuller treatment of the issue, see the work of a former professor (now deceased) of the Institute for Christian Studies, Pat Harrell: Divorce and Remarriage in the Early Church (Austin: Sweet, 1967).

[13] See further R. C. Dentan, "Redeem, Redeemer, Redemption," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), vol. IV, 21, 22.

[14] G. E. Mendenhall, The Tenth Generation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974), 66.

[15] Note, too, that the Hebrew verb hamad "does not only mean 'covet' as an impulse of the will, but that it also includes the intrigues which lead to the taking possession of that which was coveted." J. J. Stamm and M. E. Andrew, The Ten Commandments in Recent Research (London: SCM, 1967), 103. In this regard, see Micah 2:1, 2.

[16] The non-Israelite could be enslaved (Lev. 25:44-46) or charged interest on a loan (Deut. 15:3); but a female non-Israelite taken captive in war was to be treated honorably (Deut. 21:10-14). On a larger scale, Ammonites and Moabites were to be permanently excluded from "the assembly of Yahweh"; but neither Edomites nor Egyptians were to be "abhorred" (Deut. 23:3-8). From this varying response to the "enemy," the trajectory of the Old Testament leads toward the love-of-enemy promulgated by Jesus.

THE PREACHER: MORALIZER OR MORALIST?
By James W. Thompson

According to <u>Webster's Third New International Dictionary</u>, one definition of "preach" is "to exhort in an officious or tiresome manner." The definition of "sermon" is "an annoying harangue."[1] Our experience confirms the negative connotations that are associated with preaching, for we commonly hear the exclamation, "Don't preach to me." This exclamation occurs when we expect to hear moral judgments that involve castigation and condemnation. Our common usage of the terms "preach" and "sermon" suggests that public proclamation is widely considered distasteful because of its connection with moralizing and condemnation.

These common definitions of preaching are undoubtedly caricatures, but, like all caricatures, they distort what is present already. There is, especially in America, a long tradition in which the sermon has been a forum for moral judgments. Matters of public policy have often been debated in the sermon, and concrete moral advice has been given on such matters as slavery, equal rights for women, civil rights, and the issues of war and peace.[2] The rhetoric of the sermon was distinguished by the

liberal use of imperatives, prohibitions and appeals.

There is also a long tradition in which the sermon was the forum for discussing issues commonly described "private morality." The caricature of the sermon as an "annoying harangue" may be based on the use of the sermon as the forum for the preacher's personal moral judgments on topics ranging from card-playing to modesty. Indeed, in many instances, the entire "nutrition" provided by the sermon over an extended period of time was the moral judgment. The "canon" of the moralistic sermon was limited to the commands, prohibitions, and wisdom sayings in the New Testament. In some instances, even the narrative texts were examined for the primary purposes of discovering a moral injunction. This tradition of preaching, like the sermon on public policy, has been distinguished by its liberal use of the imperative and the prohibition.

It is appropriate to ask, against this background, what role the giving of moral advice legitimately has in preaching. Professor Edmund Steimle has said that the sermon should be given in the indicative mood. Homiletics professor William D. Thompson has criticized "straight, finger-pointing moralism." In Preaching Biblically, he warns against the misuse of legal material in the Bible, but discovers no positive way of using the legal material without falling into legalism.[3] Thus, in contrast to a tradition for which the commands are the primary source of preaching, a preaching tradition heavily influenced by a particular understanding of justification by faith argues that preaching is the occasion for announcing the acts of God, and not for

"finger-pointing moralism."

Other factors in addition to a theology of justification have contributed to a disdain of moral exhortation in preaching. Undoubtedly one factor is the experience of both preacher and audience of listening to condemnatory harangues which led to a reaction against all moral advice. Such an experience easily leads to an "allergic reaction" to every word of judgment. In addition, the preacher is likely to be influenced by a common unwillingness to pass judgment on or prescribe a particular behavior. This unwillingness to condemn or prescribe has its roots in forms of popular psychology that argue for diminished personal responsibility and make a questionable use of Jesus' command, "Judge not that ye not be judged" (Mt. 7:1).

Among those who argue vehemently against a moralizing kind of preaching, there is frequently no distinction given between morality and moralism. The fear of the latter produces an uncertainty about the preacher's rote in addressing important moral issues of the time. Is the pulpit the appropriate place for specific advice on greed, premarital sex, divorce, and community obligations? The diverse expectations of the preacher and his audience suggests the importance of discovering in the roles of biblical proclaimers a paradigm for the contemporary preacher.

The Rhetoric of the Bible

Amos Wilder has called attention to the aspects of the rhetoric of the Bible which serve as a paradigm for the preacher.[4] "The character of the early Christian

speech-form," he argues, "should have much to say to us with regard to our understanding of Christianity and its communication today."[5] While the modern communicator should not be enslaved to the biblical speech-forms, Wilder argues that we have much to learn from the vehicles of Christian speech that are used in the Bible. The preacher is aware that the very act of preaching is the legacy of a biblical history which places primary emphasis on hearing rather than seeing.[6] The spoken word, understood as a message entrusted to the speaker from God, was the instrument to elicit faith (Rom. 10:17). While the words of the prophets and the apostles were later committed to writing, they bear the characteristics of the spoken word. Neither the gospels nor the epistles is very literary in style. The epistles of Paul comprise what the apostle would have declared if he had been present with the churches under his influence. The various literary genres of the Bible together reflect the importance of a distinctive form of communication that the Christian story elicited.

The dominant mode of speech in the Bible, as Wilder and others have observed, is narrative. Indeed, according to Wilder,

> If one looks at other religions and philosophical classics the story aspects may be relatively marginal. Their sacred books may often rather take the form of philosophical instruction or mystical treatise of didactic code or oracular vision.[7]

The Bible, by contrast, is a continuous history that is composed of many subplots and episodes. Even those parts of the Bible which are not specifically given in the

narrative style presuppose Israel's story. The legal materials and the poetic sections of the Bible frequently recite the narrative of Israel's history or refer back to the main events in the story.

The transmission of the story of God's deeds shaped the identity of the hearers and provided continuity in Israel's corporate life. Successive generations could see their own stories reflected in the narratives about Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The midrash on Scripture that was practiced in the synagogue allowed the speaker to contemporize the old story and treat it as a living word for his own time. Jesus, in his proclamation at Nazareth (Lk. 4:16-30), takes the prophetic hope of Isaiah 61 and narratives of Elijah and Elisha and contemporizes them for his own time. The "good news for the poor," described in Isaiah 61, is given a new meaning. When Paul and the author of Hebrews refer to Israel's experiences, they assume that their readers can identify with the Israelites and their experiences of doubt, faith, hope and fear.

The narrative mode is dominant throughout the New Testament. Jesus opened the eyes of his hearers to the reality of the kingdom through the medium of parables. The parables were extended metaphors which revealed the "new world" of the kingdom where human standards are no longer operative. The gospels, with their unique arrangement, are evidence that the Christ even led to a new form of communication. The gospels expand the earliest Christian kerygma by providing sub-plots illustrating the good news that came in Jesus Christ. The epistles interpret

the kerygma for the changing needs of early Christian communities. They contain hymns and references to God's saving deeds. Indeed, the presence of four gospels and epistles written to widely scattered communities suggests that the kerygma had to be retold to the changing circumstances where the story of Christ intersected with the stories of local communities. The Book of Acts, as Martin Hengel has shown, is modeled on the historical narratives of the Old Testament.[8] This book, like others, enabled the ancient author to shape the vision of his audience by introducing them to a story that provided a means of identification with the past.

The use of narrative as the dominant form of speech in the Bible provides a useful paradigm for the preacher. The narratives were instruments of revelation, and not of persuasion.[9] The message, as Paul announced to the Corinthians, was not subject to the criteria of human wisdom (1 Cor. 2:6-16). The story, precisely because it was God's story, had cosmic dimensions.[10] Thus it was not a possession which the preacher could "tamper with" (2 Cor. 4:2) or "peddle" (2 Cor. 2:17). Early Christian preaching consisted in the telling of a story which culminated in the cross and resurrection. Paul summarized his preaching frequently, describing it as "the word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18), "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23), and "the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). The goal of early Christian preaching was the announcement of a story.

If the speech forms of Scripture provide a paradigm for the modern preacher, the goal of preaching is to tell the story in such a way to allow the audience to

share the impact of the lesson with the ancient listener. The contemporary preacher is one in a long succession of storytellers repeating the story for the needs of his audience. The goal of preaching, as William Thompson has written, is to move

> a congregation back through history to the east bank of the Jordan, for example, to feel despair at the untimely death of Moses, and to wonder if this Yahweh who led us out of Egypt and through the desert even knows how desperate is our pilgrimage through the streets of Seattle or Pottstown. It is biblical preaching when we hear him speaking through the centuries to us: 'Be strong and of good courage--for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go' (Josh. 1:9).[11]

Preaching is biblical also when the audience feels the anguish of Simon Peter at the denial of Jesus or shares the experience of disciples when they foolishly ask for the positions of power in the kingdom.

The dominant role of narrative in the Bible suggests that the indicative mood is the primary form of speech for the preacher. Preaching that is based on imperatives alone distorts the biblical message.

Haggadah and Halakah: Story and Demand

The fact that narrative has the predominant place in the Bible raises questions about the place of commands in Christian preaching. Does the importance of narrative in the Bible exclude the appeal to commands as a legitimate form of preaching? Amos Wilder, who recommends the Bible's own speech forms as a model for preaching, has chapters on the genres of dialogue, poem, story, and parable as models for the sermon, but does not treat the commands in Scripture as

a legitimate model. Books on preaching commonly warn against the misuse of the legal material by taking it out of context. However, for various theological reasons, few have offered constructive suggestions for the sermon as the occasion to preach law.

In both testaments, the story (haggadah) was never far removed from the moral demands (halakah). The Torah, for which the psalmist could express his devotion ("O how I love thy law"), consisted of the revelation of God in events and his call for a faithful response. Haggadah and halakah comprised the two elements of the Torah.[12] The two parts together answered the questions, Who are we? and What are we to do?[13] The prohibitions and commands gave concrete examples of the response required by the gracious God.[14] The God who revealed himself at Mount Sinai, creating peace and well-being for Israel, established the conditions for continued harmony. The intricate details of the Torah express concretely how the individual places his entire life under God's authority. The gift of salvation creates a new mindset, making possible the ordering of the entire life under God's command. Gospel and law are thus inextricably intertwined.

While the New Testament is primarily the narrative of God's saving acts, the preaching of good news does not preclude the concern to link haggadah and halakah. In the ministry of Jesus, the announcement of the kingdom implies a "better righteousness" and rigorous demands. The epistles of Paul include "halakah" alongside "haggadah." While Paul argues that the law no longer bestows righteousness (cf. Phil. 3:9), he appeals to the law frequently when giving moral

advice (Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14). His letters contain moral advice describing the life that is "worthy of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27). His frequent exhortations, introduced by "I appeal to you" (parakalo), indicate that Paul's preaching included the presentation of commands that are implicit in the gospel story. The righteousness of God, which is God's gift in Jesus Christ, was a power to which the Christian may give his life in obedience (Rom. 6:18).

Reflection on the place of law in the rhetoric of the Bible should provide insights that will prevent modern preaching from distorting and diluting the biblical message. Preaching is distorted which loses the interconnection of gospel and law. The model for the sermon is to be found in the way story and moral demand, haggadah and halakah, are held together in the Bible. Paul used the imperative to say, "Become what you are in Christ." His indicative, "We died to sin" (Rom. 6:2), is followed by the imperative, "You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11-12). His recitation of the story of Christ (Phil. 2:6-11) is followed by his imperative, "Work out your own salvation" (Phil. 2:12).

Paul used both the imperative and the frequent "I appeal to you" (parakalo hymas) to describe concretely the moral life as it pertains to marriage and divorce, sexual behavior, work, and relations within the family. The demands implicit within the gospel are a significant element of each Pauline letter. In each instance, the letter functioned in the place of Paul's personal presence and proclamation. Thus moral demands were an important element in Christian preaching.

Because the function of the sermon is to reproduce the impact of the ancient text for the contemporary situation, moral advice has a legitimate place in preaching. Paul gave moral advice without moralizing. Moral advice becomes moralizing where the connection between the story and the moral demand is lost. A moralistic sermon on marriage and divorce, based on 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, would repeat the prohibition on divorce, for example, without reference to the larger story: the new situation in Christ, the new possibility of glorifying Christ "in our bodies" (1 Cor. 6:20), and the new situation of grace. The indicative (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11) has created a new mind-set which makes obedience possible. In biblical preaching, the proclaimer will not hesitate to confront the hearer with the moral demand for permanent marriages and sub-mission of the body to God's service. But valid moral advice must be based on the larger story in which the Christian "is bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20).

A sermon on the family might be based on the imperatives of Colossians 3:18-4:1, which lists the duties of husbands, wives, parents, children, slaves and masters. Such a sermon reproduces the impact of the original text only when it demonstrates the aware-ness of the story which precedes it. That husbands should love their wives and wives should submit to their husbands becomes less an onerous duty when we recognize that love and submission have been demonstrated by Christ. Furthermore, these duties in Colossians 3:18-4:1 are based on the fact that

"you have been raised with Christ" (Col. 3:1) and may now "seek the things that are above" (Col. 3:2). The duties within the family are not, therefore, "mundane" duties. They grow out of the story, which has produced a "mind-set" leading to obedience.

Without reference to the story, the moral advice would be reduced to moralizing.

> Moralism holds up the virtues, be they yesterday's piety, courtesy, and cleanliness, or today's openness, frankness, and freedom, and makes a deadly transposition. Instead of offering lists of virtues as possible goals or consequences of the gospel, moralism subtly prescribes them as the means by which the grace of God is apprehended.[15]

Moralism, therefore, distorts the biblical message, while moral demands constitute an important element of the biblical message. Thus the preacher not only wishes to bring his audience to hear with ancient Israel the voices of hope and announcement of victory. He also allows his congregation to identify with the Corinthians as they heard moral demands that challenged their way of life. The appeal of Paul not to be "conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:1) is restated in biblical preaching to a community that is constantly enticed by the lax moral standards of its own culture.

An overreaction to "finger-pointing moralism" could produce a crippling distortion of the gospel as total as the legalism which the preacher abhors. The result would be a community sustained on "cheap grace" and unaware of the demands implicit in being "bought with a price." The moral confusion which characterizes our present situation places the preacher in a context analogous to

Paul's in the first century, when the cultural situation demanded that he tell his congregations about the lifestyle that grows out of being "washed, justified, and sanctified" (1 Cor. 6:11).

Notes

1   Cited in Richard Lischer, <u>A Theology of Preaching</u> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 62.

2   See DeWitte Holland, <u>The Preaching Tradition</u> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 69-76.

3   William D. Thompson, <u>Preaching Biblically</u> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 111.

4   Amos Wilder, <u>The Language of the Gospel</u> (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

5   Wilder, 13.

6   Wilder, 18.

7   Milder, 64.

8   M. Hengel, <u>Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity</u> (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 32.

9   Wilder, 29.

10   A. Wilder, <u>Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths</u> (New York: Harper, 1981), 59.

[11] Thompson, 11.

[12] See James Sanders, "Torah and Christ," <u>Interpretation</u> 29 (1975), 372-374.

[13] Sanders, 378.

[14] H. Gese, <u>Essays in Biblical Theology</u> (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 71

[15] Lischer, 62.

DIVORCE: A CULTURAL PROBLEM

By Tony Ash

I had been asked to speak at a retreat held by a Louisiana church. One of those attending had been my student several years before. She had married a man I had known fairly well because of our association in a campus organization. Then for some time they had been members at a church where I was preaching. I was shocked to learn that after several years of marriage and two children, they had divorced. I took this opportunity to spend some time with her. In our conversation she told me many things I could have guessed about being divorced, and opened my eyes to some other things I had not realized. Little did I know where this conversation would lead.

Ministry to Divorced Christians

Two other conversations followed in the next two weeks. Both were with persons whom I had known in school days, and who had experienced divorce. Thus, with three such experiences in as many weeks, I became sensitized as never before

to the trauma of a broken marriage.

A thought began to nag at me. "Why isn't someone doing something to minister to these people?" Perhaps some kind of seminar or meeting which would be therapeutic in nature could be offered. A simple publication might be made available. As so often with such ideas, the inner voice continued to prompt: "Since no one else is doing it, what about you?" Finally, with the support and cooperation of the elders of the University church in Austin, Single Again was born. It is now having its sixth birthday. Its ministry is simple, consisting of a monthly paper (mailed free) and an annual seminar held in late August.

In the six years since then, I have had the opportunity of speaking to thousands of Christians who have experienced divorce, I have been engaged in countless personal conversations with both men and women whose marriages (and lives) have come unraveled. I have heard true stories that are as bizarre as the human mind can imagine. I have seen unrelenting pain, and confusion, and bitterness, and conflict, and selfishness. I have been moved to tears, have been frustrated, and have become extremely angry. Some of those with whom I have been in contact were former students or close friends. For some I had even performed the marriage ceremony. When I considered these people I found myself disturbed by a dim, but unrelenting, feeling of guilt. How had I failed as a teacher, as a preacher, as a counselor, as a friend? Had I done something different would the marriage have held together? I remembered that in a six-year ministry at one church I had probably preached fewer

than ten sermons on marriage and the family. What had happened?

What Has Happened?

These reflections led to a conclusion. I hadn't preached on such subjects because I felt they were not needed. Divorces in the church where I ministered were virtually non-existent. If they happened they were shameful, and were kept under cover. So it was in all the churches I knew anything about. After all, we were a people who considered divorce wrong. Our families stayed together. Why preach when there was no problem. Then, too, I lived in a community where there was a Christian school. This institution could advertise that students who met on the campus and then married, stayed together. Percentages could be given. This was even one of the selling points for Christian education. So, all in all, though we knew the divorce evil was raging without, we were safe behind the thick walls of scripture and faith. Whatever is going on out there, we are safe "in here."

The Walls Are Breached

Something has happened. The walls have been breached. In some places they seem to have almost been torn down. Today hardly a church can be found that has not felt the ravages of divorce. I have often heard people speak of anywhere from one to ten marriages in a given congregation at a particular time that are in deep trouble. These are not always the marginal members. Not infrequently they are Bible

class teachers, or deacon's families, and not even preacher's and elder's families are exempt. On several occasions I have listened to heartsick church leaders pour out their agony because of the divorce of a son or daughter. And we find that our Christian schools are no longer using the stable marriages of their graduates as selling points.

The point could be extended, but the need is so obvious that it is not necessary. The haunting question that all ask is "Why?" What has changed so much in the past 15 years?

I am not a Solomon to give answers, nor am I gifted with divine insight to offer an authoritative word from above. Neither am I a sociologist or psychologist, who can say, after a scientific study, what things are true. I have talked to many, many people who have experienced divorce, and been a careful observer of the scene. It is from that perspective that the following observations are offered.

Unquestionably the primary cause for the violation of the marriage covenant is sin--human rejection of God. That could provoke a number of essays. But it is not the line I wish to pursue here. I do not wish to diminish that, or any other aspect of the problem. But the thesis of this article is that we are presently caught amidst several high-powered social forces that have devastating effects on the marriage relationship.

Laying the blame on such forces produces a certain tension. It can be said that a Christian is a Christian, and will serve Christ regardless of the surroundings. We

are not to be conformed to this world (Rom. 12:1f.). It is hard to argue with this. But on the other hand we advise our young not to get into situations where temptation is too great to resist. And the Lord told us to pray "lead us not into temptation." It is undeniable that certain cultural contexts make it easier to be good, and others make it easier to be wicked. This is not altered by the fact that different people may react to different cultural situations in different ways. The setting which harms one may strengthen another. But for us all there are places and forces which lead both through the wide gate and through the narrow.

<div align="center">Four Contributing Factors</div>

There are four cultural factors that seem to me to have had a bearing on the problem of divorce. They are the "romantic ideal," certain aspects of the woman's movement, the so-called sexual revolution, and the changes in divorce laws. Let me discuss these in turn.

By the romantic ideal I mean the view that love is a high-powered, virtually irresistible, emotional experience. Each of us, if we have not experienced it, has seen it displayed, for it is the subject of countless films, T.V. programs, and novels. It is probably one of life's most intense and unforgettable emotions. Because this experience is so attractive, and so commercially exploitable, we see it on every side. It has been with us for a long time, and has a powerful impact. It appeals to very powerful urges, both emotional and sexual. When this cultural current has flowed

into the stream with the other forces we will note, its impact is increased many fold.

The results of the romantic ideal are, first, to lead people <u>into</u> marriage for the wrong reasons, and, secondly, to lead people <u>out</u> <u>of</u> marriages for the wrong reasons. The myth has arisen that so long as people are "in love" that is all that is necessary for a good marriage. Hence marriage is contracted without any (or very little) attention to the important adjustment areas, such as finances, male and female roles, life goals, in-laws, etc. The smitten couple mistakenly assume that their romantic feelings will never die. When they do, or when they diminish, or when other realities impinge, they are ill-prepared for the task of serious marriage building.

In the second case married people, who have seen the zing disappear from their relationship assume, because they no longer have the feelings they once did, that they have lost the main reason for staying married. This problem is frequently complicated by the presence of another party, an "affair," in which the unfaithful marriage partner finds the old romantic feelings rekindled. They assume it is only right to be with the person for whom they have this intense passion--so a divorce ensues. I have often heard people say of a broken marriage "I no longer had any feelings for my mate," or, "I finally met the person I really love." Because this attitude has been hallowed by our culture, they feel free to act on the basis of it. The "old-fashioned" idea of commitment in marriage is hardly considered.

As indicated, the romantic ideal has been with us for a long time. The second cultural force, the woman's movement, is, in its current form, comparatively recent. How carefully one must tread in discussing this matter. From a personal perspective, I find much in the woman's movement to admire. In fact, Christians ought to be concerned for equal pay for equal work, abolition of sexual harassment on the job, etc.

However, in some cases with which I have dealt some aspects of some interpretations of the woman's movement have been quite destructive. Selfishness is one of the most terrible destroyers of marriage, whether in husband or wife. The extreme independence which the movement encourages in some women can easily be linked with a selfishness and vindictiveness which can produce conflicts a marriage cannot survive. In the name of self-realization there is a sacrifice of the spirit of cooperation, even of submission (Eph. 5:22-33), which a Christian marriage needs. Thus the marriage is forfeit to the cause of the autonomous "New Woman."

One Christian man told me he knew his marriage was in trouble when his wife began reading the type of article, often found in popular magazines, which extolled the joy of being liberated from the shackles of the marriage bond. She began to dream of being free, and one day, was (or so she thought). Under the power of such a transcendent appeal, some women find wifery and motherhood onerous burdens, indeed. Since much in our culture sympathizes with them, they will, upon occasion, divorce to escape their "burden."

There is perhaps an irony in this. The liberated woman, who does not take marriage seriously, has in some cases, led to the liberated man. But I have seen cases where the wives of the liberated men wanted nothing other than to be conscientious housekeepers, wives and mothers, and who were devastated by their mate's departure.

We come, thirdly, to the sexual revolution. It has been upon us now since the mid sixties. In its grosser forms we see pornography with the X-rated movies, the adult bookshops, and the like. On most newsstands one finds a glut of magazines appealing with word and picture to the erotic impulses. The impact has crept into popular nighttime television and into many, many films. It would seem that a sexual encounter is now regarded by many as a thing no more serious than a good night kiss was once considered. Many of the younger people in our culture do not regard fornication (or adultery) as a moral issue at all. They have completely missed the cultural background that is familiar to everyone over 35--there may be a lot of illicit sex, but it is illicit. Wrong has been done, no matter how it be rationalized.

The commercial possibilities of sex are enormous, both as the main object of interest, or as a device to serve another end (advertising with sex). One must be a near hermit to escape its impact. To maintain sexual purity in this culture would seem to be a great deal more difficult than in other times. It wasn't easy to begin with, in any time.

How does this affect marriages? There may be several ways. I have seen it mostly in the light regard in which sexual morality is held by some married people. Again and again I hear about "affairs" as a cause in marriage breakups. In many social contexts (not least at places of work) flirtations are the order of the day. The air is constantly charged with sexual innuendo. Out of this context come liaisons, infidelities, romances, and, not infrequently, divorces. Why get terribly concerned about extramarital sex? It is done commonly. No one seems terribly upset by it. Or so some people reason. When men and women are "coupling" promiscuously, this exerts a cultural pressure even on Christians, who have been known to succumb, with tragic consequences.

Finally, we come to the matter of divorce laws. In 48 states the law allows no-fault divorce. Perhaps we remember the dramas of 30 years ago, in which the threat of divorce met the response. "I'll fight you. I won't give you a divorce." Those days are gone now. They presumed that in a divorce there was fault, and that it had to be proved. Today no such presumption is made. That means that any one can divorce their mate at any time, for any reason, and there is absolutely nothing the party who wants to remain married can do to stop the proceedings. There may be some dispute regarding financial settlements, child custody, etc., but the divorce will go through.

I had thought that Christian marriages were held together by Christian faith. But I am discovering that many marriages in the church (were they Christian?) have

been held together by social pressure, or law. Now that these barriers have been removed, the marriages are not staying together. Divorce is easy to get. That in itself creates a problem for the troubled marriage. In addition this ease of divorce has increased the number of divorces. That lends a subtle social pressure. Whereas once divorce was done hesitantly because so few people did it, and so many frowned on it, today there is always social "approval " to be found because so many other couples have done the same thing. We reason that no one is going to be shocked by what has become a commonplace. In some minds this social pressure can be twisted into outright approval. Or, at least, "if I am wrong, so are a lot of other people, and the boat can't be that uncomfortable if so many people are in it." Look across the Bible belt, at small towns in Arkansas, Georgia, Alabama (and not just in the Bible belt). Once a divorce in town was a topic of gossip, and there was a large measure of disapproval and disgrace. See how that has changed. So many in town are now divorced or divorcing. The social stigma that would once have stopped the divorce is now no longer operative. Imagine the problem in large metropolitan areas, where divorce is even more common, and where the process can be undertaken with virtual anonymity.

Christians and Culture

The first three cultural forces, the romantic ideal, aspects of the woman's movement, and the sexual revolution, are not matters of law. Though we may not

all agree on how influential they are, can anyone argue they have not left their impact? How might they be counteracted? Certainly Christian people, who have different perspectives must, in a culture where free speech is valued, make their point of view known. This must be done vigorously, repeatedly, and intelligently. We cannot compel people to believe as we do. But we can make our case so that most people know what it is, and appreciate the reasons for which we believe as we do. If we do not make an appreciable impact on the "world," at least we can influence the church. But if culture does have some effect on changing behavior, then the more we become a part of the culture, saying what we need to say, the more we might hope that the culture we have influenced will influence other people in the right way.

The fourth pressure, no-fault divorce, is a legal matter. Some argue that the law simply reflects what is done in the society. This is partly true, but the issue is more complex. Laws reflect culture but also change culture (what about laws against racial discrimination). People tell us we cannot legislate morals. But is that not overly simple? How can law escape having an impact on our morals? Both directly and indirectly, laws do, in fact, legislate morals. So, on what basis do we make a decision? There is no doubt that divorce is a terrible evil in our midst. Were we convinced that current divorce laws were a major contributing factor, ought we not labor to see that change be made, for the good of society? But what changes would genuinely effect good? The problems are indeed complex.

Where Do We Go From Here?

In its history the church has often been compelled to take an anti-cultural stance. Because American society is presumed by some to be dependent on something like Christian values, we may be reluctant to do so in our culture today. But when it comes to the question of the eroding home, the time has come to take a stand, no matter how unpopular it may seem. Even if our society misunderstands, ignores, or scoffs, we must be willing to be distinctively Christian.

There are other things the church can do. Where possible without compromise of basic religious convictions, churches can take the lead in the community in uniting all who are concerned about the importance of the home. If society hears a united voice from the churches, the impact of what is said will be increased. Such a stance is consistent with our long-time plea for unity.

Other steps can be taken within churches. Since the solution is one that must be long term, centering on those who are now children and adolescents, there must be a long-range program. Congregations should implement total programs (Bible school, pulpit, church bulletins, special features, etc.) which will constantly keep Christian perspective on the home before the members. They might include the following:

(1) A continuous program of education from the earliest grades through the teen years in what marriage should be. Especially important would be youth programs in preparation for marriage.

(2) A program of premarital counseling. (Should a minister even perform a ceremony for a couple who are unwilling to accept such counseling?)

(3) Continuing emphasis through classes and preaching on strengthening marriages. This will be for those already married, to improve the quality of their relationship.

(4) Making available resources (classes, books, films, etc.) on handling crises that arise in marriage. This could include such matters as dealing with pressure, sexual adjustment, financial management, learning to communicate, etc. If the church cannot provide these resources, they can make referrals to those who can.

(5) Postmarital counseling.

(6) A sensitivity on the part of church leaders in spotting troubled marriages so there can be ministry before it is too late. (This is not an easy thing to do, but I am convinced it can be done by those who work hard at establishing loving rapport with their people.)

I would make one more observation. Many of us are facing a situation we have not faced before. Today a person may divorce a mate when there is no hint of infidelity. This leaves the "victim" alone, wanting to be married, but under the stigma of "divorced." Can this abandoned person (who cannot charge the other with unchastity), remarry? How should the church deal with this problem? It is one that must be faced, for it is becoming increasingly common.

CONTRIBUTORS

The contributors to this issue of the Faculty Bulletin are all members of the faculty at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Ash, Anthony Lee, B.S., Florida State University; M.A., Abilene Christian University; Ph.D., University of Southern California. Old Testament, Church History.

McNicol, Allan, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Yale University; M.A., Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Intertestamental Literature.

Thompson, James W., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Union Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Hellenistic Literature.

Watson, Paul, B.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., M.A., M.Ph., Ph.D., Yale University. Old Testament.

Weed, Michael R., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Emory University. Ethics, Theology.