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FOREWORD

In this Faculty Bulletin Pat Graham's study of Chronicles reminds us of God's concern for congruence between faith and life--integrity. Rick Marrs tells us that Christian integrity expresses itself not merely in religious exercises but in just and merciful conduct. David Worley and James Thompson explore the relation between faith and specific areas of life. Worley looks at the relationship between Christianity and the marketplace within the frame of Pauline thought. Thompson recalls Tertullian's pointed question (What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?) with particular reference to the arts--specifically, literature and theater. The concluding article reminds us that character and conduct are formed by our communities. It raises the issue of the impact of modernity upon the Christian community.

A word of appreciation is due my colleagues on the faculty the Institute for Christian Studies for their cooperation in presenting these essays. Special thanks are due to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, faculty secretary, for her help in preparing this issue of the Faculty Bulletin.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE CHRONICLER AND ETHICS: THE ISSUE OF INTEGRITY

By Pat Graham

If ethics may be defined as “rules of conduct” or “moral code,” then there are several places in the Old Testament that one could turn to study the topic. In the Pentateuch one finds the largest single concentration of ancient Israelite legal literature in the Bible. Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, in particular, include a variety of legal codes (e.g., the decalog in Ex. 20:1-17, the Covenant Code in Ex. 20:22--23:33, and the Holiness Code in Lev. 17-26). A second body of Old Testament ethical material emerges in the wisdom corpus. While the Book of Proverbs maintains an optimistic spirit and presents the reader with pragmatic rules for securing the good life, Job and Ecclesiastes seem to have a bit less confidence in the rational operation of the universe and so speak from different perspectives on life and human conduct. The ethical admonitions of Israel’s prophetic literature offer a third source for the study of Old Testament ethics. While these three bodies

of literature may come to mind quickly when the subject of Old Testament ethics is broached, they do not exhaust the Old Testament's offering in this regard.

A fourth resource for the study of Old Testament ethics, although not as obvious as the other three, is the Old Testament historical literature. Apparently, it was also through historical narrative that some in ancient Israel set out to instruct the people in the norms of conduct. Among these writings, the Books of Chronicles are probably among the latest chronologically, and none of the books has received worse press with regard to the theological system that informs the author's presentation. As the Deuteronomistic history (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1, 2 Samuel, 1, 2 Kings) has been characterized as the writing of Israel's history according to the laws of Deuteronomy, the Chronicler's history (1, 2 Chronicles) has been described as the writing of Israel's history according to the Priestly Code (the laws found primarily in Ex. 25-31; 35-40; Lev.; and Num. 1-10). Consequently, the Chronicler (=CHR) has been charged with the legalism of popularly conceived post-exilic Judaism.

The purpose of this paper will be to suggest that integrity--in the sense of consistency and wholeness--plays an important role in the CHR's ethic. In addition, three related points will be suggested. First, it will be shown that the CHR saw in the Mosaic law the standard for his evaluation of Israel's history. Consequently, he

was neither an innovator nor a pragmatist who observed life and deduced the rules of human conduct from his observations. Secondly, since the CHR chose historical narrative as the genre for his work, his ethical guidance is presented in a largely indirect manner, viz., the reader is to learn proper conduct by the good and bad examples that the history of his people provides. Finally, the CHR's perspective cannot be adequately characterized as a harsh and arid legalism. He argues for the integrity of person and nation that combines whole-hearted trust in God with proper cultic observance.

The Source of Ethics

A recent investigation of 1, 2 Chronicles has concluded that the CHR drew on the legal materials in each of the pentateuchal sources J, D, and P, as well as on Israelite legislation not included in the present form of the Pentateuch. This may indicate that the final form of the Pentateuch had not yet been fixed at the time that the CHR composed his work.¹ The CHR's use of these laws is often indicated by his explicit references to Mosaic legislation. In the examples that follow, the CHR's allusions to the law of Moses find no parallel in the deuteronomistic history. It is stated, for example, that when David had the ark moved from the house of Obededom to Jerusalem, the Levites carried it on poles "just as Moses had commanded according to the word of Yahweh" (1 Chr. 15:15). This is apparently a reference to Exodus 25:13-15. Later, when the young king Joash set

out to gather funds to repair the temple in Jerusalem, the CHR declares that he reinstated “the tax of Moses” which had been levied on Israel in the wilderness (2 Chr. 24:6, 9). This is a reference to the half-shekal tax of Exodus 30:11-16 and 38:25-26. Finally, the CHR notes that Uzziah’s leprosy was the punishment of God on this king who assumed for himself the priestly prerogative of offering incense to God (2 Chr. 26:16-21). This act by the king of Judah violated the principle of Numbers 16:40, which held that only the descendants of Aaron were allowed to burn incense to God.

These examples, which could be multiplied, show that the CHR believed that his people’s ethical norm was to be found in the law of Moses, a code that came from ancient times and was divine in origin. In this sense, therefore, the CHR was a traditionalist rather than an innovator, and characteristically, his aim was to show how obedience or disobedience to the Mosaic code impinged on the history of his people.²

Ethical Concerns and Their Expression

Historical narrative, as a genre, does not lend itself to ethical instruction in the same ways that law, wisdom saying, and prophecy do. It must proceed indirectly and hope that the attentive reader will draw the appropriate conclusions.³ In this section, attention will be given first of all to some of the CHR’s most obvious ethical concerns, and then the discussion will turn to some of the characteristic ways that he went about expressing approval or disapproval for the various kings of Judah.

One of the CHR's most prominent ethical concerns involves the way that kings acted toward God. His account of Asa's reign is particularly useful in this regard, since it demonstrates several aspects of the issue. The CHR arranged Asa's reign as follows: 1) the king inaugurates religious reforms and is granted peace and a stronger kingdom (2 Chr. 14:1-8); 2) he relies on God when attacked by a larger Ethiopian army and is given victory (14:9-15); 3) he is commended by Azariah the prophet and leads his people to swear allegiance to Yahweh (15:1-19); 4) he is threatened by the armies of North Israel and relies on the Syrians for deliverance (16:1-6); and 5) he rejects the word of Hanani the prophet who rebuked him and consequently Asa falls ill and dies (16:7-14).

It is clear that while the initial segment of Asa's reign was characterized by faithfulness to God, the last part represented a rejection of Him. At first, Asa acted decisively to eradicate idolatry in Judah. His ethic did not require him to allow his subjects the freedom to choose their deity. As king, Asa saw it as his prerogative and even as his responsibility to make this choice for them and to compel obedience to his decision on pain of death (2 Chr. 15:13). He demanded absolute faithfulness to Yahweh and His law. The CHR describes this as entering "into a covenant to seek Yahweh the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their soul" and as "swearing to Yahweh with a loud voice" and "rejoicing over the

oath,” having “sworn with all their heart” and having “sought him with their whole desire” (verses 12, 14, 15). The CHR’s pride in Asa’s actions at this point is clear. The king acted courageously and without reservation, because God required the exclusive devotion of his people and would not accept half-hearted allegiance or obedience. Such devotion involved the corporate act of the people under the king’s leadership. In this way, when God’s people resolutely determined to serve him alone, they found joy and peace (2 Chr. 14:6, 7; 15:15).

Militarily, Asa’s reign was threatened in this first period by an Ethiopian army of a million men. The king did not despair but turned to Yahweh and relied upon him for victory (2 Chr. 14:11, 12). Consequently, the forces of Asa defeated the Ethiopian army and gathered considerable spoil. This first response by Asa to a military threat assumes special significance in light of the king’s later actions, when he was threatened by Baasha with his smaller Israelite army. In the latter instance, Asa bribed the Syrians to attack Israel from the north. This skillful maneuver caused the forces of Baasha to withdraw from their positions against Judah and allowed Asa’s forces to dismantle the Israelite fortifications (2 Chr. 16:1-6). While Asa’s actions may be commendable in terms of shrewd politics, they were indefensible in terms of the CHR’s religious ethic. They displayed a lack of trust in God and constituted the entry by Judah into a new covenant

that competed with the earlier one that Asa and Judah had made with God. The integrity of Judah's devotion to God was compromised.

Finally, Asa's response to the prophetic word merits consideration. After Judah's victory over the Ethiopians, Azariah exhorted Asa to further obedience, and the king responded enthusiastically by leading the people to commit themselves completely to God (2 Chr. 15:1-15). This account serves as a contrast, however, to Asa's later actions, when he was rebuked by Hanani the seer for his alliance with Syria against Israel. The prophet called attention to Asa's earlier victory against the Ethiopian army and affirmed God's continual eagerness to aid those who were devoted to Him.

Were not the Ethiopians and the Libyans a huge army with exceedingly many chariots and horsemen? Yet because you relied on Yahweh, he gave them into your hand. For the eyes of Yahweh run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show his might in behalf of those whose heart is blameless toward him. (2 Chr. 16:8, 9)

Asa reacted angrily against the prophet. He imprisoned Hanani and vented his wrath further by cruelly afflicting others of his subjects (verse 10). The CHR moves quickly to the end of Asa's reign to note that within three years the king became ill, suffered for three years, and finally died. Even in his illness, however, the king failed to rely upon God, preferring instead to trust in his own physicians (verses 12, 13). The CHR's account of Asa's reign demonstrates clearly the author's conviction that one must never reject the prophetic word. When Asa received the words of Azariah with humility

and acted obediently, God rewarded him and his people with rest from their enemies. Later, however, when Asa arrogantly rejected the prophetic rebuke, disaster ensued. The same point is made time and again elsewhere by the CHR: the leader of God's people must always be responsive and obedient to the word of God and so maintain the integrity of that relationship with Him.

At times, one glimpses something of the CHR's ethics that concern interpersonal relationships. Since his aim was not primarily that of teaching people how to act toward one another, what he has to offer in the latter regard is admittedly slim. Nevertheless, there are two accounts that indicate two aspects of the CHR's values for human conduct. The first concerns Joash.⁵ This king of Judah had been hidden as an infant by the priest Jehoiada and his wife, when Queen Athaliah attempted to slay all the princes who might eventually pose a threat to her position as the sole ruler of Judah (2 Chr. 22:10-12). After six years, however, Jehoiada led a revolt against Athaliah and set Joash on the throne of Judah (2 Chr. 23:1-15, 20, 21). Joash's subsequent rule was guided by Jehoiada's counsel (2 Chr. 24:2, 14). After the priest died, however, Joash listened to a different group of advisers--the princes of Judah--and led his people into idolatry (2 Chr. 24:15-19). At this point, Jehoiada's son Zechariah was directed by the Spirit of God to rebuke Joash for his sin. The king failed to listen, though, or to treat him leniently out of

respect for his deceased father Jehoiada. Instead, Joash had Zechariah stoned to death (2 Chr. 24:20-22). The CHR draws attention to this fact by his remark, “Thus Joash the king did not remember the kindness which Jehoiada, Zechariah’s father, had shown him, but killed his son” (verse 22). When Joash is assassinated a bit later, the CHR makes it a point to link his death with his crime against Zechariah: “his (=Joash’s) servants conspired against him because of the blood of the son of Jehoiada the priest, and slew him on his bed” (verse 25).

The ethical value that underpins the CHR’s account of Joash’s dealings with Zechariah is clear. One has the obligation to repay kindness with kindness. Jehoiada had been responsible for preserving Joash’s life, installing him as king over Judah, and faithfully guiding his rule as God’s representative. There was a kind of consistency or integrity that characterized Jehoiada’s treatment of Joash--the former always showed kindness and loyalty toward the young prince. Therefore, Joash’s decision to execute Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, was an unconscionable act of ingratitude and showed the king’s lack of integrity.

A second example of the CHR’s ethic for interpersonal relations is found in the account of Ahaz’s reign in 2 Chronicles 28. While 2 Kings 16 reports that Syria and Israel attacked Judah, there is little indication that they were successful.⁶ The CHR, though, offers a wealth of information about this conflict. It is reported that

Pekah led Israel to slaughter 120,000 of Judah's army in a single day and that Israel took 200,000 captives from Judah, intending to keep them as slaves. Although the CHR had little sympathy for the idolatrous Ahaz and Judah, he was scandalized at Israel's lack of compassion and sense of kinship. He reports that the Israelite army took the captives from "their own kinsfolk, women, sons, and daughters" (verse 8). The speech of the Israelite prophet Oded, as he rebuked the victorious Israelite army, underscores the CHR'S concern.

Behold, because Yahweh, the God of your fathers, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand, but you have slain them in a rage which has reached up to heaven. And now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves. Have you not sins of your own against Yahweh your God? (verses 9, 10)

The matter is resolved quickly, however, when the leading citizens of Israel refuse to allow the plunder from Judah to be brought into Samaria (verses 8, 12-14). At this point, the soldiers of Israel simply walked away from the captives and the spoil, leaving them at the gates of Samaria. The response of the leaders of Samaria was remarkable. They clothed, shod, fed, and anointed the newly released captives and then conducted them—"carrying the weak on asses"--back to their countrymen at Jericho (verses 14, 15). This incredible display of kindness to the enemy populace bears a striking resemblance in several ways to the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament (Lk. 10:29-37). The account affirms the CHR'S

horror at the idea of Israelites needlessly slaughtering large numbers of their own kinsmen and cruelly enslaving a multitude that included women and children. In spite of the antipathy that the CHR held for the people of Israel on account of their idolatry and rebellion against the descendants of David, he nevertheless maintained that Judah and Israel were kindred peoples and belonged together as one.⁷ The ties of kinship were important to the CHR, and the slaughter or enslavement of one's kinsmen deeply offended his ethical sensibilities. The acts of compassion by the leading citizens of Samaria, however, serve to reaffirm the integrity or unity of God's people and model the compassion that the CHR deemed appropriate for the unfortunate victims of war between kinsmen.

Finally, it is helpful at this point to call attention to several ways that the CHR went about indicating his approval or disapproval of the actions of the characters in his history. First of all, there is his short-term retribution dogma or conviction that each king of Judah was rewarded or punished during his own lifetime for his behavior.⁸ Faithfulness to God on the part of the king led to a successful reign militarily, economically, and personally.⁹ The CHR clearly indicates his approval for a king's good behavior by noting the magnificent size of the ruler's army, his great building projects, and his striking victories over his enemies. Frequently, the CHR will remark that God gave a king "rest" and so indicate that the king and his people enjoyed a peaceful relief from attack by

neighboring countries. This, in turn, often allowed the king to focus his efforts on the strengthening of his own nation. It is erroneous to conclude from this, however, that Judah's wicked kings never engaged in building projects or raised sizeable armies. Finally, the CHR indicates his approval of a king by means of the sweeping evaluations of the ruler's character and behavior, which regularly occur at the beginning of his account for each king.

Kings who disobeyed God, on the other hand, were punished swiftly and terribly. Sometimes punishment meant defeat for the ruler's army on the battlefield, but on other occasions the punishment came more directly and personally in the form of disease or assassination. Finally, the CHR usually avails himself of the burial notice at the end of his account for each king in order to give a final verdict on the ruler's conduct. If the king was faithful to God, his body was laid to rest in the royal tombs, but if the ruler had abandoned God, his remains were buried elsewhere.¹⁰

In all these examples of the CHR's ethical concerns the issue of integrity has been apparent. The CHR praises the king, whose reign is characterized by consistency. Such a king neither worships foreign gods nor relies on alliances with foreign political powers. The praiseworthy kings of Judah show integrity: their commitment to Yahweh is complete and exclusive. Moreover, their integrity becomes evident in their dealings with other people. They recognize the bonds forged by kinship and acts of kindness, and so behave in a way that is consistent

with those relationships. What emerges in the lives of such kings is a consistency and congruence of life--integrity in the whole person and in all his actions.

The Tenor of the Chronicler's Work

The following quotation illustrates the view of the CHR's history that has been held by a number of scholars in the past:

The religious value of Chronicles lies in the emphasis given to the institutional forms of religion. Forms, ceremonies, institutions of one sort or another, are necessary for the maintenance of religious life. The Chronicler, it is true, overemphasized their importance and his teachings are vitiated by a false doctrine of divine interference without human endeavour, and a false notion of righteousness consisting largely in the observance of legal forms and ceremonies However narrow the Chronicler's teachings may be considered and however artificial their products, without the shell of the Judaistic legalism and ecclesiasticism it is difficult to see how the precious truths of divine revelation in Hebrew prophecy could have been preserved. Otherwise amid the encroaching forces of the Persian, Greek, and Roman civilisations they would have been dissipated and no place would have been prepared for the appearance of Christ and the growth of Christianity.¹¹

This quotation from just after the turn of the century suggests several points at which the CHR's thinking needs correction: 1) overemphasis on the importance of religious institutions and their rituals, 2) the mistaken idea that righteousness consists in the performance of religious ritual, 3) a narrow perspective on life or religion, and 4) Judaistic legalism and ecclesiasticism. The value of the CHR's work, however, from the perspective of religion is to be found in its assertion that religious institution and ritual are important and in its preservation of the valuable truths of divine revelation in Hebrew

prophecy. Consequently, the CHR may be credited with helping prepare a people or setting for the appearance of Christ and the growth of Christianity.

Some of these criticisms of the CHR appear warranted. One must, for example, acknowledge that the CHR is indeed concerned with the cult and religious ritual, and that he does, in fact, describe Israel's history with an eye toward observance of God's law, taking pains to note the punishments and rewards received by each king. It does not seem reasonable, however, to dismiss so quickly the CHR's religious perspective as legalistic, narrow, and mistaken. Such treatment of the CHR ignores several quite important and positive aspects of his presentation.

First of all, the CHR stresses faith in God just as other biblical writers, and never does he subordinate it to the performance of religious ritual. When foreign armies threaten the people of God, it is not military strategy that wins the day or gains divine approval, but it is trust in God (e.g., Asa and the Ethiopians in 2 Chr. 14 and Jehoshaphat against Ammon, Moab, and the men of Mt. Seir in 2 Chr. 20). Similarly, when the matter of worship arises, it is complete dedication or fidelity to God that is most important (e.g., the covenants of Asa [2 Chr. 15:8-19], Hezekiah [2 Chr. 29:3-11], and Josiah [2 Chr. 34:29-33]).

Secondly, it is by no means the case that the CHR is legalistic in the way that legalism is popularly characterized, viz., that one views law as a list of minimum

requirements to be met and as a means of indebting God to oneself. On the contrary, the CHR viewed law as the expression of the divine will and as something to be obeyed with joy and gratitude. The building of the temple under David and Solomon--a matter of great concern for the CHR--was not accomplished by a minimal obedience to law, but by the joyous and willing response of king and people to their God. Neither did the CHR portray their gifts to build the temple as a means of indebting God to Israel or as a reason for human pride in accomplishment. On the contrary, the CHR portrayed David and his people as giving credit to God for their gifts.

Then the people rejoiced because these had given 'willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the Lord; David the king also rejoiced greatly. . . . But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from thee, and of thy own have we given thee. . . . all this abundance that we have provided for building thee a house for thy holy name comes from thy hand and is all thy own. (1 Chr. 29:9, 14, 16)

Moreover, the CHR apparently maintained the same perspective toward the temple cult itself. Worship there is not presented as barren or burdensome, but as the source for joy, celebration and life--a place of prayer and access to God.¹²

Finally, the CHR is far from being content with the performance of external religious rites. He stresses the importance of personal integrity and congruence between heart and deed. One regains divine favor not by the mere outward performance of certain religious rituals, but by a sincere change of heart. King and people recognize their sin and turn to God in humility and prayer to seek

deliverance. This, in fact, offers one a clue to help make sense of the CHR's attitude toward the cult. The CHR did not elevate cultic observance above faith in God. On the contrary, he maintained that both were important and advocated a kind of integrity in which trust in God found expression in the cult. The distinction between faith in God and cultic observance, which is so often made by modern authors, may well be quite alien to the way that people in ancient Israel thought about religion.

Conclusions

This paper has not set out to represent the CHR as the purveyor of a new ethical system that rises above all others in Scripture. The intent has been more modest: to argue for a reassessment of the CHR on the basis of a sympathetic reading of his history. It should be acknowledged that the CHR was driven by ethical concerns that in many ways were similar to those of his predecessors and contemporaries. His fault is probably less that of holding an inferior ethic or theology than that of adhering to a rigidly consistent system of history.

The CHR urged respect for and obedience to the ancient laws, because he believed that the destiny of God's people was at stake. Integrity must be found in Israel, the CHR maintained, since God required the sort of whole-hearted response that makes no allowances for divided loyalties or grudging obedience. In addition,

the CHR did not see the cult as a realm that was independent of or separate from the realm of faith. The two were intimately related for him. Consequently, the person of faith rigorously obeys the divine will that has found expression in the law of Moses.

This call for integrity and wholeness in one's dealing with God and other people may have something to offer the contemporary church. The Christian cannot afford to divide life into discreet compartments--faith here, worship there, and treatment of neighbor in a third place. Faith demands the submission of the entire person to the divine will. God must be trusted at all times--no matter what the danger--and one's worship must be offered to Him alone and in a way that is consistent with His nature and will. Finally, human beings must be attentive to the bonds that unite them and so treat one another with kindness and mercy. As was the case in the CHR's day, so also in our own the community of faith is called to consistency and wholeness--to integrity.

Notes

- ¹ J. R. Shaver, "Torah and the Chronicler's History Work: An Inquiry into the Chronicler's References to Laws, Festivals and Cultic Institutions in Relation to Pentateuchal Legislation," (University of Notre Dame Ph.D. dissertation, 1983) 183-7.
- ² Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 1:349-50; Robert North, "Theology of the Chronicler," JBL 82 (1963) 372-3.
- ³ On occasion, however, one suspects that some speeches have been directed over the heads of the immediate audience to the CHR's readers. On the CHR's speeches, see Gerhard von Rad, "The Levitical Sermon in I and II Chronicles," in The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 267-80.
- ⁴ The theological basis behind the CHR's arrangement of Asa's reign is treated by Wilhelm Rudolph ("Der Aufbau der Asa-Geschichte (2 CHR. XIV-XVI)," VT 2 [1952] 367-71) and Raymond Dillard ("The Reign of Asa (2 Chronicles 14-16): An Example of the Chronicler's Theological Method," JETS 23 [1980] 207-18).
- ⁵ My understanding of the CHR's treatment of Joash's reign is offered in "The Composition of 2 Chronicles 24," in Christian Teaching: Studies in Honor of LeMoine G. Lewis, ed. by Everett Ferguson (Abilene: ACU, 1981) 138-155.
- ⁶ The relationship of 2 Chronicles 28 to the other accounts of Ahaz's reign is treated in some detail by Peter R. Ackroyd in Historians and Prophets," SEA 33 (1968) 22-37. For a presentation of the most widely held reconstruction of the Syro-Ephraimitic War, see John Bright, A History of Israel, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 273-5. An alternative interpretation has been proposed by Bustenay Oded, "The Historical Background of the Syro-Ephraimite War Reconsidered," CBQ 34 (1972) 153-65.

- ⁷ On the CHR's view of the northern kingdom, see H. G. M. Williamson, Israel in the Books of Chronicles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and R. J. Coggins, Samaritans and Jews, Growing Points in Theology (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975).
- ⁸ The CHR's view of divine retribution is summarized in the following: von Rad, Theology, 1:349-50; North, "Theology," 372-4; and Jacob M. Myers, "The Kerygma of the Chronicler," In 20 (1966) 262-8.
- ⁹ Peter Welten (Geschichte und Geschichtsdarstellung in den Chronikbüchern, WMANT, 42 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973]) has identified and treated extensively three areas that were of interest to the CHR and that were used by him to indicate his approval or disapproval for a king: fortifications and building programs, condition of the army, and battle reports.
- ¹⁰ The CHR apparently excluded the following kings from burial in the royal tombs, even though 1, 2 Kings places them there: Joram (2 Kg. 8:24; 2 Chr. 21:20), Joash (2 Kg. 12:22; 2 Chr. 24:25), and Ahaz (2 Kg. 16:20; 2 Chr. 28:27).
- ¹¹ E. L. Curtis and A. A. Madsen, The Books of Chronicles, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910) 16.
- ¹² This aspect of the CHR's theology is related to a "diminishing devotion" in the post-exilic Jewish community by Roddy L. Braun in "The Message of Chronicles: Rally 'Round the Temple," CTM 22 (1971) 512-13.

AN EXPOSITION: WHAT IS GOOD?

By Rick Marrs

“With what shall I come before the Lord,
 and bow myself before God on high?
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
 with calves a year old?
 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
 with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
 Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
 the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
 He has showed you, O man, what is good;
 and what does the Lord require of you
 but to do justice, and to love kindness,
 and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:6-8

Several years ago, a cartoon depicted Satan standing at the gates of hell welcoming newcomers. The caption below read, “You will find that here there is no right or wrong . . . only what works for you.” Today we find ourselves living in a society which is sharply divided over what constitutes right and wrong. Our society comprises significantly divergent perspectives from adherents of extreme permissiveness (for whom right constitutes whatever “works for you”), to supporters of utilitarianism (for whom right is whatever benefits the most), to

advocates of ultra-conservatism (who tend to make every issue moral, from prayer in schools to the Panama Canal, and to speak authoritatively on all such matters). In such a context, the message of Micah needs to be heard again. As Christians, we must continually ask, “What is good,” or, as the parallel line states, “What does the Lord require?”¹

With What Do I Approach God?

As moderns, we often approach the Old Testament text with some bias, thankful that we have freed ourselves from the external ritualism and legalism of our Old Testament forefathers. And yet, we pay a heavy price for this bias, for in so doing we no longer hear God’s word addressed to us. Conversely, if we are willing to identify with spiritual ancestors, we may hear God’s ancient word once again speaking to our modern context.

As we enter the social setting of Micah 6:1-8, we find ourselves in the midst of a court scene. The Lord is indicting his people for their breach of covenant. Yahweh asks, “What have I done to deserve such a response?” Most significantly, the Lord is addressing a people who see themselves as devoutly religious. Their sacrifices are numerous, their prayers profusive, their worship elaborate.² Ironically, their religion is the heart of the problem! Apparently Micah’s contemporaries see themselves as appropriately religious, even though their society is in total disarray!

In response to Yahweh’s stinging indictment, we hear the accused replying:

With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high? (v. 6)

Even though the people ask the question, from what follows it seems clear that they presume to know the answer. If God is unsatisfied, then they simply must increase the amounts--more calves, rams, oil, and so on.

As we read this response, we may be tempted to smile wryly, grateful that we have gone beyond Israel in thinking that sacrifices (however substantial) could make one acceptable before God. And yet, if we are honest, we often come before God in worship “toting our credentials.” We, like the rich young ruler, come with a desire to fulfill all the requirements so that we will be declared “good” by God. Thus, to modernize this ancient text, we assume that what God wants from us are our most valuable possessions, our securities, our fortunes, and the like. If God is unsatisfied, then we must increase the amounts! Even though these offerings may at times reflect lofty goals, we must once again hear Yahweh’s response to “what is good.” Micah 6:8 is addressed to an audience asking the question, but living convinced they already know the answer!

Micah’s Word of God

He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (v. 8)

Micah's answer was neither new nor unique. It was as old as the Decalogue. Not only had Israel been informed of God's will, she had even received a demonstration of that will in Yahweh's gracious behavior toward her. God's actions toward Israel set the standard for his expectations of her behavior toward others. For Micah, the "good" Yahweh expected from his people was demonstrated in the "good"³ he manifested toward Israel.

Micah called his listeners to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." The terms justice and kindness, are both familiar covenant terms. For Micah, to practice justice means to actualize the will of God in one's daily affairs, to uphold the right in one's daily conduct.

[Justice] means guiding one's activity not according to personal advantage, not according to personal comfort, not according to the desire to dominate, but according to God's will as it is formulated, for instance, in the Decalogue.⁴

The prophets of the eighth century univocally decry the social injustice rampant throughout Israel and Judah. Tragically, although religion was ever-present, social justice was noticeably absent.⁵

If justice was absent, how much more so its counterpart "steadfast love" (RSV: "kindness"). The term used here by Micah is hesed, the term for covenant loyalty. Incredibly, Israel /Judah of the eighth century could worship God at one moment and then exploit the poor the next! God's people inexplicably manifested no sense of community. Again, for Micah this could only be because Israel had not taken

seriously God's treatment of them.⁶ Micah's self-assured audience had never seen themselves as truly needy and helpless before God. For Micah, what was needed was not more legislation, but a restoration of a sense of community, a renewed sense of brotherhood. To put God's will into practice (i.e., "to do justice"), is, in essence, to practice love (i.e., "to love kindness").

Finally, Micah calls his listeners to "walk humbly with your God" (so RSV). This is not a third directive in a checklist; rather it is an inclusive expression of what has just been stated concretely. Only one who walks humbly with God can practice justice and manifest steadfast love. Micah's term "humbly" does not connote self-effacement; rather it conveys the nuance of attentiveness or thoughtfulness. This nuance is best exemplified in the imagery found in Psalm 123:2:

Behold, as the eyes of servants
 look to the hand of their master,
 as the eyes of a maid
 to the hand of her mistress,
 so our eyes look to the Lord our God . . .

To walk humbly with God means not going one's own way presumptuously, but watchfully attending to the will and way of God! At its profoundest level, to walk humbly with God is to practice justice and manifest steadfast love.

Certainly the ultimate model of one who walked humbly with God was Jesus Christ. No passage better expresses our Lord's studied attention to the will of God than Philippians 2:5-8:

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.⁷

To walk humbly is to refuse to become self-satisfied, arrogant, and intolerant critics of others' sins. It is rather to see ourselves as glad recipients of the grace and forgiveness of God. Only then can we practice the justice and love God seeks from us.⁸

Conclusion

On January 20, 1977, President-elect Jimmy Carter, in his inaugural address, said: "To take my oath of office I put my hand on the timeless passage of the ancient prophet Micah" and then proceeded to read Micah 6:8. He concluded his address stating that he hoped after four years our nation could say that not in vain had the words of Micah been recalled; that there had been a striving for justice, kindness, and humility.

As children of God, each day we must grapple with actualizing the reign of God in our lives. We must ask not only, "What is good?" but also, "What does the Lord require?" An easy out, for us as for ancient Israel, is to give him "things" (in whatever form they may take). However, if we take seriously Micah's message, we realize that God is not simply seeking "more religion;" rather, he wants our religion to impact on all aspects of our lives! At its deepest level, Micah 6:6-8 really is about sacrifice. However, it is not of a kind posed by the question (v. 6). Rather, it

is a sacrifice of the self. What God is seeking is not the life of something, but the life of one who stands before him and walks with him. Only one who has come to know the empowering way of God (Micah would say--who sees himself as an undeserving recipient of the saving acts of God) can stand for the eternal values of God.

What is good?

The good that Yahweh seeks in every person among his people is rooted in making justice and steadfast love the controlling interests in all of life, thereby fostering a relationship with Yahweh that is characterized by paying careful and judicious attention to honoring his claim on all of life. This is the offering Yahweh accepts.⁹

Notes

- ¹ The Hebrew literally reads “and what Yahweh seeks from you.”
- ² For a scathing critique of Jerusalem’s worship from a contemporary of Micah, see Isaiah 1:10-17.
- ³ Not unimportantly, in v. 5d, the Hebrew literally reads, “that you may know the righteous (acts) of the Lord.”
- ⁴ H. Wolff, Micah the Prophet (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 106.
- ⁵ A classic New Testament example of Micah’s opening statements is found in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The rich man apparently had no concept of social justice. Certainly it was not his fault that Lazarus was in such a beggarly condition; it was, however, his fault that Lazarus remained in that

condition! Strikingly, in response to the rich man's request that a warning be sent to his brothers, Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." For Abraham, as for Micah, the message was old and well known.

- ⁶ This sense of shared commitment or loyalty is well illustrated in the dialogue between Rahab and the spies in Joshua 2:12. Rahab entreats the spies, ". . . as I have dealt kindly (Heb.: hesed) with . . . me."
- ⁷ We would do well to avoid the romantic notions often envisioned by the phrase "walking with God" (e.g., attested in such songs as "I Come to the Garden Alone"). Biblically, to "walk with God" involves going where God has gone. If we take such a journey seriously, we come to the stark realization that God in Jesus Christ has journeyed quite often in rather undesirable places with rather unsavory characters!
- ⁸ An excellent NT example of this charge of Micah occurs in John 7:53--8:11. In the episode of Jesus and the woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus finds himself "caught on the horns of a dilemma." Will he take a hard or soft line? Dramatically, we find in Jesus' response that precious blend of justice and compassion: "Neither do I condemn you (compassion), but, go, and sin no more (justice). Not insignificantly, this woman found Jesus' attitude toward her remarkably different from that of his opponents. Jesus' opponents saw the woman simply as an object to be exploited in an argument; Jesus saw her as one desperately in need of faithful commitment.
- ⁹ A. Hunter, Seek the Lord (Baltimore: St. Mary's Press, 1982) 252.

OCCUPATIONS AND PREOCCUPATIONS IN CHRIST*

By David Worley

Every business has an effective policy. This policy or course of action can be found in written and unwritten forms. The latter, unwritten form can be mediated to the employee in various ways, from stories told about the boss, to jokes told about the competition, to informal peer pressure at coffee breaks. Whether in these informal oral traditions or in a printed handbook, a business reflects and evolves a policy.

The Christian in the business world should be concerned about business policy. In sanctioning an organization and procedures, a written business policy inevitably supports and encourages a cluster of dominant images and hierarchy of values.¹ Even the unwritten policy which one gradually learns as an employee encourages certain attitudes and dispositions toward self and others.² Indeed, the operative

*While this paper was prompted by invitation to the Christian Scholars Conference 1983, it has been written with a view to a larger, somewhat different audience. It is intended as a resource paper for Christians in the business world who aspire to worship God in their occupations. It is, however, a resource paper limited to a consideration of only one portion of scripture, Paul's letters and life.

policy in a business can contribute substantially to a person's sense of identity as he/she begins to measure personal worth and fulfillment in terms of the images and values elevated in the rhythm of business activity.

The person in Christ and in the business world should, therefore, be concerned about the business policy because business policy is concerned about the kind of person the employee is, even to the point of supporting or discouraging certain character traits. Although the Christian owner or manager may be the only one in a position to establish and change business policy, the Christian employee must be no less aware of the forces which vie for the ambitions and imagination of the heart.

This interrelationship of business policy and personal character may sound ominous and threatening. It may be. Yet some of the cardinal virtues of Wall Street, honesty, dependability, loyalty, politeness, virtues frequently encouraged in business policy, do not sound on the surface antithetical to life in Christ.³ One can, of course, imagine situations in which employee loyalty and dependability begin to contravene allegiance to the Lord Jesus but such is not necessarily the case.

How to best understand and deal with the formulations and power of policy has become a topic of much discussion the past decade in many professional and graduate schools. In his recent survey of Christian ethics (1982), Edward Long devotes an entire

chapter under “New Frameworks” to “Ethics in Vocational and Policy-Making Settings.”⁴ Our concern here, however, is not to report what philosophers and ethicists have said about business policy but rather to listen as Christians to the available resources in scripture for advice on how to think and talk about life in Christ and life in the business world, more particularly to read Paul’s letters and hear his autobiography for instruction on how a Christian should proceed in his/her occupation under the influence of business policy. To do this, we shall first consider the few remarks Paul makes about occupations and other economic matters. Then we shall turn to see what Paul might have recommended as the Christian’s pre-occupations in the marketplace.

Occupations

After his conversion, C. S. Lewis questioned whether his own occupation in life, as a broker in the literature of our culture, was really worth pursuing in view of salvation in Christ: “If it [culture] is a thing of so little value, how are you justified in spending so much of your life on it?”⁵

In the World. Certainly the question Lewis raised about his own profession has been echoed numerous times by other believers about their own vocations. What occupational pursuit or other life commitment (e.g., marriage, cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-35) doesn’t seemingly divide one’s devotions? The dilemma, of course, is part of the larger issue of the Christian’s life in the world. It is the very subject of H. Richard

Niebuhr's classic Christ and Culture in which Niebuhr types the various responses Christians have taken toward life in human society.

Some of Paul's words do sound to us today like calls for separation from the world:

“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them, for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light” (Eph. 5:6-8).

Yet in other passages Paul clarifies that separation from the world is not intended:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; not at all meaning the immoral of this world or the greedy and robbers or idolaters since then you would need to go out of the world” (1 Cor. 5:9, 10).⁶

“In the world” then what occupations may be pursued? Are some more or less suitable for Christians? Where Paul does mention occupations, in his letters to the Thessalonian Christians, Paul's encouragement to them to “work with their hands” arises first of all from his ever present concern to ensure brotherly love and internal cohesion in the church, and at the same time protect the church from any unnecessary social reproach brought on from outsiders. Not just at Thessalonica but apparently elsewhere as well, Paul made such instruction for the church's welfare a regular feature of his initial teaching to newly established churches (cf. “as we charged you,” 1 Thess 4:11).

What Paul feared, perhaps, was that the church, as brotherly love did increase (1 Thess. 4:9, 10), might be perceived by the outsider in its group cohesion (“to

aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs,” 4:11) as anti-social, if not haters of mankind. Such slander had befallen the Epicureans who had formed communities extolling the virtue of “withdrawing into leisure with one’s friends.”⁷ To counteract this, Paul expected the Christians to engage in occupational interaction with outsiders (“so that you may command the respect of outsiders,” 4:12a).

A secondary reason for Paul’s encouragement to work is in order that as few as possible within the church will be in financial need (“and be dependent on nobody” 4:12b). Some in Thessalonica refused to discipline themselves to work (2 Thess. 3:11). Paul has to charge the church “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” to keep away from such undisciplined Christians (3:6). At the same time Paul has to exhort the church to not let such behavior lead to a weariness in well doing (3:13), i.e. a lack of support for those really in need.

Paul does mention a particular kind of occupation to the Thessalonians, handwork. This was, of course, Paul’s own occupation (“we labor, working with our own hands” 1 Cor. 4:12). Luke, in Acts 18:3, reveals his more specific trade as tent making, or perhaps better, leatherworking.⁸

Was then Paul recommending manual work as the most suitable occupation for the Thessalonian Christians? The question is not really as ludicrous as it might

sound. The suitability of occupations was a topic of discussion among many Hellenistic moralists and philosophers. It is true that many moralists looked down on craftsmen and tradesmen but there were others like Musonius Rufus and Dio Chrysostom who recommended handwork.⁹ For Paul to encourage “working with hands” in view of the outsider’s opinion means evidently that the outsider would take no social offense at hand labor. Indeed the outsiders who themselves were probably artisans, shopkeepers and tradesmen hardly despised their own jobs, otherwise their tombstones which have come down to us would not have so boldly advertised their occupations.¹⁰

Perhaps Paul meant by “work with hands” no more than “doing honest work” (cf. Eph. 4:28). However, it was probably the case that more of the Thessalonian Christians fit into the category of handworkers than any other. In a recent careful survey of the individuals mentioned in Paul’s letters and their social level, Wayne Meeks concludes that “the ‘typical’ Christian, the one who most often signals his presence in the letters by one or another small clue, is a free artisan or small trader. Some even in those occupational categories had houses, slaves, the ability to travel and other signs of wealth.”¹¹

Paul, of course, could maximize his occupation in handcrafts, to the Thessalonians as a living example of the exhortation to manual work (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7-9), to the Corinthians as a man fatigued, in contrast to the elevated self understanding of some Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:8-13) and in his forgoing financial support as a living example of bypassing “rights” in the interest of love (1 Cor. 9).

But these pedagogical uses of his occupation do not explain Paul's decision to engage in leatherworking. Perhaps it was his father's occupation to which he was apprenticed. Even then one must think that Paul's decision to stay with it involved other factors. The most attractive explanation is that this occupation provided Paul with considerable flexibility. He could pick up his knives and sewing awl and move to the next town and headquarter in the neighborhood of other leatherworkers, like Priscilla and Aquilla, and start work. The workshop itself, in the daily traffic of customers and co-workers, was a good place for conversation, and certainly Paul used such opportunities as an apostle of Christ Jesus.

We, therefore, have no record of Paul advising those first urban Christians concerning more and less suitable occupations. Aside from dishonest pursuits (e.g., thievery, Eph. 4:28), Paul apparently addressed and accepted Christians in their various occupations. Surprisingly, his only real qualifications were in view of the outsider (1 Thess. 4:12; cf. Col. 4:5). Occupational interaction with the outsiders could prevent some misimpressions of this new group of believers as being isolationists and anti-social. One might also detect in Paul's regard for the outsider's opinion some recognition of a norm of decent occupational/economic behavior valued even in the buying and selling in the world. After all, as in the collection for the Jerusalem saints, Paul aimed at what was honorable "not only in the Lord's sight, but also in the sight of men" (2 Cor. 8:21).

What we have suspected as implicit in Paul's address to handworkers in Thessalonica, Paul makes explicit in 1 Corinthians 7:20-24:

“Each person should continue in that calling into which he was called. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't worry about it. But if, indeed you become manumitted, by all means [as a freedman] live according to [God's calling] Each one should continue to live in accord with his calling [in Christ] in the sight of God.”¹²

Speaking here not of occupation, but of a legal and social status, slavery, Paul indicates that a person's calling to salvation in Christ does not alienate one from his/her situation or status in the world but rather challenges the believer to live faithfully right where he/she is.

Paul, in fact, in two extended exhortations does challenge slaves, and to a lesser degree owners, to faithfulness in their respective status (Eph. 6: 5-9; Col. 3:22--4: 1; cf. 1 Tim. 6:1, 2; Titus 2:9, 10). It is in these exhortations that we have the closest analogies in Paul's letters to anything like advice we might seek on employer/employee relations in our own world.

Employee/Employer. The context for these exhortations is in itself revealing. The slave/master relationship occurs in Paul as one of three pairs of relationships, the other two being wife/husband, children/father. At least since Aristotle these same three pairs of relationships had been variously discussed by philosophers as constitutive of the

household, and in turn fundamental for the constitution of the state. Some, in fact, added a fourth element to the discussion, viz. the acquisition and utilization of money.¹³ It is only in his discussion of riches in 1 Timothy 6, in a letter which itself has considerable concern for the stability of home and church, that Paul may perhaps be reflecting the pattern of adding a fourth element to the discussion of household economy.

In both Ephesians and Colossians Paul takes up the three pairs of household relationships as part of a larger exhortation to behave as children of light (Eph. 4:22--5:21) putting on the new nature (Col. 3:5-17). Paul's discourse on these relationships within this broader context, at once, shifts the significance of household etiquette away from any implications for the political realm, to its significance in reflecting the image of God (Eph. 4:24; 5:1; Col. 3:10). This has its own implications for slave and master as we shall see.

Moreover there is a corollary reason for Paul's attention to household conduct. In both letters Paul immediately precedes his address to the household members by talking about activity in the church's assembly (Eph. 5:18-20; Col. 3:16, 17); then he proceeds to his exhortations to the household members. What is the connection? Apparently Paul is saying that the new life in Christ and in assembly does not erase the structured relationships of the household (cf. 1 Cor. 14:29-35; 1 Tim. 2:1--3:15). Certainly something radically new has happened. Paul has already said to the Colossians, "here

there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all” (3:11). But putting on the new nature does not mean a household “free for all.” And while slave may be a brother in Christ to master, and slave may admonish a master in “psalm, hymn and spiritual song” still the slave is slave and master is master. Paul goes so far to say that the slave’s service to master is “doing the will of God” (Eph. 6:6).

“Setting one’s mind on things that are above” (Col. 3:2) does not mean then forgetting things at home. In fact, quite to the contrary! The slave and master in putting on the new nature are to be renewed after the image of the Creator in and through their very duties and relationships as slave and master. With this broader context in mind, we may now look in closer detail at Paul’s hortatory utterances to slave and master.

In his words to slaves, Paul is concerned with the attitude and perspective toward the service. Through a series of prepositional phrases, Paul characterizes the attitude toward master and work: with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, from the soul, with enthusiasm. What is striking, however, is the perspective Paul urges: view your service as to the Lord, not to earthly masters. No longer is it only the service to the deprived which is service to Jesus (Matt. 25:40); now service to the earthly master is service to the Lord in heaven.

As for the slave, so for an employee today such a perspective is not attained overnight. The quality and earnestness of job performance is in our world considered a

function of promotional opportunity and pay scale. Even for the slave, who could look forward to and expect manumission after a number of years of labor, that work for the master could be performed which would be most easily seen by the master.¹⁴ Over against these human incentives, Paul urges a heavenly perspective and a heavenly incentive.

Paul, of course, is not sanctioning all labor “as to the Lord.” The perspective itself is a guard against such a notion. Engagement in dishonesty can hardly be considered as to the Lord. Paul explicitly warns against misappropriation in Titus 2:9. In his letter to Philemon (v. 18), Paul recognizes Onesimus’ past wrong to Philemon. Paul presupposes in his exhortation to the slaves that the labor is honest (Col. 3:25).

Taking such a heavenly perspective seriously will have its effects. Words of malice and slander on the job will be put away not only because service is to the Lord but also because the employee bears the image of the Creator to the outsider (Col. 3:8-10; 4:5, 6; 1 Tim. 6:1, 2; Titus 2:9, 10). Paul intends also that the work be done “with enthusiasm” (Eph. 6:7). This may be the hardest word for an employee to hear, much less understand. Boredom has become a word so associated with work. As one high school student said about her job, “It’s fun for a while but then it becomes a drag.” Yet Paul’s words to slaves address the attitude and energy in work. Paul encourages without equivocation “work from the soul” (Col. 3:23), with a view not to earthly but

heavenly incentive: “knowing that from the Lord you will receive the repayment in inheritance” (v. 24).

A cynic might wonder if slave owners had paid Paul to write those words in his letters. They sound so beneficial to the master. Certainly Paul hoped masters would receive benefits (Eph. 6:7), but his words were indeed spoken to enrich the slaves’ life in Christ.

Paul’s explicit directions to the masters are by contrast much briefer (Eph. 6:8, 9; Col. 4:1). Though he does warn against threats to slaves (Eph. 6:9), one may assume that in the first century most slave owners treated their slaves well.¹⁵ What Paul assumes as the fundamental difference for the Christian master is the incentive for treatment. While a secular master’s treatment of his slaves might be in view of protecting his investment, Paul encourages just and fair treatment because both master and slave alike are answerable to a heavenly Master (Col. 4:1).

Every employer in our world must wrestle with what for his business is just and fair treatment of employee, competitor and public. Christian and non-Christian employer alike share a common search for justice and fairness. Courses in business ethics in universities dwell at length on the implications of these twin virtues for every phase of business life. What is unique for the Christian employer, however, is the persistent effect on employee relations of remembering a heavenly Lord who forgave in Christ and

remembering a Christ who loved and gave himself up (Eph. 4:32--5:2). We shall return to these images later.

One of the real challenges for the Christian employer is to formulate written policy and set the tone for unwritten policy while keeping in mind the "Lord who is in heaven." Business policy, as we said in the beginning of our study, reinforces values and inevitably gives support to character traits. To take an example, a policy either through neglect of statement or by elevation of company loyalty may tend to diminish concern for family. No one need document the effect upon family endurance of the "career mystique." The Christian employer, however, who knows that the Lord in heaven jealously guards the household (cf. Titus 1:10-16), will seek policy which positions the business properly.

The slave owner, of course, would not have separated household from business as we have so easily done. When we think household, we think immediate family. For those in the first century, however, household could also include "slaves, freedmen, servants, laborers, and sometimes business associates and tenants."¹⁶ In short, household included business employees. Paul's practice of evangelizing households thus involved much more than reaching an immediate family; it potentially touched the lives of many of those economically dependent upon the head of the house. Certainly today many employers view their employees as part of their household and under their care and protection. Paul's practice of reaching for the whole household is a challenge for the Christian

employer, to sensitively win employees whether with or without a word by the character of life and the fruit of light (Eph. 5:9).

Preoccupations

In all this we should not hear Paul implying that occupational choice does not matter. Paul probably stayed with leatherworking because he felt it gave him a certain financial independence and mobility. Nevertheless, the particular American Christian's preoccupation with occupational choice cannot be paralleled with Paul's concerns. For Paul what must be discussed is not the kind of occupation but the kind of person one is. It is not the particular decision, but the character of the decision maker. It is not the occupation but the pre-occupation.

Already we have seen in his exhortations to slave and master that Paul is concerned about preoccupations; both slave and master must constantly remember the Master who is in heaven. To think about business in terms of preoccupation rather than occupation is to take a different trail than the one we have so far explored. It means that we must settle upon fundamental Christian preoccupations and see how these take shape in the business world.

But what would these fundamental preoccupations be for Paul? To the same Thessalonian Christians, whom we have already mentioned in our study, Paul gives thanks that faith, love and hope have already had an effect in their lives (1 Thess. 1:3);

later Paul speaks of this same triad as providing protection (5:8). In some seven other contexts in his letters, Paul mentions faith, love and hope (Col. 1:4, 5; Eph. 1:15, 18; Rom. 12:6, 9, 12; 1 Cor. 13:13; Rom. 5:1-5; Gal. 5:5, 6; Eph. 4:2-5). Twice as frequently Paul mentions faith and love together, hope often being included in faith. Of course our ears are most familiar with the ring of the triad in 1 Corinthians 13:13, where love is placed in the final position.

For Paul this triad was an apt way of speaking about what motivates and explains Christian behavior. Speaking of faith, hope and love in the business world may sound strange, stranger yet to the outsider, but as fundamental Christian preoccupations they must have their effect in our occupations. We shall begin with faith but limit ourselves to discussing two aspects of faith, reconciliation with God and the cross of Christ.

Faith. “Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). Sometimes I would just as soon relate to business associates from a purely human point of view. Then I could take with utmost seriousness the barrage of newsletters and seminars which offer advice and promises for curing all the ills of employee and management relations. But my faith in Jesus constrains me to think differently. Outside of Christ people are estranged and alienated from God (Col. 1:21). And such a condition inevitably produces hostility, enmity and tensions in

human relationships. As I said, I wish they could be fixed by a little dose of “Management 301.” But people really are sin sick and alone, without God, and no amount of competence or busyness or cosmetic activity can fill that void of separation from God.

The policies which the Christian employer can shape over time are not thereby rendered futile or meaningless. Policy can be formulated which may very well inhibit the growth of sin in an organization. And healthy images and values can be fostered through company policy. We should never underestimate the power of holiness in the life of the believer (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14). Just as the handkerchiefs and aprons from Paul’s workshop were carried away and spread health to the diseased (Acts 19:12), so also metaphorically the Christian in business can be healthy leaven in the lump. C. S. Lewis finally came to terms with his own profession by concluding that his elevation of certain values in literature could perhaps bring people to the brink of faith. Perhaps every Christian employer should pray that his business be like the ministry of John the Baptist, preparing the way for the Lord.

The Christian, however, is not immune from hearing the call “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). While reconciled, the believer must continue to treasure the peace with God. The business world has its powerful sirens of peace, claiming to fill the void of the heart and to perfect personal identity. The magnet of accumulating the controlling things

can too quickly draw the heart. The lie may be believed that who I am is what I possess; the more I have the more I am.¹⁷ But the call “Be reconciled to God” is a sharp reminder that greed is idolatry (Col. 3:5).

The reconciliation with God, we confess, has occurred through the cross of Christ (Eph. 2:16). As part of the fabric of Christian praise, we think of the cross, perhaps most often, as a “fountain, free to all, a healing stream.” The cross is more a source than a pattern for the Christian’s life.

Yet, in Paul’s letters, the cross is also understood as a model and an explanation for Christian behavior. Paul calls the Philippians to the memory of Jesus’ death on a cross as an incentive to their own expressions of selflessness in community life (Phil. 2:8). Paul understands his own sufferings as conforming to Jesus’ death (Phil. 3:10).

Our faith in a crucified Messiah then cannot be without its consequences in the business world. We do not mean that a Christian business person is out in the world seeking situations of humiliation, suffering and ridicule. Paul is quite clear that he desires his children to live peaceably in the world. Nevertheless, the cross stands at odds with traditions of power and prestige so often honored, so cultivated, so sought by many in business life. Paul makes this especially clear to the Corinthians many of whom had become bloated with a false sense of superiority because of whom they knew (1:12) and what they knew (8:1). They had taken the grounds for confidence and for personal

identity in their world and made these the criteria and valuation for Christian identity. Paul though calls them back to the message which had given them life in the first place. And that message centered on a cross. The confidence and personal identity supplied by the cross, Paul reckons, is at odds with the cultures' measurement of power and success.

The cross in the business world means for the Christian an adjustment in attitude toward fellow employees, clients and competitors. The weak and powerless are neither joked about nor trampled in the rush to sell more product. The cross in business is not a predictor of income or loss, but a general critique of what makes for success. The Christian in business can be legitimately pleased in the job but not per se because of a larger net. The Christian's sense of worth must be firmly placed in the Lord of glory who was crucified. "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31).

Hope. At first reading hope might appear as fairly antithetical to any effort in the business world. After all, Paul told the Corinthians:

"the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:29-31).

Yet in the words we have heard Paul speak to slaves, hope is an incentive to conscientious vigor at work: “Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not man, knowing that from the Lord you will receive your inheritance as your reward” (Col. 3:23, 24).

We must carefully interpret 1 Corinthians 7. Certainly Paul is not advocating withdrawal from trade and commerce nor lethargy (if not hypocrisy) in life’s routines. What he is advocating is a thorough perspective toward the relationships and activities of life. This perspective, in brief, is that no routine activity nor occurrence in this world should claim our hearts (7:35). Paul’s immediate warrant for such a perspective is the non-permanence of the world. Paul presses for this perspective in 1 Corinthians 7 because he wants to substitute this viewpoint for one held by some Corinthians (those with ascetic tendencies) that sexuality meant defilement. No, Paul says, the point in celibacy or marriage, tears or laughter, trade or commerce, is that devotion to the Lord be maintained, with as few distractions as possible.

Paul thought, however, that one could possess without being possessed: “As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). The transitory nature of the world did not mean that life was melancholy. Possessions, whatever the extent, could be enjoyed in thankfulness to God. Paul refuses to set hope

against life in the world. In fact, in three letters concerned with ascetic Christians, Paul is careful to commend both life in the body in God's creation and the hope which is on reserve for the Christian (1 Cor. 6:12--7:31; 15; Col. 1:5, 15-20; 2:16-23; 3:23; 1 Tim. 4:1-10; 6:17-19).

The shadow that hope casts on life is not then for Paul a denial of marriage or laughter or commerce or possessions. Rather hope is a monitor on the heart, that no ambition or investment be ultimate, other than hoping in the God who richly provides. Paul does warn against the craving for money and the desire to be rich (1 Tim. 6:9, 10) because these can lead to idolatry. And Paul's insistence that the form of this world is passing away can only give us pause in our American dash for growth, growth, growth. But the Christian's hope is not poison to hearty labor; it is rather an antidote to love for the world.

It is as well the assurance that provides steadiness in the midst of hardship and suffering. In Romans 8:18-25, Paul elaborates the salvation mediated in hope. The sufferings, incomparable to glory, may be here the sufferings expected before the End. But is it not possible that they are also the hardships and sufferings experienced in toil because of the curse on creation (Gen. 3:17). Paul speaks of his own exhausting toil in his lists of hardships (1 Cor. 4:11-13; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27) and these he counts as slight in comparison with the load of glory (2 Cor. 4:17). Hope then is more than a monitor that

regulates ambition. It is also a magnet that leads the wearied heart through hardship to see a promised glory.

Love. “The love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Cor. 5:14). Paul says that the love of Christ surpasses knowledge, even the knowledge of the immeasurable cosmic dimensions (Eph. 3:18, 19). Yet when Paul speaks of the love of Christ it is in an economy of words with utter simplicity and clarity: “He loved and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 5:2; Gal. 2:20; 2 Thess. 2:16). The love of Christ is not a sentimental thing to Paul; as he says in 2 Corinthians 5:14, one has died. And if this love constrains Paul, it means that he must die: “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2: 20).

The love born of such love is not natural. Natural love is preferential; it prefers to love one but not another. Paul says God’s love is radically different: “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Because such a love is so un-natural to us, Jesus had to command us to love.

In the business world it is too easy to care about some and not care at all for others. It is easy to take offense in the stress of competition and be tempted to seek some subtle form of revenge. Yet the love of Christ and Christ’s command to love constrains me. Once again I must die to my strong need to defend myself or strike out against someone. I must care about the disadvantaged as well as those who might bring me advantage.

But there is another side to Paul's words about love and it is surprising. The overwhelming number of times Paul calls upon his churches to love, it is love toward the saints (e.g., Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4; 1 Thess. 4:9; 2 Thess. 2:13); only once or twice does he mention love more generally (1 Thess. 3:12; Rom. 13:8-10). This has enormous significance for one's occupation.

It is clear that Paul desired that the local congregation be the primary peer group for his children, that the local house-church be the decisive social reality for the Christian way of life. What made this difficult was the presence of an equally strong peer group, the group at work. This was perhaps even more intense in Paul's time than in our own because not only did people of the same occupation work closely together, they usually lived in the same neighborhoods. In addition there were all kinds of craft associations formed not so much for economic advantages as social, to pursue honors among themselves, to share meals together, to have burial insurance.¹⁸

It remains a dilemma, if not a challenge, in our own time, to love the brethren and mind the store. Practically, at the simple level of time and energy expenditure, commitment to the local church will mean time and energy taken away from work. And yet Paul's charge to love the saints is straightforward and unequivocal. The conclusion is unavoidable that business loyalties must be limited loyalties. Every Christian in business will be faced with the choice whether to make the church his/her business associates the primary peer group.

There is another effect on business life in heeding the charge to love the brethren. The church can become the primary training ground for learning to understand and learning to express the love of Christ. Enduring, persistent, constant love is learned in the church because often the brethren are the “hardest” to love. No wonder that Paul brackets his description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 with “endurance” (cf. Eph. 4:2). One learns in the church the disciplined freedom of serving one another through love (Gal. 5:13-15). It is Philemon’s love for the brethren which Paul knows will make a final difference in Philemon’s viewpoint and handling of his personal economics (Philemon 5, 7, 9). And in our own occupations, how we care and treat others in business will no doubt be influenced by how we have loved each other in church.

Occupation and Preoccupation

The task remains for me as an owner and employer to formulate policy as consistent as possible with my Christian preoccupations. The task need not be a solitary one. I have the company of those, of like mind, who honor the servant Jesus. And we have a fellow worker in the person of Paul.

Imagine walking into his workshop, in the neighborhood of the leatherworkers. There he sits on his stool, bent over, cutting the leather here, sewing pieces together. We look around and, yes, there on the walls of his shop hang four plaques. What do they say?

WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.

WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED . . . THE POWER AND WISDOM OF GOD.

THIS MOMENTARY AFFLICTION PREPARES AN ETERNAL WEIGHT OF GLORY BEYOND ALL COMPARISON.

THE LOVE OF CHRIST CONSTRAINS ME.

I wonder.

Notes

- ¹ For a perceptive discussion of respective values and images honored in the business community and Christian community, see Oliver Williams and John Houck, Full Value: Cases in Christian Business Ethics (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 23-75.
- ² “As we worked on research of our excellent companies, we were struck by the dominant use of story, slogan, and legend as people tried to explain the characteristics of their own great institutions. All the companies we interviewed, from Boeing to McDonald’s, were quite simply rich tapestries of anecdote, myth and fairy tale. And we do mean fairy tale . . . these stories, myths, and legends appear to be very important, because they convey the organization’s shared values or culture.” Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run Companies (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 75.
- ³ In fact, at one level, in hortatory utterances which Paul could have heard spoken by his fellow Jews and Hellenistic moralists, Paul encourages characteristics in economics not unlike those we have isolated as Wall Street virtues: honesty, industriousness, contentment and generosity (Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11; Phil. 4:11-13; 2 Cor. 9:8). See Nils Dahl, “Paul and Possessions,” in Studies in Paul (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 22-24.

- 4 Edward Long, A Survey of Recent Christian Ethics (New York: Oxford University, 1982) 141-155. From the Hastings Center Project on the Teaching of Ethics in Higher Education has come the booklet by Joel Fleishman and Bruce Payne, Ethical Dilemmas and the Education of Policymakers (1980).
- 5 C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Culture" in Christian Reflections (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 12.
- 6 Paul's previous letter to Corinth may have contained exhortations not unlike Eph. 5:6-8. See Nils Dahl, "The Church at Corinth" in Studies in Paul, pp. 56-57.
- 7 Quotation from Philodemus the Epicurean (Peri Oikodomias 23); see discussion in Abe Malherbe's Social Aspects of Early Christianity (Baton Rouge: LSU, 1977) 23-27.
- 8 For the various meanings of skenopoios, Ron Hock, The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 20-21.
- 9 Hock, Tentmaking, pp. 35-49. It is difficult to assess to what extent the various trades despised in the rabbinic material (see Jeremias, Jerusalem, pp. 303-312) were despised in the first century. Certainly some occupations received criticism; see Martin Hengel, trans. John Bowden, Judaism and Hellenism (London: SCM, 1974) 153.
- 10 Examples in Ramsay MacMullen, Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284 (New Haven: Yale, 1974) 202 n. 105.
- 11 Meeks mentions that the extreme top (e.g., landed aristocrats, senators, equites) and bottom (e.g., peasants, hired agricultural day laborers) of the Greco-Roman social scale are missing in his impressionistic sketch of Paul's churches. It is the levels in between which are well represented, a fair cross-section of urban society; The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul (New Haven: Yale, 1983) 51-73.
- 12 Using the translation which concludes the work of Scott Bartchy First-Century Slavery and 1 Corinthians 7 :21 (SBLDS 11; Missoula: Scholars, 1973) 183.

- ¹³ See David Balch, Let Wives be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter (SBLMS 26; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981) 33-49.
- ¹⁴ Bartchy, Slavery, pp. 82-87.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 67-72.
- ¹⁶ Malherbe, Social, p. 69; Meeks, Urban Christians, p. 30; Michael Green, Evangelism in the Early Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 208-216.
- ¹⁷ This line of thought is elaborated in Luke Johnson's Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 37-70.
- ¹⁸ MacMullen, Social Relations, pp. 73-80.

THE CHRISTIAN, ENTERTAINMENT, AND THE ARTS

by James W. Thompson

At the end of the second century, Tertullian wrote a tract on The Shows, in which he warned his Christian audience against “the pleasures of the public shows.” Apparently many of Tertullian’s Christian contemporaries had maintained their interest in the various public spectacles of the period, and had seen no conflict between their Christian faith and the popular entertainment. When their attendance at the shows had been questioned, they had demanded a Scriptural reason why they should not attend the spectacles. In the opening section of Tertullian’s tract, he concedes that no biblical passage prohibits attendance at those popular events. There is no biblical passage, according to Tertullian, which says, “Thou shalt not enter circus or theater, thou shalt not look upon combat or show.”¹ Nevertheless, the stern church leader of North Africa was unyielding in his insistence that the public show was no place for a Christian. While he and his Christian contemporaries both cite Scripture as their authority in determining whether Christians

should attend theatric performances, they reach very different conclusions.

Those shows which Tertullian has in mind include a wide range of performances: athletic contests, chariot races, the gladiatorial combats, and theatrical performances. Tertullian objects to the Christian's presence at the athletic performances because one is inevitably forced in these circumstances to "stand in the way of sinners" and "sit in the seat of scoffers."² He objects to all theatrical performances because they encourage immodesty and licentiousness. The tragedies and comedies--the great productions of classical civilization--also fall under Tertullian's condemnation. For him, the great tragedians were nothing more than "impious and licentious inventors of crimes and lusts."³ If the tragedies record accounts of violence and adultery they should not be seen at all, for "it is not even good that there should be any calling to remembrance the atrocious or the vile."

Tertullian's views are deeply rooted in his belief that Christianity and culture live in opposition to each other. His famous question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" has led him to reject all of the public shows of his time. Tertullian makes no distinction between those forms of entertainment which have "redeeming social value" and those which do not. Nor does his tract attempt to distinguish between the obscene and the acceptable forms of entertainment. All of the great plays--from the bawdy comedies of Aristophanes to the noble tragedies of Aeschylus--fall under his condemnation.

Tertullian was one of the first in the history of Christianity to address a significant question which the New Testament never mentions. From ancient times to the present, the problem has been discussed by Christian thinkers. Tertullian's stern view has been echoed in many circles until the present time. A significant number of Christian groups have forbidden attendance at the theater and the movies. However, Tertullian's position remains the view of the minority, for Christians have commonly accepted the cultural heritage which is exhibited in the literary and theatrical arts. Indeed, the Christian embrace of liberal education--the legacy of Athens, not Jerusalem--suggests that Tertullian lost the battle. The Christian heritage has been characterized by an openness to the literary heritage of Athens. Those who have rejected Tertullian's strict teaching have argued correctly that the world of arts and the theater has the capacity to enrich human life. Stories which contain violence and/or adultery, from Homer's Iliad to Hamlet or The French Lieutenant's Woman, have not been rejected because of these themes. The great works of fiction can enrich human life by introducing to us the complexity of human temptations and emotions. The appreciation of form, beauty and order in art is the appreciation of God's creation. Thus few Christians today would agree with Tertullian's rejection of theater. Whether entertainment offers us only an occasion for escape and relaxation, or provides insights about life, it is too valuable to be rejected in the sweeping

way in which Tertullian rejected them. It has thus been widely assumed among Christians that a good education involves an appreciation of the theater--whether in the classical forms inherited from Aeschylus or Shakespeare or in the modern forms offered by the movies.

The Christian acceptance of this literary and artistic heritage can too easily obscure the fact that Tertullian raised important questions about the forms of entertainment which Christians see. The question today is far more complicated than it has been in previous centuries, for we are no longer confronted with the simple question of "Athens or Jerusalem." The revolutions in the media have introduced new questions, as the movies, recordings and print media have offered possibilities which Tertullian could never have imagined. The accessibility of an extraordinary number of programming options, which has been made possible by the advent of cable television and the VCR, has made Tertullian's question more urgent than ever before. While these new possibilities can be used to continue the cultural heritage of Athens, they can also be used to pander and dehumanize. Where there is art, there will also be the abuse of art. Some novels may be enriching, and others may dehumanize and desensitize the reader. Some films may, in the tradition of the classics, help us understand life; others are clearly pornographic and without any "redeeming social value."

The widespread rejection of Tertullian's advice has left the Christian with a dilemma

which becomes increasingly acute, for Christians now must decide which art forms and which performances are appropriate for them. Those who do not accept Tertullian's conclusion must concede that he raised an important question, for few would deny that art forms can be so abused as to be destructive to the formation of Christian character. Those who reject his answer must offer an alternative one in determining the Christian's approach to arts and entertainment.

The alternative has not been an easy one to find. Indecency and pornography cannot be defined purely on the basis of the subject matter, language, or even the precise amount of clothing worn. The subjects of sex and violence, which are often the criteria used to determine obscenity, are not adequate to determine the presence of indecency. While these criteria may be helpful, they do not offer an absolute guide in determining the Christian's attitude to the world of literature and the visual arts. Tertullian's question must therefore become the subject of critical reflection.

New Testament Perspectives

Tertullian correctly observed that the New Testament never addresses the problem of the Christian and the theater. Indeed, in the only passages in the New Testament where forms of the word theatron appear, the word is used consistently for the theater as the place where victims receive public abuse. In Acts 19:29, 31, Paul is brought by the mob

to the theater in Ephesus. In other passages, theatron (and the related verb theatrizomai) is an image for public abuse. Paul employs a metaphor from the Roman practice of bringing victims condemned to death into the theater on public display when he says, “We became a spectacle (theatron) to the world, to angels, and to men” (1 Cor. 4:9). Similarly, the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were “publicly exposed (theatrizomenoi) to abuse and humiliation.” Such passages suggest that the theater was primarily the place where Christians received abuse. In this situation, Tertullian’s question had not yet arisen.

Although the New Testament is silent on the Christian’s appreciation of the arts, its major witnesses offer perspectives which are helpful in answering Tertullian’s question. Indeed, despite the diversity of the New Testament writings, one conviction appears to be a unifying element in all of the major writings. It is the belief that the coming of Jesus Christ marks the end of the old aeon and the beginning of God’s “new creation.” Consequently Jesus, whose ministry is like “new wine in old wineskins,” challenges prevailing cultural values and creates a new “counterculture.” His parables present the new world of the kingdom as it calls in question the values of that society. His demand for discipleship was a summons to become a part of this new society.

The conviction that Christians form the new “counterculture” is dominant in the Pauline letters, where Paul describes the cross as the wisdom of God which stands in

opposition to all human wisdom. Christians who obey this word of the cross live already in God's new world, and are challenged not to be "conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). While Christians continue to live within the structures of this world, they have also been "rescued from this present evil aeon" (Gal 1:4). Thus they are aware of a Christian identity which distinguishes them from their own culture. Christians inhabit a "new world" (2 Cor. 5:17) and possess a new mind (Rom. 12:2).

The metaphor of the "stranger" or "pilgrim," which is employed both in Hebrews and 1 Peter, gives special emphasis to the motif of the Christian's distance from his culture. Both epistles associate the images with the church's identity in a hostile environment. In 1 Peter 4:4, a significant explanation is offered for the hostility of the local populace: "They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you." The author does not specify what features of the Christian lifestyle aroused the hostility of the populace. He may have in mind both public festivals and the local customs of the inhabitants, especially as they were related to licentiousness and drunkenness.

One can observe from the advice given in 1 Peter 2:13--3:7 that the church's pilgrim identity did not bring about a total separation from the culture. Christians are summoned to adapt to the system of government (2:13-17) and family life. The ancient practice of

slavery is assumed (2:18-25). Christians are even married to pagans (3:1-7). Thus while the pilgrim existence has not removed Christians from their culture, it has provided them with the resources necessary to reject the elements of that culture which were unacceptable to those who had become pilgrims for the sake of Christ. Those who live in that culture and interact with it daily have evoked the hostility of the populace because of their refusal to participate in immoral practices.

Perspectives for the Present

Although the New Testament does not comment explicitly on the problem which has been faced from Tertullian to the present, it does offer a helpful paradigm in our assessment of the arts from a Christian perspective. The early Christian view that the Christian has entered a new world, with its own way of knowing and seeing, offers us a perspective for approaching the problem. Whereas Tertullian rejected the theater entirely while his opponents argued for the appropriateness of activities not explicitly prohibited in the New Testament, this task of assessment requires an assessment of individual works from the perspective of the Christian faith.

Amos Wilder described this process as “Christian discrimination.” In Theology and Modern Literature, Wilder wrote,

Certain elements in the church feel an obligation to come to terms vigorously with modern culture and its various expressions on the basis of sound theological norms. Such Christian assessment is directed for one thing toward the popular arts of the time, whether

moving picture, radio, television, and comic strip or the best-seller novel and the Broadway success. Judgment need not always be disapproving. A great deal of the make-believe, entertainment, and even escape in such art forms is both talented and innocent; but distinctions must be drawn between the genuine and the specious, between works which relate themselves to reality and those which falsify it. And if the real nature of things can be falsified by a crass sensationalism of sex and violence, it can also be falsified by pseudo-idealism and sentimentality.⁴

Although Wilder was primarily concerned with the making of aesthetic judgments, one may go beyond Wilder and affirm that the Christian makes moral judgments on his entertainment. T. S. Eliot wrote,

In ages like our own, in which there is no such common agreement, it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, especially works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.⁵

He also argued that

Our religion imposes our ethics, our judgment and criticism of ourselves, and our behaviour toward our fellow men. The fiction that we read affects our behaviour towards our fellow men, affects our patterns of ourselves.⁶

Thus he concluded that what we read affects us as entire human beings. Therefore, according to Eliot, the Christian approaches literature with standards over and above those applied by the rest of the world; and “by these criteria and standards everything that we read must be tested.”

Eliot’s argument follows naturally from the conviction that the Christian’s entry into a new world places him in tension with his culture. His case for Christian discrimination can also be applied to the movies and the other arts. However, Christian

discrimination does not mean that the Christian's entertainment consists only in those forms which provide the Christian point of view, for literature offers prefabricated ideological solutions--even the Christian solution--often fails as good literature. Christian discrimination involves rather a recognition of that which distorts reality and offers a vision of life which inhibits the transformation of the Christian into his image. Those portraits of human life which pander to the taste for violence and distorted sexuality are not the only forms of obscenity, but they are significant in their capacity to dehumanize and desensitize. This Christian discrimination demands most that Christians have the sensitivity to recognize that which is unhealthy in the formation of Christian character.

How is the Christian to decide what is appropriate to read and see? The fact that our courts have not been able to give a definition of pornography does not mean that it does not exist. Former Justice Potter Stewart said, when he admitted that obscenity is difficult to define, "I know it when I see it." Christian discrimination gives the Christian the sensitivity to recognize the problem.

While Tertullian's answers may be largely unacceptable, he recognized an important problem and articulated a response. If we find the middle ground between Tertullian and his contemporaries difficult to define, we will benefit by a continuing attempt to answer the question: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"

Notes

- ¹ De Spectaculis III.
- ² De Spectaculis III.
- ³ De Spectaculis XVII.
- ⁴ Amos Wilder, Theology and Modern Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 64.
- ⁵ T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in Religion and Modern Literature, ed. G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975) 21.
- ⁶ T. S. Eliot, 24.

THE SECULARIZATION OF THE CHURCH : FROM TRANSCENDENCE TO TECHNIQUE

By Michael R. Weed

The visitor to Europe cannot fail to notice the many cathedrals and churches standing in the center of great cities, towns, and even small villages. Their majestic spires tower above surrounding buildings, pointing silently into the sky. Nor can the visitor fail to notice that these monumental structures are largely empty. Today they stand as mute but vivid reminders of the past, examples of medieval architecture, ecclesiastical museums of earlier centuries of Christendom. These empty buildings also stand as witnesses to the fact that the place of the church in society has undergone a gradual but far reaching process of change wherein religion has been displaced from the center of both public and private life.

The complex process whereby this change has come about is commonly referred to as that of secularization.¹ In essence this has meant a radical shift in consciousness affecting such matters as the self's view of time, history, society, and ultimate reality.²

Although the origins of secularization are variously traced to the Industrial Revolution, denominationalism, the Enlightenment, the Reformation, Nominalism, and even to the Judeo-Christian tradition itself, most social historians and social scientists would agree that Western civilization has largely become a secular civilization.³ In general terms this means that traditional religion no longer plays the central role it once played. More specifically, secularization involves at least two separable dimensions. First, it means a decay in the importance of religious institutions in the everyday life of society. Second, it signifies an erosion of religious consciousness in the minds and lives of individuals living in the secular society.

For Western civilization this has meant that traditional Judeo-Christian values, beliefs, and aspirations that formerly gave coherence, meaning, and direction to society have largely disappeared from the public arena. In turn, this has resulted in what Richard Neuhaus has aptly labeled “the naked public square,” i.e., a public arena with no consistent self-understanding nor accepted vocabulary, values, and vision to offer cohesion and direction to the whole.⁴ As a consequence, modern society largely ceases to depend upon an integrated consensus of values and tends toward becoming more of an agglomeration loosely held together by modern techniques and procedures.⁵ The result is that modern society is more of a balkanized and unstable hodgepodge (euphemistically

and naively called “pluralistic”) of jarring and clashing ideas and views than a society founded upon shared values and a clear vision of the human good.

Curiously, it is not in Europe but in America, where religion is apparently healthier, that the process of secularization is regarded by many as having advanced the furthest.⁶ This seeming contradiction, viz., a highly secular society and thriving religious institutions, is generally explained by the fact that secularization has followed different patterns in Europe and America. Whereas in Europe secularization has meant wholesale defection from the church, in the United States secularization means that although the churches and religious institutions tend to persist and even thrive, “their specifically religious character has become steadily attenuated.”⁷

Quite simply, this has meant that the churches in the United States have adapted themselves to survive by commending themselves to the secular society and the secular mind on their own terms. British sociologist Bryan Wilson argues that this means that

(w)ithin the ranks of traditional religion there are those who actively canvass, as the only prospect for success, the need to grasp modernity, to rationalize their own procedures, to reorganize and rebuild on the pattern of some secular institution . . .⁸

Thus by adapting to the pressures and demands of modernity, churches in the United States have been able to insure their survival in the midst of a highly secular society--at

least for the immediate future. Still, this adaptation has not been without high costs. Essentially, it has meant that religion has managed to survive in the United States by radically altering its role and function--both in the life of society and in the life of the individual church member. In short, it has meant the emergence of the "secular church."

The Secular Church

As the church adapts to its new role in a society where it is seen as increasingly marginal and in which religion is relegated to the realm of the private, the church undergoes many changes. Utility tends to become the guiding principle of the church as it commends itself as useful in the business of life (as well as in the business of business) in terms of society's own standards and values. This basic orientation makes its mark both on the organizational structure of the church and also in the church's understanding of its mission.

On the one hand, the church tends to take on the characteristics of a large contemporary organization or institution. The church becomes an assemblage of countless committees, meetings, questionnaires, memos, copy machines, and related procedures that maintain institutional momentum. In short, the church takes on and reflects the characteristics and tendencies of organizations in the society in which it exists--a technological, bureaucratic, and secular society.

On the other hand, the church maintains itself and redefines its mission by seeking to address the endless needs of the secular society's casualty list. Indeed, the cost of life in the secular society is one of failed marriages, soaring abortion rates,

. . . a high incidence of mental ill-health, widely diffused strain, addiction to drugs, high rates of suicide, crime and delinquency, the disorientation of youth in a social context increasingly bewildering and in which older moral and religious shibboleths no longer seem valid.⁹

Thus the "secular church" alters or jettisons traditional ministries (e.g., evangelism becomes "outreach") and proliferates a host of new ministries through which it seeks to "meet needs"--attract outsiders and involve insiders. The emerging secular church becomes a veritable beehive of busyness; its members are involved in a swelling number of activities and non-traditional ministries ranging from new member assimilation and stress reduction techniques, through assertiveness training and sensitivity training, to hiking and ski outings.

Further, in that the needs created by modernity's fast pace are continually changing, the secular church is committed to a constant monitoring of the latest shifts in disposition which announce the epiphany of a new "need." Consequently, the secular church requires and develops sensitive antennae to provide adequate market analysis to identify "affinity groups" and newly emerging ways by which it can further accommodate itself to society.

In all of this the secular church more nearly comes to resemble a religion emporium

or delicatessen--changing its offerings and samples in response to the appetites of consumers--than it resembles its historical namesake. Coherence in the secular church is rarely sought--and, in fact, it is frequently avoided because it curtails the freedom of expression and diversity necessitated by accommodating the disparate needs of a pluralistic society. Members are exhorted to be involved, to share, and even to serve; less frequently they are encouraged to discipleship, Bible study, and worship. The context in which this occurs is more nearly that of contemporary self-realization theories than of traditional concepts of salvation.

Clearly, as the self-understanding of the church shifts, so does that of those who serve within the institution. Not surprisingly, the role and self-understanding of the minister also undergo radical changes. The traditional role and associated tasks of the minister as representative of the Christian faith, interpreter of scripture, teacher of Christian doctrine, and exhorter of the faithful are no longer respected in society and are becoming increasingly irrelevant even within the emerging church. In order to survive within the organizational framework of the secular church, the minister is forced to give increasing attention to style and technique in pursuit of skills suitable to his changing persona. To paraphrase Bryan Wilson, ministers must now acquire new styles and learn to manipulate their images to conform to the expectations of a clientele marked by the

ideologies of secular modernity.¹⁰ Thus in an increasingly bureaucratic-technological, therapeutic, and politicized society, ministers develop managerial techniques, learn counseling skills, and--less frequently--become involved in political activism. In all of this, the minister's presence tends to become no more than a reflection and his voice an echo of society. Occasionally the minister achieves "relevance," but it is the relevance of the popular or the so-called prophetic relevance of the popular unpopular.

As the church alters its identity--its self-understanding and its mission--in society, it also takes on a different function in the life of the average church member. For older church members the secular church may retain some of its traditional functions. For younger and newer members, however, the secular church does not offer an inclusive vision of reality--much less a system of beliefs or doctrines. More nearly, the outlook of the average church member is reflective of modern secular pluralistic society--a society corroborated and legitimated by the emerging secular church. The religious consciousness of the average church member is an eclectic conglomeration; it consists largely of a subjective and highly unstable mixture of bits and pieces taken from such diverse sources as traditional religion, folk wisdom, horoscopes, "Dear Abby," and the latest version of pop psychology. Not surprisingly, in the life of the average member of the secular church, the church plays the same role it plays in society at large, viz., marginal.

It is a leisure-time pursuit. For the average church member the secular church becomes a “Christ club,” providing opportunities for conviviality, “meaningful personal relationships,” occasionally intellectual stimulation, and perhaps some recreation. The church does not, however, offer a coherent vision of the universe or a moral framework by which one may live.

In summary, the secular church survives and even thrives in a secular environment by adjusting and accommodating itself to secularism. In the process, however, the church undergoes radical redefinition, not only playing a different role in society but also performing a markedly different and diminished function in the lives of its individual members.

The Costs of Accommodation

In spite of its successes, both real and apparent, accommodation to the methods, procedures, and values of modernity exacts a high price upon the emerging secular church. It also creates fundamental problems in both practical and theological terms.

On a practical level, the secular church has committed itself to providing what the society also provides, in many cases as well as or better than the church. Further, the more successfully the church addresses and gratifies various needs of modern persons (e.g., belonging, meaningful personal relationships, involvement, recreation), the more it

legitimizes the pursuit of their satisfaction. It is simply a matter of time until many, guided by the pursuit of “need gratification,” find their needs more adequately addressed through alternatives such as health spas and service clubs and the like. (All of this reminds one of the dictum that whether or not Marx was correct in observing that religion was the opium of the people, it does appear that opium is the religion of the people.)

Further, the tactical calculation that the church may better get its message across to secular and even hostile audiences by adopting the standards of secular modernity may be a serious blunder. As sociologist Peter Berger points out, recalcitrant audiences may become more, not less, recalcitrant, demanding increasing degrees of accommodation.¹¹

Thus it is arguable that the secular church’s widespread adoption of the perspectives and methods of secular modernity, whether intentional or unintentional, may bring only apparent and short-lived successes. To the extent that this is true, the secular church more nearly represents not the victory of faith over the world but the seduction of the faith by the artful techniques of the world.¹² Or, as Berger more vividly pictures it, the secular church reminds one of the tragicomic plight of the drunkard who walks in the gutter in order to avoid falling off the curb.¹³

The secular church’s adaptation to modernity, and particularly its near wholesale adoption (if not also adulation) of the utility principle, leads directly to several

fundamental theological problems. Perhaps the most far-reaching of these is the secular church's loss of transcendence. Ultimately, religious concerns are neither reducible to nor compatible with the vision, methods, and techniques of secular modernity. "Religion necessarily speaks another language, offers itself in different terms and by different criteria, from those that prevail in the technological world of modern society."¹⁴ Consequently, however innocent the intent, the endorsement of the utility principle inevitably diminishes and eventually eliminates the sphere of the transcendent.

To be certain, the language of traditional religion and piety still abound in the secular church. The language of transcendence, however, maintains an illusion--it masks a false transcendence. In an insightful critique of modern religiosity, theologian James Gustafson contends that

(r)eligion is put into the service not of gratitude, reverence, and service to God but of human interests, morally both trivial and serious. Religion--its theologies, its cultic practices, its rhetoric, its symbols, its devotions, becomes unwittingly justified for its utility value.

For Gustafson the result of this process is that

God is denied as God; God becomes an instrument in the service of human beings rather than human beings instruments in the service of God.¹⁵

Thus the loss of transcendence amounts to the emergence of an immanentist theology--or, rather, an anthropocentric theology. The human perspective, both of the

individual self and of humanity as a whole, becomes the sole measure and goal of theology. Not surprisingly, this shift from transcendence to anthropocentric perspective radically marks the secular church's understanding of such central activities as worship and of such concepts as salvation. Worship tends to become a quasi-entertaining media event providing an "emotional outlet" and promoting self-esteem and conviviality ("fellowship"). It is decidedly not an occasion marked by reverence, awe, and an awareness of the mystery and majesty of God.

Salvation or redemption inevitably and necessarily remains an imprecise concept in the secular church. It tends, however, to be loosely equated with the promotion and gratification of the needs and interests of the self, narrowly defined. Frequently, therapeutic terminology may be employed to define God's role in salvation as that of promoting "self-realization."¹⁶ Regardless of the many variations, however, salvation comes to be understood as attained by and apparently equated with self-indulgence.

To be sure, visions of salvation may occasionally extend beyond the boundaries of self-gratification to the more inclusive social and political goals as evidenced in the various "cause theologies" (e.g., black theology, feminist theology, moral majorityism, and liberation theology). As diverse as these different theologies may appear, however, underlying their differences is a common tendency, viz., a highly selective use of God and biblical motifs to legitimate and promote various personal and moral goals.

Regardless of one's personal sympathies, there is little significant theological difference between persons using prayer and piety to achieve personal business success and persons using prayer at political demonstrations or sit-ins.¹⁷ Either way, religion becomes a utilitarian value.

Finally, the loss of transcendence and the radical shifts this loss occasions also give rise to additional practical problems of enormous dimensions. Leaders in the secular church repeatedly will encounter difficulty on occasions when, for whatever reasons, it is necessary to call for humility, patience, and sacrifice. The secular church, built around the promotion of self-esteem, gratification of needs, and self-fulfillment, simply cannot, in any consistent or convincing manner, call for self-discipline, self-restraint, or selflessness. The theology of the cross can have no real place in the "Christ club."

Recovering the Way

It has always been a difficult task for the church to be in the world and yet not of the world. In this regard, the secularization of the church is but one more example of that ongoing struggle. And yet, whether the church succumbs to the lure of power and prestige or more innocently seeks only a temporary and tactical alliance with modernity, the secularization of the church is a particularly insidious form of conformation to the world. This is true for at least two reasons. First, the secular church can point to its many very real and tangible successes. Second, the methods of secularism mask themselves as

merely neutral tools or instruments no better and certainly no worse than their users and the goals they serve. As indicated, however, hidden assumptions ride in the wake of secular techniques and methods which the church may innocently (and naively) seek to use in managing and promoting “kingdom business.”

“Recovering the way” will depend, in the first instance, on recognition of the dimensions of the problem. While such recognition must remain partial and incomplete this side of a transcendent perspective, it appears that the de-secularization of the church is a fundamental task. This, in turn, can entail nothing short of a recovery of transcendence. By the very nature of the task, however, there can be no formula, much less a technique or strategy for such a recovery. The very attempt to seek such a solution would in itself be symptomatic of the problem of the secular church. And, even if it were apparently successful, such a solution would only be another form of false or domesticated transcendence. A true recovery of transcendence cannot be managed--either by traditional piety or by the mirrors and pulleys (or computers) of modern methods and techniques. Nor can there be any assurance that a true recovery of transcendence will eventuate in “successful programs” and efficient institutions.

Although, strictly speaking, a “recovery” of transcendence would be impossible, an openness to transcendence may begin with a return to the biblical records of God’s shattering and unpredictable incursions into human history. Standing alongside Abraham,

Moses, or Isaiah, we may encounter God's irreducible "otherness"--his unfathomable mysteriousness, and his incalculable majesty. Such an awareness may evoke a sense of awe and rekindle near-forgotten memories that "his ways are not our ways." It may remind us that God is worshiped not because he is useful; he is not the guarantor of our hopes for something else, but he himself is the ultimate goal of all our hopes.

Only such an encounter with the God above our countless gods can release us from our self-encapsulation within a web of anthropocentric illusions and fantasies. Only such an awareness can expose and restrain the bloating human ego, swollen by countless forms of self-delusion.* In short, an openness to the Transcendent One will occasion an awareness of our own sinfulness and our rebellion against our Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. We will confess with Isaiah:

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts! (Isaiah 6:5)

It is only in light of such an encounter that we can receive a clear vision of our true nature and destiny.

Additionally, such a vision is critical if the church is to make any meaningful and faithful attempt at "meeting needs." It is only in this attitude that the church may recognize and re-direct false needs and identify secondary needs idolatrously masquerading as ultimate ones. Only from this perspective can it be grasped that true human freedom is freedom in limitation and that human dignity is that alien dignity

appropriate to those who are capable of reflecting the character and purpose of the Transcendent One. For the Christian this character is given its fullest expression in the Incarnation--not as a “celebration of humanity”; much less as a sanction of human ambitions--but culminating in the uncalculating selflessness of the cross. For the church, the community of the cross, this rich symbol must remain at the center of worship and life as a constant reminder of what we are and as a guide to who we are called to be.

Notes

- ¹ The term “secularization” originally designated the removal of land from ecclesiastical control in 16th century Germany. In sociological theory it designates a lessening of the significance of religious institutions and beliefs in society. Secularization as a modern social phenomenon is generally linked to the advance of industrialization and technology. While it has a distinctive shape and unique interaction with features of Western civilization, it is by no means confined to the West and may in fact be detected in Eastern cultures subject to the impact of modernity. Cf. Peter Berger, “Secularity, West and East,” This World, Winter 1983, No. 4, 49-62.
- ² For a succinct and insightful assessment of key components of modern secular consciousness see Peter Berger, “Toward a Critique of Modernity,” Facing Up to Modernity (New York: Harper, 1977) 70-80.
- ³ It should be noted that there are many different versions of secularization theory. These differ regarding such matters as the origins of secularization, whether it is evolutionary or cyclical, and whether it is confined to the West or global. For a criticism of secularization theory see Andrew M. Greeley, The Denominational Society: A Sociological Approach to Religion in America (London: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972) 127-155.

- ⁴ Cf. Richard John Neuhaus, The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).
- ⁵ Bryan Wilson, Contemporary Transformations of Religion (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 102.
- ⁶ Bryan Wilson, Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969). “Superficially, . . . and in contrast to the evidence from Europe, the United States manifests a high degree of religious activity. And yet, on this evidence, no one is prepared to suggest that America is other than a secularized country. By all sorts of other indicators it might be argued that the United States was a country in which instrumental values, rational procedures and technical methods have gone furthest, and the country in which the sense of the sacred, the sense of the sanctity of life, and deep religiosity are most conspicuously absent. The travelers of the past who commented on the apparent extensiveness of Church membership, rarely omitted to say that they found religion in America to be very superficial. Sociologists generally hold that the dominant values of American society are not religious” (112).
- ⁷ Bryan Wilson, Religion in Sociological Perspective (New York: Oxford, 1982) 152.
- ⁸ Ibid., 174.
- ⁹ Wilson, Religion in Secular Society, 94.
- ¹⁰ Wilson, Contemporary Transformations of Religion, 91.
- ¹¹ Peter Berger, “A Sociological View of the Secularization of Theology,” Facing Up To Modernity (New York: Harper, 1977) 177.
- ¹² Wilson, Contemporary Transformations of Religion, 86.
- ¹³ Berger, 178.
- ¹⁴ Wilson, Religion in Sociological Perspective, 45.

- ¹⁵ James Gustafson, Ethics From a Theocentric Perspective (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1981), Vol. 1, 25.
- ¹⁶ Brooks Holifield's fascinating study of the pastoral counseling movement in American Protestantism traces the manner in which therapeutic terminology and concepts have tended to replace traditional theological terminology and concepts and the tendency to equate salvation and spiritual growth with self-realization. See E. Brooks Holifield, A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).
- ¹⁷ Gustafson, 22, 23.
- ¹⁸ Ironically, but not surprisingly, repentance is not a dominant theme in the emerging secular church. It is the non-Christian philosopher Iris Murdoch who has called for a philosophical version of recovery of both transcendence and repentance as necessary to puncture the inflated ego and return the self to reality. Murdoch's thesis is interesting to compare with the thought of Robert H. Schuller who contends that the church has been "too theocentric" and proceeds to define sin as "anything that diminishes self-esteem." Cf. Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983) 68-91; Robert H. Schuller, Self-Esteem: The New Reformation (Waco: Word, 1982).

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