

Pictures of the Church in 1 Peter

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[GJ 10:3 (Fall 69) p. 36–46] [Grace Theological Journal](#)

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The word *ekklēsia* is not used in the Greek text of the Epistle of 1 Peter. Because of this many have thought the epistle to be rather devoid of instruction and doctrine regarding the church. On the contrary, this epistle is literally permeated with church truth, and such a fact is obvious to the reader who recognizes that the New Testament concept of “church” was a concept of people rather than of an organization. It was the ministry of the Apostle Paul to proclaim basic tenets of church organization and to develop the bulk of New Testament ecclesiology. Peter, on the other hand, is writing to the church as a group of God’s people. His concern is their lives and behavior in the midst of a wicked and perverse world, a world in which they are finding and will continue to find testings and sufferings to be their common lot.

Some, like Kelly, have argued vehemently that this epistle is directed only to Christian Jews, and indeed much of the language and style parallel the books of Hebrews and James. However, if we assume the writing to be in the seventh decade of the first century, it is probably more correct to visualize the congregations in Northern Asia Minor to which Peter is writing as heterogeneous groups of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Selwyn points out:

It is doubtful, indeed, whether there were many Churches in the first century outside Palestine, at any rate in the larger centres of population, of which the members were wholly Jewish or wholly Gentile, though in most of them Jews were probably in the majority; and we know that in parts of Asia Minor there had been a syncretism of Jewish and pagan cults which in some cases may have provided the spiritual background of those who afterwards became Christians.¹

Peter’s doctrine of the church is inseparably connected with other basic themes developed in the epistle. Primarily in connection with his Christology and his doctrine of the Christian life. The theology of the apostle is above all things Christo-centric. He begins with Jesus Christ, the Messiah, and then proceeds to develop an elaborate doctrine of the Christian life based on the person and work

of Christ. His doctrine of the church then is the next step in the structure. He reasons from Christ to Christian behavior to the life of the Christian community. The elements of the primitive *kērugma* are abundant in 1 Peter and literally form his Christology. He speaks of prophesied salvation in 1:9–12; of blood redemption in 1:3, 21; of the ascension in 3:22; of judgment in 4:17; and of Christ's return in 1:7, 13.

[GJ 10:3 (Fall 69) p. 30]

This particular treatment of the ecclesiology of 1 Peter centers on a consideration of the word pictures of the apostle. Such a treatment is self limiting, therefore omitting a number of aspects of church doctrine which are important in the total structure of the epistle. For example, one could discuss church organization from 5:1–4 or baptism from a number of passages throughout the epistle. The matter of *charismata* (spiritual gifts) is dealt with in chapter 4, verses 10 and 11—the only non-Pauline treatment of that subject in the New Testament. The concept of the church as “mission” appears throughout the epistle since Peter is so concerned with the believer's relationship to the world. All of these are important, but none of them taken separately forms as complete a picture of Petrine ecclesiology as the treatment of this subject through the apostle's use of “Word pictures.”

If one excludes the *agapētoi* sections in 2:11 and 4:12, and the *oikon tou theou* (the house of God) in 4:17, there are ten major word pictures which point one to the church in this epistle. Interestingly enough, five of them are similes and five are metaphors. They are divided, therefore, into two groups in that order.

Petrine Similes for the Church

A simile is a word picture which lays a comparison between the subject at hand and some thing to which it is thought similar by the writer. The common English words used in a simile are “like” or “as.” Peter's characteristic word is *ōs* which is most commonly translated by the English word “as.” The Greek word *ōs* allows for two possible meanings depending on the context and the usage by a given writer. It could possibly mean “as if you were but really aren't” or it could mean “as the people you really are.” Peter's usage seems best to fit the latter since he builds on each of his similes a doctrine which assumes that his readers indeed occupy the position to which he likens them.

I. “As Pilgrims and Strangers” *ōs paroikous kai parepidēmous* (1:1 ; 2:11)

Peter’s readers are “pilgrims and strangers” in the world. In the first verse of the epistle, he uses the word *parepidēmois* which the AV renders as “strangers.” *Parepidēmois* appears with *paroikous* in 2:11 and is used by itself in 1:17 to refer to the life of the believer during his “residence” on the earth. Barclay points out that “in classical Greek, *parepidēmos* was the word for a person who had settled temporarily in a place without making it a permanent place of residence.”² Of *paroikous*, Barclay says:

It describes what was known as a “resident alien.” The resident alien was a man who came to stay in a place without being naturalized. He paid an alien tax; he was a licensed sojourner. He stayed in some place, but he had never given up citizenship of the place to which he truly belonged.³

In a very real sense, Peter gives us here a picture of the church as “the new Israel.” God had set Israel aside for a season (Romans 9–11) in order to offer Gentiles a place in his total plan of redemption. The *diasporas* mentioned right at the beginning of the epistle, is a technical term which in literal usage applies to the children of Israel scattered abroad from [GJ 10:3 (Fall 69) p. 31] their homeland. Peter undoubtedly uses it to lay a groundwork for his doctrine of *paroikous*. God’s people as strangers in the world really belong to a heavenly homeland. This is a theme also well developed by the Apostle Paul in such passages as Philippians 3:20 and Ephesians 2:11–19.

The only other New Testament usage of *parepidēmous* is in Hebrews 11:13, where it is set in a characteristic reference to the Old Testament saints, particularly the patriarchs. Here, however, the author of Hebrews takes it out of the old geographical context and lays a groundwork between an earthly city and a heavenly city. The Septuagint frequently used this word in the sense of the English word “stranger” in such passages as Genesis 23:4; Psalm 39:12; 119:19.

Peter’s emphasis in this simile is to show why worldly lusts should not be dear to God’s people. The things of the flesh belong to the *kosmos* and God’s people are citizens of another country. Perhaps Peter is thinking here of our Lord’s teaching regarding the alien relationship between the Christian and the world (John 15) and is explaining by such usage why his readers should expect persecution and how they should act in the midst of persecution. This concept

of the Christian as a pilgrim in the *kosmos* was a very important one in literature of the early church.

II. “As New Born Babies” *ōs artigennēta brephē* (2:2)

The creative act of God in bringing about new life for the Christian is a favorite theme of the Apostle Peter. One cannot argue that the new birth is a Johannine concept after carefully reading this epistle. The word *brephē* is used here, of course, in its metaphorical sense. In his Gospel (2:16), Luke uses it in a literal sense. It is possible that Peter is borrowing the idea from Isaiah 28:9, “Whom will he teach knowledge? Them that are weaned from the milk and drawn from the breast.” Doubtless many of Peter’s readers are new Christians, recently come into the community of the people of God. These are to turn aside from things which characterized their former life and now “as new born babes, desire the genuine spiritual milk.” The use of *gala* here is different from the use which other New Testament writers make of the word. It is almost always used in contrast to more solid food with the suggestion that Christians ought to be putting aside the elementary things and studying more serious doctrine. Such is its usage in Hebrews 5:11–14 and 1 Corinthians 3:1–3. Peter makes no such comparison but simply desires his readers to fill themselves with the “unadulterated word—milk” so that they might thrive and be nurtured in their Christian lives.

It is quite possible that in these early verses of chapter 2, Peter is referring the use of *logos* back to his use of this word in the latter verses of chapter 1. We must not read into the text here a fully developed *logos* Christology such as that which is found in the Gospel of John but rather take the idea as referring to the total Word of God which undoubtedly centers in Jesus Christ, of whom these new Christians have already tasted. Peter’s purpose in depicting the church as new born babies undoubtedly is the laying of a groundwork for the following section on Christian behavior. One is first of all born and then one grows; and as one grows one must give concern to his behavior and manner of life. It is this comprehensive subject which occupies the apostle’s pen throughout most of the epistle, but particularly in chapter 2.

[GJ 10:3 (Fall 69) p. 32]

III. “As Obedient Children” *ōs tekna upakoēs* (1:14)

The root idea of “the children of obedience” lies in a Semitism of the Old Testament. As we encounter it in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, we refer to it as Septuagintalism. In Hosea 10:9, for example, we read of “children of iniquity” and Isaiah 57:4 of “children of transgression.” The “obedience” idea in 1 Peter seems to be almost a synonym for “faith.” In the passage before us, Peter instructs his readers to conduct themselves on the basis of the salvation which they have; in other words, to bring their state up to their standing. He says, “Wherefore having gathered up to the waist the robes of your mind, and being serious, perfectly hope upon the grace being brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As children of obedience, not putting on a mask of the desires in your former ignorance, but according to the pattern of the one who called you, (he is) holy, also become holy yourselves in all behavior” (original translation). Peter’s motive in this particular word picture is obvious from the text itself. He is introducing his readers to a life of holiness patterned after the nature of the God whom they serve. This holiness must be based upon obedience to Christ and to the Word of God in general.

The apostle may be introducing here the entire *upotassō* section which appears in chapter 2. The “children of obedience” are to be in submission or subjection to authority. As in many other New Testament passages, this submission is discussed by Peter as relating to specific realms of human activity; namely, citizens to a state, servants to masters, wives to husbands, and all men to God. The church is to be composed of people who are obedient to the will of their God.

IV. “As Free Slaves of God” *ōs theou douloi* (2:16)

The meaning of *doulos* in the New Testament is largely determined by its use in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Paul makes much of this concept of the “bond-slave” in his determination to show the Christian’s subservience to Jesus Christ. The image is one of a slave who, having been redeemed out of the slave market and set free by his master, then in gratitude for his freedom commits himself completely to that master for a life of service. So, says Peter, are those who are a part of the church. The verse reads like this: “As free men and not those who have their freedom as a cover of wickedness, but as servants of God.”

This passage is in the heart of the first *upotassō* section. Christians are not technically in subjection to the powers of this world because they are citizens of a heavenly city. On the other hand, because they are living in the *kosmos* they are to submit themselves to “every human regulation for the sake of the Lord”

(v. 13). Kings and governors rule by the will of God, and it is God's will that the church be subservient to the civil authorities. The righteous behavior of the members of the church will serve to silence "the ignorance of unthinking men" (v. 15). Perhaps this use of *doulos* in verse 16 is also a foreview of what Peter is going to say shortly in verses 18–25, where he shows that Christ is an example of submission in suffering for the slaves to follow.

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V. "As Living Stones" *ōs lithoi zōntes* (2:5)

The *oikos* concept in chapter 2 is one of the most well-developed word pictures in the entire epistle. It is what the Germans would call a "Stichwort" passage because it develops instruction on the basis of a "catch word." It may be helpful to reproduce here a translation of the entire section beginning at verse 4 where Peter introduces Christ.

As a living stone, indeed rejected by men, but by God, chosen (and) honorable. And you as living stones are being built up a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices accepted by God through Jesus Christ. Because it is contained in Scripture, "behold I place in Zion an elect stone, an honorable cornerstone; and the one who believes in him shall not be ashamed. Therefore to you who are believers he is the preciousness; but to unbelievers, the stone which the builders rejected, this became the head of the corner (1 Pet 2:4–7).

The Old Testament passages from which Peter develops this stone concept are Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 28:16, and Isaiah 8:14. However, he may very well be depending upon Christ's own application of these passages as recorded in the Gospels. Paul also develops the *oikos* image in Romans 9:33. The idea is that the church is a spiritual house. The apostles and prophets may very well be part of the foundation but Christ himself is the chief cornerstone. The idea of *zōntes* with *lithoi* demonstrates that the life which this stone (or these stones) have is the life of God. The contrast is with the Greek word *bios* which refers to mere organic life. Peter's objective in the *oikos* concept is actually two-fold; first, to show the preeminence of Christ in the spiritual building which is the church, and secondly, to show the close relationship that the believers have to the Lord; as he is the stone, so his people are the stones.

Petrine Metaphors for the Church

I. “An Elect Race” *genos eklekton* (2:9)

Peter’s concept of the elect people of God may be the most highly developed ecclesiology of the entire epistle. The word *eklekton* comes from the verb *kaleō* which means “to call.” Elect ones are “called out.” And the “called out ones” exist in a community of “called out ones” which is the *ekklēsia*.

The word has definite overtones regarding the transfer of God’s choice from Israel to the Church. It appears right at the beginning of the epistle as the fourth word, defining the strangers of the dispersion. The word also appears in 4:10 and 5:13 showing that the stream of God’s chosen people runs throughout the entirety of the epistle. In the verse under consideration at the present time, we are confronted with one of the primary sections of the entire epistle. People of the church are an elect race. In verses 6–8, Christ is the subject of the discussion; and in verses 9 and 10, Peter changes the focus to the readers.

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II. “A Royal Household of Priests” *basileion ierateuma* (2:9)

This unusual concept cannot properly be understood apart from Exodus 19:3–6. Here the Hebrew refers to a “kingdom of priests” and the LXX changes the metaphor to “royal priesthood.” At the time of the writing of the Septuagint, the priesthood in the synagogues was considerably more relevant to the spiritual life of the people than the monarchical idea. The Old Testament reference is a picture of Israel serving as a community of priests in the world. The doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers is an important one to evangelicals and in this verse we have the *locus classicus* of this doctrine.

Like the reference to Israel, the reference to the church depicts this community in its relationship to the world around. Verses 9 and 10 of chapter 2 conclude the dynamic indicative section of the book. Verses 1–3 deal with Christian growth and holiness; verses 4–8 deal with Christian edification built upon Christ; and verses 9–10 show how the Christian community is built upon the promises of God.

III. “A Holy Nation” *ethnos agion* (2:9)

Again we are dependent here upon Exodus 19, this time particularly upon verse 6 which reads in the AV, “And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.” The idea of a “holy nation” is almost a paradox in Biblical language. The word *ethnos* in its various forms is used to speak of the heathen and the Gentiles, but the word *agios* is extremely important in the New Testament to speak of God’s separation of persons or things unto his own distinctive use, and such is its meaning here. It is one of the key words of 1 Peter used with particular force in Chapter 1, verses 15 and 16.

Here again we have a contrast and a comparison. The contrast is between the believers who are the church and the world; and the comparison is between a holy God and His holy people.

IV. “God’s Own Possession” *laos eis peripoiēsin* (2:9)

Because of the fact that he has chosen them and redeemed them, God’s people are his own private property. The proper understanding of the phrase above must be seen in the light of verse 10 where Peter tells his readers, “Once you were no people, now you are God’s people.” The relationship to God is the only thing that really means anything to the church in the final analysis. *Laos eis peripoiēsin* might very well be literally translated “a people made for a possession.” God is a spirit but he manifests himself through the lives and bodies of his people. They belong to no one else, yea, not even to themselves for through this relationship they are now God’s own possession.

V. “The Flock of God” *poimnion tou theou* (5:2)

This phrase appears in the middle of the passage which is probably the closest Peter ever comes in this epistle to technical ecclesiology. He speaks here to the elders exhorting them to “feed the flock of God.” One cannot read these words without serious consideration of [[GJ 10:3 \(Fall 69\) p. 35](#)] the historical event recorded in the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John . As Peter was commanded to be a shepherd of Christ’s sheep, so now he charges other leaders in the church to do the same. The picture of God’s people as sheep and their leaders as shepherds is not an uncommon one in the New Testament. Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 9, and it appears again in this epistle in the 25th verse of chapter 2. In this last mentioned passage, we have a familiar Petrine comparison again as the writer thinks of Christ as a sacrificial lamb (Isa 53:6)

and then suggests that his people are also sheep formerly straying but now returned to their shepherd.

Wuest points out the “churchiness” of this idea as he says, “The word ‘feed’ is the translation of a Greek word which literally means ‘to shepherd,’ and includes the duties of a shepherd, tending, feeding, guiding, and guarding the flock of God. The noun form of the word is translated ‘pastors’ in Eph 4:11.”⁴

In conclusion, two things might be noted. First of all, seven of the above ten word pictures were taken from the first ten verses of the second chapter, leading us to recognize this section as the most important ecclesiological unit in this epistle. Secondly, there is a heavy communal emphasis on Peter’s concept of the church. Certainly the church is composed of individuals, but Peter recognizes that it is the church in community life and behavior which affects the world for good or for bad.

1 Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1964), p. 44.

2 William Barclay, *A New Testament Word Book* (New York: Harper & Bros., n.d.), p. 122.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

4 Kenneth S. Wuest, *First Peter and the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 124.

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[GTJ 5:1 (Spr 84) p. 3]

Luther on Life without Dichotomy

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James Edward McGoldrick

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was a fundamental belief of all the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century, but none gave it greater emphasis than Martin Luther. The great German father of the Reformation regarded this doctrine as the basis for a proper understanding of the Christian life. His teaching on this subject stressed the wholeness of the believer's life as a priest before God regardless of his occupation. Luther believed that this doctrine demolished the sacred/secular dichotomy of the medieval church, a false dichotomy which undermined the entire biblical teaching about salvation and its implications for the Christian in the discharge of his social responsibilities. The true Christian life, in Luther's understanding, is the life of service rendered eagerly to one's neighbors, for true faith is always active in love.

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Writing to Christians in the first century, the Apostle Peter admonished them to recognize that they composed "a spiritual house, ...a holy priesthood, offering sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Believers, Peter said, "are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [they] may declare the praises of him who has called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:5, 9 NIV).

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to which Peter referred is an indispensable distinctive of biblical faith, and without it true Christianity cannot endure. The church was, however, still in its infancy when professional priests rose to prominence and assumed the role of necessary mediators

between God and men. A sharp cleavage consequently developed between the clergy and the laity, and Christians were instructed to regard the priests and monks as members of a *sacred* estate and to view themselves as the *secular* estate. Medieval teaching depicted the church as a ship sailing toward heaven with priests and monks aboard. Laymen had to swim or be towed by ropes attached to the ship. Many people, of course, drowned in a vain effort to pursue the vessel of salvation. In the medieval view *secular* [GTJ 5:1 (Spr 84) p. 4] occupations were regarded as spiritually inferior to the *sacred calling* of the priesthood. Laymen were taught to depend upon the clergymen as those who dispensed saving and sanctifying graces of which the institutional church was the fountain.¹

In the Middle Ages the Christian life was construed in terms of a sacred/secular dichotomy, and salvation was believed to be a reward for good works made possible by an infused grace which was imparted principally by the sacraments. Human merit became the central concern in soteriology, and the monastery was viewed as the ideal place for the practice of Christian piety. The medieval conception of the Christian life was egocentric and sacerdotal. The Pauline declaration of freedom from the law (Rom 8:1–4) evidently was eclipsed by a rigorous legalism which imposed a type of spiritual bondage through the teaching of works-righteousness. This may have been the darkest feature of the so-called Dark Ages.

Although the wonderful light of the gospel was dimmed badly in the Middle Ages, it was not extinguished, and in the 16th century it burst forth again in all its radiant brilliance when God called Martin Luther into the service of the truth. Luther, himself a priest and monk, through patient exegesis of the scripture, learned the truth of justification through faith alone, a discovery which led him to renounce the sacred/secular dichotomy and to reclaim the NT teaching of the priesthood of all believers. Through faith, Luther found in the gospel the joy of Christian freedom experienced in a life without dichotomy.

As a believer liberated through faith in Christ, Luther never ceased to extol the unity and wholeness of the Christian priesthood. He contended that all of God's people belong to a single *sacred* estate in which all have equal access to the Father through Christ. Every form of honest toil performed for God's glory is therefore a divine calling. Luther spoke at times about a *weltlicher Beruf* (worldly calling), but he meant thereby a place in the world where one could fulfill his divinely ordained vocation. In Luther's understanding, one should serve gladly in the station where God has placed him, and that is to be determined mainly by the gifts of providence. To some God has granted the gifts for the gospel ministry; to others he has imparted talents for ruling principalities, mending shoes, or raising potatoes.

In a letter of 1520 addressed to the princes of Germany Luther called upon the rulers to exercise their Christian priesthood by leading the reform of church and society. In this treatise the great reformer [[GTJ 5:1 \(Spr 84\) p. 5](#)] expressed abhorrence for the dichotomous view of the Christian life in which he had been schooled.

It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are called the *spiritual* estate, while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the *temporal* estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office.²

It follows from this argument that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, and are truly priests, bishops, and popes.... We are all one body of Christ the Head, and all members one of another. Christ does not have two different bodies, one temporal, and the other spiritual. There is but one Head and one body.³

In arguing that all Christians are members of the spiritual estate and discharge a sacred calling, Luther recognized no distinctive call to the ministry as opposed to a call to any other vocation. He believed that God works through men, so the church could appraise one's gifts and extend the call to preach accordingly.⁴ Contrary to the medieval view, which extolled the monastic life as the highest calling, Luther affirmed the sacredness of every station in life as a place where Christians may exercise their gifts in the ministry of their priesthood.

The medieval Catholic view of the Christian life stressed renunciation of the world and its pleasures as the most meritorious endeavor possible. Luther, however, espoused a joyous affirmation of life lived in society. He regarded the created world as the proper place for the practice of godliness, because the Christian is a subject (citizen) of two kingdoms, and to each kingdom he has responsibilities. He should not withdraw from the kingdom of earth in order to seek the kingdom of heaven, for the Christian life is one of service to be rendered here and now in Jesus' name.

[\[GTJ 5:1 \(Spr 84\) p. 6\]](#)

Luther taught that all true Christians have been called into the kingdom of heaven by saving grace, and all are equal in that kingdom. It is a kingdom of *receiving* the benevolence of the King. The kingdom of earth, on the other hand, is a state of social (but not spiritual) inequalities. In this kingdom the Christian lives for *giving* by serving others.⁵ As the Christian discharges the duties of his priesthood, he demonstrates a faith which is active in love. No station in life is intended for the exaltation of him who holds it. Even the prince, who enjoys authority to rule lands and peoples, should recognize that God has called him to serve those he governs, “for those who punish evil and protect the good, are God’s servants and workmen.”⁶

Although Luther regarded justification *sola fide* as the heart of the Christian faith and therefore emphasized the believer’s relationship with God, it is evident that he had a keen sense of the Christian’s social responsibility as well. He believed that God’s saving grace sets one free from the penalty due to sin and from the legalism of works-righteousness which had kept people in bondage for so long. In his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520) Luther stated, “a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁷

At first glance the above propositions may appear to be irreconcilable, but Luther found them fully harmonious—correlative truths. He explained by citing the dictum of St. Paul, “though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone” (1 Cor 9:19 NIV). Luther held that genuine Christian faith always produces love, for faith must be active in love. Faith ascends to God, and Christian love descends to one’s neighbor and renders service to him as a fulfillment of the believer’s calling. The Christian does not need to work for his salvation, as the Romanists contended, so he is free to invest his life in the service of his fellow men. In the ultimate sense, one can do nothing for God, for he is utterly self-sufficient. Man, however, who has been created in the image of God, is constantly in need of spiritual and material assistance. Let the saints then follow the example of Christ, who came to earth in both the form of God and the form of a servant (Phil 2:5–11).⁸

As Christ is priest and king, so his disciples are priests and kings (1 Pet 2:9). Luther exclaimed,

[GTJ 5:1 (Spr 84) p. 7]

Not only are we [Christians] the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things....

Christ has made it possible for us...to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow kings, but also his fellow priests.⁹

The believer's kingship and priesthood testify to his spiritual freedom. "From this anyone can clearly see how a Christian is free from all things and over all things, so that he needs no works to make him righteous and save him, since faith alone...confers all these things."¹⁰ The faith which confers these benefits is a gift from God, and those who receive it demonstrate its reality by good works. As Luther stated it beautifully,

Faith is truly active through love. That is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fulness and wealth of his faith.¹¹

Good works performed in faith do not bring benefit to God or to one's self. They bring benefits to one's neighbor. Although believers and unbelievers may perform exactly the same outward deeds, the works of the latter are not truly good. Unless one performs works from a motive of sincere love for God, his works are not pleasing to God despite the relative earthly benefits they may confer. For this reason Luther scorned the monastic view of good works. The monks declared their intention to imitate the example of Christ, and some of them became renowned for their charity. Luther contended, nevertheless, that their works were not good because they were motivated by a selfish desire for reward, and the monks trusted in their imitation of Christ to save them. True morality is present only when one performs good works lovingly and eagerly without regard for any personal gain to be realized.¹² As Luther related, "our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works."¹³

In the medieval church enormous emphasis was placed on the meritorious character of celibacy, to which all clergymen were committed by vows. Although marriage was regarded as a sacrament and [\[GTJ 5:1 \(Spr 84\) p. 8\]](#) therefore a means of grace, celibacy, which was not a sacrament, was considered a far superior spiritual state. Luther denied its sacramental character, but he extolled marriage as the ideal context in which believers may put faith to work in active love. He argued that God created man and woman for each other, and he assailed Rome for exalting celibacy over this divine institution. He lamented that canon law had contaminated what God had declared clean and holy. Luther regarded celibacy as unnatural. He complained

that the “papal rabble, priests, monks, and nuns resist God’s...commandment when they despise...marriage and vow that they will maintain perpetual chastity while they deceive the common people with lying words and wrong impressions.”¹⁴ In praising marriage Luther said that it excels all positions of earthly honor. “It is not an estate to be placed on a level with the others; it precedes and surpasses them all, whether those of emperor, princes, bishops, or anyone else.”¹⁵

In hailing marriage as an excellent relationship in which faith may be active in love, Luther contended that even menial tasks are good works pleasing to God when performed in faith. Speaking about a godly husband, he wrote, “cutting wood or heating a room is just as holy for him as praying...is for a monk, for all works of a pious man are good because of the Holy Spirit and his faith.”¹⁶ The same is true of a devout wife and mother. Tending to the needs of crying children, washing diapers, and making beds are forms of Christian service which no one should denigrate.¹⁷ So fervent was Luther in advocating marriage that he branded the Roman stress on celibacy a mark of Anti-Christ.¹⁸ Luther then directed people away from monasteries populated by celibates to the Christian home where father, mother, and children served God through serving one another and therefore enjoyed life without dichotomy.

One reason why Luther found monasticism so distasteful was because it encouraged the belief that begging was an especially pious expression of Christian humility. During the Middle Ages beggars were very common, and the church admonished its members to give alms generously. Many people were poverty-stricken due to circumstances they could not control, and for such people Luther had a tender heart, and to them he gave lavishly. The monks, however, assumed poverty voluntarily because they regarded it as a means of [\[GTJ 5:1 \(Spr 84\) p. 9\]](#) acquiring merit in heaven, a view which Luther came to abhor. The German reformer emphasized the dignity of work as a calling, a service of love for one’s neighbors.

When the gifts of one’s calling are employed faithfully in loving service the Christian performs works which are truly good. They please God, benefit one’s neighbors, and give joy to those who do them.

If this truth could be impressed upon the poor people, a servant girl would dance for joy and praise and thank God; and with her careful work, for which she receives sustenance and wages, she would gain a treasure such as all who pass for the greatest saints do not have.¹⁹

Such a servant girl would find satisfaction in her work, her work in the *sacred* estate, and she would experience the joy of life without dichotomy.

In Luther's understanding of the Christian life the believer's self-image as a servant is a fundamental motif. In the reformer's words, "a Christian lives not in himself but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love."²⁰

To those who claimed to possess saving faith but failed to demonstrate an active concern for their neighbors' needs Luther issued a warning about the "illusion of faith." He insisted that emotional responses to the gospel are not necessarily evidences of genuine faith. Active love, expressing itself in good works, is the only reliable external index of faith. Such love, Luther held, would extend to sharing one's earthly goods with a neighbor in need. Just as Christ emptied himself when he left heaven to become man (Phil 2:5), believers should sacrifice their possessions for the benefit of those in need. When illness strikes Christians should aid the sick, even at the risk of contagion to themselves. Luther did so himself by remaining in Wittenberg to minister to the sick and dying during an epidemic of bubonic plague.²¹

In rejecting the sacred/secular, clergy/laity dichotomy of the medieval church Luther denied that the Christian life should be ascetic in character. He believed that God had created the world for his own glory, but also for the enjoyment of his people. Luther therefore encouraged Christians to engage in, for example, the visual and musical arts, and to enjoy the excitement of athletic contests. For [\[GTJ 5:1 \(Spr 84\) p. 10\]](#) music he had a particular love, and his contribution to Christian hymnody was immense.

Luther appreciated greatly the aesthetic value of music, so he did not react against Catholic ceremonialism as strongly as did, for example, Zwingli and Calvin. Luther believed that music is a gift from God, an ideal means by which believers can express their loving adoration. He found devotional music a weapon with which to fight against temptation, and in order to promote Christian piety through music he composed thirty-seven hymns, all in the German language for use by entire congregations. No longer would Gregorian chants sung in Latin by monastic choirs dominate the services of the church. Worship became a corporate experience in the Reformation, and bodies of the faithful joined in singing such Lutheran compositions as "Jesus Christ Our God and Savior," "Lord, Keep us Steadfast in Thy Love," "From Trouble Deep I Cry to Thee," and, of course, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Luther said, "I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise."²²

In the late Middle Ages, as in modern times, the divine gift of music was often employed for perverse uses, a practice which caused Luther great dismay. His insight into the character and proper role of music offers valuable guidance for the church in all ages.

That it is good and pleasing to God to sing spiritual songs is, I think, not hidden to any Christian.... The kings and prophets of the Old Testament...praised God with singing and playing, with poetry and all kinds of string music.... St. Paul too instituted this in 1 Corinthians 14:15 and bids the Colossians (3:16) heartily to sing spiritual songs and psalms unto the Lord in order that thereby God's Word and Christian doctrine might be used and practiced in diverse ways....

I greatly desire that youth...be trained in music and other proper arts, ...whereby it might be weaned from the love ballads and sex songs and learn something beneficial and take up the good with relish, as befits youth. Nor am I at all of the opinion that all the arts are to be overthrown by the Gospel, as some superspiritual people protest, but I would gladly see all the arts, especially music, in the service of Him who has given and created them.²³

Contrary to Zwingli and Calvin, who feared that music might distract people from giving attention to the sermon, Luther became the father of the singing Protestant Church. Calvin eliminated all but congregational singing of psalms in unison, and Zwingli forbade the use of musical instruments in services of worship. Luther, however, [GTJ 5:1 (Spr 84) p. 11] favored the use of instruments, and the German Lutheran Churches went on to excel all other Protestant bodies of the sixteenth century in the development of their hymnody. J. S. Bach is a fine example of Luther's enduring influence. Bach employed music as a vehicle by which to proclaim the great themes of Reformation theology by composing to correspond with the doctrines of Luther's catechisms. He was guided by biblical principles in both the words and the form of his music. Bach wrote, "all music [should] have as its sole aim the glory of God and the recreation of the soul. Where this rule is not observed there is no real music, but only a devilish blubbering and whining."²⁴

Luther rejected the contention that the Christian life should be one of asceticism. He issued a ringing affirmation of God's good gifts, the enjoyment of which is a wholesome pleasure to be desired, and the Jesuits in the Counter-Reformation charged that more people had been damned by Luther's hymns than by his sermons and books.

From Luther the church has received a rich legacy in doctrine and practice. In the providence of God it was he who led the way to demolish the dichotomy which had kept people from harmony with God and fellowship with one another, and from enjoying the Christian life in its wholeness, a wholeness which is realized by those who, though they are kings and priests, find their deepest satisfaction in being servants.

1 See the excellent article by Otto Pfeleiderer, "Luther as Founder of Protestant Morals," *Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (1888) 31-53.

2 Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," tr. C. M. Jacobs, rev. James Atkinson, *Luther's Works*, 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 127.

3 Ibid., 129-30.

4 The implication of Luther's teaching should be clear—no profession or occupation is more "reverend" than another. The godly farmer is just as reverend as the clergyman. There should therefore be no talk about "full-time Christian service." It is significant that the reformers placed far less emphasis on the rite of clerical ordination than is the case today. Neither Philip Melancthon nor John Calvin was formally ordained. This is, of course, not an argument against ordination as such, but it does reflect the reformers' position on the priesthood.

5 See Philip S. Watson, "Luther's Doctrine of Vocation," *SJT* 11 (1949) 364-77.

6 Luther, "Temporal Authority, to What Extent It should be Obeyed," tr. J. J. Schindel, rev. W. I. Brandt, *Luther's Works*, 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962) 100.

7 Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," tr. W. A. Lambert, rev. Harold J. Grimm, *Luther's Works*, 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 344.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 355.

10 Ibid., 356.

11 Ibid., 365.

12 See Gustaf Wingren, "The Christian's Calling According to Luther," *Augustana Quarterly* 21 (1942) 3-16; Martin J. Heineken, "Luther and the 'Orders of Creation' in Relation to a Doctrine of Work and Vocation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (1952) 393-414.

13 Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 372-73.

14 Luther, The Sixth Commandment, *Large Catechism* in Book of Concord, ed. T. G. Tappert, *et. al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1952) 392.

15 *Ibid.*, 393.

16 Quoted by William H. Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 146.

17 *What Luther Says*, II, ed. E. M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) #2766.

18 *Ibid.*, #2779.

19 Luther, *Large Catechism*, 385.

20 Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 371.

21 See the discussion of Luther's social ethics in Paul Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. R. C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 294ff.

22 *What Luther Says*, 11, #3091.

23 *Ibid.*, #3095.

24 Quoted by Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967) 149; *Luther's Works*, 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) contains all of Luther's hymns with helpful editorial comments.

[[GTJ 5:1 \(Spr 84\) p. 13](#)]

The Imperial Priesthood of the Believer (Revelation 1:6; 1 Peter 2:5,9)

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Robert Clark

Some one has truly said that no believer can “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith he is called” (Eph 4:1) who does not comprehend and practice his function as a priest of the new covenant. Unhappily, this is a part of the Christian calling that is little understood by the average believer. It is a sad commentary on the intelligence and spiritual acumen of believers that they should be so slow to perceive truths that are so clearly stated in Holy Writ. Man clings fatuously to the carnal and temporal, and is indifferent to the eternal and spiritual. He holds rigidly to the shadow and lets the substance go. The type means more to him than the antetype; the prophecy bulks larger in his mind than the fulfillment. And, perhaps, this is nowhere so apparent as in the matter of the priesthood of the believer. We have, today, great ecclesiastical systems, with their priestly orders, rituals and ceremonies, which purport to be the legitimate, Biblical means of grace for the development of spiritual life; but in view of the clear teaching of the Word of God, and of the effects of that kind of ministry, we believe that that kind of priesthood is a hindrance rather than a help. It is a ministry that is patterned after the Aaronic priesthood rather than after that of our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 5:1–10:39). That priesthood was concerned with carnal ordinances that were temporal, typical and imperfect, and which could never make the worshippers perfect. They had to be offered year by year, again and again (Heb 10:1–4). The whole service of sanctuary priesthood and sacrifices by its very nature, witnessed to its imperfection and transitoriness (Heb 9:1–10). The [\[BSac 92:368 \(Oct 35\) p. 443\]](#) exigencies of the Christian calling require a priestly ministry that is based on more secure foundations than these. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says: “For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins, and then for the people’s: for this he did once, when he offered up himself” (Heb 7:26, 27). “And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.... For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands,

which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb 9:15, 24).

Priesthood is a function that has been in operation since the beginning of the human race. In Old Testament times there were three orders of men that were especially set apart by anointing with holy oil, for a particular vocation; these were the kingly, the prophetic and the priestly orders. A king, in Old Testament times, was one who was to rule men for God. A prophet was one who spoke for God to men. And a priest was one who spoke for men to God. The priestly office came first in time, as it did also in respect to man’s need. When our first parents sinned and fell from the high estate into which they had been created, God Himself exercised the office of a priest when He slew animals and provided a covering for His unfortunate creatures (Gen 3:21). He was, in type, propitiating the Divine government on behalf of the sinful state of mankind (Rom 3:25). Abel was doing priestly service “when he offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts” (Heb 11:4). In the patriarchal period the head of the family was the priest. He would build an altar, offer a sacrifice and call on God for help. We read that as Abraham journeyed from place to place, he built an altar unto the Lord and called on the name of the Lord (Gen 12:7, 8). Later, when Israel had been [[BSac 92:368 \(Oct 35\) p. 444](#)] delivered from Egyptian bondage and was about to receive the Law, God proposed to make them “a kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:6); but Israel refused the obligation through fear of too close contact with God (Exod 20:19) and God accepted their renunciation (Deut 18:16, 17). Moses became the Mediator with God for them. The Aaronic priesthood became the temporary depository of all Israel’s priesthood, until Christ the antitypical High Priest came. In the future when the Israelites turn to the Lord they shall be “priests of Jehovah, the ministers of our God” to the Gentile nations in Christ’s millennial kingdom (Isa 6:16; 66:21). During this age all the saints gathered from the Jews and Gentile are called to be priests unto God (1 Pet 2:5, 9); and when glorified shall reign with Christ as king-priests (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) resume the priesthood which God from the first designed for His people. Then there will be a blessed and holy series: Christ, the Royal High Priest; the glorified saints king-priests; Israel in the flesh mediating as king-priests to the nations in the flesh.

The priesthood of the believer is in keeping with his heavenly calling, birth, citizenship, association, service and rewards (John 3:3; Phil 3:20; Eph 1:3). It is essentially spiritual. Its sanctuary and sacrifices are in the same category. Peter says: “Ye also, as living stones are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5). This is the “greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made

with hands” (Heb 9:11), “which the Lord pitched and not man” (Heb 8:2). This is the substance, the real, the true, of which the Mosaic economy was only the shadow (Heb 10:1). Christ is the Great High Priest in this sanctuary. He is qualified by His Deity (Heb 1:1–14); by His humanity (Heb 2:1–18); and by His voluntary sacrifice of Himself for the sin of the world (Heb 9:1–10, 25).

The priesthood of the believer is called a royal priesthood by Peter, and John says: “He hath made us kings and priests unto God” (Rev 1:6), a better translation is that “He hath made us a kingdom of priests.” Kingdom is the [BSac 92:368 (Oct 35) p. 445] collective description; priest is the individual designation. The whole company of priests form a kingdom, with royal place, authority and rule (Rev 5:10). They are a holy priesthood because they have been called out and set apart for a holy service; and they are made holy by the one offering of our Lord Jesus Christ, He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified (Heb 10:14).

Priesthood is an office, not a gift. In the enumeration of gifts, priesthood is not mentioned (1 Cor 12:1–31; Eph 4:1–16). The endowment of the believer with one or more gifts was for the purpose of testimony or for the edification of the church. The gift made him an evangelist, a teacher, a pastor, or an administrator. In a word, the gift gave a man a prophetic ministry which is that of a representative of God speaking to men. Priesthood, on the other hand, is to provide men with a representative before God. “Every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God.” “For Christ is not entered into the holy place made with hands; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb 5:1; 9:24). The church is not called out by priestly service, but by prophetic ministry. The ministry of the priest will appear later.

Priesthood is for all believers. It is a birth relationship like the Aaronic priesthood. This cannot be said of any particular gift. For, while all have gifts, not all have the same gifts. “Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? (1 Cor 12:4, 29). But all are priests with the right of exercising priestly functions. The New Testament denies the right of men to elect some of their fellows to a priestly class, with special privileges of access to God. We are a kingdom of priests with Christ our Great High Priest. We are a spiritual house, or family, an holy priesthood. This is true of the most humble believer as it is of the most instructed child of God.

The priesthood of the believer is individual and personal. The church, as a corporate body is not said to be an holy priesthood. It is true that every believer is a living stone in [BSac 92:368 (Oct 35) p. 446] the holy temple, and a priest; but he is a priest because he is a Christian, a believer in Jesus Christ.

The chief privilege of the priest is that of access to God. Under the law only the priests could go into the holy place of the temple where incense was offered. The high priest alone could enter into the holiest of all, and that but once a year. The type was fulfilled by Christ, one for all (Heb 10:9, 12); and when He died the veil of the temple (between the holy place and holy of holies) was rent, so that now the priests, equally with the High Priest, have access, not once a year, but at any time, to God in the holiest. The Jewish high priest could only enter into the holy place in virtue of the sacrificial blood which had been shed and was sprinkled on the mercy-seat (Heb 9:7). So Christ has entered, by His own blood, into heaven itself, having obtained eternal redemption for us (Heb 9:12). When we exercise our priestly functions we join Him there in spirit (Heb 9:24; 4:14, 16; 10:19–22).

The functions of the new Testament priest are next in order. The first is that of sacrifices. He is ordained to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins (Heb 5:1). However, the New Testament priest has no occasion to offer sacrifices for sin; that was done once for all when Christ offered Himself. But there are other offerings that he can make that are essential to his priestly service. The first of these is his own body, for life or for death, as the Lord pleases. On the seal of the China Inland Mission there is engraved the figures of an ox, a plough and an altar. Under them are the words: "Either or both." Sacrifice or service. Paul exhorts us: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom 12:1). This offering of ourselves is an acceptable offering to God because of Christ. We are accepted in the Beloved (Eph 1:6). Christ, too, gave himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savor (Eph 5:2). It is a reasonable service in view of the abounding mercies of God to us; we can do no less to Him. Again it is a living, rational, intelligent, voluntary sacrifice in contrast to dumb animals, [[BSac 92:368 \(Oct 35\) p. 447](#)] or to dead matter. If our gifts of things are acceptable to God, how much more ourselves who are made in the image of God, must be. "My Son," He says, "give me thy heart." This offering that we present to God will bring untold blessing to ourselves. We shall be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we shall prove, or experience, what is the good, and acceptable and perfect will of God. A spiritual metamorphosis will take place in us that will change the current and texture of our lives (2 Cor 3:18). We present, or dedicate ourselves to Him, and He consecrates us by His indwelling Spirit."

The next offering of the New Testament priest is the sacrifice of praise. "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name" (Heb 13:15). Two things are to be noted: what this sacrifice is, and how it is to be offered. It is the fruit of our

lips that make mention of His name. It is our lips that give audible expression of what we feel in our hearts. Praise was always a part of priestly service. Some of the offerings were designed to be an expression of thankfulness and praise. In the temple the Levites had trained singers and musicians to assist in their services. Praise is not only beneficial to the one who offers it; it is a testimony to all who hear. "He that offereth praise glorifies God." "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." This offering of praise is to be continual. Like the burnt offering that was offered under the law, morning and evening (Exodus 29:28-42). This offering did not speak about sin, but of devotedness to God. It was a thank offering, freely given.

The third offering that the New Testament priest could make was his property, such as he possesses. "But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Heb 13:16). This form of priestly service has an ever widening ministry, as we are blessed by God (2 Cor 8:9). It begins first, logically and morally, with one's own dependents. The Word of God speaks in no uncertain terms: "But if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, [[BSac 92:368 \(Oct 35\) p. 448](#)] and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim 5:8). It may not be strictly priestly service to provide for our own, but we cannot render any acceptable service if we neglect to provide for those to whom we are obligated naturally.

The second group to whom we can minister and who have a claim upon our interests are the needy saints. And given to them is an evidence that the love of God dwells in our hearts (1 John 3:16, 17); and it is a means whereby Christians are bound together in mutual bonds of love (2 Cor 9:12-13).

This service is to be extended to those who minister in the Word. Since they render unto us spiritual things, it is but right that we should reciprocate with temporal things. "Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things" (Gal 6:6). The cause of Christ is thereby prospered by this service which leaves men free to give their whole time to Gospel ministry (3 John 5-8).

This priestly service in the use of our means is to be toward all men as we have opportunity, and are able (Heb 13:2; Gal 6:10). The Father Himself has given us an example of spontaneous liberality for "he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and unjust" (Matt 5:45). All humanitarian efforts thus come under the head of priestly sacrifice, rather than of Christian service. Christian service is the ministry of a special gift given to us as individuals (1 Cor 12:4-11).

The New Testament priest is also an intercessor. His access to the throne of grace gives him the privilege of pleading for others as well as for himself

(Heb 4:16; 7:25; 1 Tim 2:1). Circumstances may arise and prohibit us from exercising the ministry of a gift, such as preaching, or teaching; but the priestly service of intercession can go on. Paul was confined to prison in Rome, but he prayed continually for his fellow workers and converts. Our Lord Jesus Christ is exercising this priestly ministry of intercession for us now at the right hand of God (Heb 7:25).

Finally, it is pertinent to say a word about the exercise of priesthood. While all the sons of Aaron were priests, [[BSac 92:368 \(Oct 35\) p. 449](#)] there were conditions imposed upon the exercise of the office. He must be free from physical defects; he must reach a certain age; he must conform to certain social family restrictions. Then he must be formally inducted into his office. He was washed, clothed, anointed and presented with the offerings (Exod 29:1–24). Everything was furnished for him. This is done for every believer (Eph 1:3). But if he became defiled, through any cause, he must not minister until he is cleansed from his defilement (Lev 22:1–9). This is equally true of the New Testament priest (John 13:4–10; 1 John 1:9). Sin will vitiate our service. We must approach the throne of grace in the full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb 10:22).

As priests, we must remember that our place of priestly service is in the most holy place, where Christ is. We must come therefore into His presence by the way of the brazen altar and laver. The priests had to resort to the laver again and again as they went in to burn the incense or minister in the holy place. So must we resort to the cleansing ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ as we enter into the holy place (John 15:4–10). Conformity to the priestly law was a matter of life and death with the Aaronic priests; it is a matter of spiritual growth or atrophy with us. In the ministry of the Word, God will tolerate defilements in His servants, that He will not in their priestly service. In witnessing, we have to do with men; but as priests we approach an infinitely holy God. Let us therefore fear, since this ministry is open to us all, lest any one of us come short because of sin.

Waterbury, Vermont

[[BSac 92:368 \(Oct 35\) p. 450](#)]

A. Old Testament Ethics As a Discipline

The discipline of OT ethics in this century has been in a similar state of uncertainty as to its identity and scope as that of OT theology as a whole. There have been serious critiques of earlier attempts (Eichrodt, Hempel, Van Oyen) to systematize or unify diachronically the ethical teaching of the OT (Barton, McKeating). Just as there is a problem in relating the changing history of Israel's religion to a unified OT theology, so there is a need to distinguish between the conventions of Israelite belief and behavior at different times, the ethical values and interpretive criteria of different OT authors, and what the OT as a whole may be understood to present as a coherent set of ethical values.

In addition to this methodological debate, there is also the question of how the ethical teachings of the HB apply today. In what sense can the OT be said to have moral authority over Christians? Historically this question has tended to concentrate on the validity of OT law (Bloesch, 1067–1125). In the Reformation period, Luther stressed the functions of the law as a “hedge,” restraining sin in Israelite civil society, and as a “mirror,” exposing our own sin to ourselves and thus driving us to the Gospel. He appears to have rejected in theory a “third use” of the law, i.e., as an authoritative guide to Christian morality. Yet he made extensive practical use of it in his catechisms, where he essentially “Christianized” the Decalogue. Theologically, however, law preceded and stood in contrast with the gospel. Calvin saw a greater continuity between OT and NT and so emphasized the “third use” of the law, taking seriously Christ's affirmation of its continuing validity. To him, the gospel did not replace the law, but showed its true integrity and enabled Christians to fulfill it in a positive way. The Anabaptist, radical wing of the Reformation differed from the mainline Reformers over their use of the OT, largely because of their different ecclesiological starting point. Faced with the use of the OT in defense of infant baptism and the use of the sword, Anabaptists tended to demote the authority of the OT for Christians in their

struggle for adult believers' baptism and for pacifism. Recent studies, however, have exonerated them from the charge of Marcionism (Swartley, *Essays*).

In this century, the extremes of interpretation have been the theonomist position on the one hand, arguing that the OT law is permanently valid and ought to be applied not only in the church but by civil magistrates (Bahnsen), and the extreme dispensationalist position on the other, arguing that OT law was entirely confined to the dispensation of Israel and has no binding authority in any respect on Christians during the church age (Geisler). Critics of both views have tried to preserve the ancient distinction (stemming from Origen, Augustine, and Calvin) between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws in the OT (Kaiser, "God's Promise"). While recognizing that this is not an explicit distinction in the text itself nor intended as an exegetical guide, it is seen to have some NT support and hermeneutical value, provided it does not result in limiting Christian interest in the OT to the Ten Commandments alone. There is not so much a separate category of moral law as a moral dimension to all laws at the level of principle, which encourages ethical investigation even of kinds of laws that Christians no longer regard as binding (Wright).

Critical scholars in recent years have argued for a great variety of views as to how the OT can function ethically for Christians. It may reflect the natural morality and moral consensus of Israel within the context of wider ANE morality, and as such we can critically compare it with our own ethics (Rogerson). It provides a rich matrix of ethical insights and resources, but we must not reduce it to timeless principles and thereby ignore the historically conditioned nature of OT laws and conventions (Clements). Rather, it is the very concreteness and earthy specificity of the OT that serve as a healthy corrective to the tendency for Christian ethics to deal in vague generalities (Davidson, Goldingay). While the OT may no longer be prescriptively normative, it is still strongly influential in shaping the Christian's identity and moral character (Birch and

Rasmussen). This is particularly the role of OT narratives, which have moral power in exposing reality, shattering and transforming worldviews, and demanding response (Birch, "Moral Address"). The moral power of OT texts is applied to contemporary social, political, and economic issues through a kind of neotypology in the many writings of Brueggemann (especially *The Land* and *Prophetic Imagination*).

Sociological approaches to the OT have also injected a new dimension into the ethical relevance of the OT. This can be decidedly ideological in thrust, as in Gottwald's overtly Marxist reading of the socioeconomic features of Israelite religion. But it has the merit of pointing strongly to the ethical relevance of Israel as a whole social organism and not just of isolated texts from her traditions (Wright, "Ethical Relevance").

This variety of approaches to OT ethics is illuminating in portraying Israel's actual response to ethical issues in her own context, in helping us relate that context to our own, and in showing us how literary texts of many different genres actually function in shaping or resourcing the ethics of the reader. Some scholars, however, regret the loss of a sense of coherence or central unifying principle, and also the lack of a concept of authority, i.e., that the OT still has an abiding normative ethical role for Christians. Kaiser relates these weaknesses also to newer literary approaches to the OT, which have shifted the focus in hermeneutics from author intention to reader response and thus undermined any objective authority of the text for normative ethics ("New Approaches"). Kaiser himself wants to reinstate the authority of OT moral law, but avoid the theonomist extreme by dealing at the level of applied principles. Goldingay (38–65) also values the normative authority of the OT ethically, but cautions that it is not our derived principles that have that authority but the text itself. We must take into account the specificity, diversity, and limitations of OT commands and set them fully in their historical context. Wright has proposed a paradigmatic approach that sees Israel as a whole, set in the midst

of the nations, as God's model, with all the concreteness of historical and contextual particularity, but with a paradigmatic function that releases the teaching of the OT to application in wider human society and across cultures. The ethical relevance of the law is thus set within the wider question of the purpose of Israel's existence and mission for the sake of humanity as a whole. Schluter and Clements have developed this approach at the level of practical proposals for social reform in Britain. Others have explored similar applications in the United States (Mason).

The field of OT ethics is attracting increasing scholarly attention, and the barrenness of the mid-twentieth century seems to be giving way to a time of greater promise and fruitfulness (Janzen, Knight, Birch).

In the confines of this article, a descriptive or analytical account of OT ethics would be too ambitious. So we follow a broadly canonical order, observing major themes of ethical importance in relation to the great articulations of Israel's faith. The OT assumes the existence of one, living, personal God and sets the whole of human life in response to him. OT ethics, therefore, is primarily a response to God, who he is and what he has done. That response is first set in the context of God as Creator and thus has a universal force. Second, OT ethics is set in the context of the God of covenant purpose, whose commitment to bless the human race led him to initiate a special relationship with Israel, which in turn required their ethical response. Third, Israel's ethical response was shaped by the God of redemptive action, who delivered his people and then gave them a land to live in and a law to live by.

B. Creation

1. *Ethical simplicity.* The monotheism of the opening chapters of the Bible is so obvious that we easily miss its ethically revolutionary character. The creation narratives exclude polytheism and dualism and the pervasive ethico-cultural edifices that go with them. Only one God created the heavens and the earth, and human

beings are answerable only to that one God. This immediately introduces a fundamental simplicity into biblical ethics. A commitment to love and obey the one living God rescues us from the fear of offending one god by trying to please another, with resulting conflict of moral requirements. Ps 33 draws universal conclusions as it moves directly from the sole creative word of Yahweh to the universal challenge to all human beings to fear him (vv. 6–8), since he is the moral adjudicator of all human behavior (vv. 13–15; cf. also 96:4–5, 10ff.). This essential simplicity serves as an incentive to act in accordance with God’s revealed word (Deut 30:11–14; Mic 6:8).

2. *Moral order.* Gen 1 presents creation as a place of order, system, and structure. We live in a cosmos, not a chaos (cf. Isa 45:18ff.). This provides an objective basis and authority for the exercise of moral freedom and sets limits to moral relativism. Whatever the culture or historical context, we all have to live in God’s created world as his human creatures. There is a basic shape to that world that we did not invent, and therefore a corresponding shape to the moral response required of us if we are to live within it with the kind of freedom that, by God’s so ordering, it authorizes. Morality, in biblical terms, therefore, is preconditioned by the given shape of creation, which underlies the relativity of cultural responses to it within history.

The established order of creation also generates confidence in the reliability and predictability of life in this world. This does not, of course, rule out the unexpected apparent misfortunes of life (cf. Ecclesiastes). Nor is it fatalism. It is simply that the HB moves from the observation of regularity, consistency, and permanence in creation itself (e.g. in Jer 31:35ff.) to affirmations of the same characteristics in God, and thence to the assumption that certain consequences will always follow from certain actions. There are causes and effects in the moral realm, as in the physical, and it is part of wise living in this world to take note of them and behave accordingly.

Such ethical consequentialism is found in the Wisdom literature, which tends to be grounded in a creation rather than a redemption theology. Much of the advice and guidance given in Proverbs is prudential: “Think what will happen if. . . .” Behavioral cause and effect are repeatedly linked. The Wisdom tradition’s sexual ethic illustrates this. Whereas the law simply prohibits adultery, on penalty of death, Wisdom warns against it by describing the appalling consequences the adulterer exposes himself to, personally and socially. Moral rules and moral consequences actually reinforce one another in this way of thinking (e.g., Prov 5; 6:24–35; 7). Wisdom’s consequentialism, however, is thoroughly personal and theistic. Behind all the prudential advice of the sages stands their own foundational axiom, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” Whatever results follow from our actions are not mechanical cause and effect, but the outworking of God’s own order in his world. The consequentialism of Wisdom is thus based on what we would theologically call God’s sovereign providence and justice.

3. *The image of God.* Among the most important implications of the creation material for biblical ethics is the affirmation that God made human beings in his own image. This has two primary ethical effects.

(a) *The sanctity of human life.* As early as the texts of the Noahic covenant, the principle was stated that human life was to be treated as inviolable because human beings were made in the image of God (Gen 9:6). Even animals would be held to account by God for killing human beings. The influence of this principle can be seen in Israel’s law. For example, laws about domestic animals that injure or kill humans are common in ANE legal corpora. All of them prescribe various degrees of compensation and punishment of the owner. Only the Hebrew law prescribes that the “guilty” ox also was to be stoned to death (Exod 21:28ff.). It seems most likely that this element was included because of the religious principle of the sanctity of human life, as crystallized in Gen 9:5–6 (cf. Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land*, 156–60). Empirically, this high value shows

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

(b) *The equality of human beings.* The OT did not eliminate all social distinctions, such as the subordinate social and economic status of the slave. It did, however, go a long way in mitigating the worst effects through a theology of essential human equality based on our common createdness. OT law knows nothing of the graded penalties for crimes against different ranks of victim, as was common in ANE law. God commanded both native and alien to be treated equally (Lev 24:22). The slave was given human and legal rights unheard of in contemporary societies (Exod 21:20–21, 26–27). This is reflected in Job’s great ethical self-defense, in which he bases his claim to have treated his slaves with justice in any case they brought against him upon an unambiguous statement of created human equality between master and slave: “Did not he who made me in the womb also make them?” (Job 31:15). Once again it is in the Wisdom literature that we find the broadest outworking of this creation theology into the social ethos of Israel. Several texts in Proverbs affirm the equality before God of rich and poor (e.g., Prov 22:2; 29:13), and others so identify God with every human being, regardless of status, that what we do to them we do to God himself (14:31; 17:5; 19:17). This is one area where we can hear distinct echoes of the Wisdom tradition in the ethical teaching of Jesus.

C. Covenant Promise

1. *Universal concern.* Gen 3–11 describes the corruption and frustration of God’s purpose for human life on earth as a result of human sin and rebellion, which escalates through those chapters from individual, through familial and societal, to global proportions. The initiation of a covenant of promise with Abraham in Gen 12, therefore, has an equally global scope. It stands as the foundation of God’s redemptive project for his whole creation, throughout the rest of the Bible. It is the covenant of grace, which stands behind all

subsequent acts of God in history, for it represents God's commitment to the ultimate good of humanity: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (12:3). The universal scope of this promise echoes throughout the ancestral narratives (18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14) and then on through the rest of the HB. This commitment to a covenant purpose of redemption on God's part injects an element of eschatological hope and "missionary" purpose into biblical ethics. Otherwise, the uncertainties of history could reduce us to cynicism about the value of moral choices, as Ecclesiastes observes. But with the ultimate perspective of redemption and new creation, ethical behavior has a firm foundation and is not just short-term expediency.

2. *The people of God.* God promised to make Abraham into a great nation (Gen 12:2-3). This is a major feature of biblical ethics, with its roots here in the OT. God's answer to a world of nations scattered in arrogance and strife (as portrayed in Gen 11) was to create a new community. It would be a people descended from Abraham, blessed as he was, but they would ultimately be the vehicle for bringing blessing to the whole world of nations, and their contribution to that purpose would be by their ethical distinctiveness. Simply being Israel was an ethical agenda and mission in the midst of the world. To be an Israelite was to be called to respond to God's covenant purpose for the nations by living as his people in their midst.

The clearest expression of this is Gen 18:19: "I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." The context of this verse is God's imminent judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. In the midst of a world characterized by Sodom (→), whose evil was causing an outcry, God wanted a community characterized by his own values and priorities, i.e., righteousness (note the wordplay between **דָּרַךְ** and **דָּרַעַ** cf. Isa 5:7) and justice (**טָרַף־שֶׁמֶר**). The presence of these two phrases, "the way of

the LORD” and “doing what is right and just” here in the ancestral narratives shows that Israel’s identity as a distinct ethical community is traced back before the Sinai covenant and Mosaic law. It was something written into their genetic code, so to speak, while they were as yet in the loins of Abraham. In fact, such ethical distinctiveness is put forward here by God himself as the very reason for the election of Abraham: “I have chosen him, so that. . . .” The sense of purpose is strong in the verse. Election means election to an ethical agenda in the midst of a corrupt world of Sodoms. And that ethical agenda is itself only part of a still wider purpose: “so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” That is a clear reference, in the light of the preceding verse, to God’s ultimate intention to bring blessing to all nations through Abraham’s descendants. That is God’s mission, God’s universal agenda. That too was the reason for the election of Abraham. What is therefore highly significant in the structure of this verse, syntactically as well as theologically, is the way ethics stands as the middle term between election and mission. The distinctive quality of life of the people of God, committed to his way of righteousness and justice, stands as the purpose of election on the one hand and the means to mission on the other. It is the fulcrum of the verse. This sequence of election, ethics, and mission underlies the whole biblical agenda for the life of God’s people. OT ethics is thus set in a universal and eschatological framework.

Jer 4:1–2 provides an illustration of the same principle from the prophetic corpus. Jeremiah first urges the people to renounce idolatry and make their worship and general social life compatible “in a truthful, just and righteous way.” Then he goes on to spell out the results that would flow from such radically ethical repentance. He takes for granted that God’s judgment on Israel itself would be averted and moves on to a more universal vision, giving another clear allusion to the Abrahamic covenant: “Then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory” (4:2b). Clearly Jeremiah believed that the quality of Israel’s ethical life was not just an end in

itself, but was supposed to have far-reaching consequences for the nations as well. Much more was at stake in the matter of Israel's moral and spiritual repentance than just saving Israel's own skin from judgment. Isa 48:1, 17–19 makes the same point rhetorically and hypothetically, but at the same time strongly binds together again the link between God's redemptive purpose for humanity, as signaled in the Abrahamic covenant, and his ethical demand on Israel as the people of God. OT ethics had a missionary purpose.

D. A Redeemed People

The historic deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt was explicitly said to be motivated by God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham. The book of Exodus moves on from the deliverance itself to the encounter between Yahweh and Israel at Mount Sinai. There Israel was faced with the searching ethical implications of what had happened to them.

1. *Priestly and holy.* Exod 19:4–6 is a crucial passage, for it is a hinge between the redemptive history of the Exodus and the law and covenant texts that follow. In these verses God gives to Israel an identity and a mission, which is the basis for the ethical demands of the law. And behind both stands the redemptive action of God himself. So by way of preface to all the detailed legislation to follow, the fundamental ethical principle is that God's requirements depend, first, on what God himself has done and second, on who Israel is.

(a) *God's initiative and universal interest.* "You yourselves have seen what I did" (Exod 19:4). As in the Decalogue, the text begins with an historical reminder of God's own action. Israel was now a free people because of God's initiative of redemptive grace and promise-keeping. Whatever moral demands they now faced could never be more than a response to what God had already done for them. The priority of grace over law was not a NT discovery or revolution, but was built into the nature of divine-human encounter from the beginning. It was an explicit part of the covenant with

Israel and remains a fundamental principle of biblical ethics as a whole.

Although at this point in the canonical story the focus is primarily on Israel and the unique redemptive and covenant relationship between them and God, the universal scope of the Abrahamic covenant has not been lost. God's vision is still as broad as "all the nations" and "the whole earth." Even in Egypt he had demonstrated that to Pharaoh (Exod 9:14, 16, 29). Whatever ethical demands follow must be set not only in the light of the immediate historical act of redemption, but also in the context of God's universal goal.

(b) *Israel's identity and moral obligation.* Having laid this dual foundation, Exod 19:6 goes on to spell out the role and mission of Israel in two phrases, which echo elsewhere in the OT and are also applied to the church in [1 Peter 2:9](#): "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

(i) *Priestly.* A priest in ancient Israel was someone who stood between God and the rest of the people. He was a mediator in both directions. On the one hand, he represented God to the people, both in his life and example, but especially through his responsibility for teaching the law (Lev 10:9–11; Deut 33:8–10; Jer 18:18; Hos 4:6; Mal 2:1–9). Through the priest, then, the people could know God. On the other hand, he represented the people before God, since it was his task to bring the sacrifices and to make atonement for the people at the altar. Through the priest, then, the people could come to God.

So it is with this double significance of the priesthood that Israel as a whole community was commissioned to be Yahweh's priesthood among the nations. On the one hand, Israel would represent the true God to the nations—revealing his will, his moral demands, his saving purpose, etc. Through Israel, other nations would know Yahweh. But it would also be through Israel that God would eventually bring the other nations to himself in redemptive, atoning, covenant relationship. Through Israel, other nations would

come to Yahweh. Later prophets pick up both ideas: the law of God going out from Israel to the nations, and other nations coming up to God. The priesthood identity of Israel thus gives to OT ethics yet another dimension of “missionary” relevance. Right at the start of their historical journey, God sets their ethical agenda in the context of their mission in the midst of the nations (the same thrust is found in Peter’s application of the priestliness of the people of God, [1 Peter 2:9–12](#)).

(ii) *Holy*. This word has the sense of distinctiveness and difference. Israel would be a nation as other nations, but they were to be holy—different from the rest of the nations (Lev 18:3). This is the practical implication of the priestly doctrine of Israel’s election from among the nations (20:26). Even the foreigner Balaam recognizes this conscious sense of distinctiveness about Israel (Num 23:9).

The outworking of this characteristic affected every dimension of Israelite national life, whether religious, social, economic, political, or personal. This is most clearly seen in Lev 19, a chapter full of practical laws for daily life, all under the heading, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2). Holiness affected more than the ritual area of life. It dictated generosity with agricultural produce (vv. 9–10; cf. Deut 24:19), fair treatment and payment of employees (Lev 19:13; cf. Deut 24:14), practical compassion for the disabled and respect for the elderly (Lev 19:14, 32; cf. Deut 27:18), the integrity of the judicial process (Lev 19:15; cf. Deut 16:18–20), safety precautions (Lev 19:16b; cf. Deut 22:8), ecological sensitivity (Lev 19:23ff.; cf. Deut 20:19–20), equality before the law for ethnic minorities (Lev 19:33–34; cf. Deut 24:17), and honesty in trade and business (Lev 19:35–36; cf. Deut 25:13ff.). In short, to love your neighbor (and even the stranger) as yourself (Lev 19:18, 34) is not rooted in a revolutionary love ethic initiated by Jesus (cf. Mark 12:31) but is the fundamental ethical demand of Old Testament holiness (Gammie, 33–34).

2. *Keeping the law.* Setting OT law in this perspective (God's redemptive action and universal goal) is helpful in softening the otherwise starkly deontological flavor of the law—i.e., the predominance of divine command as the basis for behavior. The covenant relationship between Israel and God entailed obedience to his laws, statutes, and ordinances. Ethics certainly involved rules based on divine authority. But the OT's deontology was as theistic as its consequentialism. The authority of the law was not that of abstract ethical absolutes but the authority of the personal God whom they knew as Creator and Redeemer. Obedience to the law was thus not just conformity to the rules per se but personal loyalty to the God who gave them.

3. *Motivated obedience.* For that reason the law itself contains a large number of "motive clauses," giving reasons why particular laws should be obeyed. These fall into several categories (cf. Wright, *Living*, 21–32).

4. *Gratitude.* The Decalogue itself begins with a statement of redemption in order to underline that obedience to the following laws is a matter of grateful response (Exod 20:2). The sermon form of Deuteronomy 4–11 reinforces this point. The God who loved Israel's ancestors enough to rescue their descendants from slavery is a God to be loved in return, with a covenant love expressed in obedience. Significantly, the area of law where this motive of gratitude for historical deliverance is most pressed is that which concerned the poor, the stranger, the debtor, the slave—the very conditions from which God had rescued Israel (e.g., Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:33–36; 25:38, 42–43, 54–55; Deut 15:15). There are narrative examples of the same principle at work (e.g., 1 Sam 11:12–13; 30:22–25).

5. *Imitation of Yahweh.* God's action for Israel was not just the motive for obedience, but also the model for it. Obedience was "walking in the way of the LORD." In Deut 10:12–19 this motive of imitation (vv. 17b–19) is added to the motive of gratitude (v. 15). In the narratives we have a reference to David's imitation of "God's

kindness” (2 Sam 9:3). In the Psalms imitation of God’s ethical characteristics is inculcated through the regular celebration of them, and occasionally by a direct comparison between the ethical qualities of Yahweh and those of the righteous person (as in the parallel Psalms 111 and 112; note vv. 3, 4, 5 and 9 in each).

6. *Human good.* Obedience to the law is not only a duty, but is constantly buttressed by the “utilitarian” consideration that it will produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This is the thrust of the exhortations in Deut (e.g., Deut 4:40; 5:33; 6:24–25; 30:15–20, etc.). The king’s social justice will bring blessing and prosperity to the whole nation (Ps 72). Conversely, endemic social evil will produce economic, ecological, and political disaster (Hos 4 and the prophets *passim*). The psalms that praise the law are far removed from legalistic rule-book morality. Rather, they rejoice in obedience as the means of maintaining and enjoying that righteous relationship with God that leads to the greatest personal freedom and social health (Ps 1; 19; 119). The Wisdom writings evince a similar outlook (Prov 3:5–10; 11:17; 14:34).

7. *The law’s scale of values.* Within the Decalogue (Exod 20:1–17) we can see a scale of priorities in the order of the commandments. God comes first (nos. 1–3). The Sabbath commandment is for the good of the whole of society (no. 4). Then comes the authority and integrity of the family (no. 5), followed by individual life (no. 6), sex and the integrity of marriage (no. 7), property (nos. 8, 10), and judicial integrity (no. 9).

More than this, the rest of the laws show some definite priorities in their scale of values. (i) *Life matters more than property.* Thus, no offense involving property (theft, fraud, etc.) was punishable by death in normal Israelite judicial procedure. Nor could a murdered life be given a mere cash value by allowing the murderer off with a fine (Num 35:31–34).

(ii) *Persons matter more than punishments.* Contrary to popular belief, the *lex talionis* was designed to limit vengeance and protect the criminal from excessive punishment. It was probably a

principle stated in stark terms that were not meant to be literally applied. Physical punishment (beating) was strictly controlled to preserve the dignity of the offender (Deut 25:1–3). Imprisonment was not prescribed for any offense. Physical mutilation was almost entirely absent (25:11 being the single, remote exception).

(iii) *Needs matter more than rights and claims.* There was an ethos in Israelite law, clearest in Deuteronomy, that even in a matter where one had a legal right or claim, one had to act with consideration for the needs and feelings of the other party. Sometimes this ran counter to the whole custom of the ancient world, as in the granting of asylum to runaway slaves (Deut 23:15–16). Sometimes it protected the dignity of the weakest and most vulnerable, such as debtors (24:10–13) or female captives (21:10–14). It put human physical need above strict property rights (23:24–25; 24:19–22). It was even extended to animals (22:1–4, 6–7; 25:4). There was, in short, within the overall social and economic system of Israel a strong ethical thrust towards upholding the rights and needs of the weaker sections of society, not just by exhortations to charity, but also by structural mechanisms, such as sabbatical release of debt and slaves and the Jubilee Year (cf. Wright, “Israel as a Society”).

8. *A community ethic.* Apart from the periods of rampant paganism and moral decadence (such as the reign of Manasseh), average Israelites shared a common ethos that was substantially informed by the major distinctives of the Mosaic law. That evidence is to be found in the ethical “typologies” that are found here and there—that is, the portraits of typically righteous or unrighteous behavior. These are revealing precisely because they are not in a legal context, but reflect the extent to which the values of the law penetrated the commonly accepted values of society. Examples of such lists are found in the narratives (e.g., 1 Sam 12:1–5), in the Psalms (15; 24), in the Wisdom tradition (e.g., Job 31), and in the Prophets (e.g., Ezek 18) (Wright, *Living*, 203–8). The most notable feature of all these lists is the extent to which they combine what

we would call private and public morality—everything from inward thoughts to civic duty. They offer most revealing and rewarding insights in any study of OT ethics.

Decalogue (Ten Commandments): Theology; Word of God

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