

A Theology of Lordship

The
DOCTRINE
of the
CHRISTIAN
LIFE

JOHN M. FRAME

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A THEOLOGY OF LORDSHIP

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THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

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To Johnny

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:37–40)

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:29–31)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10)

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

CHAPTER 3

Ethics and Divine Lordship

I don't intend for this book to replace previous works on ethics written from a Reformed Christian viewpoint. John Murray's *Principles of Conduct*¹ and *Divorce*² still serve as benchmarks for exegetical depth in the field. John Jefferson Davis's *Evangelical Ethics*³ continues to be an invaluable resource correlating biblical principles with historical and contemporary discussions of ethical problems. Readers will see that in this volume I have drawn freely from these books, as well as from Jochem Douma's *The Ten Commandments*⁴ and *Responsible Conduct*.⁵ Furthermore, my philosophical position is only an elaboration of Cornelius Van Til's *Christian Theistic Ethics*.⁶

The contribution I hope to make in this volume is to show the relationship of the Christian life, including ethics, to God's lordship. I have expounded the nature of lordship at length in *The Doctrine of God*, especially in chapters 1–7. In the present chapter, I will review that discussion and apply it to ethics in a general way, laying the foundation for what is to follow.

The name Lord (representing the Hebrew terms *yahweh* and *'adon* and the Greek *kyrios*) is found over seven thousand times in most English Bibles, usually referring to God or specifically to Jesus Christ. God's revelation of

1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957.
2. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961.
3. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1985, 1993, 2004.
4. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996.
5. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003.
6. [Ripon, CA:] den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971.

the name Yahweh to Moses in Exodus 3:14–15 is foundational to the biblical doctrine of God, for Yahweh is the name by which he wants especially to be remembered. The name Lord is found in the main confessions of faith of both testaments (see Deut. 6:4–5; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). God performs all his mighty works so that people will “know that I am the LORD” (Ex. 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:22; 10:2; 14:4, and many other texts).

As Lord, God is, first of all, *personal*, for Lord is a proper name. Thus the Bible proclaims that the ultimate reality, the supreme being, is not an impersonal force like gravity or electromagnetism, or even a set of superstrings, but a person: one who thinks, speaks, feels, loves, and acts with purpose. As a person, he uses the impersonal realities of the universe for his own purposes and to his own glory. Modern secular thought is profoundly impersonalistic, holding that persons are ultimately reducible to things and forces, to matter, motion, time, and chance. Scripture denies this impersonalism, insisting that all reality, including all value, comes from a supreme personal being.

Second, the Lord is a supremely *holy* person. His personality shows his kinship with us, but his holiness shows his transcendence, his separation from us. God is above us, beyond us—not in the sense that he is far away, for he is intimately close; not in the sense that he is unknown or unknowable, for he clearly reveals himself to us; not in the sense that human language cannot describe him, for he describes himself to us in the human language of Scripture.⁷ God is beyond us, rather, as the supreme person, the universal King, the Lord of all, before whom we cannot help but bow in awe and wonder. And, since our fall into sin, God is also separate from us, because ethical purity must be separate from ethical depravity (Isa. 6:5; Luke 5:8).

Third, God as Lord is head of a *covenant* relationship. In a covenant, God takes a people to be his, redeems them from death, demands certain behavior on their part, and declares his blessings and curses: blessings if they obey, but curses if they disobey. Parallels to this biblical concept of covenant can be found in ancient Near Eastern literature outside the Bible. A great king (the suzerain) would impose a treaty (or covenant) upon a lesser king (or vassal) and would author a document setting forth its terms. The document, typically, followed a standard literary form:

1. The name of the suzerain
2. Historical prologue: what the suzerain has done to benefit the vassal

⁷ This book, like all books in this series, assumes that Scripture is the Word of God and therefore infallible and inerrant in its original form. I plan to argue the point in *The Doctrine of the Word of God*.

3. Stipulations: commands specifying how the vassal king and his people must behave
 - a. In general, the requirement of exclusive allegiance to the suzerain (sometimes called love)
 - b. Specifically, laws indicating how the suzerain wants the vassal to behave
4. Sanctions
 - a. Blessings: rewards for obeying the stipulations
 - b. Curses: punishments for disobedience
5. Administration: dynastic succession, use of the treaty document, etc.

Except for section 5, this is the literary form of the Decalogue.⁸ God comes to Israel and gives his name ("I am the LORD your God," Ex. 20:2a), identifying himself as the author of the covenant and of the covenant document. Then he tells Israel what he has done for them ("who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," v. 2b). Then come the commandments, with sanctions embedded in some of them (as in vv. 5–6, 7, 12). The first commandment demands exclusive covenant loyalty, and the others show what forms that loyalty is to take. As Lord, therefore, God is the suzerain, the head of the covenant relationship.

The heart of that relationship is: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Jer. 7:23; cf. Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Rev. 21:3, and many other passages). It is amazing that the same Lord whose holiness separates us from him also reaches out to draw us into the circle of his holiness—indeed, to make us his holy people.

THE LORDSHIP ATTRIBUTES

My study of lordship indicates that the word *Lord* in Scripture has certain important connotations. That is, it is not only a name of God, but also a description. Among its connotations, three in particular stand out:

CONTROL

The Lord announces to Moses that he will deliver Israel from Egypt by a mighty hand and a strong arm. He shows his strength in the plagues and

8. For a more detailed discussion of this covenant structure and the literary form of the covenant document, see Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972). Kline maintains that, not only the Decalogue, but also the book of Deuteronomy, is in its literary form a covenant document.

in the deliverance of Israel through the sea on dry land, followed by the drowning of the Egyptian army. Thus God wins a decisive victory over Egypt, its ruler, and its gods (Ex. 12:12; 15:11; 18:11).

In his continuing relations with Israel, God regularly connects his lordship with his sovereign power, controlling all things. He is gracious to whom he will be gracious, and he shows mercy to whom he will show mercy (Ex. 33:19). What he intends to do, he accomplishes. Nothing is too hard for him (Jer. 32:17; Gen. 18:14). His word is never void of power (Isa. 55:11). His prophecies always come to pass. As I argue in *The Doctrine of God*, chapter 4, God controls the forces of nature, human history, and free human decisions (including sinful ones). It is he who gives faith to some and withholds it from others, so that he is completely sovereign over human salvation.⁹ The following passages set forth the comprehensive reach of his sovereign power:

Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come? (Lam. 3:37–38)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. (Eph. 1:11)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

AUTHORITY

God’s authority is his right to tell his creatures what they must do. Control is about might; authority is about right. Control means that God makes

9. For discussions of how this divine control affects human freedom and moral responsibility, see *DG*, chapter 8. For a discussion of the problem of evil, see *DG*, chapter 9, and *AGG*, chapters 6 and 7.

everything happen; authority means that God has the right to be obeyed, and that therefore we have the obligation to obey him.

God's authority is part of his lordship. When God meets with Moses in Exodus 3, he gives him a message that has authority even over Pharaoh: Let my people go, that they may serve me. When God meets with Israel at Mt. Sinai, he identifies himself as Lord and then tells them to have no other gods before him. God's lordship means that we must obey his Ten Commandments and any other commandments he chooses to give to us. So Deuteronomy 6:4–6 confesses the lordship of God, and then goes on to tell us to obey all his commandments. Jesus, too, says over and over again, in various ways, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15; cf. vv. 21, 23; 1 John 5:3). “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ ” he asks, “and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46; cf. Matt. 7:21–22).

God's authority is absolute. That means, first, that we shouldn't doubt or question it. Paul says that Abraham did not waver in his belief in God's promise (Rom. 4:16–22). Abraham was certainly tempted to waver. God had promised him the land of Canaan, but he did not own one square inch of it. And God had promised him a son, who would in turn have more descendants than the sand of the sea. But Abraham's wife, Sarah, was beyond the age of childbearing, and Abraham was over one hundred years old before the promise was fulfilled. Nonetheless, Abraham clung to God's authoritative word; so should we.

Second, the absoluteness of God's authority means that his lordship transcends all our other loyalties. We are right to be loyal to our parents, our nation, our friends; but God calls us to love him with *all* our heart, that is, without any rival. Jesus told his disciples to honor their parents (Matt. 15:3–6), but he told them to honor him even more (Matt. 10:34–38).

Third, to say that God's authority is absolute means that it covers all areas of human life. Paul says, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Everything we do is either to God's glory or it is not. God has the right to order every aspect of human life.

Covenant Presence

So God's lordship means that he controls everything, and that he speaks with absolute authority. But there is also a third element to God's lordship, and in some ways this is the deepest and most precious. That element is his commitment to us, and therefore his presence with us.

The essence of the covenant, as we have seen, is God's promise, “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Jer. 7:23). God said that to

Abraham (Gen. 17:7), and he also said it to Israel under Moses (Ex. 6:7) and to the New Testament people of God (Rev. 21:3). He said this many times throughout Scripture. This means that the covenant Lord is one who takes people to be his.

When God takes us to be his people, he fights our battles, blesses us, loves us, and sometimes gives us special judgments because of our sins (as in Amos 3:2). But most importantly, he is *with us*. He places his name upon us (Num. 6:27), to brand us as his. Since we are his children, he dwells with us (Gen. 26:3, 24; 28:15; 31:3; Ex. 3:12; 4:12; Deut. 31:8, 23; Josh. 1:5; etc.), and we with him. In the Old Testament, God literally dwells with Israel, as he places his theophany in the tabernacle and the temple. In the New Testament, Jesus is “Immanuel,” God with us (Matt. 1:23). He becomes flesh to dwell among us (John 1:14). And after his resurrection, he sends the Spirit to dwell in us, as in a temple.

Control, authority, presence. Those are the main biblical concepts that explain the meaning of God’s lordship. We can see this triad in the literary form of the treaty document, mentioned a few pages ago. Recall that in the treaty the great king begins by giving his name (in the Decalogue, Lord). Then, in the historical prologue, he tells the vassal what he has done, how he has delivered them, emphasizing his might and power (control). Next he tells them how they should behave as a response to their deliverance (authority). Then he tells them the blessings for continued obedience and the curses for disobedience (covenant presence). God is not an absentee landlord. He will be present with Israel to bless, and, if necessary, to judge.

THE LORDSHIP ATTRIBUTES AND CHRISTIAN DECISION MAKING

The lordship attributes also help us to understand in more detail the structure of Christian ethics. In particular, they suggest a way for Christians to make ethical decisions.

How GOD GOVERNS OUR ETHICAL LIFE

First, by his *control*, God plans and rules nature and history, so that certain human acts are conducive to his glory and others are not.

Second, by his *authority*, he speaks to us clearly, telling us what norms govern our behavior.

Third, by his *covenant presence* he commits himself to be with us in our ethical walk, blessing our obedience and punishing our disobedience. But

his presence also provides us with two important means of ethical guidance. First, because he is present with us, he is able to serve as a moral example: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2; cf. Matt. 5:48). Second, he and he alone is able to provide sinners with the power to do good, to set us free from the power of sin (John 8:34–36).

THE DEMAND FOR APPROPRIATE RESPONSE

When we learn of God’s *control*, we learn to trust in God’s plan and his providence. God told Abraham that he would own the land of Canaan and have a huge number of descendants. But at the time he owned no land in Canaan, and his wife was far beyond the age of childbearing. Nevertheless, his overall attitude toward the promise was one of trust, or faith, as Paul says in Romans 4:20–21, “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” Faith in Christ is faith in what he has done and what he has promised to do in the future. It is trust in God’s sovereign care for us.

Next, when we learn of God’s *authority*, we learn to obey him. Says God through Moses:

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son’s son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut. 6:1–3; cf. vv. 6–9 and many similar verses in Deuteronomy)

The psalmist says:

You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
Oh that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments. (Ps. 119:4–6)

God’s control motivates us to trust; his authority motivates us to obey. “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus,” as the hymn

puts it.¹⁰ David says, “Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness” (Ps. 37:3).

Finally, when we become aware of God’s covenant presence, we are moved to worship. Whenever God meets with human beings in Scripture, the situation immediately becomes one of worship: when the King enters, we bow down. Think of Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3) or Isaiah meeting God in the temple:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa. 6:1–5)

The apostle John tells that when the glorified Jesus appeared to him, “I fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17).

Three lordship attributes, three mandatory responses: faith, obedience, worship. These responses are the foundation of our ethical life.¹¹

THE THREE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

Faith, hope, and love are three virtues often brought together in the New Testament (1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5–6; Col. 1:4–5; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8; Heb. 6:9–11). Christian writers after the New Testament sometimes presented these “theological virtues” as supplements to the four “cardinal virtues” of Greek philosophy (prudence, justice, temperance, and courage). That gave them a total of seven, which, of course, is a desirable number.

10. Words by John H. Sammis, 1887.

11. Thanks to Mike Christ, who first suggested this triad to me. I’ve modified his formulation a bit, added exposition, and take full responsibility. Readers who are new to my triads will learn that they can be shuffled and rearranged without problem. Ultimately, as we shall see, each member of the triad includes the others. So different arrangements are possible and often edifying.

The idea that Christian morality is a supplement to pagan morality is an inadequate view, as I plan to argue in more detail at a later point. Scripture does affirm all seven of these virtues, but it gives some preeminence to faith, hope, and love. Love is the highest of these, according to 1 Corinthians 13:13, John 13:34–35, and other passages. Occasionally Paul speaks of faith and love, without referring to hope (Eph. 1:15; 3:17; 6:23; 1 Tim. 1:14; 6:11; 2 Tim. 1:13; Philem. 1:5). Faith includes hope, for hope is faith directed to God's promises for the future. And love, as the summation of Christian virtues, includes both faith and hope.

We can also look at this triad in terms of the lordship attributes. Faith trusts in God's revealed Word. Hope looks to God's controlling power, which will accomplish his purposes in the future, as in the past. And love treasures the presence of God in the intimate recesses of the heart and the new family into which God has adopted us.

NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CRITERIA OF GOOD WORKS

What is a good work? Reformed theologians have addressed this question in response to the problem of the so-called virtuous pagan. Reformed theology teaches that human beings are by nature totally depraved. This means, not that they are as bad as they could be, but that it is impossible for them to please God in any of their thoughts, words, or deeds (Rom. 8:8). Apart from grace, none of us can do anything good in the sight of God. Yet all around us we see non-Christians who seem to be doing good works: they love their families, work hard at their jobs, contribute to the needs of the poor, and show kindness to their neighbors. It seems that these people are virtuous apart from Christ.

Reformed theology, however, questions such virtue. It acknowledges that unbelievers often contribute to the betterment of society. These contributions are called civic righteousness. Their civic righteousness does not please God, however, because it is altogether devoid of three crucial characteristics:

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God. (WCF, 16.7)

Note the three necessary ingredients: (1) a heart purified by faith, (2) obedience to God's Word, and (3) the right end, the glory of God.

The first is a plainly biblical emphasis. The Westminster Confession cites Hebrews 11:4 and some other texts. Romans 14:23 also comes to mind, which says, "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." In Jesus' arguments with the Pharisees, too, it is evident that our righteousness must not be merely external (see especially Matt. 23:25–26). In describing the necessity of an internal motive for good works, Scripture refers not only to faith, but especially to love, as in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3 and many other passages. We learn from these passages that love is not only necessary for good works, but also sufficient; that is, if our act is motivated by a true love of God and neighbor, we have fulfilled the law (Matt. 22:40; Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14).

The second element of good works, according to the Confession, is obedience to God's Word, to his law. Note the references in the previous section to the importance of obeying God's Word. Certainly obedience to God's Word is a necessary condition of good works, for disobedience to God's law is the very definition of sin (1 John 3:4). It is also a sufficient condition, for if we have obeyed God perfectly, we have done everything necessary to be good in his sight. Of course, among God's commands are his commands to love (see the above paragraph) and to seek his glory (see the next paragraph).

The third element is the right end, the glory of God. Ethical literature has often discussed the *summum bonum*, or highest good, for human beings. What is it that we are trying to achieve in our ethical actions? Many secular writers have said this goal is pleasure or human happiness. But Scripture says that in everything we do we should be seeking the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Any act must glorify God if it is to be good, so seeking God's glory is a necessary condition of good works. And if an act does glorify God, then it is good; thus, glorifying God is a sufficient condition of good works.¹²

So there are three necessary and sufficient conditions of good works: right motive, right standard, and right goal.¹³ Right motive corresponds to the lordship attribute of covenant presence, for it is God's Spirit dwelling in us who places faith and love in our hearts. Right standard corresponds

12. There is a sense, of course, in which even wicked acts bring glory to God, for God uses the wickedness of people to bring about his good purposes (Rom. 8:28). But the wicked person does not intend to glorify God by his actions. So 1 Corinthians 10:31 speaks of intent as well as action. Cf. Matt. 6:33.

13. Cornelius Van Til, in *Christian Theistic Ethics*, was the first to think through the significance of this confessional triad for ethical methodology. I gratefully acknowledge his influence upon my formulation here. In fact, Van Til's discussion was the seed thought for all my triadic thinking.

to God's lordship attribute of authority. And right goal corresponds to the lordship attribute of control, for it is God's creation and providence that determine what acts will and will not lead to God's glory. God determines the consequences of our actions, and he determines which actions lead to our *summum bonum*.

BIBLICAL REASONS TO DO GOOD WORKS

The history of redemption. There are basically three ways in which Scripture encourages believers to do good works. First, it appeals to the history of redemption. This is the chief motivation in the Decalogue itself: God has redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt; therefore, his people should obey him.

In the New Testament, the writers often urge us to do good works because of what Christ did to redeem us. Jesus himself urges his disciples to “love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34). Jesus’ love, ultimately displayed on the cross, commands our response of love to one another. Another well-known appeal is found in Colossians 3:1–3: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

When Christ died, we died to sin; when he rose, we rose to righteousness. We are one with Christ in his death and resurrection. So those historic facts have moral implications. We should live in accord with the new life, given to us by God’s grace when we rose with Christ (see also Rom. 6:1–23; 13:11–12; 1 Cor. 6:20; 10:11; 15:58; Eph. 4:1–5, 25, 32; 5:25–33; Phil. 2:1–11; Heb. 12:1–28; 1 Peter 2:1–3; 4:1–6).

So the Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes that our good works come from gratitude. They are not attempts to gain God’s favor, but rather are grateful responses to the favor he has already shown to us.¹⁴

But our focus on the history of redemption is not limited to the past. It is also an anticipation of what God will do for us in the future. God’s promises of future blessing also motivate us to obey him. Jesus commands us, “Seek

14. This motivation is not what John Piper calls “the debtor’s ethic,” in which we do good works in a vain attempt to pay God back for our redemption. We can, of course, never do that, and we should not try to do it. See Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995), 31–39, and the summary discussion in *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 33–38. But gratefulness, nonetheless, is the only legitimate response to the grace God has given us in Christ.

first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33).¹⁵

This motivation emphasizes God's control, for history is the sphere of God's control, the outworking of his eternal plan.

The authority of God's commands. Scripture also motivates our good works by calling attention to God's commands. Jesus said that he did not come to abrogate the law, but to fulfill it: "Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:19). In their preaching, Jesus and the apostles often appeal to the commandments of the law and to their own commandments (see Matt. 7:12; 12:5; 19:18–19; 22:36–40; 23:23; Luke 10:26; John 8:17; 13:34–35; 14:15, 21; Rom. 8:4; 13:8–10; 1 Cor. 9:8–9; 14:34, 37; Gal. 4:21–22; Eph. 4:20–24; 6:1–3; 1 Thess. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; Titus 2:1; James 1:22–25; 2:8–13; 1 Peter 1:16; 1 John 2:3–5; 3:24; 5:2).

God's commandment is sufficient to place an obligation upon us. We should need no other incentive. But God gives us other motivations as well, because we are fallen and because he loves us as his redeemed children.

This motivation reflects God's lordship attribute of authority. We should obey him, simply because he has the right to absolute obedience.

The presence of the Spirit. Scripture calls us to a godly life, based on the activity of the Spirit within us. This motivation is based on God's lordship attribute of presence. Paul says, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do" (Gal. 5:16–17). God has placed his Spirit within us to give us new life and therefore new ethical inclinations. There is still conflict among our impulses, but we have the resources to follow the desires of the Spirit, rather than those of the flesh. So Paul appeals to the inner change that God has worked in us by regeneration and sanctification. In Ephesians 5:8–11, he puts it this way: "For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." In the verses that follow, Paul continues to

15. This is what Piper calls "future grace" in the works cited in the previous note.

expound on the ethical implications of this transformation (cf. Rom. 8:1–17; Gal. 5:22–26).

So Scripture motivates us to do good works by the history of redemption, the commandments of God, and the work of the Spirit within us, corresponding to God's lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence, respectively.

TYPES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

These three motivations have led Christian thinkers to develop three main types of Christian ethics: command ethics, narrative ethics, and virtue ethics. Command ethics emphasizes the authority of God's moral law. Narrative ethics emphasizes the history of redemption. It teaches ethics by telling the story of salvation. Virtue ethics discusses the inner character of the regenerate person, focusing on virtues listed in passages like Romans 5:1–5, Galatians 5:22–23, and Colossians 3:12–17.

Sometimes a writer will pit these types of ethics against one another, designating one as superior to the others. I don't see any biblical justification for that kind of argument. As we saw, Scripture uses all of these methods to motivate righteous behavior. And it is hard to see how any of these could function without the others. It is God's commands that define the virtues and enable us to evaluate the behavior of characters in the narrative. It is the narrative that shows us how God saves us from sin and enables us to keep his law from the heart. And the virtues define what the redeemed person looks like when he obeys God from the heart.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

We can see the same triadic structure in the actual content of biblical ethics. I shall expound this structure at length later in the book. For now, let us note statements of the apostle Paul that intend to show the highest priorities of the Christian life. In these passages, he is opposing Judaizers, who think that one must be circumcised to enter the kingdom of God. He replies that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is important, but rather something else:

For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. (1 Cor. 7:19)

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. (Gal. 5:6)

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision,
but a new creation. (Gal. 6:15)

As mentioned earlier, there is a reference in 1 Corinthians 7:19 to keeping the commandments of God. It corresponds to God's lordship attribute of authority. "Faith working through love" in Galatians 5:6 is the work of the Spirit within us, and refers to God's covenant presence. "New creation" in Galatians 6:15 is the great redemptive-historical change brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection, the powerful work of God's sovereign control over history.¹⁶

FACTORS IN ETHICAL JUDGMENT

Imagine that you are a pastor or a counselor, and someone comes to your office with an ethical problem. Basically, there are three things that you will need to discuss: the situation, the Word of God, and the inquirer himself.

Normally, we ask first about the situation: "What's your problem? What brings you to see me?" This question is ultimately about God's lordship attribute of control, for God is the one who brings situations about.

Then we ask, "What does God's Word say about the problem?" This discussion invokes God's lordship attribute of authority.

Thirdly, we focus on the inquirer, asking how he or she needs to change in order to apply God's solution to the problem. At this point, we are thinking especially about God's presence within the individual. If the person is a non-Christian, then evidently he needs to be born again by God's Spirit before he can apply the Word of God to his life. If the person is a believer, he may need to grow in certain ways before he will be able to deal with the issue before him.

We note in such conversations that each of these subjects influences the other two. We may start with a presentation problem: "My wife is angry all the time." But as we move to a focus on God's Word, gaining a better understanding of Scripture, we may gain a better understanding of the problem as well. For example, Scripture tells us to remove the log from our own eye before trying to get the speck out of another's eye (Matt. 7:3). So the inquirer may come to see that his wife is angry because he has provoked her. So the problem now is not only in her, but in him as well. Reflection on God's Word has changed our understanding of the problem.

But this new understanding of the problem pushes us to look at more and different Scripture texts than we considered in the beginning. As we understand the problem better, we understand better how Scripture relates to it. Scripture and the situation illumine one another.

16. Thanks to my colleague, Prof. Reggie Kidd, for bringing these texts to my attention.

Then, when we move to the third question and ask the inquirer to look within, he may see even more things in himself that have provoked his wife's anger. So the problem, God's Word, and the inquirer have all illumined one another. You cannot understand your problem or yourself adequately until you have seen it through what Calvin calls "the spectacles of Scripture." And you can't understand the problem until you see yourself as a part of it.

And you can't understand God's Word rightly until you can use it, until you see how it applies to this situation and that. This is a more difficult point, but I think it is important. If someone says he understands "You shall not steal," but has no idea to what situations that commandment applies (such as embezzling, cheating on taxes, and shoplifting), then he hasn't really understood the biblical command. Understanding Scripture, understanding its meaning, involves *applying* it to situations. A person who understands the Bible is a person who is able to use it to answer his questions, to guide his life. As I argued in chapter 2, theology is application.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE DISCIPLINE OF ETHICS

In general, then, ethical judgment involves the application of a *norm* to a *situation* by a *person*. These three factors can also be seen as overall perspectives on the study of ethics:

The situational perspective. In this perspective, we examine situations, or problems. This study focuses on God's actions in creation and providence that have made the situations what they are, hence God's lordship attribute of control. The situational perspective asks, "What are the best means of accomplishing God's purposes?" That is, how can we take the present situation and change it so that more of God's purposes are achieved?

God's ultimate purpose is his own glory (1 Cor. 10:31). But God has more specific goals as well: the filling and subduing of the earth (Gen. 1:28), the evangelization and nurture of people of all nations (Matt. 28:19–20), and the success of his kingdom (Matt. 6:33).

The situational perspective explores the consequences of our actions. From this perspective, we ask, "If we do this, will it enhance the glory of God and his blessing on his people?" We seek the best means to achieve the ends that please God. We might describe ethics from this perspective as a Christian *teleological* or *consequential* ethic.

The normative perspective. From the normative perspective, we focus on Scripture more directly. Our purpose is to determine our duty, our ethical norm, our obligation. So we bring our problem to the Bible and ask, "What

does Scripture say about this situation?" At this point, we invoke God's lordship attribute of authority. Since we are focusing on duties and obligations, we might call this perspective a Christian *deontological* ethic.

The existential perspective. The existential perspective focuses on the ethical agent, the person (or persons) who are trying to find out what to do. From this perspective, the ethical question becomes, "How must I change if I am to do God's will?" Here the focus is inward, examining our heart's relationship to God. It deals with our regeneration, our sanctification, our inner character. These are all the product of God's lordship attribute of presence within us.

INTERDEPENDENCE OF THE PERSPECTIVES

We have seen previously that knowledge of our situation, knowledge of our norm, and knowledge of our self are interdependent. You can't understand the situation fully until you know what Scripture says about it and until you understand your own role in the situation. You can't understand yourself fully, apart from Scripture or apart from the situation that is your environment. And you don't understand Scripture unless you can apply it to situations and to yourself.

So the situational perspective includes the other two. When we understand the situation rightly, we see that Scripture and the self are elements of that situation, facts to be taken account of. So we can't rightly assess the situation unless we assess the other two factors.

The same is true of the normative perspective. To understand Scripture is to understand its applications to the situation and the self.

Similarly with the existential perspective: as we ask questions about our inner life, we find that the situation and God's revelation are both elements of our personal experience, apart from which we cannot make sense of ourselves.

So each perspective necessitates consideration of the others. Each includes the others. Figure 1 pictures the content of ethics as a triangle. You can begin your study of ethics at any of the three corners. But as you advance through the triangle, you will eventually meet up with the other corners. For example, if you start to study the situation, you will eventually find yourself studying the norm and the ethical agent.

That's why I describe these approaches as "perspectives." I don't think of them as "parts" of ethics, as though you could divide the triangle into three distinct parts and then study each one separately. No, you can't really study the situation without the norm, and so on.

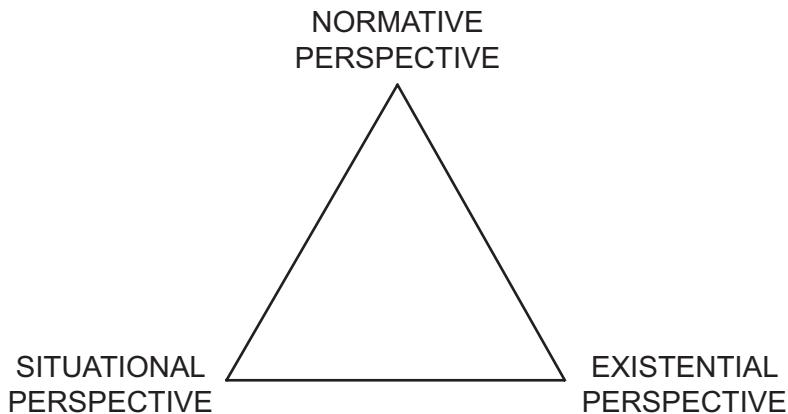


Fig. 1. The Triangle of Ethics

So the triangle represents the whole subject matter of ethics, and the corners represent different entrances to that subject matter, different emphases, different initial questions. But the goal is always to cover the whole triangle with regard to any ethical question.

In the end, then, the three perspectives coincide. A true understanding of the situation will not contradict a true understanding of the Word or the self. And a true understanding of each will include true understandings of the others.

But if the three are ultimately identical, why do we need three? Why not just one? The reason has to do with our finitude and sin. God knows all truth simultaneously, from every possible perspective. He knows what the whole universe looks like to the eye of the snail on my window ledge. But you and I are finite, not omniscient. We can only see a portion of reality at a time. That is to say, we can only see the world from one perspective at a time. For that reason, it is good for us to move from one perspective to another. Just as the blind man had to move from the elephant's leg to its trunk, to its torso, to its head, and finally to its tail in order to get an adequate picture of the elephant, so we need to move from one perspective to another in order to get a full understanding of God's world.

And we are sinners in Adam. According to Romans 1, that means that we have a tendency to suppress the truth, to exchange the truth for a lie, to try to push God out of our knowledge. Salvation turns us in a different direction, so that we are able to seek the truth. But the continued presence of sin in our minds and hearts means that we need to keep checking up on ourselves, and multiplying perspectives is one helpful way to do that.

In ethics, the three perspectives I have mentioned are especially helpful. The three perspectives serve as checks and balances on one another. The normative perspective can correct mistakes in my understanding of the situation. But the opposite is also true: my understanding of the norm can be improved when I better understand the situation to which the norm is to be applied. Likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for the existential perspective.

Multiperspectivalism is not relativism. I am not saying that any viewpoint is a legitimate perspective. There is in ethics and in other disciplines an absolute right and wrong. The procedure I have outlined above is a means for us to discover that absolute right and wrong.

Scripture itself is absolutely right: inspired, infallible, inerrant. But we are fallible in our study of Scripture. To understand it rightly we need information outside the Bible, including knowledge of Hebrew and Greek grammar, knowledge of ancient history, and an understanding of those contemporary questions that people pose to Scripture.

TRIPERSPECTIVALISM AND THE REFORMED FAITH

In the next chapter, I shall apply this threefold scheme to debates between Christians and non-Christians on ethical matters. Here, briefly, I should like to speak about debates within the Christian fold.

I belong to the Reformed theological tradition, and I subscribe, with some exceptions, to the teachings of the Reformed confessions. Many of my readers (though I hope not all of them) come from that tradition as well. In this book, I shall often quote Reformed confessions, catechisms, and theologians. I don't think that the Reformed tradition has said the final word in theology, and there are some topics on which I disagree with many Reformed people. Some of those discussions will appear in this book. But in general I think that among all the traditions of Christian theology, the Reformed tradition is the closest to Scripture.

Some people in the Reformed tradition think that my triperspectival scheme is relativistic. I have responded to that criticism in the preceding section. Others think it is at best an innovation. I agree that the technical terms are new. But it seems to me that the basic ideas are an outworking of traditional Reformed theology.

The three categories first caught my interest when I read Cornelius Van Til's discussion of goal, motive, and standard.¹⁷ As I mentioned earlier, Van Til derived that triad from the Westminster Confession of Faith. He

17. See the above discussion of the necessary and sufficient criteria of good works.

also spoke much about the interdependence of revelation from God, from nature, and from man: we get revelation from God about nature, revelation from nature about God, and so forth.¹⁸

More fundamentally, it is important to understand that Reformed theology has always strongly emphasized God's revelation in the creation and in human persons (God's image), as well as his revelation in Scripture.

Other branches of the church have often criticized Reformed ethics for being merely an ethics of law. Reformed theology has indeed had a more positive view of God's law than some other theological traditions, such as Lutheranism, dispensationalism, and charismatic theology. And occasionally Reformed writers have emphasized law in such a way as to detract from other aspects of biblical ethics. But in the debate between traditions it is important to make clear that the Reformed faith at its best has emphasized, not only law, but also a strong view of God's revelation in creation and in human beings. Calvin and the Reformed Confessions typically begin by invoking the teaching of Psalm 19 and Romans 1, the clarity of God's revelation throughout the universe. And Calvin, on the first page of his *Institutes*, notes that we cannot know God without knowing ourselves, or ourselves without knowing God.¹⁹ And he disclaims knowledge of which comes first.

So in the theological debate, Reformed ethicists can rightly insist that their ethical tradition is not just an elaboration of God's law. God's law is our ultimate and sufficient ethical standard, but we must understand that standard by relating it to the divine revelation in the world and in ourselves. Reformed ethics can account for the nuances and subtleties of ethical decision making, without compromising the straightforward, simple unity of our obligation, namely, to obey God as he has revealed his will in Scripture.

18. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 62–109.

19. 1.1.1.

CHAPTER 4

Lordship and Non-Christian Ethics

In chapter 3, I examined the general structure of a biblical ethic based on God's lordship, particularly his lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence. In this chapter, I will use that discussion to indicate the most important ways in which Christian ethics is different from non-Christian ethics.

In general, non-Christian ethics does not affirm the lordship of the God of the Bible.¹ I will seek to show here how a denial of divine lordship affects ethics. However, I will compare Christian and non-Christian thought in metaphysics and epistemology, before dealing specifically with ethics.

TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE²

The lordship attributes will help us to get a clear idea of the concepts of transcendence and immanence, which theologians often use to describe the biblical God. These are not biblical terms, but the Bible does speak of God being "on high" as well as "with us." He is both "up there" and "down here." He is exalted, and he is near. When Scripture speaks of God being up there, theologians call it transcendence. When Scripture speaks of God being down here with us, theologians speak of immanence.

1. I shall try to show that by specific examples in later chapters. I realize that the followers of such religions as Judaism and Islam would claim to worship the God of the Bible while denying the full supremacy of Christ. While opposing orthodox Christianity, they would claim to be serving the Lord. I will deal with that claim in chapter 5.

2. This section summarizes chapter 7 of DG.

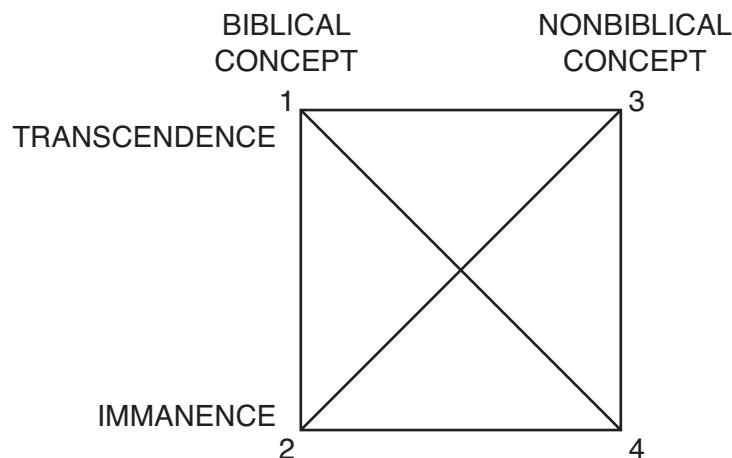


Fig. 2. The Square of Opposition: Transcendence and Immanence

There are dangers, however, in the concepts of transcendence and immanence. We can understand those dangers more clearly by looking at the diagram in figure 2.³

Views 1 and 2, on the left side, represent a biblical understanding of transcendence and immanence; views 3 and 4, on the right side, represent common nonbiblical views.

In Scripture, God is transcendent (view 1) in that he is exalted as Lord, as King. We should associate transcendence with the lordship attributes of control and authority. He is immanent (view 2) in the sense that he is covenantally present with us. So understood, there is no contradiction, not even a tension, between divine transcendence and immanence.

Some, however, have misunderstood God's transcendence. They think it means that God is so far away from us that we cannot really know him, so far away that human language can't describe him accurately, so far away that he's just a great heavenly blur, without any definite characteristics. That view, that of nonbiblical transcendence, is view 3 on the diagram. If God is transcendent in that way, how can he also be near to us? That kind of transcendence is incompatible with biblical immanence (view 2). That incompatibility is represented by a diagonal line between views 2 and 3.

Further, we can know definite things about God because they are revealed to us in the Bible. Despite the limitations of human language, God is able to use it to tell us clearly and accurately who he is and what he has done.

3. In the first printing of *DG*, p. 113, the diagram is misnumbered. It should be numbered as here. The diagram as presented on p. 14 of *DKG* is correct.

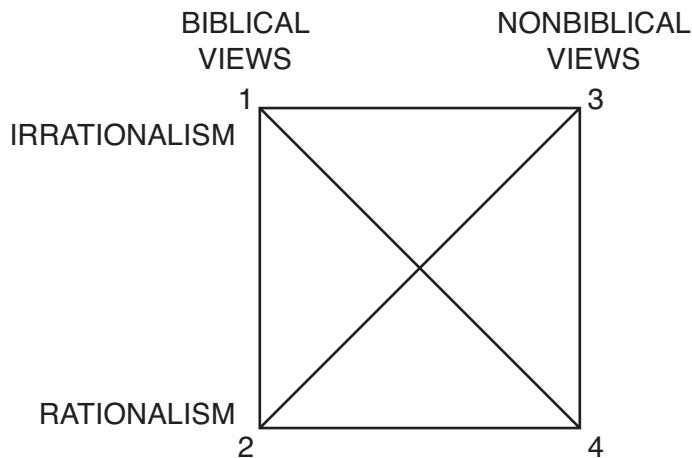


Fig. 3. The Square of Opposition: Irrationalism and Rationalism

These are aspects of God's immanence in the biblical sense (view 2), which are rejected by those who hold the nonbiblical concept of transcendence (view 3).

The term *immanence* is similarly misunderstood. Some theologians speak as though God's immanence immerses him in the world, hides him in the world, so that he can't be clearly distinguished from it (view 4). Some people even think that when you look deep down inside yourself, you discover that you are God and God is you. But that's not biblical. God is always distinct from the world, for he is the Creator and we are the creature. But God does come to be with us (the meaning of *Immanuel*, the name of Jesus in Matthew 1:23), and that's something wonderful and precious.

So the nonbiblical view of immanence (view 4) contradicts the biblical view of transcendence (view 1), confusing the Creator with the creature and giving God's sovereign control and authority to the world. The diagonal line between view 1 and view 4 indicates this contradiction.

IRRATIONALISM AND RATIONALISM

Let me now change the labels on the diagram, in order to present a similar argument about epistemology, or the theory of knowledge. In figure 3, I am replacing "transcendence" and "immanence" with "irrationalism" and "rationalism," respectively.⁴

4. For this discussion, compare DKG, 360–63, and CVT, 231–38.

Since Scripture teaches us that God is the ultimate controller and authority for human life, he is also the author of truth and the ultimate criterion of human knowledge. Therefore, our knowing is not ultimate, or, as Van Til liked to put it, autonomous. Human knowledge is “thinking God’s thoughts after him,” in submission to his revelation of the truth, recognizing his revelation as the supreme and final standard of truth and falsehood, right and wrong. Non-Christians (and Christians who compromise with secular ways of thinking) look at this principle as irrationalistic. They are appalled at the idea that we should renounce our intellectual autonomy and accept God’s Word on his authority alone. To Christians, doing this is not irrationalistic at all; rather, it is the way God designed our minds to think. But it does involve confessing that human reason is limited, subordinate to God’s perfect reason. So we can interpret view 1 of the rectangle as Christian “irrationalism” (note the quotation marks).

But we believe not only that human reason is limited, but also that under God our reason has great power. Since God has come into our world and has clearly revealed himself here, we are able to know many things with certainty. Non-Christians tend to see such claims of knowledge as rationalistic. How can anybody, they ask, be sure of anything in this confusing world? So I would label view 2 as Christian “rationalism.” Again, note the quotation marks. Christians plead not guilty to the charge of rationalism, because they recognize that God’s mind is far greater than ours, and therefore that the realm of mystery (view 1) is far greater than the realm of our knowledge. But they also recognize that through God’s revelation they have access to real truth.

In the current debate between modernists and postmodernists, the modernists tend to accuse Christians of irrationalism—of believing biblical doctrines without sufficient reason. Postmodernists charge Christians with rationalism. They think Christians are arrogant to claim that they can know anything for sure.

But when we turn the tables, allowing ourselves as Christians to comment on non-Christian epistemology, we find ourselves saying about them what they say about us. That is, we say that they are irrationalistic and rationalistic. The nonbiblical view of transcendence holds that God either does not exist or is too far away from us to play a role in our reasoning. But if that is true, we have no access to an ultimate standard of truth. Such a view is skeptical or irrationalistic, as I would label view 3 on the diagram. The diagonal line between view 2 and view 3 shows the contradiction between them: the Christian says that God has come near us and has given us a clear revelation of truth; the non-Christian denies that and prefers skepticism.

But there is another side to non-Christian reasoning. For everyone who rejects divine authority must accept some other authority. Reasoning cannot be reasoning without some standard of truth and falsehood. The non-Christian either assumes the ultimate authority of his own reason (autonomy), or he accepts some authority other than that of the God of Scripture. In any case, he substitutes the authority of a creature for that of the Creator. He assumes that we have access apart from God to an authority that will allow our reasoning to be successful. That position (view 4) is rationalism, and it contradicts the limitations on reason asserted by view 1.

So Van Til argued that unregenerate human beings are rationalists and irrationalists at the same time. They claim that their own reason has ultimate authority (rationalism), but they acknowledge nothing that will connect human reason with objective truth (irrationalism).⁵

The rationalist-irrationalist dialectic of non-Christian thought bears on ethical reasoning, as well as on thinking about other matters. As we shall see, nonbiblical ethicists often oppose absolutes in general, but they forget their opposition to absolutes when they propose their own fundamental ethical principles, such as love or justice. One egregious example is provided by Joseph Fletcher. In his book *Situation Ethics*, he says that “for the situationist there are no rules—none at all,” but in the same paragraph he proposes a “‘general’ proposition . . . namely, the commandment to love God through the neighbor.” Is there a contradiction here between “no rules” and the rule of love? Fletcher replies enigmatically that the love commandment “is, be it noted, a normative ideal; it is not an operational directive.”⁶ Evidently he thinks that the love commandment is not a commandment, and therefore not a rule. But this distinction is quite implausible.

SPECIFICALLY ETHICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE RECTANGLE

I have used the rectangular diagram to illustrate the difference between those who accept the lordship of the biblical God and those who reject it, both in metaphysics (transcendence and immanence) and in epistemology (irrationalism and rationalism). I will refer to these metaphysical and epistemological interpretations in my critical evaluation of non-Christian

5. For more discussion of the rationalist-irrationalist dialectic in non-Christian thought, see my CVT, chapter 17, and DKG, 360–63.

6. Joseph F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 55.

ethical systems. There are, however, still other interpretations of the rectangle that are more specifically ethical in their meaning.

Absolute ness and Relevance of the Moral Law

Most writers on ethics would like to discover principles that are absolute (and so obligatory) and are also relevant (bearing on practical ethical decisions). In a biblical worldview, the law of God, our ethical standard, is absolute (view 1 on the diagram) because of God's absolute control and authority. Yet it is also relevant (view 2) because God reveals it to us in our experience through his covenant presence. He is with us in the ethical struggle. He knows the problems with which we must deal and has indeed designed the moral law with our situation fully in view.

But those who reject the biblical worldview find it difficult to achieve either absoluteness or relevance. The absoluteness of the moral law, for them, is the absoluteness of an opaque reality, which says nothing clearly (view 3). And relevance becomes the relevance of creatures talking to themselves (view 4). We shall see that among some non-Christian thinkers the authority of a moral principle is in proportion to its abstractness, that is, its irrelevance. The more specific and more relevant an ethical principle is, the less authority it has. For example, in Plato the highest ethical principle is abstract Goodness, which has no specific content at all. The same is true of Fletcher's view of love.

There is a religious reason for this antithesis between absoluteness and content. The non-Christian ethicist would like to believe, and would like others to believe, that he has moral standards and that it is possible to have moral standards without God. But he doesn't want to be bound by any rules. He wants to be autonomous. So he arrives at the paradoxical notion of absolutes without content: an appearance of moral principle, without any real moral principle at all. The alternative, of course, which has the same motive, is a moral content without authority. So in non-Christian ethics, there is an inverse relationship between the authority of a principle and its content, or relevance.

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

In the Christian understanding, God's sovereignty is his lordship. So it entails his control and authority over all things (view 1 on the diagram).⁷

7. For a discussion of divine sovereignty and human freedom and responsibility, see DG, chapters 4, 8, and 9.

But his authority also entails human responsibility: what God says, we must do. And his authority is not a bare command, for he enters our history in Christ to live our lives and to redeem us. So our responsibility is not only a response to God's authority (view 1), but also to his covenant presence (view 2).

So human responsibility does not conflict with God's authority or presence. But what of his control? Does God's control of our actions compromise our responsibility? Those who reject this biblical worldview often argue that ethical responsibility presupposes total human autonomy to perform actions that are not caused by God, our environment, or even our own desires—actions that are totally uncaused. This view of freedom is sometimes called libertarianism. I have argued that libertarianism is incoherent and that it is not the ground of moral responsibility.⁸ When a court examines whether Bill is responsible for committing murder, it cannot possibly use the libertarian criterion, for it would be impossible to prove that Bill's action is totally uncaused. Yet some such view is implicit in the idea that creatures are autonomous (view 4 on the diagram).

The only alternative, on a nonbiblical worldview, as I see it, is that our actions are controlled by some unknown reality (view 3 on the diagram). But a being of whom we are wholly ignorant cannot be the ground of our responsibility. Further, since we know nothing of such a force, we must regard it as impersonal. But an impersonal force cannot be the ground of ethical responsibility. We cannot incur ethical obligations to forces like gravity or electromagnetism. Ethical obligation is fundamentally personal, arising out of loyalty and love.⁹

So it is not the control of God over our actions that compromises our responsibility. Rather, it is worldviews that deny God's control and affirm libertarian freedom that destroy our responsibility. God's control supports our responsibility, by providing a personal context in which alone our choices can have meaning.

OBJECTIVITY AND INWARDNESS

The Bible teaches that the law of God is objective in the sense that its meaning does not depend on us. It comes from God's authoritative word (view 1). Yet God is not pleased with merely external obedience. He wants his word to be written on the human heart, where it motivates us from

8. DG, chapter 8.

9. Compare my "moral argument for the existence of God" in AGG, 93–102.

within. In the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34), God writes his word, his moral law, on the hearts of his people. That is an aspect of his covenant presence (view 2). In the Christian worldview, moral standards are both objective and inward.

Those who deny that worldview must seek objectivity in an unknowable realm (view 3), where the moral standard cannot be known at all, let alone objectively. They seek inwardness by making each person his own moral standard (view 4). But that dispenses with all objectivity and leaves us with nothing to internalize.

HUMILITY AND HOPE

God's transcendence (view 1) shows us how small we are and promotes humility. But God has come into our history (view 2) to promise us, by grace, great blessings in Christ. We are indeed small, but we are God's people and therefore great. A non-Christian, however, is either driven to pride, because he is his own autonomous standard (view 4), or to despair, because he is lost in an unknown, uncaring universe (view 3).

FREEDOM AND AUTHORITY IN SOCIETY

We should also consider the implications of lordship in regard to social ethics. Most of those who write about the role of the state want to achieve a balance between law and order, on the one hand, and individual freedom, on the other. In Scripture, God gives control and authority to civil rulers in his name (Rom. 13:1–6), providing a basis for civil law and order. This view of civil authority can be placed in position 1 on our diagram. But the authority of the civil ruler is not absolute; it is limited by God's higher authority. Furthermore, God sets standards for civil rulers, as for all rulers. They are not to be tyrants, to "lord it over" people; rather, they are to serve those whom they rule, as Jesus himself came not to be served, but to serve (Matt. 20:25–28).¹⁰ In this respect, they are to reflect God's own covenant presence, his covenant solidarity with his people. So they should seek what is best for their subjects. The ruler's power is also limited by the powers of other God-appointed authorities, as in the family and the church. So Scripture gives us a charter for limited government and personal liberty. We may place this teaching at point 2 of the diagram.

10. Jesus speaks here primarily of the apostles' role as leaders of the church. But since he compares their work to the work of Gentile civil authorities, he implicitly makes his own servanthood the model for Christian civil rulers as well. I shall consider the relation of church and state more fully under the fifth commandment.

Non-Christian social and political philosophy is also concerned about law and order, on the one hand, and personal liberty, on the other. But their arguments for law and order tend toward the extreme of totalitarianism (as in Plato, Hobbes, and Rousseau). They accept no revelation of God limiting the powers of government, and they have no other arguments sufficient to establish such limits. So government becomes an idol, a substitute for God himself. This teaching fits position 4 on our diagram.

But if the non-Christian thinker is more interested in personal liberty than in law and order, his argument for personal liberty leads naturally to anarchy. Again, non-Christian thought has no recourse to divine revelation that would affirm personal liberty while establishing a limit upon it. For the non-Christian defender of liberty, it must become an absolute, leaving government with no legitimate power at all. Thus, political chaos adds to the conceptual chaos implicit in position 3.

Of course, many non-Christian ethicists have sought a balance between law and liberty. John Locke is well known for his balanced approach in such matters. But although he was primarily a secular thinker, he may have been influenced by Christian writers, such as Samuel Rutherford, the author of *Lex, Rex*. Rutherford worked out a balance between the state and the people, mainly through biblical exegesis. Locke tried to accomplish the same balance through an empiricist epistemology. But David Hume later argued that one cannot derive moral obligations from empirical observation, an argument that made Locke's political philosophy far less plausible. I shall argue later in this book that no line can be drawn limiting the powers of government except by means of divine revelation. So the tension between irrationalism and rationalism in non-Christian thought can be seen also as a tension between anarchy and totalitarianism.

THREE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

In this section, I will discuss another aspect of the ethical debate between Christians and non-Christians. This debate also concerns the lordship attributes.

Most people who think about ethics, Christian and non-Christian alike, are impressed by the teleological, deontological, and existential principles:

The teleological principle: A good act maximizes the happiness of living creatures. That is to say, a good act does good. Christians emphasize that a good act is one that is good for God, bringing him glory. But Scripture

tells us that what brings glory to God also brings good to his people: “And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day” (Deut. 6:24; cf. 10:13). Non-Christian writers, like Aristotle, have also emphasized that doing good brings happiness, however that may be defined. The ethical life is the good life, the blessed life (Ps. 1; Matt. 5:1–11). And of course to live ethically is also to bring blessing to others.

In Christian ethics, this insight is based on God’s lordship attribute of control. It is God who arranges nature and history so that good acts have beneficial consequences, to himself, to the ethical agent, and to other persons.

I call this the principle of *teleology*, for it declares that all our behavior should be goal oriented, that it should seek the glory of God and the happiness of people.

The deontological principle: A good act is a response to duty, even if it requires self-sacrifice. We admire people who follow their ethical principles, even at great cost. In the Bible, Abraham obeyed God’s word, even though it meant leaving his home country and moving to a place where he was a complete stranger (Gen. 12:1), and even though it meant taking his son Isaac up to a mountain to be a human sacrifice (Gen. 22:1–19). To do his Father’s will, the Lord Jesus gave his very life.

So God defines duties for us, absolute norms that take precedence over any other consideration. Our duties are what we must do, what we ought to do. They are necessary. And they are universal, for they apply to everyone. If it is wrong for me to steal, then it is wrong for you to steal in the same situation. Ethics is no respecter of persons.

This insight is based on God’s lordship attribute of authority. The ultimate source of human duties is God’s authoritative word. Some secular thinkers, such as Plato and Kant, have also acknowledged the importance of duty. But, as we shall see, they have had a difficult time determining where our duties are to be found and what our duties actually are.

I call this the principle of *deontology*, from the Greek verb translated “owe, ought, must.” It states that ethics is a matter of duty, of obligation.

The existential principle: A good act comes from a good inner character. A good person is not a hypocrite. He does good works because he loves to do them, because his heart is good. Scripture emphasizes that the only righteousness that is worth anything is a righteousness of the heart. The Pharisees cleansed the outside of their cup, their outward acts, but not the

inside, their heart-motives (Matt. 23:25). Non-Christian writers, such as Aristotle, have also frequently emphasized the importance of character, of virtue, of inner righteousness. But, as we shall see, they have not succeeded in showing what constitutes virtue or how such virtue may be attained.

This insight is based on God's lordship attribute of *presence*, "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Without inward regeneration and sanctification, our best works are hypocritical.

I call this the *existential principle*, for it says that morality is personal and inward, a matter of the heart.

ARE THE THREE PRINCIPLES CONSISTENT?

Christians can gladly accept all three of the principles listed above. The God of Scripture is the author of the situation, the Word, and the moral self, so that the three are fully consistent with one another. He ordains history, so that people will find their ultimate blessing in doing their duty. He has made us in his image, so that our greatest personal fulfillment occurs in seeking his glory in history, as his Word declares.

Many non-Christian writers appreciate the three principles, or at least one or two of them, even though they reject the God of the Bible. However, in the absence of the biblical God, these principles are in tension with one another.

The teleological principle says that ethical action leads to happiness. Yet the deontological principle says that in order to do our duty, we must sometimes sacrifice our happiness.

The teleological and deontological principles say that our ethical responsibility is objective, grounded outside ourselves. But the existential principle suggests that our goodness is inward and therefore subjective.

The deontological principle says that we are subject to a moral law that declares our duty, apart from our inclination or the consequences of our acts. But the teleological and existential principles measure our goodness by the consequences of our actions and our inner life, respectively.

The existential principle says that it is wrong to measure a person's goodness by anything external to him. But the teleological and deontological principles say that one may measure goodness by the consequences and norms of actions, respectively.

Non-Christian thinkers who appreciate the teleological principle tend to be empiricists in their epistemology (such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill), basing human knowledge on sense perception.

But philosophers have generally recognized that sense perception does not reveal to us universal or necessary principles. It cannot reveal universal principles, because our senses cannot perceive the whole universe. And the world cannot reveal necessary principles to our senses, because necessity is not perceivable by the senses. At most, the senses tell us what happens, not what must happen, and certainly not what ought to happen. But the deontological principle says that ethics is based on principles that are universal, necessary, and obligatory.

So if one tries to hold these principles without God, they inevitably appear to be in tension with one another. With God, they cohere, for the same God who controls the consequences of our acts also declares our duties and also gives us a new inner life. But without God, it seems likely that in some situations one ethical principle will contradict another. We may, then, have to abandon our duty in order to maximize happiness or be as loving as possible (Joseph Fletcher) in a particular situation. Of course, we must then decide which principle will prevail. Non-Christian ethicists differ among themselves on this matter, forming three schools of thought.

THE THREE SCHOOLS OF NON-CHRISTIAN ETHICS

TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS

For some non-Christian ethicists, the teleological principle prevails. For them, what is important is the goal we are pursuing, usually defined as happiness or pleasure. That happiness can be individual (as in Epicurean hedonism) or both individual and corporate (as in Mill's utilitarianism). The ethical value of our actions is measured by the consequences of those actions—to what extent they maximize happiness and minimize unhappiness.

Teleological ethicists tend to be hostile to the idea that we are bound by absolute rules that take precedence over our happiness, as in deontological ethics. They also dislike the notion that ethics is subjective, as in existential ethics. Rather, they think it is something public—even subject to calculation. For they believe that we can determine what to do merely by calculating the consequences of our actions, the quantity and/or quality of pains and pleasures that our actions produce.

DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS

For other non-Christian ethicists, the deontological principle prevails. For them, it is important above all to have access to authoritative norms

that govern all human conduct. The teleological principle, that we should seek happiness, is insufficient, they say, even unethical. We admire, not those who seek their own happiness, but those who sacrifice that happiness for a higher principle. And to a deontologist, the existential idea that ethics is essentially subjective is destructive of ethics itself.

So the deontologist goes in search of absolute ethical principles. For him, a moral principle must be external to ourselves, universal, necessary, transcendent—indeed, godlike. Opponents of this approach believe that deontologists have failed to prove that such principles exist. But deontologists believe that without such principles there can be no ethics.

EXISTENTIAL ETHICS

I use the term *existential ethics* to refer to a broad movement, of which twentieth-century writers like Jean-Paul Sartre are only a part. Existential ethicists are those who are impressed most of all with the existential principle discussed in the last two sections. The most important thing about ethics, they say, is its inwardness. Goodness is of the heart, a matter of motive. A good act is an act that actualizes the true self (our essence, in Aristotle and idealism; our freedom, according to Sartre). If there are moral laws or principles, they must be affirmed from within. If we seek happiness, it is our own happiness, not a happiness defined by someone else. So it is wrong to judge anyone on the basis of external conduct alone.

In the chapters that follow, I will be discussing specific examples of these types of ethics, as well as some thinkers who attempt to combine them in various ways. Then I will discuss the general structure of Christian ethics as an ethic that recognizes all three principles as perspectives, an ethic in which the three principles are reconciled through divine lordship.

CHAPTER 11

The Sufficiency of Scripture

The last of the six attributes of Scripture is sufficiency, sometimes called *sola Scriptura*, “by Scripture alone.” The sufficiency of Scripture, particularly as applied to ethics, is a doctrine of immense importance and one that is frequently misunderstood. So I will discuss it at greater length than the other attributes. My basic definition: Scripture contains all the divine words needed for any aspect of human life.

CONFESSORIAL FORMULATION

The WCF formulates the doctrine thus:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. (1.6)

Below is a commentary on this statement, phrase by phrase:

“The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life . . .” The sufficiency of Scripture is comprehensive, as explained in chapter 10. Everything we need to know for God’s glory is in the Bible. The same is true for our own “salvation, faith and life.” The Confession does not understand these terms in the narrow ways that I argued against in chapter 10. It sees salvation as comprehensive, as we can tell from the rest of the document. Similarly, “faith and life” is a comprehensive pair of concepts. WSC, 3, says, “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” So it is reasonable to think that “faith and life” in WCF, 1.6, refers to everything we are to believe and do, the whole content of Scripture applied to the whole content of the Christian life.

Christians sometimes say that Scripture is sufficient for religion, or preaching, or theology, but not for auto repairs, plumbing, animal husbandry, dentistry, and so forth. And of course many argue that it is not sufficient for science, philosophy, or even ethics. That is to miss an important point. Certainly Scripture contains more specific information relevant to theology than to dentistry. But sufficiency in the present context is not sufficiency of specific information but sufficiency of divine words. Scripture contains divine words sufficient for all of life. It has all the divine words that the plumber needs, and all the divine words that the theologian needs. So it is just as sufficient for plumbing as it is for theology. And in that sense it is sufficient for science and ethics as well.

“. . . is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” The sufficient content of Scripture includes, not only its explicit teaching, but also what may be logically deduced from it. To be sure, logical deduction is a human activity, and it is fallible, as are all human activities. So when someone tries to deduce something from Scripture, he may err.¹ But the Westminster Confession speaks not of just any attempt to deduce conclusions from Scripture, but

1. This liability to error should caution us to be careful in the work of logical deduction. Certainly it must be done with hermeneutical wisdom. “All men have sinned (Rom. 3:23); Jesus is a man (1 Tim. 2:5); therefore, Jesus sinned” may seem like a valid syllogism, but of course it presupposes a defective Christology. (Thanks to Richard Pratt for this example.) So the right use of logic depends on many other kinds of skill and knowledge. On the other hand, the possibility of error should not lead us to abandon logical deduction. For error is not found only in logic, but also in every other activity by which we seek to understand Scripture: textual criticism, translation, interpretation, theology, preaching, and individual understanding. If our goal is to avoid making any error at all, we should not only avoid

of “good and necessary consequence.” That phrase refers to logic done right, ideal logic. When deductive logic is done right, the conclusion of a syllogism does not add to its premises. It rather brings out content already there. In the classic syllogism, “All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal,” the conclusion doesn’t tell you anything that you couldn’t find out from the premises themselves. What the syllogism does is to make the implicit content explicit. Logic is a hermeneutical tool,² a device for bringing out meaning that is already there in the text. So (1) the “content of Scripture” includes all the logical implications of Scripture, (2) the logical implications of Scripture have the same authority as Scripture, and (3) logical deductions from Scripture do not add anything to Scripture.

“...unto which nothing at any time is to be added.” Covenant documents in the ancient Near East often contained an inscriptional curse, a prohibition against adding to or subtracting from the document. Scripture, our covenant document, also contains such language (see Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18–19; cf. Josh. 1:7). These passages do not forbid seeking information outside of Scripture. Rather, they teach that we will never need any divine words in addition to God’s written words, words that are available to us only in the Bible. That means as well that we should never place any human words on the same level of authority as those in Scripture. That would be, in effect, adding to God’s words.

“...whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” One can add to God’s words either by claiming falsely to have new words from God, or by placing human tradition on the same level of authority as God’s Word. The Confession ascribes these errors to its two main opponents, respectively: the enthusiasts and the Roman Catholics. The enthusiasts were largely Anabaptists, who held views similar to some modern charismatics. The Roman Catholics defended their tradition as a source of revelation equal to the Bible. Roman Catholic theology has since changed its formulations somewhat,³ but it still regards tradition as highly as it regards Scripture. Since the writing of the Confession, it has become important also for Protestants to guard their respect for

logic, but we should avoid all these other activities as well. But that in itself would be an error of another kind.

2. See DKG, 242–301.

3. Roman Catholic theologians today tend to speak, not of “two sources” of revelation (Scripture and tradition), but of “one source,” the stream of tradition of which Scripture is a part. Neither of these views, however, is compatible with the sufficiency of Scripture.

their own tradition, so that it doesn't compete with the unique respect due to Scripture.⁴

"Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word." To say that Scripture is sufficient is not to deny that other things may also be necessary. We should always remember that the sufficiency of Scripture is a sufficiency of divine words. It is a sufficient source of such words. But we need more than divine words if we are to be saved and to live holy lives. In particular, we need the Spirit to illumine the Word, if we are to understand it. So no one should object that the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture leaves no place for the Holy Spirit.

"...and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed." I shall say more about these "circumstances" when I discuss the second commandment and the regulative principle of worship. For now, let us note that the sufficiency of Scripture does not rule out the use of natural revelation ("the light of nature") and human reasoning ("Christian prudence") in our decisions, even when those decisions concern the worship and government of the church.⁵

The reason for this, of course, is that Scripture doesn't speak specifically to every detail of human life, even of life in the church. We have seen that in one sense Scripture speaks of everything, for its principles are broad enough to cover all human actions. The principle of 1 Corinthians 10:31, that we should do all to the glory of God, speaks to every human activity and grades every human act as right or wrong.

But it is often difficult to determine in specific terms what actions will and will not bring glory to God. At that point, natural revelation and Christian prudence give us important guidance. For example, Scripture doesn't mention abortion. But natural revelation tells us that abortion is a procedure that takes innocent life. That shows us that the Bible's prohibition of murder is relevant to the matter of abortion.

Note that in this example, as the Confession says, there are "general rules of the Word" that are relevant to our decision. There are always general

4. See my articles, "Sola Scriptura in Theological Method," in my *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), and "Traditionalism," available at <http://reformedperspectives.org>, under "practical theology," and at www.frame-poythress.org.

5. Note the triad: Scripture, the light of nature, Christian prudence.

rules of the Word relevant to any human decision, as we have seen, such as the rule of 1 Corinthians 10:31. So to use the data of natural revelation in this way, though it is extrascriptural, is not to add to Scripture in the sense of Deuteronomy 4:2. To do this is not to add more divine words. It is, rather, a means of determining how the sufficient word of Scripture should be applied to a specific situation.

The fact that Scripture doesn't mention abortion, or nuclear war, or financial disclosure, or parking meters, therefore, does not mean that we may abandon Scripture in considering these issues. There is always a principle of Scripture that is relevant. The only question is: specifically, how does that principle apply? Recourse to natural revelation and human prudence can help to answer that question.

BIBLICAL BASIS

But is this confessional doctrine itself biblical? I believe it is. As we've seen, the covenant document contains an inscriptive curse, forbidding adding and subtracting. This is to say that God alone is to rule his people, and he will not share that rule with anyone else. If a human being presumes to add his own word to a book of divinely authoritative words, he thereby claims that his words have the authority of God himself. He claims in effect that he shares God's throne.

Nevertheless, during the history of Israel some did have the audacity to set their words alongside God's. False prophets claimed to speak in God's name, when God had not spoken to them (1 Kings 13:18; 22:5–12), a crime that deserved the death penalty (Deut. 18:20). And the people worshiped according to human commandments, rather than God's (Isa. 29:13–14):

And the Lord said:

“Because this people draw near with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,
and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,
therefore, behold, I will again
do wonderful things with this people,
with wonder upon wonder;
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

Jesus applied Isaiah's words to the Pharisees, adding, “You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8). And it is

likely that some people in Paul's time wrote letters forged in Paul's name, claiming his authority for their own ideas (2 Thess. 2:2).

God's own representatives, however, fearlessly set God's word against all merely human viewpoints. Think of Moses before Pharaoh, Elijah before Ahab, Isaiah before Ahaz, Jonah before Nineveh, and Paul before Agrippa, Felix, and Festus. Consider Jesus, who spoke with the same boldness before the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, Herod, and Pilate. Those who are armed with God's word, the sword of the Spirit, are free from the tyranny of human opinion!

Paul, in his famous statement about biblical inspiration, speaks of sufficiency as well: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). "Every" refers to sufficiency.

GENERAL AND PARTICULAR SUFFICIENCY

We should notice that 2 Timothy 3:16–17 ascribes sufficiency to the Old Testament. That is an interesting point, that the Old Testament is actually a sufficient moral guide for New Testament Christians. Why, then, does God give us the New Testament as well? That question leads to a distinction between general sufficiency and particular sufficiency:

GENERAL SUFFICIENCY

At any point in redemptive history, the revelation given at that time is sufficient. After Adam and Eve sinned, God revealed to them how they would be punished, and he also revealed to them the coming of a deliverer, the seed of the woman, who would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). This revelation, extensive as it is, is not nearly as extensive as the revelation available to us in the completed biblical canon. Was this revelation sufficient for them? Yes, it was. Had they failed to trust this revelation, they could not have used as an excuse the fact that it wasn't full enough. In this revelation, they had all the divine words they needed to have. So that revelation was sufficient.

Nevertheless, God added to that revelation, by speaking to Noah, Abraham, and others. Why did he add to a revelation that was already sufficient? Because Noah needed to know more than Adam did. The history of redemption is progressive. In Noah's time, God planned to judge the world by a flood, and Noah had to know that. The Adamic revelation was sufficient for Adam, but not for Noah.

Recall the principle I offered in chapter 10 regarding the clarity of Scripture: Scripture is clear enough to make us responsible for carrying out our present duties to God. Sufficiency should be understood in the same way. God's revelation to Adam was sufficient for him to carry out his duties, but Noah needed more, for he had additional duties. He needed more in order to do God's will in his time.

Similarly, the revelation of the Old Testament was sufficient for the first generation of Christians. But God graciously provided them with much more, including the letters of Paul. In God's judgment, these were necessary for the ongoing life of the young church, and when they were collected and distributed, believers recognized them as God's word. Once the New Testament began to function as God's word in the church, the Old Testament was no longer sufficient in itself, but it continued to function as part of the canon which was, as a whole, sufficient.

That consideration raises the question of whether God will add still more revelation to the canon. Sufficiency in itself, what I am calling "general sufficiency," does not preclude divine additions to Scripture, though it does preclude mere human additions.

PARTICULAR SUFFICIENCY

But there is an additional principle that should lead us not to expect any more divine words until the return of Christ. That principle is that Christ's redemption is final. When redemption is final, revelation is also final.

Hebrews 1:1–4 draws this parallel:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Verse 3 speaks of Jesus' purification for sins as final, for when finished, he sat down at God's right hand. Verse 2 speaks of God's speech through his Son as final, in comparison with the "many times" and "many ways" of the prophetic revelation. Note the past tense: "has spoken." The revelation of the Old Testament continued over many centuries; that of the Son came once for all. Nothing can be added to

his redemptive work, and nothing can be added to the revelation of that redemptive work.

Hebrews 2:1–4 also contrasts the revelation of the old covenant with that of the new:

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

The “message declared by angels” is, of course, the Mosaic law. The “great salvation” in Christ is something far greater. The message of this salvation was declared first by Christ and then by the apostles (“those who heard”), with God himself bearing witness through signs and wonders. From the writer’s standpoint, these declarations were all in the past. Even though part of that message (at least the letter to the Hebrews) was still being written, the bulk of it had already been completed.

Scripture is God’s testimony to the redemption he has accomplished for us. Once that redemption is finished, and the apostolic testimony to it is finished, the Scriptures are complete, and we should expect no more additions to them. Scripture is the deposit of the apostolic testimony, its written record. It is the only form of that testimony passed on to us beyond the apostolic generation. Once that testimony is complete, Scripture, too, is complete.

The same conclusion follows from 2 Peter 1:3–11. There, Peter notes that Jesus’ “divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence” (v. 3). All things that pertain to life and godliness, therefore, come from Jesus’ redemption. After that redemption, evidently, there is nothing more that could contribute anything to our spiritual life and godliness. Peter then mentions various qualities that we receive through Jesus, concluding, “For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (v. 11). This is the language of sufficiency. The virtues that come from redemption are sufficient for us to enter the final kingdom. Nothing more is needed.

So within the concept of sufficiency, I distinguish between general and particular sufficiency. As we saw earlier, the general sufficiency of Scripture excludes human additions, but is compatible with later additions by God

himself. This is the sense in which the Old Testament is sufficient according to 2 Timothy 3:16–17. The particular sufficiency of Scripture is the sufficiency of the present canon to present Christ and all of his resources. God himself will not add to the work of Christ, and so we should not expect him to add to the message of Christ.

THE USE OF EXTRABIBLICAL DATA

If we remember that the sufficiency of Scripture is a sufficiency of divine words, that will help us to understand the role of extrabiblical data, both in ethics and in theology. People sometimes misunderstand the doctrine of sufficiency by thinking that it excludes the use of any extrabiblical information in reaching ethical conclusions. But if we exclude the use of extrabiblical information, then ethical reflection is next to impossible.

Scripture itself recognizes this point. As I said earlier, the inscriptive curses do not forbid seeking extrabiblical information. Rather, they forbid us to equate extrabiblical information with divine words. Scripture itself requires us to correlate what it says with general revelation. When God told Adam to abstain from the forbidden fruit, he assumed that Adam already had general knowledge, sufficient to apply that command to the trees that he could see and touch. God didn't need to tell Adam what a tree was, how to distinguish fruits from leaves, or what it meant to eat. These things were natural knowledge. So God expected Adam to correlate the specific divine prohibition concerning one tree to his natural knowledge of the trees in the garden. This is theology as application: applying God's word to our circumstances.

The same is true for all divine commands in Scripture. When God tells Israel to honor their fathers and mothers, he does not bother to define "father" and "mother" and to set forth an exhaustive list of things that may honor or dishonor them. Rather, God assumes that Israel has some general knowledge of family life, and he expects them to apply his command to that knowledge.

Jesus rebukes the Pharisees, not because they had no knowledge of the biblical text, but because they failed to apply that knowledge to the things that happened in their own experience. In Matthew 16:2–3, he says, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." The chief deficiency in their application of Scripture was their failure to see Jesus as the promised Mes-

siah, the central theme of the Hebrew Bible. In John 5:39–40, Jesus says, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”

Against the Sadducees, who deny the resurrection, Jesus quotes an Old Testament text that at first glance doesn’t seem to speak to the point: “And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Matt. 22:31–32).

That text (Ex. 3:6) was a famous one; every Jewish biblical scholar knew it well. The Sadducees’ problem was not that they didn’t know the text, but that they were unable or unwilling to apply it to the current discussion of resurrection. Jesus taught them that to the extent that one cannot apply Scripture, one is actually ignorant of Scripture. Knowing Scripture cannot be separated from knowing its applications.⁶ But that is to say that one cannot know Scripture without understanding how it applies to extrabiblical data. Here, one cannot rightly understand the normative perspective without the situational perspective.

So Scripture itself says that Scripture has an ethical purpose. The right way to study Scripture is to apply it to the issues that face us in our own time. In Romans 15:4, Paul says, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Unlike any other ancient book, Scripture was written for the purpose of instructing those who would live many centuries in the future, to give them instruction, endurance, encouragement, and hope. Its own authors (divine and human) intended it to guide us in our ethical and spiritual struggles.

Similarly, the familiar passage in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work,” indicates not only that Scripture is God’s word, but also that it has a practical and ethical purpose. Both this passage and the famous passage 2 Peter 1:19–21 were written by aged apostles, concerned about false teaching likely to enter the church after their deaths (2 Tim. 3:1–9; 2 Peter 2:1–22). Paul and Peter agree that Scripture contains the resources necessary to distinguish true from false teachers, both in their doctrine and in their character. (The ethics of the false teachers is a main emphasis of these contexts.) But to use Scripture that way is, of course, to apply it to the situations that the people encounter.

6. See DKG, 81–85, 95–98.

THE LOGIC OF APPLICATION

Ethical reasoning can often be expressed in the form of moral syllogisms. In a moral syllogism, the first premise states a principle, and the second states a fact to which the principle applies. Then the conclusion states the application. We might describe the first premise as normative, the second as situational, and the conclusion as existential, since it brings the principle to bear on our own ethical decision.⁷ For example:

- (1) Stealing is wrong (normative premise).
 - (2) Embezzling is stealing (situational premise).
- Therefore, embezzling is wrong (existential conclusion).

In Christian ethics, the normative premise ultimately comes from God, for only he has the authority to define ethical norms for human beings. In principle, this premise may come from any kind of divine revelation. But we must remember the primacy of Scripture, which governs our understanding and interpretation of general and existential revelation. Our interpretations of general and existential revelation must be tested by Scripture. If someone claims that God wants me, say, to move to Paris, he needs to show me from Scripture that this is indeed God's will. But then the ultimate norm is Scripture, not general or existential revelation by itself.

We may state the sufficiency of Scripture for ethics as follows: Scripture is sufficient to provide all the ultimate norms, all the normative premises, that we need to make any ethical decision. It contains all the divine words we need to make our ethical decisions, and all ultimate ethical norms come from the mouth of God.

Then what use is general revelation? First of all, it is especially important in furnishing situational premises. Of course, the Bible also furnishes situational premises, as in:

- (1) Adultery is wrong (Ex. 20:14).
 - (2) Lust is adultery (Matt. 5:27–28).
- Therefore, lust is wrong.

But most of the time we need extrabiblical data to formulate the situation we are seeking to address, as in the following example:

- (1) Stealing is wrong.

7. Within this general structure, subsidiary arguments are usually needed to establish the normative premise and the situational premise. So ethical arguments in practice have many premises and many twists and turns of logic. In the present discussion, I am presenting a general form that summarizes many arguments about ethics.

(2) Cheating on your income tax is stealing.
Therefore, cheating on your income tax is wrong.

The Bible, of course, does not mention the U.S. income tax, although it does mention taxes in general. What it says about taxes in general is relevant, of course. It is among the “general rules of the Word” mentioned in the Confession. But in order to evaluate the second premise, we need to know not only these biblical principles, but also some facts not mentioned in Scripture that tell us what the income tax is. Here is an even more obvious example:

(1) Sabbath breaking is wrong.
(2) Operating a tanning salon on Sunday is Sabbath breaking.
Therefore, operating a tanning salon on Sunday is wrong.

To establish the second premise, of course, we need to know some general principles of Scripture about the Sabbath. But Scripture doesn’t mention tanning salons. So we need some specific information from outside the Bible to warrant the second premise.

Of course, to go “outside the Bible” is not to go outside of God’s revelation. It is rather to move from the sphere of special revelation to the sphere of general revelation. So the whole syllogism utilizes general revelation, illumined and evaluated by special revelation.

Secondly, it should also be evident that even the normative premises of ethical syllogisms use extrabiblical data at some point. All our use of Scripture depends on our knowledge of extrabiblical data. Scripture contains no lessons in Hebrew or Greek grammar. To learn that, we must study extrabiblical information. Similarly, the other means that enable us to use Scripture, such as textual criticism, text editing, translation, publication, teaching, preaching, concordances, and commentaries, all depend on extrabiblical data. So in one sense even the first premises of moral syllogisms, the normative premises, depend on extrabiblical knowledge. Without extrabiblical premises, without general revelation, we cannot use Scripture at all. But Scripture is emphatically a book to be used.

None of these considerations detracts from the primacy of Scripture as we have described it. Once we have a settled conviction of what Scripture teaches, that conviction must prevail over all other sources of knowledge. Scripture must govern even the sciences that are used to analyze it: textual criticism, hermeneutics, and so forth. These sciences enable us to understand Scripture, but they must themselves be carried on in accord with Scripture. There is a hermeneutical circle here that

cannot be avoided, and that circle shows how the normative and situational perspectives are interdependent. But in the hierarchy of norms, Scripture must remain primary.

ADIAPHORA

The Greek word *adiaphora* means literally “things indifferent,” that is, things that make no difference. In theological ethics, people have sometimes used it to designate a class of actions that are neither right nor wrong, a third category of actions in addition to right ones and wrong ones. Some people have referred to eating meat and drinking wine (Rom. 14:21), for example, as *adiaphora*.

The question of *adiaphora* relates to the sufficiency of Scripture in this way: Scripture commands certain actions, and these are right. Scripture forbids certain actions, and these are wrong. But it seems as though there are many actions that Scripture neither commands nor forbids, such as eating meat and drinking wine. Scripture determines what is right and wrong, so when it is silent, neither category can apply. Thus, the argument goes, there must be a third category, the *adiaphora*.

Historically, this concept has been used most frequently in the area of worship. Luther applied the term to certain Roman Catholic forms of worship, which he thought were neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture, and which the believer could therefore observe or not observe in good conscience. The Puritans and the Scottish Presbyterians, however, denied the existence of *adiaphora* in worship. For them, what God commands in worship is right; anything else is forbidden—there is no middle ground.⁸

I too reject the concept of *adiaphora*, not only in worship, but in ethics generally. My reasons, however, differ from those of the Puritans and the Scottish Presbyterians.

First, let us be clear that there are no *things* (i.e., material objects in the world) that are indifferent in any meaningful way, even though the literal meaning of the Greek term *adiaphora* is “things indifferent.” People sometimes say, for example, that heroin is bad, peaches are good, but wine is indifferent. Remember, however, that such statements refer to nonmoral goodness, not moral goodness as I defined it in chapter 2. Also, Scripture tells us that in that nonmoral sense everything God created is good, not bad or indifferent (Gen. 1:31; 1 Tim. 4:4). I would judge from these passages that even heroin has a good use and is part of God’s

8. I shall discuss this issue in more detail when we consider the second commandment.

good creation. In any case, these passages leave no room, in the world of material things, for adiaphora.

Those who have used the concept of adiaphora have generally applied it to human actions, rather than to material things. So applied, the concept deals with ethical goodness and badness. But are there any human actions that are ethically indifferent? When Paul says, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31), he implies that everything we do either brings glory to God or does not do so.⁹ The “whatever” is universal. It includes our eating and drinking, sleeping, waking, bathing, working, marrying, entertaining ourselves—indeed, every human activity. When we glorify God, we are doing right, and when we do not glorify God, we are doing wrong. Here there is no room for a third category that we might call adiaphora. No human action is indifferent to God.

Why, then, has the concept of adiaphora become so popular in some circles? I think it has been confused with other concepts that are legitimate. These are:

1. Choices between two or more good things, rather than between good and evil. Certainly there are many choices of this kind in human life. But when we make a choice among equally good options, our choice is good, not indifferent.

2. Acts concerning which Scripture is silent. Now as we have seen, there are no human actions concerning which Scripture is absolutely silent. For 1 Corinthians 10:31 and similar passages cover everything. But there are human actions concerning which Scripture does not speak specifically. For example, Scripture doesn’t specifically mention my use of a computer. It is addressed in 1 Corinthians 10:31 generally and implicitly, but not specifically. So we might be tempted to think that specific actions of this kind are adiaphora. However, my use of the computer is not ethically indifferent. It is either ethically good or ethically bad, for it is either to God’s glory or not.

3. Acts neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. This is close to the previous category. But there are some acts that are mentioned in Scripture, and mentioned specifically, that are neither commanded nor forbidden. An example would be eating meat and drinking wine in Romans 14:21. We may be tempted to say that such actions are adiaphora. But we saw in chapter 2 that actions that are neither forbidden nor commanded are permitted (1 Cor. 7:6). What God permits us to do is good. So actions in this category are good, not bad or indifferent.

9. Earlier we cited other passages that also emphasize the universality of our responsibility to God: Rom. 14:23; Col. 3:17, 23.

4. Acts that are neither right nor wrong in themselves, but are right or wrong in specific circumstances. Eating ice cream, for example, can be right in some circumstances, but wrong in others. Drinking a glass of wine may be a good thing to do in many circumstances, but not if one has already had ten glasses. Are such actions adiaphora? I would say not. Eating ice cream is not right or wrong “in itself,” but no human action is ever performed in itself. It is always performed in one set of circumstances or another. Any specific act of eating ice cream will always be either right or wrong, never indifferent. That is true for any other act that is neither right nor wrong in itself.¹⁰

THE STRONG AND THE WEAK

Those defending the concept of adiaphora often mention Paul’s discussions of the strong and the weak in Romans 14:1–15:13 and 1 Corinthians 8–10. The Roman and Corinthian churches were divided by controversies over vegetarianism (Rom. 14:2), the observing of special days (Rom. 14:5),¹¹ and the eating of food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8:1). The argument goes that these matters are adiaphora: it is a matter of indifference whether someone abstains from meat, or observes holidays, or eats food offered to idols.

In my view, it is misleading to describe these matters as adiaphora. The passages make clear that they are not matters of indifference. Rather, the choices that we make in these areas are either right or wrong. There is no middle ground.

The passages contrast two groups of Christians, whom Paul describes as “strong” and “weak.” In 1 Corinthians, he describes the weak as those who lack knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1, 7, 10–11) and have a weak conscience (vv. 7, 9, 10–12). These groups were opponents, and on the specific issues of the controversy, Paul sides with the strong (Rom. 15:1), although he criticizes their behavior. Some readers are inclined to assume that God always favors those who have the most religious scruples. But in these passages, to the

10. If someone prefers to use the word “adiaphora” to refer to actions that are neither right nor wrong in themselves, I will not protest too much. Definitions are never a matter of life or death. Of course, in this case the term will refer only to general categories of these actions, not to specific examples of these categories. But I think that the use of this term always connotes the thought of moral neutrality, which is, in a Christian understanding, divine indifference. But God is never indifferent to what we do, as is plain from 1 Cor. 10:31 and similar texts. So I think even the most defensible uses of the term, such as this one, tend to mislead.

11. In my later discussion of the fourth commandment, I shall consider the implications of this passage for the keeping of the weekly Sabbath.

surprise of such readers, the strong are the ones without the scruples. The strong are the ones who eat meat, who think that observing special days is unnecessary, and who have no problem eating food offered to idols. The weak are the ones whose consciences are troubled by such practices.

Both groups are persuaded of the rightness of their positions. As Paul says, each carries out his practice “in honor of the Lord” (Rom. 14:6). And Paul honors the Christian professions of each. Although he disagrees with the weak, he describes them as brothers (v. 15) and as those “for whom Christ died” (v. 15; cf. 1 Cor. 8:11).

This division creates three problems in the churches, and it is important to keep these distinct in our minds:

1. The very fact that one group in the church is spiritually weak or lacks knowledge is a problem. People who are spiritually weak and ignorant need pastoral help to make them strong and knowledgeable. That help comes from the Lord, operating through the means of grace: the Word, the church, and prayer. Paul doesn’t go into detail about what the strong should do to educate the weak, but he speaks elsewhere of teaching, nurturing, and restoring.

2. The two groups have bad attitudes toward each other. In this regard, both the strong and the weak are at fault. The strong “despise” the weak (Rom. 14:3, 10). The weak “pass judgment on” the strong (vv. 3–4, 10).¹² Passing judgment here probably means accusing of sin, perhaps even casting doubt on the other person’s allegiance to Christ.

Paul’s response to this problem is simply to forbid such attitudes: don’t despise, don’t judge. Both groups belong to Christ, and it is simply wrong for Christians to treat one another this way. Note that Paul never suggests in these passages that the strong should subject the weak to formal discipline, as he does with the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5. Rather, the two parties are to love one another as brothers within the church.¹³ To say this is not to contradict the need for education and nurture, as noted above. Certainly the strong must seek to educate, nurture, and strengthen the weak. And, doubtless, the weak will continue for a time to seek to change the strong as well. But there are right and wrong ways to carry out this

12. First Cor. 8–10 doesn’t include these specific expressions, but it is clear from 8:1–3 that Paul sees a lack of love in the whole controversy. In this passage, he mainly confronts those who have knowledge, the theologically stronger party. Although they have knowledge, they have not been using it in a loving way.

13. Evidently, then, not all differences within the church are subject to the formal procedures of church discipline. There are disagreements that may and ought to be tolerated. No church or denomination may demand complete agreement on all matters. For more discussion of this important subject, see my book *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), now available at www.thirdmill.org and www.frame-poythress.org.

ministry to one another. Despising and passing judgment are not among them. The strong may not despise the weak, because the weak are fellow Christians. The weak may not judge the strong for the same reason—and, of course, because the strong are right.

3. But there is a third issue that Paul is mainly concerned with in these passages, and here the strong are at fault. The strong, by their behavior, are in danger of placing “a stumbling block or hindrance” (Rom. 14:13; cf. 1 Cor. 8:9) in the way of their weak brothers. This is a very serious matter. Paul describes the stumbling block as something that not only brings grief to the weak (Rom. 14:15), but defiles the weak conscience (1 Cor. 8:7), destroys the brother (Rom. 14:15; cf. 1 Cor. 8:11), even tends to “destroy the work of God” (Rom. 14:20),¹⁴ and brings condemnation (v. 23). In placing a stumbling block before a weak brother, therefore, the strong brother himself sins against Christ (1 Cor. 8:12), even though, as we have seen, his convictions on these ethical issues are correct.

What kind of behavior by the strong could have such serious consequences? Evidently they were leading the weak into sin, for sin is the only thing with the spiritually destructive power that Paul describes. What kind of sin? The strong influenced the weak to sin against the dictates of his conscience (1 Cor. 8:7, 12). Conscience, as we shall see later, is our ability to tell right from wrong. People’s consciences are not infallible. Sometimes a person’s conscience tells him something is wrong when it is right, and vice versa. Consciences have to be taught and nurtured, by the means of grace, as we saw above.

Now a Christian’s conscience tells him what is pleasing or displeasing to God. If that conscience is weak, it tells him that some actions displease God, when in fact they please God. If the weak Christian violates his conscience, then, he violates what he considers to be the dictates of God. To violate one’s conscience, even when the conscience is wrong, is to rebel against God.¹⁵

The “stumbling block,” then, is an inducement to sin against a weak conscience. Let’s imagine that an elder of the church, a strong believer, invites a weak believer, a Christian who believes that God commands vegetarianism, to eat at his table. The strong believer serves meat, perhaps in

14. We should make allowance for hyperbole here. In the most important sense, the work of God cannot be overthrown. But the nature of sin, from Satan’s first rebellion down to the present, is to destroy, particularly to destroy a person’s spiritual life.

15. This is a sort of catch-22, to be sure. When one’s conscience misleads, it may be wrong to follow it, for to follow it may lead to sin. But it may also be wrong to disobey conscience, for to disobey conscience is always to rebel against what one thinks is right. This dilemma shows the importance of educating the conscience according to God’s Word.

part to pressure the weaker believer to become strong. The weak believer then is faced with the temptation to eat meat, which would violate his conscience. The temptation is all the greater because of his desire to please the elder and the general demands of hospitality. But if the weak believer eats the meat (without his conscience first being strengthened), he will be guilty of sin. Even though eating meat is not contrary to God's law, the weak believer is motivated by rebellion against God. He is placing the demands of hospitality, the demands of his host, over the demands of God, and therefore he sins. What is sinful is not the act itself, but the motive, the heart attitude.

At Corinth, the strong believers were actually going to feasts at idols' temples (1 Cor. 8:10). Paul's view is that the food itself is not a danger, even if it had at one point been offered to an idol (8:8; 10:25). But the religious context of a feast at an idol's temple could well be a danger to a weaker Christian. And if the weaker Christian hears that the food has been offered to an idol, and he sees the strong eating it (especially in the idol's temple), he may well be tempted to fall back into the actual worship of idols.

The strong, therefore, should avoid doing anything that might tempt the weak to sin against their conscience. The strong should certainly seek to educate the weak with the Word of God, to make them strong. But while the weak brother is weak, the strong should not tempt him to do things that violate his weak conscience or that might lead him back into an idolatrous religious system. The strong should teach, in other words, but should not exert pressure. We nurture the conscience, not by force or pressure, but by godly persuasion.

How do these passages apply to us today? People sometimes derive the lesson from these passages that a pastor should not drink alcoholic beverages in front of the teenagers in his church, for fear that he will encourage underage drinking. There is some wisdom in that advice, though it can be pressed too far. It might be better for the pastor to instruct the youth, so that they will not be tempted in that way. But that advice does not in any case arise from the passages we have discussed.

A better parallel involving the use of alcohol would be this: a pastor invites to his home for dinner a man who is conscientiously opposed to any use of alcoholic beverages. The pastor drinks wine himself and puts pressure on his guest to do the same. The example is a bit artificial. Most conscientious abstainers in our culture today are not likely to be influenced to violate their conscience by such an example. More likely, they will be inclined to "pass judgment on" the pastor in this case. That would be unfortunate, but that is not what Paul calls the "stumbling block." Nevertheless, that spiritual

danger exists in some cases, and it is therefore wrong for the pastor to try to convert the abstainer to his position by using social pressure.

I hope it is evident now that the concept of adiaphora is inappropriate to describe the issues presented in these passages. It is true, of course, that eating meat, observing days, and eating idol food are not right or wrong in themselves, but become right and wrong in various circumstances. But, as I indicated earlier, all human acts take place in one set of circumstances or another. None occur simply in themselves. And in the circumstances described in these passages, the acts in view are right in some cases and wrong in others—never neutral. The strong are right to eat meat, for example, but they are wrong when they eat in such a way as to pressure the weak to violate their conscience. The weak are right to abstain, though not for the reasons they give. Both are wrong in their attitudes toward one another.

In these passages, it is plain that God's attitude toward these actions is not neutral at all. The passages have a pervasive emphasis on God's lordship, and it is because of God's lordship that Paul exhorts the people as he does. Note how many times the words *God* and *Lord* appear in these passages:

Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Rom. 14:3–4)

The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (Rom. 14:6–12)

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as

indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:4–6)

It is in the context of discussing these problems that Paul writes the verse that I have often been citing: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

Paul commends mutual love in these situations because of the lordship of God. God is not neutral here. He cares what we do, and he cares about how we treat one another: not despising or judging, not setting a stumbling block in a brother’s way. Partaking and abstaining are both good acts, when they are done in honor of the Lord. And they are good precisely because they honor God. There is no suggestion here of moral neutrality, nothing for which the term *adiaphora* might be appropriate.

But these passages are relevant to the sufficiency of Scripture, precisely because of the emphasis here on God’s lordship. The prevailing issue here is God’s honor, what pleases him. Human opinions must yield to God’s words, which alone have ultimate authority. We find those words exclusively in Scripture.

CHAPTER 12

Law in Biblical Ethics

We have been studying the normative perspective on Christian ethics. In general, the normative perspective asks what God wants us to do. We saw that the ultimate norm is God himself. More specifically, we find his will for us in his word or revelation. We have looked at a number of forms that revelation takes, but we have focused on God's written word, the Scriptures, because of its primacy in the covenant that God made with us. In the previous two chapters, we discussed six attributes of Scripture that bear on ethics.

When we think of Scripture as an ethical norm, we are thinking about it as law. So it is important for us to give some attention to the concept of law in the Bible. From one perspective, law is a part of Scripture; from another perspective, it is the whole of Scripture.

In an obvious way, law is one part of Scripture that must be coordinated with other parts. The traditional Jewish divisions of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) were the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Law, or Torah, consists of the first five books of Scripture, the Pentateuch. Christians have traditionally divided the Bible (both testaments) into law, history, poetry, prophecy, gospels, epistles, and apocalyptic. Like the Jews, Christians find law in the first five books.

Of course, the first five books contain not only law, but also other types of literature. Much of the Pentateuch is historical narrative, not divine commands. Many have translated *torah* as "instruction," rather than "law," and that seems appropriate, although the instruction in these books cer-

tainly includes a great deal of law in the literal sense. The centerpiece of the Pentateuch is the covenant that God made with Israel under Moses, which includes law as well as other elements, as we saw in chapter 3.

Divine commands are also found in many other parts of Scripture. Kings and Chronicles, for example, contain many divine commands for worship in the temple. The book of Proverbs contains advice from wise teachers that carries the force of divine commands. The prophets constantly command Israel to repent, at God's behest. Jesus shows the depth of the law in his teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). The letters of the apostles contain much ethical instruction. In one sense, then, law is scattered throughout the Bible.

The element of law is important to Scripture, but Scripture contains many other elements as well. It contains imperatives, which we easily associate with law, but also indicatives, questions, promises, and exclamations.¹ It contains legal material, but also other genres, such as narrative, poetry, song, wisdom, parables, humor, and apocalyptic. We should note that all of these are God's authoritative word, and all of them are relevant to ethics, for according to 2 Timothy 3:16 *all* Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for our instruction in righteousness, to equip us for good works.

It is interesting and important to consider how material in Scripture that is not legal in form can be relevant to ethics. Obviously, for instance, narrative is important because it tells the story of how God rescued us from sin and enabled us to do good works, and because it provides many examples of human behavior—some for our imitation, and some not. Poetry and song drive God's word (law and narrative) into our hearts, making it vivid, memorable, and motivating. Parables invite us to place ourselves in a provocative story that challenges our ethical complacency. Humor puts our pretensions into perspective. Apocalyptic stretches the imagination with symbolism about God's coming judgments and blessings.

As we see the variety of ways in which Scripture teaches ethics, we should be motivated to use similar variety in our own teaching. Ethical instruction is not just stating ethical norms. It is also singing, telling stories,² joking, exclaiming, and symbolizing.³

1. For another discussion of genres and speech acts, see DKG, 202–5.

2. Think, for example, of how Nathan confronted David using a parable to convict him of sin (2 Sam. 12:1–15). There will be more on this when we consider the existential perspective.

3. Obviously, I am not adept at these alternative ways of teaching ethics. But I would encourage others, with other gifts, to employ them for the edification of God's people. These are just as important as the writing of theology books.

So if we ask the normative question, “How does God want me to live?” we must look, not only at the specifically legal sections of Scripture, but through the whole Bible. This is only to say that the normative perspective is indeed a perspective, a perspective on the whole Bible.

In that sense, the whole Bible is law. For the whole Bible is God’s authoritative word, given to us for our instruction in righteousness, to equip us for good works.⁴ Everything in Scripture has the force of law. What it teaches, we are to believe; what it commands, we are to do.⁵ We should take its wisdom to heart, imitate its heroes, stand in awe at its symbolism, laugh at its jokes, trust its promises, and sing its songs.

LAW AND GRACE

In what follows, I shall discuss relationships between the concept of law and other concepts in Scripture. First of all, it is important for us to understand the relationship between law and grace.

This relationship is, of course, an elementary aspect of the gospel. It is plain in Scripture that we cannot be saved from sin by obeying the law. Paul says:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received

4. The same thing can be said of narrative and the other forms of language as well. Some sections of Scripture are specifically narrative in form, but to know the whole narrative of the Bible you must consult the whole book. For that story includes the stories of God sending prophets, wisdom teachers, and so on. Similarly with other forms of speech and literature. See DKG, 202–5.

5. This is easier to understand if we recall a frequent theme of the Theology of Lordship series: epistemology is part of ethics. That is, there is an ethics of belief as well as an ethics of action. So even those parts of Scripture that seem to be given for our contemplation rather than our action are ethical: they tell us normatively what and how to contemplate.

by faith. (Rom. 3:19–25; cf. 4:1–8, 13–16; 11:6; Gal. 2:15–21; Eph. 2:8–10; Phil. 3:9; Titus 3:5)

Salvation, in other words, is not something we can earn by doing good works. It is, rather, God's free gift to us, given because of Christ's death for us. Our righteousness before God is the righteousness of Christ and him alone.

This has been the standard Protestant teaching since the Reformation, and it is enshrined in all the Protestant confessions. Recently, however, some have asked questions about Paul's teaching in this area. Some answers to those questions have been described as the New Perspective on Paul. That perspective is based on writings of Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and others. In that perspective, the problem with Judaism, according to Paul, was not works-righteousness, but its failure to accept God's new covenant in Christ, which embraced Gentiles as well as Jews. On this perspective, Paul's gospel is not an answer to the troubled conscience of someone (like Luther) who can't meet God's demands. Rather, it is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to bless all nations. The "works of the law," against which Paul contends, are not man's attempts to satisfy God's moral law, but the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, such as circumcision, food laws, and cleansings.

Discussions of the New Perspective are very complex, entering into details about the nature of Palestinian Judaism at the time of Paul, Paul's own history, and the exegesis of crucial texts. I cannot enter this controversy here. I do agree with those who believe that Sanders and others have been too selective in their references to Palestinian Judaism, and I believe that the New Perspective fails to deal adequately with a number of Pauline passages, such as Romans 4:4–5, Romans 11:6, Ephesians 2:8–10, and Philippians 3:9, which make plain that Paul rejects, not only legal barriers between Jew and Gentile, but also all attempts of people to save themselves by their works. Paul's argument in Romans 1–3, too, makes this clear: all people, Jew and Gentile alike, are guilty before God and cannot do anything to justify themselves. Their salvation comes only by God's grace, according to the passage in Romans 3 quoted above. So Luther's doctrines of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* are fully scriptural and fully Pauline.⁶

6. I recommend Kim Riddlebarger's essay, "Reformed Confessionalism and the 'New Perspective' on Paul," available at the website of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, www.alliancenet.org, as an excellent introduction to this discussion. I fully endorse the conclusions of that article. I also commend a critical article, "N. T. Wright on Justification," by Charles E. Hill, available at <http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/nt/NT.h.Hill.Wright.html>.

The New Perspective legitimately warns us against reducing Paul's gospel to soteric justification by faith. Paul's confrontation with the Jews was on several fronts. Nevertheless, it is important to insist that we are saved only by the grace of God in Christ, not by any works of our own.

In his chapter on "Law and Grace," John Murray summarizes well what law can and cannot do for us. Below are the main headings of his discussion:⁷

What Law Can Do

1. Law commands and demands; it propounds what the will of God is.
2. Law pronounces approval and blessing upon conformity to its demands (Rom. 7:10; Gal. 3:12).
3. Law pronounces the judgment of condemnation upon every infraction of its precept (Gal. 3:10).
4. Law exposes and convicts of sin (Rom. 7:7, 14; Heb. 4:12).
5. Law excites and incites sin to more virulent and violent transgression (Rom. 7:8, 9, 11, 13).

What Law Cannot Do

1. Law can do nothing to justify the person who in any particular has violated its sanctity and come under its curse.
2. It can do nothing to relieve the bondage of sin; it accentuates and confirms that bondage (Rom. 6:14).

GOD'S LAW AS THE CHRISTIAN'S NORM

But if law cannot justify us or relieve the bondage of sin, is it then obsolete to those who receive God's saving grace? Does the believer have nothing to do with law? Quite otherwise. Scripture is clear that the law has a positive role in the believer's life. The law is a gracious gift of God (Ps. 119:29). It is given for our good (Deut. 10:13). The psalmists express over and over again their delight in the law of the Lord (Pss. 1:2; 119:16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 174). Jesus says:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in

7. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 184–85.

the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17–19)

And he adds to that law many of his own commandments, which he also expects us to keep: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15; cf. vv. 21, 23; 15:10; 1 John 2:3; 5:3; 2 John 6).

Paul says that the law is “holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12; cf. vv. 13–14, 16, 19, 21–22, 25), and he speaks of himself as “not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21). He treats the basic principles of the Mosaic law as normative for Christians in passages like Romans 13:8–10, 1 Corinthians 7:19, and Galatians 5:13–14. And, like Jesus, he also sets forth ethical commands, as in Romans 12–16, Galatians 5:13–6:10, and Ephesians 4–6.

How is this positive emphasis on law compatible with grace? It is simply that those who are saved by God’s grace will want to obey him. Obedience does not earn salvation for us; rather, it is the natural response of those who have become God’s sons and daughters. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it,

Q. 86. Since, then, we are redeemed from our misery by grace through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we do good works?

A. Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we show ourselves thankful to God for His blessing, and that He be glorified through us; then also, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by the fruits thereof; and by our godly walk may win others also to Christ.

Now to obey someone, we must know what he wants of us. So to obey God, we must meditate on his law.

How, then, is this positive regard for the law compatible with Paul’s statement in Romans 6:14, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace”? In what sense are we “not under law”? Again, Murray’s analysis is helpful. He argues that “under law” in the context of Paul’s argument here refers to the bondage of sin:

The person who is “under law”, the person upon whom only law has been brought to bear, the person whose life has been determined exclusively by the resources and potencies of law, is the bondservant of sin. And the more intelligently and resolutely a person commits himself to law the more abandoned becomes his

slavery to sin. Hence deliverance from the bondage of sin must come from an entirely different source.⁸

That “entirely different source,” of course, is God’s grace. So Paul says, “You are not under law, but under grace.” Grace, in Romans 6, particularly represents the fact that when Jesus died for our sins, we died to sin, and we were also raised with Christ to newness of life.

So, the expression “under law” has different meanings in Romans 6:14 and in 1 Corinthians 9:21. In Romans 6:14, Paul denies that believers are in bondage to sin, since they are not limited to what Murray calls “the resources and potencies of law.” But in 1 Corinthians 9:21 Paul recognizes that the law continues to have authority over him, to show him how to obey the Lord who has saved him by grace.⁹

Paul also uses the phrase “under law” to refer to the distinctives of the Mosaic covenant, such as circumcision, temple sacrifices, the Aaronic priesthood, feast days, and so on—distinctives which the Judaizers were trying to impose upon Gentile Christians (Gal. 3:23). This is the theme that has become prominent in the writings of the New Perspective. The phrase in Galatians 3:23 has a meaning that is different from that of the phrase either in Romans 6:14 or in 1 Corinthians 9:21. In this sense, to be “under law” is to be under “the pedagogical nonage and tutelage of the Mosaic economy,” in contrast to “the mature sonship and liberty enjoyed by the New Testament believer.”¹⁰ We should ascribe the same meaning to the “abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances” in Ephesians 2:15.

So Murray concludes that we are not under law in the sense of (1) being under the bondage of sin (Rom. 6:14) or (2) “being under the ritual law of the Mosaic economy” (Gal. 3:23). But we are under law in the sense of being obligated to obey our Lord (1 Cor. 9:21).¹¹

LAW AND GOSPEL

I would now like to look at a distinction that is closely related to that between law and grace, but by no means identical to it. That is the distinction between law and gospel. As we have seen, we are saved by God’s grace, not by our obedience to his law. So some have tried to draw a sharp distinction between two messages in Scripture. One message,

8. Ibid., 185–86.

9. See Murray’s valuable discussion in *ibid.*, 186–89.

10. *Ibid.*, 188.

11. *Ibid.*, 190.

"law," supposedly conveys law without grace, while the other, "gospel," conveys grace without law. In my judgment, it is not possible to make this distinction, even though Scripture does make a sharp distinction between works and grace.

It has become increasingly common in Reformed circles, as it has long been in Lutheran circles, to say that the distinction between law and gospel is the key to sound theology, even to say that to disagree with certain formulations of this distinction is to deny the gospel itself.

Sometimes this argument employs Scripture passages like Romans 3:21–31, emphasizing that we are saved by God's grace through faith alone, apart from the works of the law. In my judgment, however, none of the parties to the debate questions that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone. But it is one thing to distinguish between faith and works, a different thing to distinguish between law and gospel.

THE TRADITIONAL DISTINCTION

The distinction between law and gospel is not a distinction between a false way and a true way of salvation. Rather, it is a distinction between two messages, one that supposedly consists exclusively of commands, threats, and therefore terrors, and the other that consists exclusively of promises and comforts. Although we are saved entirely by God's grace and not by works, there are not two different messages of God in Scripture, one consisting exclusively of command ("law") and the other consisting exclusively of promise ("gospel"). In Scripture itself, commands and promises are typically found together. With God's promises come commands to repent of sin and believe the promise. The commands, typically, are not merely announcements of judgment, but God's gracious opportunities to repent of sin and believe in him. As the psalmist says, "Be gracious to me through your law" (Ps. 119:29 NIV).

The view that sharply separates the two messages comes mainly out of Lutheran theology, though similar statements can be found in Calvin and in other Reformed writers.¹² The Epitome of the Lutheran Formula of Concord, at 5.5, recognizes that gospel is used in different senses in Scripture,

12. Lutheran theologians frequently complain that Reformed theology "confuses" law and gospel, which, in the Lutheran view, is a grave error. The main difference is that in the Reformed view law is not merely an accuser, but also a message of divine comfort, a delight of the redeemed heart (Ps. 1:2). Also, the Reformed generally do not give the law/gospel distinction as much prominence within their systematic theological formulations. And, historically, they have been more open to the broader biblical language which the Lutheran Formula of Concord calls "correct" but not "proper" (see below).

and it cites Mark 1:15 and Acts 20:21 as passages in which gospel preaching “correctly” includes a command to repent of sin.¹³

But in section 6, it does something really strange. It says:

But when the Law and the Gospel are compared together, as well as Moses himself, the teacher of the Law, and Christ the teacher of the Gospel, we believe, teach, and confess that the Gospel is not a preaching of repentance, convicting of sins, but that it is properly nothing else than a certain most joyful message and preaching full of consolation, not convicting or terrifying, inasmuch as it comforts the conscience against the terrors of the Law, and bids it look at the merit of Christ alone. . . .

I say this is strange, because the Formula gives no biblical support at all for this distinction,¹⁴ and what it says here about the “gospel” flatly contradicts what it conceded earlier in section 5. What it describes as “correct” in section 5 contradicts what it calls “proper” in section 6. What section 6 does is to suggest that there is something “improper” about what it admits to be the biblical description of the content of the gospel in Mark 1:15 and Acts 14:15.¹⁵ Mark 1:15 is “correct,” but not “proper.”

13. I am quoting the Epitome, a summary of the Formula, rather than the Solid Declaration, which deals with these matters at greater length. I think the argument of the Epitome is easier to follow, and I don’t think the Solid Declaration adds anything important to the present discussion, though some Lutheran correspondents have told me otherwise.

14. The Solid Declaration (in section 6 of the chapter on “Law and Gospel”) mentions Mark 1:15, in which “believing in the gospel” is distinguished from repenting. But especially in view of the use of “gospel” in verse 14, we may not take “gospel” in verse 15 to exclude any command. Indeed, “believe in the gospel” is itself a command. Section 26 of the Solid Declaration mentions also 2 Cor. 3:7–18 as a passage that “thoroughly and forcibly shows the distinction between the Law and the Gospel.” That passage does not mention “law” or “gospel,” but it does distinguish the Mosaic covenant as a “ministry of death” (v. 7) and a “ministry of condemnation” (v. 9) from the new covenant in Christ as a “ministry of righteousness” (v. 9). But the difference here is one of degree. Paul is comparing the relative glory of the two covenants. He is not teaching that the Mosaic covenant contains only condemnation. Indeed, not even Lutheran theologians believe that the gospel was absent from the Mosaic period or that it made its first appearance at the time of Christ. In all periods of redemptive history, God has renewed his promise of redemption.

15. The passage cited by the Formula, Acts 20:21, does not use the usual Greek verb for preaching the gospel (*euangelizō*), but the verb *diamartyromai*, “testify.” But Acts 20:21 is nevertheless significant, since it gives a general description of what Paul declared in his preaching “both to Jews and to Greeks.” That preaching was certainly gospel preaching. Paul resolved in his preaching to “know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Luke 24:47 is also significant, for it includes both repentance and forgiveness of sins as the content that Jesus gave to his disciples to preach (*kēryssō*) to all nations.

LAW AND GOSPEL IN SCRIPTURE

I have been told that “proper” at this point in the Formula of Concord means, not “incorrect” or “wrong,” but simply “more common or usual.” However, I have looked through the uses of the *euangel-* terms in the New Testament, and I cannot find one instance in which the context excludes a demand for repentance (that is, a command of God, a law) as part of the content of the gospel. That is to say, I cannot find one instance of what the Formula calls the “proper” gospel, a message of pure comfort, without any suggestion of obligation. And there are important theological reasons why such a message cannot be found.

Essentially, the gospel in the New Testament is the good news that the kingdom of God has come in Jesus (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14; Luke 4:43; Acts 20:24–25).¹⁶ The kingdom is (1) God’s sovereign power, (2) his sovereign authority, and (3) his coming into history to defeat Satan and bring about salvation with all its consequences.¹⁷ God’s kingdom power includes all his mighty acts in history, especially the resurrection of Christ.

God’s kingdom authority is the reiteration of his commandments. When the kingdom appears in power, it is time for people to repent. They must obey (*hypakouō*) the gospel (2 Thess. 1:8; cf. *apeitheō* in 1 Peter 4:17). The gospel itself requires a certain kind of conduct (Acts 14:15; Gal. 2:14; Phil. 1:27; cf. Rom 2:16).

When God comes into history, he brings his power and authority to bear on his creatures. In kingdom power, he establishes peace. So New Testament writers frequently refer to “the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15; cf. Acts 10:36; Rom. 10:15), sometimes referring to the “mystery” of God bringing Gentiles and Jews together in one body (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 6:19).

The gospel is this whole complex: God’s power to save, the reiteration of God’s commands, and his coming into history to execute his plan. It is good news to know that God is bringing his good plans to fruition.

16. N. T. Wright believes that this use of *gospel* has a double root: “On the one hand, the gospel Paul preached was the fulfilment of the message of Isaiah 40 and 52, the message of comfort for Israel and of hope for the whole world, because YHWH, the god of Israel, was returning to Zion to judge and redeem. On the other hand, in the context into which Paul was speaking, ‘gospel’ would mean the celebration of the accession, or birth, of a king or emperor. Though no doubt petty kingdoms might use the word for themselves, in Paul’s world the main ‘gospel’ was the news of, or the celebration of, Caesar.” See “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” available at <http://www.ctinquiry.org/publications/wright.htm>. Of course, both of these uses focus on the rule of God as Lord, and both involve what is traditionally called law.

17. This is a triad of the sort discussed in this and other books in the Theology of Lordship series.

Consider Isaiah 52:7, one of the most important background passages for the New Testament concept of gospel: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” It is the reign of God that is good news, news that ensures peace and salvation. Even the demand for repentance is good news, because in context it implies that God, though coming in power to claim his rights, is willing to forgive for Christ’s sake. As God comes, he reigns, establishing his law throughout the earth.

In Isaiah 61:1–2, which Jesus quotes in his Capernaum sermon (Luke 4:18–19), Isaiah proclaims:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn.

This verse also provides important background to the New Testament use of gospel: note the “good news to the poor” in verse 1. This message too is the message of the coming of a king, a new administration of justice, even vengeance. This gospel, like that of Isaiah 52:7, is about the reestablishment of law.

So the gospel includes law in an important sense: God’s kingdom authority, his demand to repent. And even on the view of those most committed to the law/gospel distinction, the gospel includes a command to believe. We tend to think of that command as being in a different class from the commands of the Decalogue. But that too is a command, after all. Generically it is law. And, like the Decalogue, that law can be terrifying to someone who wants to rely only on his own resources, rather than resting on the mercy of another. And the demand for faith includes other requirements: the conduct becoming the gospel that I mentioned earlier. Faith itself works through love (Gal. 5:6) and is dead without good works (James 2:17).

Having faith does not merit salvation for anyone, any more than any other human act merits salvation. Thus we speak of faith, not as the *ground* of salvation, but as the *instrument*.¹⁸ Faith saves, not because it merits salva-

18. See, for example, WCF, 11.2.

tion, but because it reaches out to receive God's grace in Christ. Nevertheless, faith is an obligation, and in that respect the command to believe is like other divine commands. So it is impossible to say that command, or law, is excluded from the message of the gospel.

As gospel includes law, so does law include gospel. God gives his law as part of a covenant, and that covenant is a gift of God's grace. The Decalogue begins, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). Only after proclaiming his saving grace does God then issue his commands to Israel. So the Decalogue as a whole has the function of offering Israel a new way of life, conferred by grace (cf. Deut. 7:7–8; 9:4–6). Is the Decalogue "law" or "gospel"? Surely it is both. Israel was terrified upon hearing it, to be sure (Ex. 20:18–21). But in fact it offers blessing (note v. 6) and promise (v. 12). Moses and the Prophets are sufficient to keep sinners from perishing in hell (Luke 16:30–31).

So the definitions that sharply separate law and gospel break down on careful analysis. In both law and gospel, God proclaims his saving work and demands that his people respond by obeying his commands. Law and gospel differ in emphasis, but they overlap and intersect. They present the whole Word of God from different perspectives. Indeed, we can say that our Bible as a whole is both law (because as a whole it speaks with divine authority and requires belief) and gospel (because as a whole it is good news to fallen creatures). Each concept is meaningless apart from the other. Each implies the other.

The law often brings terror, to be sure. Israel was frightened by God's display of wrath against sin on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 20:18–21). But the law also brings delight to the redeemed heart (Ps. 1:2; cf. 119:34–36, 47, 92, 93, 97, 130, 131; Rom. 7:22). Similarly, the gospel brings comfort and joy, but (though less often noted in the theological literature) it also brings condemnation. Paul says that his gospel preaching is, to those who perish, "a fragrance from death to death" and, to those who believe, "a fragrance from life to life" (2 Cor. 2:15–16; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18, 23, 27–29; 2 Cor. 4:3–4; Rom. 9:32). The gospel is good news to those who believe. But to those who are intent on saving themselves by their own righteousness, it is bad news. It is God's condemnation of them, a rock of offense.

WHICH COMES FIRST?

In discussions of law and gospel, one commonly hears that it is important, not only to preach both law and gospel, but also to preach the law first and the gospel second. We are told that people must be frightened by the

law before they can be driven to seek salvation in Christ. Certainly there is a great need to preach God's standards, man's disobedience, and God's wrath against sin, especially in an age such as ours, where people think that God will let them behave as they like. And very often people have been driven to their knees in repentance when the Spirit has convicted them of their transgressions of God's law.

But, as we have seen, it is really impossible truly to present law without gospel or gospel without law, though various relative emphases are possible. And among those relative emphases, the biblical pattern tends to put the gospel first. That is the pattern of the Decalogue, as we have seen: God proclaims that he has redeemed his people (gospel), and then tells them to behave as his covenant people (law). Since both gospel and law are aspects of all God's covenants, that pattern pervades Scripture.

Jesus reflects that pattern in his own evangelism. In John 4:1–42, he tells the Samaritan woman that he can give her living water that will take away all thirst. Only after offering that gift does he proclaim the law to her, exposing her adultery. Some have cited Luke 18:18–30 as an example of the contrary order: Jesus expounds the commandments and only afterward tells the rich ruler to follow him. But in this passage Jesus does not use the law alone to terrorize the man or to plunge him into despair. The man goes sadly away only after Jesus has called him to discipleship, which, though itself a command, is the gospel of this passage.

LEGITIMATE USE OF THE TRADITIONAL DISTINCTION

Now if people want to define *gospel* more narrowly for a specific theological purpose, I won't object too strongly. Scripture does not give us a glossary of English usage. A number of technical theological terms don't mean exactly what similar terms sometimes mean in the Bible. *Regeneration* and *election* are examples, as is *covenant*.¹⁹ We can define our English terms pretty much as we like, as long as those definitions don't create confusion in our readers.

Over the years, we have come to think of *gospel* as correlative with *faith*, and *law* as correlative with *works*. In this usage, law is what condemns, and

19. The phrases "covenant of works" and "covenant of grace," found in WCF, 7.2–4, are not found anywhere in Scripture. *Covenant* in Scripture refers to particular historical relationships between God and his people, mediated by Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. "Covenant of grace" generalizes the common features of these historical covenants, seeing them as successive manifestations of God's redemptive lordship. "Covenant of works" finds in God's relation to our first parents features that are present in his later covenants (with significant differences, of course).

gospel is what saves. Although this distinction differs from the biblical uses of the terms, it does become useful in some contexts. For example, we all know a type of preaching that merely expounds moral obligations (as we usually think of them: don't kill, don't steal, etc.) and does not provide the knowledge of Christ that sinners need for salvation. That kind of preaching (especially when it is not balanced by other preaching emphases) we often describe as a preaching of mere law, legalism, or moralism. There is no good news in it. We are inclined to say that it is not preaching of the gospel. So, in this general way we come to distinguish the preaching of law from the preaching of gospel. That is, I think, the main concern of the Formula of Concord: to remind us that we need to preach both things.

We should be reminded, of course, that there is also an opposite extreme: preaching "gospel" in such a way as to suggest that Christ makes no demands on one's life. We call that "cheap grace" or "easy believism." We might also call it preaching "gospel without law." Taken to an extreme, it is antinomianism, the rejection of God's law. The traditional law/gospel distinction is not itself antinomian, but those who hold it tend to be more sensitive to the dangers of legalism than to the dangers of antinomianism.

Such considerations may lead us to distinguish in a rough-and-ready way between preaching law and preaching gospel. Of course, even in making that distinction, our intention ought to be to bring them together. None of these considerations requires us to posit a sharp distinction. And certainly, this rough-and-ready distinction should never be used to cast doubt on the integration of command and promise that pervades the Scriptures themselves.

It should be evident that "legalistic" preaching, as described above, is not true preaching of the law, any more than it is true preaching of the gospel. For as I indicated earlier, law itself in Scripture comes to us wrapped in grace.

LAW/GOSPEL AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The Formula's distinction between law and gospel has unfortunate consequences for the Christian life. The document does warrant preaching of the law to the regenerate,²⁰ but only as threat and terror, to drive them to Christ

20. Theological literature speaks of three "uses of the law": (1) to restrain sin in society, (2) to terrorize people in order to drive them to Christ, and (3) to guide believers. In Lutheranism (not in Reformed circles), there has been controversy over the third use, though the Formula affirms it. But in Lutheranism it is often said that "the law always accuses." So the third use is essentially the second use directed at believers, driving us to Christ again and again and away from our residual unbelief. Reformed writers do not deny our continual

(Epitome, 6.4). There is nothing here about the law as the delight of the redeemed heart (Ps. 1:2; cf. 119:34–36, 47, 92, 93, 97, 130, 131; Rom. 7:22).

The Formula then goes on to say that believers do conform to the law under the influence of the Spirit, but it does so only as follows:

Fruits of the Spirit, however, are the works which the Spirit of God who dwells in believers works through the regenerate, and which are done by believers so far as they are regenerate [spontaneously and freely], as though they knew of no command, threat, or reward; for in this manner the children of God live in the Law and walk according to the Law of God, which [mode of living] St. Paul in his epistles calls the Law of Christ and the Law of the mind, Rom. 7, 25; 8, 7; Rom. 8, 2; Gal. 6, 2. (Epitome, 6.5)

So the law may use threats to drive us to Christ. But truly good works are never motivated by any command, threat, or reward.²¹

In my view, this teaching is simply unbiblical. It suggests that when you do something in obedience to a divine command, threat, or promise of reward, it is to that extent tainted and unrighteous, something less than a truly good work. I agree that our best works are tainted by sin, but certainly not for this reason. When Scripture presents us with a command, obedience to that command is a righteous action. Indeed, our righteousness is measured by our obedience to God's commands. When God threatens punishment and we turn from wickedness to do what he commands, that is not a sin, but a righteous response. When God promises reward, it is a good thing for us to embrace that reward.²²

The notion that we should conduct our lives completely apart from the admonitions of God's Word is a terrible notion. To ignore God's revelation of his righteousness is sinful. To read Scripture, but refuse to allow its commands to influence one's conduct, is the essence of sin.

need for Christ and the importance of hearing again and again that we are saved only by his grace. But in Reformed theology the law also plays a more direct role, giving us specific guidance in God's delightful paths.

21. We may question the consistency of this position. If the threats of the law drive someone to Christ, resulting in faith in Jesus, is that belief a good thing? One would be inclined to say yes, but it cannot be if actions motivated by threat are *ipso facto* sinful.

22. At this point, there is an odd convergence between traditional Lutheranism and secular deontology. Secular deontologists, like Kant, whom we considered in chapter 8, also reject ethical actions motivated by reward or punishment and say that one does good only by doing his duty "for duty's sake." As I indicated in my discussion of Kant, that position is unscriptural. Scripture often motivates our conduct by rewards and punishments, and it is not ethically right to shun these divine provisions. Kant also rejected ethical actions done in obedience to commands from someone outside the self, again violating Scripture, but strangely echoing the Formula of Concord.

And what, then, is supposed to motivate good works, if not the commands, threats, and promises of reward in Scripture? The Formula doesn't say. What it suggests is that the Spirit simply brings about obedience from within us. I believe the Spirit does exactly that. But the Formula seems to assume that the Spirit works that way without any decision on our part to act according to the commands of God. That I think is wrong. "Quietism" is the view that Christians should be entirely passive, waiting for the Spirit of God to act in them. This view of the Christian life is unbiblical. The Christian life is a battle, a race. It requires decision and effort. I am not saying that the Formula is quietist (Lutheranism rejected quietism after some controversy in its ranks), but as we read the position of the Formula, it does seem that quietism lies around the corner from it.

THE OBJECTIVE AND THE SUBJECTIVE

Part of the motivation for this view of the Christian life, I believe, is the thought that one's life should be based on something objective, rather than on something subjective. On this view, our life is built on what Christ has done for us, objectively in history, not on anything arising from our own subjectivity or inwardness. On this view, the gospel is a recitation of what God has done for us, not a command to provoke our subjective response.

This understanding focuses on justification: God regards us as objectively righteous for Christ's sake, apart from anything in us. But it tends to neglect regeneration and sanctification: that God does work real subjective changes in the elect.

I have no quarrel with this understanding of justification. But in Scripture, though justification is based on the work of Christ external to us, it is embraced by faith, which is subjective. And faith, in turn, is the result of the Spirit's subjective work of regeneration (John 3:3).²³ So nobody is justified who has not been subjectively changed by God's grace.

Thus, the WCF, even in speaking of assurance of salvation, refers not only to the objective truth of God's promises, but also to "the inward evidence of those graces" and "the testimony of the Spirit of adoption" (18.2), which are in some measure subjective.

In fact, we cannot separate the objective from the subjective or, in the terminology of my earlier distinctions, the situational from the existential.

23. So, again, saving faith works through love (Gal. 5:6) and is dead without works (James 2:14–26).

Objective truths are subjectively apprehended. We cannot have objective knowledge, confidence, or assurance, unless we are subjectively enabled to perceive what God has objectively given us.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

Since the law/gospel distinction, as expressed in the Formula, is unscriptural, I do not commend it to Reformed believers. It is especially wrong to claim that this view is or should be a test of orthodoxy in Reformed churches.

LAW AND LOVE

Many discussions of ethics, especially by theologians, deal with the relationship between law and love. The question is important, because love is in some sense the central principle of Christian ethics. Some writers say that love somehow replaces law in the Christian life. But we should not accept that view without some reflection.

We saw in chapter 3 the centrality of the covenant relation in which God is lord and we are vassals, servants, sons, daughters, and bride. In the ancient Near East, *love* often refers to the allegiance of a vassal to his lord. Recall the elements of the suzerainty treaty that I listed in that chapter. In the treaty, the first stipulation, or law, is that of exclusive covenant allegiance, sometimes called love. In the Decalogue, that stipulation is the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). Deuteronomy 6:4–5 expresses this stipulation with the term “love” in the Shema, the famous confession of the Jewish people: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Jesus calls this “the great commandment in the law” (Matt. 22:36), “the great and first commandment” (v. 38). In verse 39, he adds, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself”—another commandment of love, this one from a more obscure Old Testament passage, Leviticus 19:18.

Jesus emphasizes the centrality of love in the believer’s life. He stresses not only love of neighbors, but even love of enemies (Matt. 5:43–48), teaching that as God loves his enemies, we should also love ours. And love is his “new commandment”: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you

are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35; cf. 15:12, 17; 1 John 2:7–11; 3:11–24; 4:7–21). This commandment is "new" because it is based on the example of Jesus' own love for his people, a love, as the narrative later indicates, unto death. This love is to be the mark of the church, by which believers are to be distinguished from the world.²⁴

Similarly, the apostles emphasize love in their ethical teaching (see Rom. 12:9–10; 15:30; 2 Cor. 8:7; Gal. 5:6, 22; Eph. 1:15; 3:17; 6:23; 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 13:1; 1 Peter 1:22). Love is the highest Christian virtue, according to 1 Corinthians 13 and 1 Peter 4:8. And as Jesus teaches (see Matt. 22:37–40; cf. also 7:12), so also does Paul teach that love fulfills the law (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14; cf. 6:2).

What is love? I will discuss the nature of love more fully under the existential perspective. For the present, we may think of it triperspectively: love is allegiance, action, and affection. As we have seen, within the covenant, love describes the exclusive allegiance of the vassal to the suzerain. Scripture also defines love by action, as by Jesus' atoning work in 1 John 4:10 and our actions toward others in Romans 13:10 and Ephesians 5:2. Biblical love is also affection, as indicated by references to romantic and sexual love (Gen. 29:20, 32; Prov. 5:19), the analogy therein to God's love (Hos. 3:1; 11:4; 14:4; Zeph. 3:17), close friendship (2 Sam. 1:26), and the believer's affection for God (Ps. 119:97) and for other believers (Rom. 12:10; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:17).

The following considerations are important in considering the relationship between love and law:

LOVE IS A COMMAND, PART OF THE LAW

Love is the great commandment, the greatest commandment, the highest virtue, the mark of the believer, the center of biblical ethics. But it is also, nevertheless, one command among others. Many thinkers, such as Friedrich

24. In the tradition of Reformed theology, the marks of the church are the preaching of the Word of God, the right administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. I believe it is biblical to speak of these as marks, but to do so requires a number of inferences. Scripture never directly refers to them as marks. But it does refer in that way to the love of Christ. It is unfortunate that this mark has been suppressed in favor of the others. And it is tragic that the world has often not been able to see this mark in us. Too often the church has not been a notable example of love, but has been more famous for its battles. See my paper, "Machen's Warrior Children," in Alister E. McGrath and *Evangelical Theology*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

Schleiermacher,²⁵ Emil Brunner,²⁶ and Joseph Fletcher,²⁷ have tried to show that love is something other than a command. Fletcher says:

Only one “general” proposition is prescribed, namely, the commandment to love God through the neighbor. . . . And this commandment is, be it noted, a normative ideal; it is not an operational directive. All else, all other generalities (e.g. “One should tell the truth” and “One should respect life”) are at most only *maxims*, never rules. For the situationist there are no rules—none at all.²⁸

Here Fletcher denies that love is a “rule.” He admits that it is a general proposition, but he puts the word “general” in quotation marks. (And what is the difference between a rule and a proposition?) Then he says that love is a “normative ideal,” not an “operational directive.” If he has defined that distinction anywhere, I have not located the definition. Evidently he thinks that even love cannot direct us in all concrete ethical decisions, but serves only as an ideal.

Fletcher, of course, wants to deny that love is a rule or law, because he doesn’t want us to be subject to rules at all, but he does want us to be subject to love, at least in an ideal way. But if “love only is always good,”²⁹ then it is hard to understand why it is not a law or a rule. So Fletcher denies the existence of rules and, like Plato, embraces, in effect, a rule that cannot be defined. The first is irrationalistic, in terms of our earlier analysis, and the second is rationalistic. But, as with Plato, since the rationalistic principle lacks content, it is essentially irrationalistic. And since Fletcher’s denial of rules is a rational hypothesis,³⁰ his irrationalism is rationalistic.

In place of all this, Scripture clearly makes love a command of God. That fact immediately rules out any opposition or antithesis between love and commandments in general. Any arguments directed against the keeping of commandments in general carry equal weight against the keeping of the

25. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). He thinks that love cannot be a law, since law is concerned only with outward acts. That may be true of human law, but it certainly is not true of the law of God.

26. Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947). Brunner says that God’s will for me, love, is absolutely concrete, while law deals only with general principles. But it certainly is not obvious that general principles can never dictate concrete decisions. Scripture itself assumes that God’s commands do and ought to have this effect.

27. Joseph F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

28. Ibid., 55 (emphasis his).

29. Ibid., 57 (the title of chap. 3).

30. But how can one use reason to prove such a universal negative?

love commandment specifically. But in an ethic governed by Scripture, such arguments carry no weight at all.

THE LOVE COMMANDMENT REQUIRES OBEDIENCE TO THE WHOLE LAW OF GOD

In the suzerainty treaty structure of the covenant, the commandment to love the Lord (requiring exclusive covenant loyalty) precedes the detailed prescriptions of the law. We demonstrate our love by obeying the commandments. Such is the relationship in the Decalogue between the first commandment and the rest. Note also what follows the love commandment in Deuteronomy 6:4–9:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

To love God completely is to take heed to his words, to saturate one's mind and the minds of the others in one's family, with the commands of God. This is certainly at least part of what is meant by love fulfilling the law: love carries out the commandments of the Lord.

So Jesus says that those who love him will keep his commands. This is a major theme in the Johannine writings (John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10; 1 John 2:3–5; 5:3; 2 John 5–6).³¹ Unlike Fletcher, Scripture never suggests that one must disobey a divine command in order to fulfill the law of love.

LOVE IS A PROVOCATIVE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE LAW

We have seen that the law commands us to love, and that love commands us to keep God's commandments. Law requires love, and love requires law. But that relationship suggests synonymy: that law is love and love is law. Can that be right? And the question naturally arises: if love

31. Compare also the interplay between love and obedience in 1 John 3:19–24, where these are wrapped together in a uniquely Johannine way with the concepts of assurance, God's knowledge, answered prayer, believing in Christ, abiding in him, and the Spirit's witness.

and law impose on us the same obligations, how do they differ? Why do we need two categories, if each contains all the content of the other?

Readers of the Theology of Lordship series will not find it strange that I describe this relationship as perspectival. Love and law are the same content, considered from two different angles. But how do they differ as perspectives?

As perspectives, the difference between them is in focus or emphasis. Law focuses on the acts we are to perform, while love focuses on the heart-motives of these acts. Of course, godly heart-motives are themselves commanded by the law, and acts are part of the threefold definition of love that I presented earlier. But there is a difference of focus here.

To say that love is the central obligation of the Christian is to emphasize that slavish obedience (Kant's "duty for duty's sake") is not the goal of the law. Rather, that goal is to have a genuine passion for God and others that comes from the heart.³² Biblical ethics is first of all personal, for God is the absolute person. It is behavior appropriate to a relationship with the one who created and redeemed us, our covenant Lord, a relationship that includes others made in his image.

But unlike Plato's Good, Kant's categorical imperative, and Fletcher's love, biblical love is not an abstract conceptual blank. It has definite content, and God specifies that content in his law. That is the principle we express best by describing our obligation from the perspective of law.

MORAL HEROISM

In this section, I will reflect further on the relationship between love and law, particularly in relation to the sufficiency of Scripture.

I have said that Scripture is sufficient for ethics in the sense that it includes all the divine words we will ever need to determine our obligations. And since God's word is the source of our obligations, we have none except those presented in the Word.

That might lead us to think that determining our obligation is fairly simple. If we are obligated to do something, there will be a biblical command to that effect. If there is no biblical command, there is no obligation. So it might seem possible to codify our obligations fairly concisely, just as the Jews found 613 commands in the Torah. Once we have obeyed all those specific commands, we might imagine, we will be right with God.

32. Recall our discussion in chapter 9 of God's word written on the heart.

But a number of incidents recorded in the Bible discourage such a project. For example, we read in 2 Samuel 23:13–17 that David longingly expressed a wish for some water from the well of Bethlehem, his hometown, then under the rule of the Philistines. In response, David's three mighty men

broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate and carried and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it. He poured it out to the LORD and said, “Far be it from me, O LORD, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?” Therefore he would not drink it.

Were these men ethically obligated to perform this action? One looks in vain for any text of the Torah or elsewhere in Scripture that commands such a thing. David did not command his men to do this, so they were not carrying out the will of a civil authority.

So it may seem that they were not obligated to do what they did. Nevertheless, the text agrees with David that what they did was something noble and wonderful. This was an action of surpassing valor. Scripture never suggests that they sinned by adding to the word of God. And it is hard for me to imagine that they would have done such a thing except out of great loyalty to their leader.

The same question can be asked about the story of the widow in Mark 12:44 who gave two small coins, all that she had, to the temple treasury. The law mandated only a tithe. Was she, then, performing a work of supererogation, doing more than the law requires, adding to God's word? Or was she doing something she was not actually obligated to do? And what about Barnabas, who sold his property and gave it to the church (Acts 4:37)? Peter told the liar Ananias that believers are not required to give their land to the church (Acts 5:4).

Some might be inclined to say that David's mighty men, the widow, and Barnabas were governed, not by obligation, but by some other motive. If they were not obligated to perform their works of heroism, they would not have sinned if they had chosen not to do those things.

But to say that these actions are not obligatory poses problems. Are these actions optional? Are they things that you can do or not do, at your own pleasure? Does such a category of actions really exist?

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul describes all his exertions for the gospel, with all the “rights” he has relinquished so that the gospel might be made available without charge. If he had a right to be paid by the church, we are inclined to say, certainly he wasn't *obligated* to preach without pay. But there is a

sense of obligation in the passage: “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship” (vv. 16–17). Paul may have had a certain “right” not to preach without payment, but he had a definite *compulsion* to forego that payment. Further, his decision discharged a “stewardship entrusted” to him. What if he had refused to discharge that trust? Would he have sinned?

Before you answer, note that Paul says later, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (v. 23). Then he describes his compulsion as that of a runner with his eye on the victor’s prize, concluding, “I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” In some sense, winning the prize depended on Paul’s moral heroism.

This almost sounds like salvation by works. Of course, we know from other Scripture that it isn’t that. What is it, then? Well, ultimately the prize is Jesus. It is his kingdom; it is the full blessing of knowing him. Compare what Paul says here with another passage reflecting his moral heroism, Philippians 3:7–11, 14:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. . . . I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul is so passionate about Jesus that he wants to experience all the blessings that come to those who go all out for him. It’s not that otherwise he will go to hell, or that there is some precise proportion between the merit of earthly works and heavenly reward. It is just that Paul wants to know Jesus as best he can. Compare 2 Corinthians 12, where Paul says that he endures his sufferings “for the sake of Christ” (v. 10), for in that weakness is his strength. Compare also 2 Corinthians 1:5–6, and the perplexing Colossians 1:24.

But aren’t we *obligated*, in one sense, to know Jesus as best we can? Eternal life itself is knowing Jesus (John 17:3). God told Israel through Moses that

they should come to know him (Deut. 7:9). He did his mighty deeds so that they “may know that I am the LORD” (Deut. 29:6). We are obligated not only to know him, but to *love* him, with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind (Matt. 22:37).

Paul’s particular moral heroism is not obligatory for all of us. Preaching without charge was Paul’s way of carrying out his passion for knowing and loving Jesus. Other apostles accepted payment for their ministry, as was their right. But they showed their passion for Christ in other ways. It is that passion that is obligatory, not a particular way of expressing it. It is the principle, not Paul’s particular application of it, that is important.³³

But God does expect some level of heroism from each of us. The great commandment, to love God with all we have, is an extreme demand. God may never call you to an act of military heroism like David’s mighty men, or to give away all your belongings, like the poor widow, or to sell your property, like Barnabas. But he will ask you to make some kind of hard sacrifice, as he asked the rich young ruler to sell all his goods to feed the poor.

Moral heroism is an obligation, because our overall obligation is to be like Jesus: to love as he did (John 13:34–35; 1 John 4:9–12) in his most extreme sacrifice, and to serve others as he served us (Mark 10:45).

Moral heroism is another illustration of the fact, discussed in chapter 11, that the whole counsel of God for ethics includes, not only the explicit content of Scripture, but also what may be deduced or drawn from it by way of application. Moral heroism applies the law of love to situations in life that excite our admiration, even though the specific action may not be described explicitly in Scripture.

So moral heroism is part of our obligation. Of course, when we understand this obligation, we can see much more clearly why our good works can never measure up to God’s standards. By comparison with the heroism of Christ, and even by comparison with some of his best followers, we fall far short. So we rely wholly on God’s grace in Jesus for our salvation. But as we renounce our own righteousness for that of Christ (Philippians 3:9 again), we come to see Jesus’ glory in comparison with our rubbish, and God plants in us that passion to run the race with Paul: to know the fullness of Christ’s blessings and, above all, to know Christ himself.

33. Every commandment makes obligatory some specific applications. For example, Matt. 22:37 implies that we should not bow down to Baal or Zeus. But every commandment also allows a certain amount of leeway for individual application. For example, the fifth commandment requires Ruth Billingsley to honor her aging parents, Joe and Katherine Billingsley. But it doesn’t specify precisely how she is to honor them with respect to financial support, living arrangements, personal visits, etc. We shall discuss this flexibility of application again in the next chapter, under “Priorities.”

CHAPTER 13

Applying the Law

Under the normative perspective, we have considered the norms of Christian ethics from the most general to the most specific: God himself, his word, his written word, his law. As we saw in the previous chapter, law is both a part of Scripture and a way of looking at Scripture as a whole. Either way, God's law is normative for our lives. It tells us what to believe and what to do.

But we still need to get more specific. How shall we determine in specific terms what God's law has to say to us? In discussing moral heroism in the previous chapter, we saw that determining God's will is not a simple matter of looking things up in a list of commandments. God's commandments, particularly the law of love, are very broad. Their applications may take many forms that never appear on a list of commands—and indeed do not appear explicitly in any biblical text. As I indicated in chapter 11, most applications of Scripture require extrabiblical data, and they lead to conclusions that may not be stated explicitly in Scripture.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that Christians, rightly or wrongly, ignore many biblical laws. We don't offer animal sacrifices, but God commanded Israel to do that. The law of animal sacrifices is part of the law of God.

If we deny the necessity of animal sacrifices today, then we must distinguish between divine laws that are *currently* and *literally* normative, and others that are not. Everything in Scripture is normative in some way, because it comes from the mouth of God. Even those laws that we

no longer observe literally, like those regulating animal sacrifices, have much to tell us about God's redemptive purpose, and what they teach us is divinely authoritative. But we believe that God no longer commands such sacrifices, and we believe that on the authority of the Word of God. So there is a difference in Scripture between what is generally normative and what is currently and literally normative.

How do we tell the difference? This is a hermeneutical question, a question of how we are to interpret the laws of the Bible. We may also describe it as a question of application: we are asking how the legal material in Scripture applies to us today.

When you think about it, it is fairly obvious that not every command in Scripture is normative for us today. As a rather absurd example, consider Jesus' command to his disciples in Luke 19:30, "Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here." Jesus here instructs his disciples to bring him a colt on which to ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. One can imagine a religious sect taking this verse as a literal demand on every Christian: every year, before Palm Sunday, every church member goes into town to fetch a colt for Jesus to ride.¹

Such a practice is ludicrous, of course, because it is obvious from the context of Luke 19:30 that Jesus was not issuing this command as a perpetual ordinance for all time. Rather, this command was limited to a single instance, in a single, narrowly defined setting. How do we know that? Well, the passage doesn't say so explicitly. But to make the commandment broader than that defies good hermeneutics and even common sense.²

So it will not do for us to take every imperative in Scripture as a law to obey today. God has not given every biblical command to us so that we will carry it out immediately. Indeed, every command is directed to a particular situation that is both similar to, and different from, our situations today.³ That fact introduces complications into the project of formulating an ethic based on biblical law.

When such complications appear in theology, it is often time to make distinctions. In this case, some distinctions within God's law will give us some guidance in determining what is currently normative. I shall

1. But we wonder, why only once a year? If Jesus commanded this act as a perpetual obligation, shouldn't we be doing it all the time—even at the cost of martyrdom (for some governments have been unkind to horse thieves)?

2. Common sense is not the chief rule of theology, but it is not to be routinely ignored.

3. Note again the overlap between the normative and situational perspectives. Without taking account of the situation in which the norm is given, we simply don't know what the norm is.

distinguish (1) between creation ordinances and later laws, (2) between the Decalogue and other legislation, (3) between the old and the new covenants, (4) between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws within the Old Testament, and (5) between certain kinds of priorities that exist in all biblical law. As in the previous chapters, we are moving from broad distinctions to more precise ones. Along the way, we shall look at the question of theonomy. And at the end we shall look at the concept of tragic moral choice, which claims that God's requirements for us are sometimes inconsistent.

CREATION ORDINANCES

Creation ordinances are laws that God gave to Adam and Eve before the fall. John Murray lists among them “the procreation of offspring, the replenishing of the earth, subduing of the same, dominion over the creatures, labour, the weekly Sabbath, and marriage.”⁴ These are taken from Genesis 1:28, 2:2–3,⁵ 15, and 24. Of course, God also gave them the specific command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17), but that is not usually considered a creation ordinance, because God gave it only for one occasion, not as a perpetual ordinance for mankind.

I would add worship to this list. It is implicit in the Sabbath ordinance, but it is best to make it explicit. Although the term *worship* is not found in Genesis 1–3, it is inconceivable that Adam and Eve did not respond in worship to God's intimate and immediate presence in the garden. The garden is a sanctuary, a dwelling of God, and therefore holy ground. Like God's dwellings on Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion, Eden is evidently a mountain dwelling of God.⁶

The teaching of Genesis 1:27–28, that man is the image of God, also has ethical implications, as in Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9. God's procedure in creating Adam (Gen. 1:26–28) and Eve (2:21–23) was different from the way he made other creatures. And to humans, but not to any other

4. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 27.

5. This treatment of the Sabbath ordinance is controversial. I shall argue its validity under the fourth commandment.

6. Gen. 2:10 describes a river originating in Eden and flowing downward, supplying current sufficient to carry four great rivers to the sea. This is parallel to “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb, through the middle of the street of the city” (Rev. 22:2). Eden's tree of life reappears in the holy city of Revelation, and the most prominent feature of the city is the presence of God himself, and the lamb.

creature, God assigned the godlike task and privilege of taking dominion over the whole earth (Gen. 1:26, 28). Given these honors, Adam surely knew that human life was something exceedingly precious to God, to be deeply respected. In Genesis 9:1–7, God renews the cultural mandate to Noah, with a reminder that man is made in God's image (v. 6). He thereby justifies the law against shedding man's blood. Certainly that law was known to Adam and Eve as well, heightening the tragedy of Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis 4.

So the creation ordinances, like other biblical laws, have a threefold, indeed a triperspectival, focus: on God (worship, Sabbath), on the natural world (replenishing, subduing, and dominating the earth), and on man himself (marriage, procreation, labor).

Creation ordinances are important, because they form the basic law of human existence. They do not presuppose any particular historical circumstances, as do, for example, the laws of Moses. Creation ordinances are given to man as man, presupposing only our creation in God's image and the earth as our created environment. So it is unlikely that God would abrogate or significantly modify any of these ordinances in the course of history.

After the consummation of history, of course, at least one of these ordinances will change. Jesus teaches that in the resurrection, human beings will neither marry nor give in marriage (Matt. 22:30). Evidently, then, procreation also ceases. Some have taught, too, that since Jesus has filled all things (Eph. 4:10) and has subdued all things to himself (Matt. 28:18), the cultural mandate is no longer in effect for New Testament believers. For the commandment is to fill and subdue the earth, and Jesus has already fulfilled both tasks. I disagree with this view, as I shall indicate under the situational perspective. But although the creation ordinances are, among biblical laws, the least problematic, there is room for discussion as to their present and future application.

THE DECALOGUE AND THE CASE LAWS

The Decalogue may be seen as a republication of the creation ordinances, applying them to Israel's life within the Mosaic covenant. The first four commandments deal with worship, including the Sabbath.⁷

7. In referring to the commandments in the Decalogue, I am using the numbering system common in Reformed (and most evangelical) circles, rather than the different systems used by Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Jews. The first, then, is the prohibition of other gods, and the second is the prohibition of idol worship. The prohibition of coveting is all one commandment, the tenth.

If I am right to include worship as a creation ordinance, and Murray is right to include the Sabbath, then these four commandments are direct applications of these ordinances. The fifth and seventh commandments are based on the ordinances of marriage and family. The sixth and ninth commandments are based on the preciousness of human life in the image of God. The eighth and tenth commandments are based on God's command to labor, to subdue the earth, and to take dominion over it. God gives to us possessions, inheritances, and he calls us to increase these by the sweat of our brow, not by taking what belongs to others.

Certainly the commands of the Decalogue still bind believers under the new covenant, in general terms. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount contains extended exposition of some of the commands in the Decalogue. He condemns the oversimplifications and distortions of the scribes and Pharisees, but he affirms the commandments in their deepest significance. To the rich young man who asks Jesus what he must do to attain eternal life, Jesus presents commandments of the Decalogue (Matt. 19:16–19), before telling him to sell his goods and "follow me" (v. 21).⁸ Paul cites commandments from the Decalogue when he seeks to show that love fulfills the law (Rom. 13:9–10). James also affirms commandments of the Decalogue as he demands that his readers fulfill the whole law, not just part of it (James 2:8–12).

So the whole church has recognized that the Decalogue remains normative for us, with the exception, according to some, of the fourth commandment. I shall address the controversy over the fourth commandment at a later point. But there are no changes in redemptive history sufficient to make adultery lawful or to render unnecessary the honoring of parents.

Nevertheless, there are some features in the Decalogue that refer specifically to Israel's situation as they wait in the wilderness to enter the Promised Land. In the Deuteronomic version of the fourth commandment, the people are told to keep the Sabbath because "you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 5:15). The fifth commandment promises to those who honor parents "that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12). When we apply these commandments to our own situations, we need to

8. It may be significant that the commandments Jesus cites in verses 18–19 are from the "second table" of the law, dealing with our responsibilities to fellow human beings. The requirement to "follow me," then, in effect summarizes the first table, our responsibility toward God. So Jesus' use of the Decalogue may contain a startling testimony to his own deity. In any case, Jesus' directive to the rich man indicates the important role of moral heroism within the law.

apply these details in ways different from, though analogous to, Israel's situation. We keep the Sabbath, not because we were literally delivered from Egypt, but because Jesus delivered us from the greater bondage of which Egypt is a type: bondage to sin. And we honor parents, not literally to have long life in the land of Canaan, but to enjoy God's fullest blessings wherever we are "in the land," that is, "on the earth" (*epi tēs gēs*) (Eph. 6:3)⁹—and, beyond that, in the new heavens and new earth to come.

So it is not unthinkable that some elements of the Decalogue may change in their application, even though the basic obligations set forth bind all human beings until the last judgment.

Within the Pentateuch, it is also important for us to distinguish between fundamental law (creation ordinances, the Decalogue) and case law. Some scholars use the terms *apodictic* and *casuistic* to identify these two categories. Apodictic laws are, as Kant would say, categorical imperatives. They simply tell us what to do or not to do.

Casuistic laws are hypothetical imperatives. Typically, they begin with an "if," indicating the circumstances in which the law is applicable. For example, Exodus 22:1 reads, "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep." The apodictic laws serve as the fundamental constitution of Israel. The case laws are judicial precedents, examples of how judges have applied the apodictic laws to various circumstances. God preserved them here to give to judges authoritative examples of how to apply the apodictic laws.

Of course, every situation is different. Exodus 21:33–34 says, "When a man opens a pit, or when a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his." But what if the owner of the field has taken steps to cover his pit, but a storm weakens the cover? Then, presumably, the judge must assess (as judges must do today) how much of the responsibility belongs to the owner and how much he should pay, taking the circumstances into account. The case laws are not intended to refer specifically to every situation that may arise. Rather, they address representative situations, guiding judges in assessing responsibility.

9. This may be a bit of an exegetical stretch. Paul may simply be quoting the commandment, and *gē* may simply refer to the Promised Land, as the corresponding Hebrew term does in Ex. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16. But, as we shall see in the next section, the equivalent of the Promised Land in the new covenant is nothing less than the whole earth. By omitting "that the Lord your God is giving you" in his restatement of the commandment, Paul universalizes the place of blessing from "the land" of Israel under the old covenant to "the earth" in general under the new covenant.

The Decalogue leaves judges no discretion. They have no authority to make theft legal or to penalize people for worshiping the true God. But the case laws encourage judges to be flexible in considering how the principles of the Decalogue apply to each case. The judges may not contradict the case laws, any more than they may contradict the Decalogue. But since cases vary, God gives to judges discretion to relate the Decalogue to new cases in wise and creative ways. As in modern courts, the judges certainly had power to determine mitigating and aggravating circumstances, to assess motives, and to determine probabilities in the evidence.

The penalties attached to crimes in the case laws are also exemplary, not to be automatically applied. For example, it is evident that in many capital crimes there is provision to ransom the life of the criminal. Numbers 35:31 prohibits ransom for the life of a murderer. But that suggests that ransom was possible in other crimes for which the case laws specify the death penalty, even when the text does not specifically mention the possibility of ransom. Examples may be adultery, homosexuality, and blasphemy. Exodus 21:30 specifically mentions the possibility of ransom in an otherwise capital case. It may well be that judges in Israel had considerable liberty to determine penalties for crimes, following general principles of law found throughout the Pentateuch.

THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

When the New Testament refers to “the old covenant” (2 Cor. 3:14; cf. Heb. 8:13), it speaks of the covenant that God made with Israel, with Moses as mediator (Ex. 19–24). The “new covenant” is, in Hebrews 8 and 10, the covenant of which Jesus is the mediator, identified with the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31–34.

God is the author of both covenants, and the covenant documents of each continue to be normative for God’s people. Jesus proclaims the authority of the old covenant Scriptures in Matthew 5:17–20, as we’ve seen, and Paul says the same thing in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. The new covenant words of Jesus and the apostles come to us authoritatively through the New Testament Scriptures.

Both covenants continue the promise that God will bless all nations through Abraham’s children (Gen. 12:3), a promise of God’s grace. Both covenants also include divine commands. Murray argues that the demand for obedience and the promise of salvation by grace through faith are sub-

stantially the same in both covenants.¹⁰ The demand for obedience in both covenants is not a demand that people earn their salvation through meritorious works (though the Jews sometimes misconstrued the Mosaic covenant as involving works-righteousness). Rather, it calls upon the believer to obey God (by God's grace) as the appropriate response to redemption. Murray quotes Geerhardus Vos in this connection:

It is plain, then, that law-keeping did not figure at that juncture [the Mosaic covenant] as the meritorious ground of life-inheritance. The latter is based on grace alone, no less emphatically than Paul himself places salvation on that ground. But, while this is so, it might still be objected that law-observance, if not the ground for receiving, is yet made the ground for retention of the privileges inherited. Here it cannot, of course, be denied that a real connection exists. But the Judaizers went wrong in inferring that the connection must be *meritorious*, that, if Israel keeps the cherished gifts of Jehovah through obedience of His law, this must be so, because in strict justice they had earned them. The connection is of a totally different kind. It belongs not to the legal sphere of merit, but to the symbolico-typical sphere of *appropriateness of expression*.¹¹

Nevertheless, Hebrews 7–10 does indicate substantial changes that come with the new covenant, changes so great that the author refers to the old covenant as “obsolete” (8:13). He adds, “And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” Those changes are:

A *new priesthood* (7:1–28). Jesus, the priest after the order of Melchizedek, replaces the Aaronic priesthood. This fact involves “a change in the law” (7:12), for the Mosaic law itself makes no provision for such a change. For this reason alone, many of the laws of the Pentateuch are no longer literally applicable: those that deal with the ordination of priests, their daily work of sacrifice, the cleansing rituals they must follow, their daily maintenance of the tabernacle and temple, and their yearly entrance into the holiest place.

A *new sacrifice* (8:1–10:18). By his sacrifice, Jesus deals with our sins “once for all” (9:26–28; 10:12–18). It was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats, under the old covenant, to take away sins (10:4), but

10. Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 194–201. His whole discussion is valuable.

11. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 143.

Jesus' sacrifice of himself dealt with the sins of his people completely and for all time, so that we need no additional sacrifice. So in the new covenant, sacrifices of animals, grain, oil, and wine play no further role. Laws requiring these are no longer literally normative, though we can learn much from them about the nature of Jesus' sacrifice.

Other passages in the New Testament mention three more changes that are also vitally important:

A new nation. The new covenant is not specifically between God and national Israel, as was the old. It is with a new family, a new nation, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. Of course, even the old covenant was open to Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel and accepted circumcision. And the new covenant is in a sense an extension of the old: the olive tree of Israel with some branches broken off and other (Gentile) branches grafted in (Rom. 11:17–24).

But the new covenant is nevertheless radically new. In the new covenant, “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6; cf. 6:15; 1 Cor. 7:19). Because of this new family, the council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15 stated that Gentiles could be members of the church in good standing without being circumcised and without keeping all the laws of Moses. The council did ask that Gentiles abstain from “things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20, 29).¹² The reason given was not the intrinsic immorality of these actions, but because “from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues” (v. 21). Of course, sexual immorality is to be avoided as something wrong in itself (as 1 Cor. 5:1–13). But the council was immediately concerned, evidently, not with morality as such, but with the offense that Gentile Christians might give to Jewish Christians.

So God has broken down “the dividing wall” (Eph. 2:14) between Jews and Gentiles, as Paul writes to Gentile Christians:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the common-

12. These are among the “Noachian commandments” recognized by Jewish tradition as pertaining to Gentiles as well as Jews. A good, brief introduction to this tradition can be found in J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 202–7.

wealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph. 2:11–22)

Note that breaking down the dividing wall leads to the abolition of commandments and ordinances (v. 15). Note also that there is a new temple (vv. 21–22).

In the new covenant, then, the temple in Jerusalem has lost its status as the unique dwelling place of God. Its veil was torn in two, from top to bottom, when Jesus was crucified (Mark 15:38). In AD 70, the building itself was destroyed, as Jesus had predicted (Matt. 24:1–2). God's dwelling is now in the heavenly tabernacle (Heb. 9:11), in Jesus (John 1:14), and in Jesus' people (1 Cor. 3:16).

And if God no longer dwells uniquely in the temple, the unique significance of the land of Palestine must change as well. The land was holy because the holy God dwelled in that land, with his holy people. But if there is a change in the holy people and the place of God's dwelling, then the land loses its special significance.

It is hard to say precisely what modifications these principles introduce into the law, but let me suggest the following:

1. Certainly this development does away with the requirement of circumcision, effectively replacing it with the new covenant sacrament of baptism. It vindicates the judgment of Acts 15.
2. I would assume that it also changes those provisions of the old covenant law that are primarily designed to defend the unique holiness of the temple, the land, and the nation of Israel. The new covenant church as

such possesses no land in Palestine. The annual feasts, which brought the Jews near to God's dwelling three times a year, are no longer appropriate to a truly international people of God. The laws such as the Jubilee that guarded the original divisions of the land of Palestine are not binding on Gentiles who never had such land rights.

3. Advocates of the New Perspective on Paul claim that certain laws had a particular importance in the conflict between Judaism and Hellenism, and therefore in the New Testament controversy over the "works of the law." Don Garlington describes the views of James D. G. Dunn: "Dunn does maintain that 'the works of the law' encompass the whole Torah, but within the period of the Second Temple certain aspects of the law became especially prominent as the boundary and identity markers of the Jewish people: prominently circumcision, food laws, purity laws, and sabbath."¹³ It may well be that these are the laws that Paul especially considers to have been set aside by the work of Christ,¹⁴ although, as Dunn implies, these are not the only laws, for Paul, that lack the power to save.

4. Vern S. Poythress argues that many other laws in the old covenant are, in part or in whole, means by which God guarded his unique relationship with the Jewish people in the holy land of Palestine. Israel, for example, was to purge the land of false religion. Deuteronomy 13:1–18 calls Israel to destroy unbelieving cities within the holy land as part of its holy war against the Canaanite tribes. But in the New Testament, God does not call the church to exterminate unbelievers for their unbelief, but rather to fight against the "ultimate opponents" of the Lord, Satan and his hosts (Eph. 6:12). And:

Now during the New Testament era there is an advance. Holy war is waged through baptism and union with Christ. The flesh is crucified (Gal. 5:24). Human beings are not simply destroyed as were the Canaanites, but raised to life because of Christ's resurrection. This situation is the foundation for widespread evangelism.

13. Garlington, *Law and Gospel: The Contribution of the New Perspective on Paul* (forthcoming). The reference to sabbath will trouble some who follow the tradition of the Westminster standards. But of course that term is found in Col. 2:16, so there must be some sense in which the term *sabbath* can designate a law transcended by Christ. I shall discuss this issue under the fourth commandment.

14. In one sense, no law of God is ever set aside or abrogated (Matt. 5:17–20). But there are some laws that, because of events in redemptive history, we come to observe, in our new covenant age, in very different ways from what God asked of the old covenant Israelites. The commands to worship God by sacrifice, for example, continue to be normative, but we now worship by the sacrifice of Christ. Please insert this qualification whenever I use terms like *abrogated* or *set aside*. What I mean is that such laws are no longer to be *literally* obeyed. But I cannot state that qualification every time the issue comes up.

Now the whole inhabited earth has become the new land that is to be conquered in God's name (Matthew 28:18–20). We are to wage holy war. But the nature of that holy war is redefined because of Christ.¹⁵

So we should also take into account:

A *new mission*. As Poythress indicates, the new covenant requires a new conquest, not the military conquest of a piece of territory, but the conquest of the whole world through the preaching of the gospel. Like holy war in the Old Testament, this conquest brings God's judgment. But for those whom God has chosen, the judgment has fallen on Christ, and what remains is resurrection to new life. The Great Commission states the fundamental task of the church:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:18–20)

As a result of this missionary conquest, God dwells in people all over the world, “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). In the Old Testament, there was also a concern for the nations of the world. God had promised Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). But in the Old Testament itself, the missionary direction was, as it has been called, predominantly “centripetal”: the nations were to come to worship God in Jerusalem (as in Zech. 14:16–19). Isaiah anticipates a greater reality: altars to the Lord in foreign lands and equality among Egypt, Assyria, and Israel, as God’s people (Isa. 19:23–25). But only in the New Testament, in Jesus’ Great Commission of Matthew 28, does the movement of God become fully “centrifugal,” moving outward to all the nations of the world.

This expansive mission reinforces the importance of the changes in law noted above. As the church moves to many nations, there is no place for laws mandating distinctive clothing or diet. Rather, Paul’s rule is: “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). God no longer asks us to preserve the distinctiveness of our own national culture, but to sacrifice that distinctiveness to reach others

15. Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991), 147–48.

for Christ. So the Lord admonishes Peter, when he resists reaching out to the Gentile Cornelius, that “what God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15). God drives home the point in a vision where he tells Peter to kill and eat all sorts of animals that the law describes as unclean.

So the cleansing laws and dietary laws no longer bind the Christian literally, though we may still learn much from them about God’s desire for purity in his people:

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col. 2:16–17)¹⁶

According to this arrangement [that of the Old Testament priesthood and temple], gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. (Heb. 9:9–10)

As for dietary laws, see Mark 7:14–23 (especially v. 19), Peter’s vision in Acts 10:9–16 and 11:2–10, and the passages we considered earlier in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8–10, which emphasize that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

A new maturity. In Galatians 3:23–4:11, Paul compares our freedom from the law to the freedom of slaves liberated from their bondage. The law was “our guardian until Christ came” (3:24). The “guardian” (*paidagōgos*, translated “schoolmaster” in the KJV) was the servant who took the children to school, often giving them some harsh discipline along the way. But “now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (v. 25). This means that we are no longer slaves, but sons, crying “Abba! Father!” (4:6–7). This new relationship to God sets us free from “the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world” (4:9), such as the observance of “days and months and seasons and years” (v. 10).

It is difficult to determine precisely what laws Paul refers to here. I shall refer to this passage again under the fourth commandment. But here I want to observe that Paul regards the New Testament believer as more mature than believers under the old order. Children need constant restraint to keep them moving in the right direction. Adults, ideally at least, are expected

16. We shall discuss under the fourth commandment the specific teaching of this passage concerning Sabbath observance.

to discipline themselves from within. So it is right for them to have more freedom and responsibility. In the religious parallel, Christians are sons, rather than mere slaves. Our relation to God is more spontaneous.

This maturity comes from the work of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit in a far greater fullness than was known under the old covenant. So, as we saw in chapter 3, the New Testament writers motivate us to good behavior, not only by citing the law, but by appealing to the work of Christ (Col. 3:1–3) and the presence of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16).

MORAL, CEREMONIAL, AND JUDICIAL LAW

WCF, 19.2–4, presents a distinction between various kinds of law:

2. This law, after [man's] fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.
3. Beside this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.
4. To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

The moral law, then, is our fundamental responsibility toward God as set forth in the creation ordinances and, as we have seen, in the Decalogue. Ceremonial law has to do with the Aaronic priesthood, animal sacrifices, annual feasts, circumcision, the Day of Atonement, laws of uncleanness, and other matters. Judicial law (often called civil law) includes crimes punishable by the state and the penalties required for them.

The distinction is a good one, in a rough-and-ready way. As we have seen, there are such things as moral laws, that are based on our nature as creatures in the image of God, and are therefore literally normative for all history. It will never be right to steal or murder. It will always be right to worship the one true God exclusively and to honor one's parents. And, as we saw in the last section, there are many laws that should not be kept

literally in the present period of redemptive history, and those are what the Confession calls ceremonial. Finally, there are laws given to guide the actions of civil magistrates in Israel, and those may be called civil.

But when we get into details, these designations are not as sharp or as helpful as we might like. For one thing, the laws of the Pentateuch are not clearly labeled as moral, civil, or ceremonial. In passages like Leviticus 19, laws that we group under different categories are mixed together. And the New Testament doesn't mention such distinctions either, typically referring simply to "the law." As we have seen, "the law" has various meanings in the New Testament, which must be determined by context. Our threefold distinction, though not found explicitly in Scripture, is a useful tool to analyze and classify the various laws in the Bible.

Further, there are problems with each of these designations:

The moral law. The creation ordinances and the Decalogue are surely the most obvious candidates for the status of "moral laws." But as we saw earlier, there are open questions as to their present applicability. Of course, if one believes, for example, that the cultural mandate is no longer normative, then he can relegate that commandment to the ceremonial category, rather than the moral category. But then, the distinction between "moral" and "ceremonial" is not as helpful as we might have thought. In these cases, we don't determine that a law is ceremonial and therefore not currently normative; rather, we follow the reverse procedure. Rather than determining that a law is abrogated because it is ceremonial, we determine that it is ceremonial because we believe it to be abrogated. So *moral* is just a label for those laws we believe to be currently normative, rather than a quality of the laws that leads us to that conclusion. The same is true for the label *ceremonial*. There is nothing particularly wrong with this procedure, as long as we understand what we are doing.

The ceremonial law. One might think that ceremonial laws are about ceremonies, particularly liturgies used in worship. Many of them are, including circumcision, the sacrifices, priestly ordination, priestly garments, feasts, perhaps cleansing laws, and so on. However, some laws about ceremonies are generally considered part of the moral law, rather than the ceremonial law. For example, the first four commandments of the Decalogue govern the worship of God's people. Also, some laws often called ceremonial have little to do with ceremonies, such as dietary laws, clothing laws (e.g., Num. 15:38), and laws concerning leprosy and other diseases. Again, it seems as though theologians call certain laws "ceremonial," not because they share a certain subject matter, but rather because they are judged not appropri-

ate to the new covenant. The name *ceremonial*, therefore, is somewhat misleading. But I suppose we need some word to refer to laws that are not currently normative, and *ceremonial* is the word adopted by the Reformed tradition for that purpose.

The civil law. The civil laws are defined as the laws of the state of Israel as it existed in the Old Testament period. There are a number of problems, however, with this concept:

1. The laws of the Pentateuch rarely indicate precisely who is to enforce them. Some fall under the authority of judges (e.g., Ex. 21:22), while others are the province of the priests (e.g., Lev. 1–9). Sometimes the elders play a role (as in Deut. 19:12). But many others are not assigned to any government except that of God (as, we presume, Lev. 19:18), the self-government of individuals (e.g., the dietary laws), or the informal sanctions of the community.

2. In Reformed theology, as in the Westminster Confession, the distinction between civil law and moral law indicates that all the laws deemed civil are no longer normative. But that raises questions that deserve to be investigated. The Mosaic law contains the death penalty for the crime of murder, for example (Ex. 21:14; Deut. 19:11–13). But that law was not given merely to Israel. God gave it long before to Noah, and through him to the whole human race (Gen. 9:6). This law does not serve any purpose that is unique to the Israelite theocracy. Rather, it is an administration of simple justice. So among the civil laws are at least some that apply to nations other than Israel—that is, some that are not merely civil, but moral.

3. WCF, 19.4, quoted earlier, makes a significant exception to the “expiration” of the civil laws: “not obliging any other now [i.e., any state other than Old Testament Israel], further than the general equity thereof may require.” What is this “general equity”? The precise meaning of this phrase has been the subject of considerable debate, but the basic idea is not difficult to ascertain.

God gives some laws to Israel that presuppose its unique status as God’s chosen people. Among these are the laws concerning sacrifices, the tabernacle, and the priesthood. But he gives other laws that do not presuppose Israel’s unique status, but which merely command basic justice. We saw this above with regard to the death penalty for murder. As another example, the basic penalty for theft is double restitution (Ex. 22:7). This penalty, again, is not based on Israel’s unique status as God’s holy people. Rather, it is a matter of simple justice: the thief must return what he stole, plus an equal amount, so that he loses what he hoped to gain. This law is

normative, not only for Israel, but for any nation that seeks justice. That is to say, this particular civil law is a moral law.

All the laws that God gives to Israel are just, and in that sense they are a model for other nations. Moses says to Israel:

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." (Deut. 4:5–6)

That is to say, all the laws of God are perfectly just and right, given Israel's situation. Israel is God's holy people, and these laws are perfect laws for a holy people in the environment of the Promised Land. When Israel keeps these laws, the nations will see them as good and wise.

This does not mean that all the laws of Israel should have been copied verbatim into the law books of Egypt and Babylon. Egypt and Babylon were not holy peoples. Their culture and economies were different. But certainly some laws, like double restitution for theft, should have been adopted by those and other nations as well. Further, Leviticus 18:24–30, speaking of laws concerning sexual relations, indicates that nations other than Israel should have the same standards as Israel:

Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people. So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God.¹⁷

17. For other evidence of the continuity between what God demands of Israel and what he demands of other nations, see Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 339–64.

So we should understand “general equity” to refer to the overlap between the civil law and the moral law. In the law of Israel, God enforces justice among his people. The law has other purposes as well, including ritual holiness, typology, and symbolism, that are not appropriate for other nations. But justice is appropriate for all nations, and the justice of the law of Moses is a model for justice in all nations.

The problem, then, in dealing with Israelite civil law, is to distinguish between the demands of justice as such and the special demands made of Israel as a holy people of God. The requirements for observing the Feast of Tabernacles are clearly for Israel alone, but the death penalty for murder is for all. But the two aren’t always that easy to distinguish. What about the provision of cities of refuge for those accused of murder (Num. 35)? Is that a wise provision to protect the lives of those falsely accused, or is it a special provision for God’s holy people (note that the slayer is released only at the death of the high priest, v. 28)? The student of the Mosaic law must think through each statute to determine what it means, asking why God gave that statute to Israel. Did God give it simply as justice? As a type of Christ? As a way to remind Israel of their special covenant? Or some combination of these? Students of the law must think through many possibilities.

THEONOMY

Theonomy, sometimes called Christian reconstruction, is a movement of Reformed thinkers dedicated to encourage observance of the Mosaic law by Christians. The patriarch of the movement was the late Rousas J. Rushdoony, who set forth his position in many writings, especially *The Institutes of Biblical Law*.¹⁸ This position is also espoused in many writings by economic historian Gary North, Rushdoony’s son-in-law. The most cogent exponent of theonomy was the late Greg L. Bahnsen, author of *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*.¹⁹

Bahnsen uses a phrase that expresses well the overall program of theonomy, as theonomists understand it: “the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail.”²⁰ It appears to be a simple and radical proposal, telling us to hear God’s law and do it, all of it. According to Bahnsen, this proposal is an implication of Matthew 5:17–20. So he and other

18. Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1973. See my review in appendix G to this volume.

19. Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1977.

20. Ibid., 39 (the title of chap. 2).

theonomists see their opponents as antinomian—as people who are not willing to obey God's commands.²¹

But, as we have seen, the question of obeying biblical laws is not simply whether we will obey them. It is also a question of how to interpret them and how to apply them. And theonomists are not oblivious to the hermeneutical questions. Indeed, they, like the majority of Christians, regard much of the law as no longer normative. When Bahnsen speaks of "the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail," he does not mean that we should follow the dietary laws or bring animal sacrifices to church with us. Rather, like most of us, he sees these laws as fulfilled in Christ, in such a way that they don't need to be kept literally today. The "abiding validity" of these laws means, rather, that we keep them by worshiping on the basis of Jesus' final sacrifice. When we bring the sacrifice of Christ before the Father, we are obeying the Old Testament command to bring sacrifices to God. So "the abiding validity of the law" is flexible enough to allow considerable change in the specific nature of our obligation. But understood in that flexible way, most orthodox Reformed thinkers would agree with the principle. Given that flexible understanding, the principle is not nearly as radical as it sounds.

So what is different about theonomy? I would say that theonomy is not absolutely different from other Reformed positions, but only relatively so. Theonomy is a school of thought within Reformed theology that prefers literal, specific, and detailed applications of Mosaic civil laws to modern civil government. The word "prefers" gives us some leeway. At points, the theonomists, like the rest of us, apply the law in general and nonliteral ways. But they tend more than the rest of us to prefer the specific and the literal.

In terms of our earlier discussion, theonomists tend to see a larger overlap between civil laws and moral laws than do other Reformed thinkers. Greg Bahnsen even rejects the distinction between civil law and moral law. For him, there is a major distinction in Scripture between moral laws and ceremonial laws (or "restorative laws," as he prefers to call them). And the civil laws, including the penalties for civil crimes, are not a third category. Rather, they are themselves either moral or ceremonial. In Bahnsen's view, they are largely moral.²² In particular, Bahnsen and other theonomists insist that the penalties for civil crimes in the Pentateuch are normative for modern civil governments, including the death penalty for adultery, homosexuality, and blasphemy.

21. Bahnsen calls his opponents "latent antinomians" in *ibid.*, 306–14.

22. *Ibid.*, 207–16.

Theonomy appeals to many who are unhappy with the vagueness of much Christian ethics. Theonomy seems to promise them clear-cut answers to their ethical questions. But theonomists differ much among themselves as to how the civil laws are to be applied. In their movement, there is controversy, for example, over the status of dietary laws, the levirate, and long-term loans.

So the differences between theonomists and other Reformed thinkers are not sharp, but somewhat fuzzy. Theonomy, as defined above, is an emphasis, a tendency.

The opposite tendency is found in a number of other authors, notably Meredith G. Kline. Like Bahnsen, Kline makes a bold, programmatic statement, namely, “The Old Testament is not the canon of the Christian church.”²³ By this statement, he does not intend to deny the authority of the Old Testament. Indeed, he recognizes the Old Testament to be God’s word, inspired and infallible. But it is not *canon*, which means that it is “not a matter of faith-norms but of life-norms. More specifically, inasmuch as the nuclear function of each canonical Testament is to structure the polity of the covenant people, canonicity precisely and properly defined is a matter of community life-norms.”²⁴ For Kline, the Old Testament is not part of the Christian canon, because it is the covenant document of the Mosaic covenant, not of the new covenant in Christ. The New Testament alone is the document of the new covenant. Although the Old Testament is normative for the faith of New Testament believers (i.e., for their “faith-norms”), it is not normative for its community life-norms (though presumably it is authoritative in some way for individual life-norms).

I find these distinctions unpersuasive. I grant that we should define the canon as those documents that God has given to govern the lives of the covenant people of God. But I don’t see any biblical basis for the distinctions between life and faith, or individual and community, that Kline sets forth. Faith is part of life, and both individual and community life are under God’s covenant.

But my main point is that Kline, like Bahnsen, is not as brash as his initial hypothesis might suggest. When Kline says that the Old Testament is not our canon, he does not mean what most of us think of when we hear the word *canon*. Rather, he has a technical concept of canon that doesn’t exclude at all the authority of the Old Testament as the word of God. Further, Kline, like Bahnsen, is willing to apply Old Testament statutes

23. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 99.

24. Ibid., 101–2.

to contemporary civil law, as in his discussion of Exodus 21:22–25.²⁵ In that article, he argues that the Israelite regard for the unborn rules out the practice of abortion. So Kline, like the theonomists, represents a tendency, not an extreme.

One gets the impression from reading Bahnsen and Kline that their principles are intended to determine our application of specific texts in the Mosaic law. Bahnsen's approach suggests that we should always, or most often, apply them literally; Kline's approach suggests the reverse. But since both principles have exceptions, we still need to give close attention to the application of each individual text. For example, as we examine the statute forbidding the eating of blood (Lev. 17:10–12), we must ask questions such as: What did this mean to its original audience? Why did God give them this rule? Does that reason make it appropriate to our situation, as it was in the situation in which it was written?

We must ask such questions of every statute, regardless of whether Bahnsen is right, or Kline, or some third alternative. That fact suggests to me that the exegesis of specific texts is more fundamental than the truth of any broad theological principle. That is, the exegesis determines the principle, rather than the other way around. That is always true in theology, and it is true in this case.

So whether the theonomist tendency, the Klinean tendency, or a more conventional Reformed approach is correct will depend not upon general theological principles, but on the exegesis of specific passages. If, on investigation, the best exegesis finds that most of the contested texts warrant highly specific, literal, and detailed applications, then we will have to say that the theonomists are most right. If exegesis more often points the other way, we will have to say that the theonomists are relatively wrong.²⁶

I cannot exegete all the relevant passages here, but perhaps the following comments will be found helpful:

1. Historically, Reformed thought has shown elements of both relatively theonomic and relatively nontheonomic emphasis. I do not believe that either approach may claim unequivocally to be “the Reformed position.” Of course, Reformed people are not antinomian. They believe that Christians are governed by God’s law, and that includes the Old Testament. But Reformed exegetes, including Calvin, have varied greatly

25. Meredith G. Kline, “*Lex Talionis and the Human Fetus*,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (1977): 193–201.

26. *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, by Vern S. Poythress, is, in my judgment, the best attempt so far to analyze the meaning of the statutes of the law. After a comprehensive discussion of the laws themselves, Poythress presents, as an appendix, a critical analysis of theonomy.

as to how literally and specifically they apply the details of the Mosaic legislation to their own situations.

2. Kline's rejection of theonomy presupposes some ideas that are themselves controversial and in my opinion dubious: (a) the sharp distinction between "life-norms" and "faith-norms," (b) the derivation from the Noachic covenant of a religiously neutral state, and (c) his view of the New Testament as the sole canon of the Christian church. We should not, therefore, assume that Kline any more than theonomy represents the Reformed tradition unambiguously.

3. Other critics of theonomy tend to be vague in their arguments or even reveal a certain antipathy toward the Mosaic laws themselves (e.g., the horror displayed at the very idea of making homosexuality a capital crime).

4. Since both Bahnsen and Kline make broad, bold programmatic statements that they modify considerably in their detailed discussions, it seems to me that those bold statements do not really or fairly represent the views they are presenting. In actual fact, they are closer together than their rhetoric would suggest.²⁷

5. In the application of Scripture, there is never unity without diversity, or diversity without unity. Every law of Scripture must be applied to situations. Since every situation is different, every application is somewhat different. On the other hand, since all Scripture is God's word, all applications are applications of the word of God, applications of a fundamental unity. Therefore, any rhetoric that denies unity or diversity is misleading. Contrary to theonomic rhetoric, there is always "change" from one application of a law to the next application of it. And contrary to antitheonomic rhetoric, all of God's Word must be brought to bear upon all of human life (Matt. 4:4).

6. "Change" in this discussion applies both to redemptive-historical change (e.g., old covenant to new covenant) and to cultural change (e.g., we no longer fence our roofs, as in Deuteronomy 22:8, because we no longer use the roof as space for living or entertaining guests). Assessing the relevance of all these forms of change is not always easy. Should believers wear tassels on their garments (Num. 15:38–39)? Is that ruled out by redemptive-historical change? Is it ruled out because the tassel has no symbolic value in the present-day world? How about head covering for women in worship (1 Cor. 11:2–16)? We should not assume that for each of these questions there is one obvious and easy answer, such that those who come to opposite conclusions from ours are fools or heretics. God has ordained, and therefore takes account of, our epistemological limitations.

27. See my "The One, the Many, and Theonomy," in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 89–99.

7. Given the various changes from situation to situation in the application of the law, it is certainly not self-evident that God intended all of the civil laws given to Israel to bind all civil societies. If some of the statutes given to Israel are or are not also binding on other nations, that point must be demonstrated in piecemeal fashion, from one statute to the next.

8. Recall my earlier discussion of the relationship between the Decalogue and the case laws. Given the flexibility allowed to judges in Israel, it is not evident that the penalties of the case laws form a code to be mechanically imposed in each case. Every case is different. The penalties of the case laws are exemplary. And even if the case laws given to Israel are normative for modern civil governments, they do not present an exhaustive catalogue of penalties for every situation. There will always be a need for judicial flexibility. That flexibility will be all the more important in a modern society, in which judges must deal with many things unknown to ancient Israelites. What penalty should be given to Internet pornographers, for example? So even if the case laws are normative today, they would not preclude judicial flexibility; rather, they would necessitate it.

9. There is some confusion in theonomy between present and future application of the law. The rhetoric of theonomy is often calculated to arouse immediate action, and at least some of the appeal of the movement is that people see in it a practical political program for today's society. But others are horrified by the idea that theonomists, taking over government in these confused times, would immediately proceed to execute homosexuals, adulterers, and so on. Confronted with this objection, Bahnsen argues that the Mosaic laws should not be enforced today. They presuppose, he says, a people who understand and believe the law and who are committed to being God's people.²⁸

But that changes theonomy from being a practical program for the present to being a future ideal. I suspect that few of us would disagree with theonomy, or would disagree as strongly, if it were simply presented as a future ideal. Sure, if the postmillennial hope is realized and the world is largely Christianized,²⁹ then most of us would find attractive the prospect of living under something like the Mosaic civil law.

28. Another theonomic reply has been that theonomists believe in limited government, so that a theonomic government would not have the power to conduct a reign of terror. That point is reassuring to some extent. But it is odd to hear that a theonomist government would deny to itself sufficient power to enforce what it considers to be biblical norms.

29. Most theonomists are postmillennialists. They believe that there may be a very long time before Jesus returns in glory. In that time, perhaps tens of thousands of years, it is not difficult for theonomists to envision the world becoming substantially Christian.

We can well agree that there are elements of the Mosaic law which would be enforceable and helpful in contemporary society, such as double restitution for theft without prison sentences. But the question of what is or is not to be implemented now is a difficult question, and it is made all the more difficult by Bahnsen's present/future distinction. We need not only determine how literally the law is to be applied in the ideal situation; we must also determine how it is to be applied in the nonideal situation of today.

To the extent that theonomy is a future ideal, rather than a present-day political program, it becomes less radical and more theoretical. To some readers, that makes theonomy more attractive; to others, less.

10. Much of the rhetoric of theonomy is based on the assumed need for certainty on specifics. I have often heard Bahnsen ask candidates for licensure or ordination in presbytery how they would argue against, say, bestiality, without referring to Old Testament case law. We need the case laws, his argument goes, because the other parts of Scripture are not sufficiently specific. Another example: theonomists typically deny the appeal to "natural light" (an appeal commonly made by Calvin and his successors) because the natural light is not sufficiently specific in its directives. The argument suggests that we need divine direction that is perfectly specific, that leaves no room for human reflection, lest we obey ourselves rather than God.

But in my view this is not the nature of Christian ethics. No command of Scripture is perfectly specific; all Scripture commands are general to some extent. Scripture does not tell me what key to press on my computer as I write this chapter. But it does tell me in general what I ought to say. Scripture does not anywhere specifically forbid abortion; we determine that abortion is wrong by applying the eighth commandment and the language of Scripture concerning the unborn. Scripture does not speak of nuclear war, of the use of artificial life support, and so on. So in Christian ethics there is always a situational perspective. To apply Scripture to specifics, we need to have knowledge of things outside the Bible.

Thus, we should not be frustrated that we do not have, say, a scripturally dictated maximum income tax rate. We will never escape the need to apply general principles to specific situations.

11. I have come to the conclusion that theonomy is a good case study of how theological ideas should *not* be introduced. The sharp polemics of the theonomic movement (and, to be sure, of its critics in return) have been, in my view, quite unnecessary and indeed counterproductive to its own purposes. People have a hard time seeing the important truths that theonomy communicates; it is hard to learn from someone who is always

accusing you of something. Reformed people have always had a high regard for God's law. They are not, on the whole, antinomians and should not be stigmatized as such. Theonomists should not attack them for "latent antinomianism," but rather should ask probing questions to gently guide them into more thoughtful and accurate applications of God's Word.

Am I condemning here the accusatory language used by the Reformers and indeed by Scripture itself? Doubtless there is a place for harsh language. Jesus was harsh with the Pharisees, but not with the woman of Samaria, although he certainly did convict her of sin. In general, I think the Reformers were justified in their polemics, but I have often wondered how much more persuasive they might have been if they had more regularly observed the adage that "you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

12. For all of this, I would say that theonomy has in many ways been a helpful movement. When I went to seminary, we had excellent courses in Old Testament history, poetry, and prophecy, but almost nothing on the law. My initial exposure to the details of the Mosaic law was through the theonomic literature. Further, the theonomists show how we can incorporate into Christian faith and life the *love* of God's law evident in Psalms 1, 19, 119, and elsewhere.

At the very least, the theonomic writings show us why the nations around Israel would marvel at the wisdom of the law (Deut. 4:6). Certainly, God gave these statutes for the good of his people (Deut. 10:13). Had Israel kept the law, she would have been far better off. And as we come better to appreciate the goodness of the law in its original context, we may come more to understand how it may be relevant to our own society, how it could be good for us as well.

PRIORITIES

We have been looking at various factors that determine whether particular biblical laws are currently normative. But even among laws that are normative at a particular time and place, there are priorities to be observed, and those priorities should also influence our decisions.

As we saw in chapter 9, our ultimate ethical authority is God himself. He is law in the highest sense. The law that he reveals to us is a system, a comprehensive way of life in which the supreme goal (*summum bonum*) is to bring glory to him (1 Cor. 10:31). Within that system, some elements are more important, more pressing, than others.

That is true in any system of law. In the United States, for example, there are many different kinds of law: the Constitution, federal statutes,

orders from the executive branch, state constitutions and statutes, local laws, decisions of courts. Even the orders given by a policeman on his beat are law in a sense. But within this system, some kinds of law take precedence over others. When someone believes that a statute is unconstitutional, for example, he may appeal to the court system. The court's decision, for better or worse, takes precedence over the statute in question. When Paul, in Romans 13:1, tells us to be subject to "the governing authorities" (cf. 1 Peter 2:13), he means, therefore, to be subject to the entire system of law.

In American law, we may assume that there are contradictions within the system that have to be resolved by court appeals and such. We may not assume that in the case of God's law. Nevertheless, it too is a system, and there are parts of it that, at any given time, will take precedence over other parts. In what follows, I shall describe several kinds of priorities.

NORMATIVE PRIORITIES

There are some principles of God's law that Scripture explicitly states to be more important than others. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus says that justice, mercy, and faithfulness are "weightier matters of the law," compared with the Pharisees' concern with the tithing of mint, dill, and cumin. Significantly, Jesus affirms the tithing of herbs when he tells the Pharisees, "These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others" (v. 23). Both the more weighty and the less weighty matters are part of the law. But there is a difference between them.

Similar is God's statement in Hosea 6:6, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (cf. Mic. 6:6–8; Matt. 9:13; 12:7). In fact, God did desire burnt offerings, for he commanded them often in the Old Testament. The statement in Hosea is making a comparison, and it is to some extent hyperbolic. It means that God's desire for steadfast love is so much greater than his desire for sacrifice that in the context of such a comparison it seems that he does not desire sacrifice at all. Clearly these passages indicate not only normative principles, but normative emphases. The principles that God considers most weighty are the ones that should preoccupy us above all.

Similarly, WLC, 151–52, tells us that some sins are worse than others. That principle is implicit in the above references and in other passages (see Ezek. 8:6, 13, 15; Matt. 12:31–32; Luke 12:47–48; John 19:11; Heb. 10:29 [cf. 2:2–3]; 1 John 5:16). Any sin is sufficient to condemn us to hell. But even in hell there are degrees of punishment, as seems to be implicit in Luke 12:47–48.

These passages describe objective differences of importance among God's laws. The law itself declares these differences, and so I call them normative priorities.

SITUATIONAL PRIORITIES

In various situations in life, it becomes more important to follow one principle of the law than to follow another. Modern secular legal systems, for example, make special provision for emergencies. Normally, for example, we are expected to drive on the right side of the road and not to cross solid lines. But when Jim is driving and a sinkhole appears ahead, leaving him no room to drive on that side, it is legitimate for him to wait until a safe moment and then cross the solid line in order to drive around the sinkhole. The highest principle of the law is safety, and that takes precedence over the normal traffic rules. If Jim is arrested for breaking a traffic law, concern for safety can serve as a legal defense. In fact, in such a case, Jim has not violated the law. He has maintained its highest intention, which is to keep people safe.

Scripture also recognizes that emergencies can affect our relationship to God's law. Jesus notes how David and his men "entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him" (Mark 2:26). The reason, simply, was that they were hungry (v. 25). Jesus also defends his own disciples when they plucked grain to eat on the Sabbath: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath" (vv. 27–28). God did not make the Sabbath to starve human beings, says the lord of the Sabbath himself. If Sabbath restrictions prevent nourishment, they must yield. This is not Sabbath breaking, he says. It is, rather, a keeping of the Sabbath, as God intended it to be kept.

Similarly, the Bible's instruction to submit to human authorities (Rom. 13:1; 1 Peter 2:13; Heb. 13:17; cf. Ex. 20:12) is an important rule, but it is subordinate to our higher duty to obey God. So when the highest Jewish authority, the high priest, together with the Sanhedrin, ordered the apostles not to teach in the name of Jesus, they answered, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), and they violated the order "every day, in the temple and from house to house" (v. 42).

Philosophers have sometimes distinguished "prima facie duties" from "actual, present duties." Obedience to legitimate human authority is a prima facie duty in biblical ethics. We should practice such obedience except in the rare instance of an overriding consideration. One who argues that there is such an exception must bear the burden of proof. But there are

indeed cases of such overriding considerations, where our actual, present duty is an exception to a *prima facie* duty.

To follow a legitimate exception, as the apostles did in Acts 5:29, is not to break the law of God. Taken as a whole system, the law requires that such exceptions be made.

We are on somewhat dangerous ground here. Ethicists are sometimes tempted to say, for example, that since love is the highest principle of Christian ethics, it warrants exceptions to laws of chastity. The argument is that one may have sexual relations outside marriage, as long as they are true expressions of love. Why should we accept Acts 5:29 as an exception to the general principle of Romans 13:1, and not accept loving fornication as an exception to, say, 1 Corinthians 6:18?

The answer is that the exception of Acts 5:29 comes from Scripture. It comes, not only from Acts 5:29 itself, but from the overall biblical teaching that God alone is the supreme authority. But Scripture never suggests that the law of love warrants fornication. To say that it does is to misunderstand biblical love. Love is first of all a love of God, a relationship of allegiance, action, and affection, as we saw in chapter 12. Those who love God will obey his standards for sexuality. Second, love is a relationship of allegiance, action, and affection between human beings, in which one seeks what is best for the other. Scripture teaches that fornication is never best for anybody.

So we should be able to see that “situational priorities” are never opportunities for us to deviate from Scripture. Rather, they inform us as to the complexity and depth of Scripture’s own ethical standards. Indeed, as in other contexts, here the situational is the application of the normative, and therefore part of the normative. Normative and situational are never opposed; they always imply one another.

EXISTENTIAL PRIORITIES

But there is yet a third kind of priority in our attempt to keep the law. That is the set of priorities related to our own callings.

Perhaps we can get at this issue by noticing that obeying God usually takes time and planning. We tend to think of obedience as an instant response to divine commands, as when Jesus called his disciples and they “immediately” followed him (Matt. 4:20, 22). And certainly, when God gives us a negative command, telling us to stop doing something, he gives us no opportunity to postpone our obedience.³⁰

30. Someone once told me that a man in a church who had committed adultery claimed that he was “in the process of” repenting. I gathered that meant that he committed adultery less frequently than before. But repentance for a particular sin is not a process, but a decisive break.

Sermons sometimes suggest that to obey God means to drop everything we are doing and to do something else. If the sermon text calls for persistent prayer, we ought to stop everything else and pray. The preacher reminds us that Luther spent many hours in prayer, and we feel guilty that we have not done that.

But then the next sermon says the same thing about another duty, say, evangelizing your neighborhood. And then we are told to feed the poor, visit the sick, pursue social justice, study Scripture, parent our children, work on our marriage, attend worship services, and on and on. The guilt becomes greater than we can bear.

The fact is, however, that although all these are legitimate biblical duties, we cannot do them all at once. We are finite. Our schedules are limited. We must frequently stop obeying one command in order to carry out another. God understands our finitude. He does not assume that every command of his must be carried out immediately and continually. It is comforting and reassuring for us to realize that as well.

God also understands that Christians will vary from one another in the emphasis they place on each command. That emphasis will vary with gifts and calling. Those who are called to be full-time preachers will spend more time preaching than those who are called to be full-time homemakers. Even prayer varies among us. All of us are called to pray, but some of us, like the widows mentioned in 1 Timothy 5, may be called to continue “in supplications and prayers night and day” (v. 5).

So we are responsible to set priorities among divine commands. How arrogant that sounds! Who are we to determine how much time we are to spend carrying out each divine command? How can anyone presume to determine priorities among ultimates? But we must and we do.

We can understand this principle better when we see that many of God's commands are not given primarily to individuals, but to a corporate body—either to the human race as a whole or to the church as the body of Christ. For example, God gave the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 not to Adam and Eve as individuals, but to them as a corporate family, including their descendants. Adam could not have filled or subdued the earth as an individual. Only the human race as a whole could have any hope of carrying out that mandate. The same is true of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). Neither Peter nor Andrew could single-handedly make disciples of all nations. But the church, acting as a body under the impetus of God's Spirit, can and will.

So my individual responsibility is not to subdue the earth or to disciple all the nations. It is, rather, to find a specific role, for which God has gifted me, that will contribute something to those results. In my case, though

some may disagree, God has called me to be a theologian. That calling requires me to study the Bible more than most, and to spend less time than others bringing the gospel door to door. It is that calling that determines, or should determine, my personal set of priorities. I must make a decision, but God offers his guidance for such decisions.

To speak of such a decision is merely to talk about applying God's Word to one's individual situation. We have seen over and over again that Scripture can do its work in our lives only as we apply it to our situations. Scripture itself requires it, and so existential prioritizing is a norm. Existential priorities, therefore, are not exceptions to divine norms, any more than situational priorities are. Indeed, at this point the existential and the normative coincide.

It is important that we recognize a legitimate diversity here within the body of Christ. The person who spends ten hours a week feeding the poor is not necessarily more faithful than the widow who spends those ten hours in prayer—or vice versa. We should be thankful to God for this diversity, for it is through this diversity of contributions that God accomplishes his great work.

People sometimes mistakenly think that if God has given a command, it must be given unlimited emphasis and time.³¹ So, in some denominations, one commonly hears that since God requires sound doctrine, the church assemblies must give unlimited attention to doctrinal issues, even at the expense of missions, evangelism, and prayer. The problem is, of course, that God has also commanded missions, evangelism, and prayer. And if a denomination is to have a balanced view of things, it must at some point stop its doctrinal debates long enough to concentrate on other matters.

Imbalance sometimes occurs in the opposite direction, as well. Unfortunately, because of the denominational divisions of the church, people preoccupied with doctrinal matters tend to gravitate to certain denominations, and people preoccupied with practical ministry end up in others. It would be better to have people with both preoccupations in the same church.

But we should be clear that people preoccupied with doctrine are not necessarily more holy, more faithful, or more Reformed (!) than those who are preoccupied with missions. People with one group of priorities should

31. I belonged to a presbytery once that consumed enormous amounts of time on the reading and correcting of minutes, normally the first thing on the docket. When I asked why, I was told that God wants us to do all things decently and in order, and that entails a concern for accurate minutes. So God has ordained, the argument went, that the perfecting of minutes be given as much time as it takes—even if it squeezes out other matters, such as discussing church planting and evangelism. I didn't find the argument persuasive.

not criticize those who have a different emphasis. The difference is often a difference in divine calling.

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church is relatively preoccupied with issues of doctrinal purity, while the Presbyterian Church in America, holding to the same confessional standards, is relatively more preoccupied with church planting and missions. Some in each body are convinced that the other body is unfaithful to the Lord, because of its different emphasis. Attempts to merge the two denominations have not succeeded. In my judgment, part of the problem is that some in each group have confused their group's priorities with biblical principle.

A better way to look at it is this: the PCA is like a breadwinner, leaving the home each day to reach the world outside. The OPC is like a homemaker, keeping the house clean, determining who should be invited to dinner. Homemakers and breadwinners often get into arguments, but both are necessary to a good marriage. A church without breadwinners, or without homemakers, is a church that lacks some important gifts of God. So in my judgment the two denominations should not let the differences in their priorities interfere with their fellowship. They should rather be attracted to one another. Indeed, they should become one.³²

TRAGIC MORAL CHOICE

We have been looking at various ways in which divine laws can lose their immediate, present normativity. But an important question remains, namely, whether two divine laws can ever make incompatible demands on us. This is the question of "conflict of duties," sometimes called "tragic moral choice." It is one of the most discussed questions in the ethical literature. You have probably thought about the famous illustration from World War II: You are hiding Jews in your basement. The Nazis come and ask you directly whether there are any Jews in your house. If you answer truly, you give innocent lives over to death. If you answer falsely, you tell a lie and violate God's standards of truthfulness. So in this case the sixth commandment, which prohibits murder, seems to impose on you a responsibility incompatible with the ninth commandment, which mandates telling the truth.

32. For more on the biblical mandate for church union, see my *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), now available at www.thirdmill.org and at www.frame-poythress.org.

In this situation, it seems as though we must disobey one divine command in order to obey another, which is to say that at this point the demands of God's law are inconsistent. Or we can look at the problem from the situational perspective and say that in this situation there is no righteous alternative. In this situation, it is impossible not to sin.

Many ethicists assume that such conflicts exist. Liberal theologians have no problem affirming this, for they do not believe that the Bible teaches a consistent system of ethics. But even evangelicals sometimes affirm the existence of tragic moral choice. John Warwick Montgomery, who believes strongly in biblical inerrancy, writes:

The Christian morality fully realizes the difficulty of moral decision, and frequently a Christian finds himself in a position where it is necessary to make a decision where moral principles must be violated in favor of other moral principles, but he never vindicates himself in this situation. He decides in terms of the lesser of evils or the greater of goods, and this drives him to the Cross to ask forgiveness for the human situation in which this kind of complication and ambiguity exists.³³

Montgomery says here that sometimes we find ourselves in situations so difficult that we cannot avoid sinning. Doubtless he would say that this is one of the effects of the curse on the ground following Adam's sin. But though there is no righteous alternative available to us in such situations, we can nevertheless ask God's forgiveness through Christ.³⁴

I must, however, take exception to this reasoning. I don't believe that the theory of tragic moral choice is compatible with Scripture, for the following reasons:

1. In Scripture, we have a moral duty to do what is right, and never to do what is wrong. But Montgomery seems to think that in situations of conflicting norms we have a moral duty to do something wrong, something for which we must afterward ask forgiveness. That notion is, in my judgment, morally confused.

2. In Scripture, ethical knowledge presupposes knowledge of what is right. God judges even pagans because they know what is right, but reject that knowledge (Rom. 1:18–23, 32). But on Montgomery's view, in certain situations there is no right alternative and therefore no possibility of knowing the right. By what standard, then, does God judge such conduct?

33. Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1970), 69.

34. Montgomery is Lutheran, and we can hear in his words echoes of Luther's "sin boldly" and "*simul justus et peccator*."

3. On this view, the law of God itself is contradictory, for it requires contradictory behavior.³⁵

4. Indeed, on this view, Scripture counsels us to sin, contrary to Psalm 19:7–9, which says:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
 reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
 making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
 rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
 enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean,
 enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
 and righteous altogether.

5. And then, on this view, since Scripture is God's word, God himself counsels us to sin. That is a blasphemous supposition, rejected in the strongest terms by James 1:13–14.

6. It is also important to consider the Christological implications of this view. If Jesus faced conflicts of duties, then he was guilty of sin, for a conflict of duty is by definition one in which any choice is sinful. That conflicts with the biblical affirmation of Jesus' sinlessness (Heb. 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5). On the other hand, if Jesus did not face tragic moral choices, and we do, then we cannot affirm that he "in every respect has been tempted as we are" (Heb. 4:15). If tragic moral choices exist, they are the toughest choices we have to make, the height of our moral and spiritual warfare. If Jesus did not have to make them, he did not endure our spiritual battle at its hardest point, and so the assurance of Hebrews 4:15 rings hollow. The only way to avoid this problem is to say that there are no tragic moral choices, that Jesus did not face them, and that neither do we.

7. God's Word gives us a specific promise concerning temptation in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond

35. Someone may want to argue that the law is consistent, but its applications are not. But I have argued that the applications of words are their very meanings (see DKG, 81–85, 93–98). And in this book I have argued in chapter 11 that the extrabiblical data by which we apply God's commands never subtract from the authority of those commands. Surely the consistency of Scripture is an empty concept if Scripture can command us to do contradictory things.

your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." This text says that no temptation is so great that the Christian cannot escape it. That is, even in the worst temptations, God gives us the resources to be faithful to him, to make right choices, to find ways of escaping from wickedness. Tragic moral choice, however, is a situation where by definition there is no way to escape. So this passage implies directly that there is no tragic moral choice.

This verse is, of course, a promise to Christian believers, not to others. But it would be odd to imagine a world in which every situation offers a right alternative to the Christian, but not to the non-Christian. It is true that non-Christians, lacking God's grace, commit sin in all they do. But that is not because there is no right alternative available for them. To the contrary, it is because they know what is right (Rom. 1) and refuse to do it.

So I must conclude that there are no tragic moral choices, no conflicts of duties. We should try to understand, however, why the theory of tragic moral choice is so plausible to many. The main reason, I think, is that many moral decisions are very difficult to make. Sometimes it is hard to find the way of escape, and people are tempted to think that such a way does not exist. Please don't think that in rejecting the theory of tragic moral choice I mean to imply that ethical decisions are easy to make. Rather, I encourage you to sympathize with those who wrestle with these issues, to pray for them, and to help them to find a godly solution.

Some alleged examples of tragic moral choice are really questions of priority within the divine law, such as we discussed earlier in the chapter. Others have to do with questions of interpretation. For example, as I shall argue later, I think a sound interpretation of the ninth commandment will allow us to withhold the truth from those who seek innocent life. So, rightly understood, the ninth commandment does not conflict with the sixth, and the example of the Nazis demanding information about Jews is not an example of tragic moral choice.

Another reason why people find this theory attractive is that they have found themselves in situations where they must choose "between two evils." As we recall, Montgomery used this as an example of tragic moral choice, but more analysis is needed. It is important to distinguish between "evils" and "wrongs." An evil is an event that brings suffering. A wrong is a moral evil, a sin against God, a violation of his law.

Now it is usually wrong to inflict evils on people, but not always. The punishment of criminals and just war bring suffering on those deemed to deserve it. But Scripture does not regard these as wrong. A surgeon may choose to inflict pain on a patient in order to heal him. The pain is an evil;

it exists only as part of the curse brought on the earth by sin. But it is not wrong for the surgeon to inflict pain for a good purpose. In doing this, he brings about evil, but he does not do wrong.

So it is sometimes necessary and right to choose the lesser of two or more evils. But it is never necessary or right to choose between two wrongs. The surgeon does no wrong when he inflicts evil on a patient for a good reason. Choosing between two evils, so understood, is not tragic moral choice. It may, indeed, be virtuous.

CASUISTRY

The application of Scripture to situations is sometimes called casuistry. Casuistry deals with cases, relating general ethical principles to the specifics of human life. Casuistry has gotten a bad name, because many have abused the process. For that reason, I prefer the term *application* to the term *casuistry*. But in fact we should recognize that, by whatever name, casuistry is unavoidable. Ethical norms, including those in Scripture, are always somewhat general. Scripture does not describe every situation in which we find ourselves each day, nor does it prescribe norms specifically for each of those situations. The work of applying its general norms to those specifics belongs to us, making use of both special and general revelation. And that work is called casuistry.

In casuistry, we see clearly the complexity of ethical decision making. The casuist must rightly interpret both the moral law and the situation to which the law will be applied. He must understand also people's motives (existential perspective), which can often affect or even determine the rightness or wrongness of their actions. He must understand mitigating circumstances and aggravating circumstances, which can also affect whether an action is right or wrong and the degree of rightness or wrongness.

The chief danger is that the casuist will replace or even contradict the moral law with his own (or a tradition of) interpretations. Jesus charged the Pharisees with breaking the commandment of God for the sake of their tradition (Matt. 15:3). Tradition is not in itself a bad thing. Used well, it makes the godly thinking of past generations useful to us today. But when used wrongly, it imposes barriers between the believer and God's Word.

This danger has taken two distinct forms in the history of ethics. Some casuists have been lax, using their interpretative powers to rationalize sin. Others have tried to be more rigorous, using casuistry to impose a burdensome yoke of regulations on God's people. So in ancient Judaism there was conflict between the lax school of Hillel and the rigorous school of Sham-

mai. And in post-Reformation Roman Catholic circles there was debate between the lax Jesuits and the rigorous Jansenists.

The relatively lax parties have been famous for their justifications of apparently sinful conduct, such as (1) justifying a wrong action because it is more right than its opposite, (2) determining exceptions to general commands, (3) determining implicit qualifications for commands, and (4) excusing normally sinful actions if done from a good motive. These things are not always wrong. As we saw earlier, not every biblical command is to be fulfilled literally and immediately. There are exceptions and qualifications to some commands that Scripture presents implicitly or explicitly, as points 2 and 3 indicate. We shall see in our discussion of the existential perspective that motive does play a role in the moral quality of actions (cf. point 4). I have no sympathy for point 1, however, which either assumes tragic moral choice or assumes that in some other way a wrong action can be right. But even in areas 2–4, casuists of the lax sort have often gone too far, not observing the limits set by Scripture.

The rigorist schools of casuistry have added vast catalogues of moral restrictions to the relatively simple requirements of God's Word, leaving little freedom to the believer. Sometimes their motive in this has been to "fence" the law, adding extrabiblical restrictions to keep us from violating genuine biblical laws. Hence, to keep people from the possibility of boiling a young goat in its mother's milk (forbidden in Ex. 23:19), the Jews insisted that people not eat meat and dairy products at the same meal.

This encourages a nit-picking mentality, interest in minutiae, over against "the weightier matters of the law." There is nothing wrong with an interest in the minutiae of Scripture, unless, as with the Pharisees, that interest crowds out the things that are most important. Rigorism also obscures the clarity of Scripture, making it seem as though ethical questions can only be decided by experts.

To guard against the abuse of casuistry, we need to have (1) a firm, practical confidence in the Scriptures as the clear and sufficient word of God, (2) an awareness of what is more or less important within Scripture itself, and (3) a mature conscience, resisting rationalization and self-justification.

It is also important to know the limits of casuistry. Sometimes we dream of constructing a large book that would contain, not only all the ethical principles of the Bible (totaling 613, according to Jewish tradition), but also all the possible applications of those principles. But that dream is a delusion. The possible applications of the law of God can never be listed or written down. The number of them is far too large to be written in a book. With every breath we take, we are applying God's law. Every thought, word, and deed is done either to God's glory or to the glory of an idol (1 Cor. 10:31

again). And even if there were such a book, new situations would continue to arise. And then there would be questions about the application of that book itself—how it governs our conduct in those new situations.

Ethics books have their value, I hope, but that value is not to exhaustively describe our moral responsibilities. There will always be a need for individual application. Experts can help us in this task, but they cannot anticipate every fork in the road. God can, and his Spirit alone can equip us adequately for the moral journey.

CHAPTER 18

Goodness and Being

We have seen that the normative perspective of Christian ethics asks, “What is my duty before God?” The situational perspective asks, “How should I change the world in order to achieve the goals that are pleasing to God?” Now we shall investigate the existential perspective, which asks, “How must I be changed, if I am to please God?” The question may also be asked from a corporate standpoint: “How must *we* be changed, if *we* are to please God?” The three questions are ultimately equivalent, but they present different perspectives on ethical choice, and each can sometimes help us to correct our misapprehensions of the others.

The normative perspective can be seen as a Christian deontological ethic, the situational perspective as a Christian teleological ethic, and the existential perspective as a Christian existential ethic. These reflect the emphases of their non-Christian counterparts (as we examined them in chapters 6–8), but they bring these emphases together into a more coherent and fruitful unity in the context of our covenant relationship to God.

I begin with some ontological observations, similar to those I made about the other two perspectives. Under the normative perspective (chapter 9), I showed how God’s word is God himself, revealing himself through created media. Under the situational perspective (chapter 15), I indicated that our basic situation is God himself, together with all the persons and things he has made. Now again, under the existential perspective, we must consider the supremacy of God himself and his relationship to his creatures.

God is not only the chief norm and the chief fact, but also the chief person, the chief subjectivity. As such, he is not only our law and our situation, but also our example of holiness, righteousness, and love.¹ He is good, as only a person can be.² But to say that is not to say that he conforms to a standard of goodness imposed on him from above. Nor is it to say that he creates goodness as he creates the world, so that he could change it tomorrow. Goodness is neither above God nor below God. Rather, goodness is God. God is his own goodness. Goodness is God's eternal attribute. Without his goodness, he would not be God. So he will never be other than good. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). And "anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8; cf. v. 16).³

This is to say that, like the highest being, the highest goodness is a person. He is not an impersonal, abstract form, like Plato's Good.⁴ So our supreme standard of goodness, holiness, righteousness, and love is an absolute person. Since he is a person, he is not only a standard, but also an example to us of ethical perfection. He calls us to imitate what he is (Lev. 19:2) and what he does (Matt. 5:43–48; John 13:34–35).

God does not need anyone to tell him what to do. He does what is good because it is his character to do so. In the most important sense, he cannot do anything else. He does good because it is his deepest desire to do so. God's goodness and his being are one.

GOD'S IMAGE AND HUMAN GOODNESS

God has made human beings to be his image, and his intention is for his own union of goodness and being to be reflected in us. Of course, the image is never quite the same as the original reality. We know that human goodness is not inseparable from human nature, as God's goodness is from his, because we have indeed fallen from our original goodness. Neverthe-

1. I understand holiness, righteousness, and love as forms of divine goodness. See DG, 394–401.

2. This is true in both ethical and nonethical senses of goodness, but in this context I am thinking primarily of ethical goodness.

3. This is the doctrine of divine simplicity, that all of God's defining attributes are necessary to his being. For a general discussion of simplicity, see DG, 225–36 and *passim* through the chapters dealing with the divine attributes.

4. Cf. my discussion of Plato in chapter 8, especially on the dialogue *Euthyphro*. Also recall my discussion in chapter 3 of the importance of the fact that the Lord is a person, and the argument in chapter 4 and in AGG, 93–102, that the highest standard of ethics must be personal.

less, God made Adam to be a good person (Gen. 1:31); he gave him a good ethical character.⁵ It is a great mystery how Adam, good as he was, came to sin against God.⁶

Besides being good, Adam was free and responsible before God.⁷ Thus, Adam had to make his own decisions. He was responsible to obey God's norms, but to do that he had to adopt God's norms as his own. Adam had to decide whether he would make his decisions in accordance with God's standards.

A person can be obedient simply out of fear. But in our relationship to God, that is hardly the ideal. God wants us to obey him because we believe that his norms are *right*, that he is indeed the highest standard of goodness. One who obeys only out of fear might think that the one he obeys has false standards. But he obeys anyway, because he doesn't want to be hurt. But to obey God in the fullest sense is to confess that his standards are right and true. And to confess that is to adopt his standards as our own. And so a Christian who has faithfully internalized God's standards lives by standards that are both God's and his own. Such Christians do what they want to do, living by their own desires. That is the limited truth in the existential tradition of secular ethics (chapter 6).

Since there was no ethical tension within man, as originally created, Adam reflected God in the unity of his ethical commitment. He did not have to wrestle with tensions between will and intellect, between emotions and reason, or between heavenly ends and earthly ends. All of his being was an image of God's goodness.

Human beings reflect God's goodness in another way as well. As God's vassal kings, charged with exercising dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28), we have the responsibility to apply God's norms to the rest of creation. Everything in creation is subject to us as we carry out our cultural task. So God intends us not only to be good in our inmost being, but also to be lawgivers to the rest of creation. As the image of God, we reflect God's ethical authority. As God is the ultimate lawgiver, so he has made us also

5. This is the common Reformed view, in contrast to the Roman Catholic position I discussed briefly in chapter 17. On the Roman view, Adam was created with an inner tension between his senses and reason, a tension that required a special gift of grace (*donum superadditum*) to relieve. Reformed theology does not recognize any such tension in Adam's original constitution. But the WCF does say that Adam was "yet under a possibility of transgressing" (4.2). It does not specify what it was in Adam that made sin to be possible.

6. John Murray calls this an "insoluble psychological and moral problem" in "The Fall of Man," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976–82), 2:75.

7. I discuss the nature of human freedom and responsibility in DG, 119–59.

to be lawgivers, as well as law keepers. As such, we are to fill the earth with the righteousness and love of God.

God created Adam to be something truly wonderful, a glorious image of God himself. Like God, though on a different level, Adam was worthy of respect and honor. The image of God is what makes human life exceedingly precious (Gen. 9:5–6; James 3:9).

GOD'S IMAGE AND THE FALL

There is controversy in the church as to whether in the fall the image of God was lost (as in Lutheran teaching) or merely defaced or marred (as in Reformed teaching). I hold to the latter view because of Bible references to the existence of the image in sinful people (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). The continuance of the image implies that even after the fall, human beings are precious in God's sight and therefore ought to be precious in man's sight as well. Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 invoke that preciousness as a principle that we are morally responsible to abide by. Clearly then, the fall takes nothing away from our moral responsibility, though it inhibits us from carrying out that responsibility.

So it remains true, even after the fall, that we are responsible to internalize the law of God, so that it becomes the law of our being as well. Our sinfulness will impede this process until we reach glory, but we should still seek that unity of goodness with all our being. As that unity increases, we will be more confident in deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong—that is, deciding according to our internalized divine standards.

We must never be satisfied with less than obedience to God from the heart. That is a large order, and it is a measure of our fallenness that we never do that perfectly in this life. Even when we conform outwardly to the law, we often note in ourselves some deficiency in inward motivation.

How does the fall affect the unity of human nature discussed earlier? As I said in the previous section, sin is not the result of inevitable conflict between various aspects of our being. Rather, it is the result of personal, willful choice, a choice of the whole person. It is true that following the fall, human beings often have to wrestle with ethical choices. A part of us wants to do right, another part to do wrong (Rom. 7). Sometimes we present this wrestling as a conflict between intellect and emotions, or between intellect and will. But, as we shall see later, this is not the best way to describe such moral instability. Intellect, emotions, and will, even assuming that they can be distinguished in the conventional way, are equally fallen, equally subject to regeneration.

So our struggle is not between our intellect and our emotions or our will, but between right and wrong.

All of our faculties and capacities are subject to temptation and therefore to inward ethical anxiety. We struggle between good and bad emotions, good and bad volitions, and good and bad thinking. These are different ways of saying that we struggle as whole persons between obedience and disobedience to our God. So, even as fallen creatures, there is a unity in human nature, though there is inward tension as well.

GOD'S IMAGE AND REDEMPTION

The atonement of Christ, applied to our hearts by the continuing work of the Spirit, renews us in the image of Christ (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). This restores in principle the moral excellencies with which God originally created Adam. Sin does remain in the believer, not to be wholly eradicated until the return of Christ. But the *dominion* of sin is gone forever (Rom. 6:14).

The basis of Paul's confidence in Romans 6:14 is that when Jesus died, we died with him, and we were raised from the dead with him to newness of life (vv. 1–11). John Murray argues that the believer's "old man" (v. 6), the unregenerate self enslaved to sin, is dead once for all, never to be resuscitated. He is not "dead, but still alive," but simply dead.⁸

Our ethical struggle, then, is not a struggle to put to death our unregenerate self, but rather to grow as regenerate people. Murray says, "The definitive transformation, summed up in the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new, does not remove the necessity or the fact of progressive renewal."⁹ Referring to this progressive renewal, he cites Ephesians 4:23; Colossians 3:10; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 12:2. He continues:

But this *progressive* renewal is not represented as the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new, nor is it to be conceived of as the progressive crucifixion of the old man. It does mean the mortification of the deeds of the flesh and of all sin in heart and life. But it is the renewal of the "new man" unto the attainment of that glory for which he is destined, conformity to the image of God's Son.¹⁰

If, of course, the old man is simply dead, then it is something of a mystery as to why there is any sin in the new man—why anything remains to be

8. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 202–28.

9. Ibid., 218.

10. Ibid., 219.

mortified.¹¹ But this is the mystery of “the already and the not-yet,” which we discussed in chapter 16. Our present concern, however, is to indicate the unity of goodness and being in the new man. Our union with Christ in his death and resurrection leads to a unity in our own being. The ethical struggle is anomalous. Our deepest desire as regenerate believers, and the Spirit’s overall purpose for us, is to remove the remnants of sin from our hearts, so that our character is consistently righteous. The goal of God’s dealing with us is that one day it will be impossible for anyone to conceive of us apart from our good character, that our goodness will become an essential and defining attribute of our being, as with God himself.

So Paul says that believers *are* light in the Lord (Eph. 5:8; cf. Matt. 5:14). As new covenant believers, the law is written on our hearts (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10). We have God’s word, not only as general and special revelation, but as existential revelation as well (see chapter 9): God’s Word illuminated by God’s Spirit.

In the meantime, there is a battle to be fought. Scripture attributes sanctification to a work of God’s grace that begins in our death and resurrection with Christ and continues as God constantly renews us in the image of Christ (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), creating us as his workmanship for good works (Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14). But this work of divine grace does not justify a passive attitude on our part. We are not to wait for the Holy Spirit to act in our lives. Rather, we are to take up arms against the forces of evil (Eph. 6:10–20) and to devote ourselves to good works (Titus 3:8). The Christian life is not a walk in the park. It is a war, a race (1 Cor. 9:24–27). We are not to “let go and let God,” but rather to follow Paul’s mandate: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” not in spite of the fact, but because “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13).

Sometimes the sovereignty of God excludes human responsibility. For example, because God alone is the Creator, we cannot create ourselves. Because God is absolutely sovereign in providing atonement, we cannot atone for ourselves. His sovereignty excludes any attempt on our part to claim

11. Strangely, Murray does not refer to the two passages in the New Testament that speak of mortification, Rom. 8:13 and Col. 3:5, although he does affirm the concept in the above quotes. But what is it that is mortified, if the old man is already dead? Perhaps we should recognize that although the teaching of Scripture is self-consistent, the metaphors in the Bible need not be perfectly consistent with each other. For example, Jesus is both “the foundation” of the church (1 Cor. 3:11) and “the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20, where the apostles and prophets are “the foundation”). The point we should take from the mortification language of Scripture is that there is something in us that has irrevocably died with Christ, but there is also something in us that remains to be put to death. Mortification, like other aspects of the Christian life, is both already and not yet.

his distinctive prerogatives. But most often, God's sovereignty engages our responsibility, rather than detracting from it. So it is with sanctification.¹²

Cornelius Van Til, perhaps to the surprise of some of his readers, says that "the primary ethical duty for man is self-realization," for "when man becomes truly the king of the universe the kingdom of God is realized, and when the kingdom of God is realized, God is glorified."¹³ Van Til expounds the concept of self-realization under three subheadings: (1) "Man's will needs to become increasingly spontaneous in its reactivity."¹⁴ (2) "Man's will needs to become increasingly fixed in its self-determination."¹⁵ (3) "Man's will must increase in momentum."¹⁶ His illustration of momentum is a growing business: as the business increases, its managers need to increase in "alertness, stability, and comprehensiveness of decision."¹⁷

Here Van Til uses many bywords of the existential tradition. But he sees no tension between this language and his overall emphasis on the authority of God's law and the kingdom of God as man's *summum bonum*. For Van Til, as for Scripture, God's sovereign control and authority do not exclude, but encourage, a bracing sense of human responsibility and a deep reflection upon human ethical subjectivity. Note especially his emphasis on the freedom of the believer. Our trust in God does not extinguish our spontaneity, but rather fires it up. Our will is indeed God-determined, but also self-determined. And redemption creates within us a "momentum" toward godliness, a momentum that comes from within, as well as from without.

So we should not follow those who think that a proper emphasis on the objectivity of redemption excludes an emphasis on subjectivity. Divine grace, atonement, and justification are certainly objective—realities occurring outside ourselves, which we cannot change. But regeneration and sanctification are realities also. They too are objective works of God's grace, but they are also events that occur within us. And sanctification is a process for which we, together with God, must take responsibility. Christian ethics requires consideration of both the objective and the subjective, and of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

12. On the general relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, see DG, 119–59. See also my comments on quietism in chapter 12 of the present volume. Quietism has appeared, not only in Lutheranism, but also in other Christian circles, such as the "victorious life" teaching of the Keswick Bible conferences. See B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958).

13. Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* ([Ripon, CA]: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971), 45.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 46.

17. Ibid.

CHAPTER 19

Motives and Virtues

In chapter 3, I discussed the three necessary and sufficient conditions of good works that are mentioned in WCF, 16.7, namely, having the right standard, having the right goal, and having the right motive. Under the normative perspective (especially chapter 9), I discussed the standard, the word of God in its various forms. Under the situational perspective (especially chapter 17), I discussed the goal, the glory of God, which, like the word of God, can be particularized in various ways (as human enjoyment of God, the kingdom of God, the cultural mandate, and the Great Commission). In this chapter, as part of the existential perspective, I shall consider the motive of Christian ethics.

A motive is “an emotion, desire, physiological need, or similar impulse that acts as an incitement to action.”¹ Some motives are desires to accomplish some specific result in the external world, as when a prosecutor says of a defendant, “His motive was revenge.” In that context, *motive* becomes roughly synonymous with *goal*. We discussed goals under the situational perspective, but since the desire to achieve a goal is subjective, we might have carried on much of that discussion under the existential perspective. This is another example of how the three perspectives overlap.

But in the present discussion, I will focus on the inner, subjective dimensions of motive—those aspects of character, desire, and feeling that incite us to good or bad actions.

1. *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), 890.

Scripture is clear in teaching that a right motive is necessary for a human action to be good. Both the Old Testament (Deut. 6:5–6) and the New Testament (Matt. 5:8, 28; 6:21; 12:34–35; 15:8, 18–19; 22:37; Rom. 6:17; 10:9–10) emphasize that true obedience to God is from the heart. As we have seen, God intends for his law to be written, not only on stone and paper, but also on the human heart (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10). The heart is the center of human existence, the whole person as God sees him, the true self when all its masks are removed. So the heart is the motive of motives, the fundamental disposition of every person. The heart is the source of our most fundamental commitment, either to serve God or to serve an idol. It governs our actions (Matt. 15:19), words (Matt. 12:34), and thoughts (Matt. 9:4; 15:19).

Scripture strongly opposes hypocrisy (Isa. 29:13–14; Matt. 15:8–9). Jesus saw hypocrisy especially in the Pharisees, who did their good works to be seen by other people (Matt. 6:1–8; 23:5). External goodness is not enough, says Jesus. Not only the outside, but also the inside of the cup must be clean (Matt. 23:25–26).

The apostle Paul tells us that love is necessary for any work to be a truly good work (1 Cor. 13), and Hebrews 11:6 says that “without faith it is impossible to please [God].” WCF, 16.7, speaks of faith as that which purifies the heart, without mentioning any other motive for purity, evidently because faith is the sole instrument of justification. But Scripture, concerned not only with initial justification, but also with the continuing process of sanctification, mentions other motives as well, most notably love.

If love and faith are motives for good works, there is evidently a significant overlap between motives and virtues. That should not surprise us. Virtues, in Scripture, are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) applied to the heart (Eph. 6:6 and many other passages). For example, if the Spirit applies love to the heart of the believer, that believer becomes a loving person. He displays love in his behavior. Our behavior is always governed, motivated, by the character of our heart (Matt. 12:35). So the qualities of the regenerate character are motives, and our motives are virtues. This is to say that in a Christian view of things virtues never lie dormant. They are active and dynamic. They seek expression. They motivate. Motives are virtues, and virtues are motives.

A VIRTUE ETHIC THAT IS CHRISTIAN

The existential perspective on Christian ethics is not simply a Christian counterpart of secular existential ethics. It is also a virtue ethic that is

Christian. Recall the distinction between command ethics, narrative ethics, and virtue ethics, set forth in chapter 3. A complete Christian ethic contains all three of these, and each includes the others perspectively. I have presented a command ethic under the normative perspective and a narrative ethic under the situational perspective. Now we should consider under the existential perspective what an ethic of virtue might mean in a covenantal Christian setting.

From what we have seen earlier, it is possible to teach ethics in several ways. In a command ethic, one sets forth the requirements of God's Word and seeks to apply those to all areas of human life. In a narrative ethic, we tell the story of God's people, from creation to the present day, as we anticipate the eschaton. There is no inconsistency between these two approaches, and they reinforce one another. The commands of God must be applied to the whole situation of mankind, which is described in the narrative. The narrative includes descriptions of events in which God gives commands to us, and it declares the resources that God has given to us by grace to keep those commands.²

A virtue ethic that is Christian will focus on a description of the regenerate heart. It will describe the biblical virtues and show how they motivate us to do good works. It will give examples of people who are loving, faithful, self-controlled, and so on. In doing so, of course, it will also expound God's commands, for the virtues are what God requires of us. And it will expound the Christian narrative, for that story tells us what God has done to plant such virtues in our hearts. Ultimately, then, a Christian virtue ethic will differ from the other two only in emphasis, in perspective. But that perspective is very important. It provides a window into the soul.

In this book, my main discussion of ethical issues will be an exposition of the Ten Commandments. There I will take a command approach. This is in line with the Reformed tradition, which typically expounds Christian ethics in terms of the law of God. But this is not the only biblical option. A command ethic operates in terms of the normative perspective, but it is also possible to teach ethics focusing on the situational (narrative ethics) and existential (virtue ethics) perspectives. I would hope that authors

2. "Narrative ethics" in recent theology sometimes means an ethic without commands, an ethic in which we tell the story only to encourage ethical action and to suggest ethical possibilities or "trajectories," but not to define our ethical responsibilities. But that is to eviscerate the narrative of Scripture. Scripture presents a narrative of God making demands on us, as well as making and fulfilling promises. To base ethics on a narrative devoid of revealed commands leaves us with no ethical standards except those derived from would-be autonomous human thought.

other than I will take up the challenge to write genuinely Reformed ethical treatises from situational and existential perspectives.

What follows will not be a complete virtue ethic or anything close to it. But it will attempt to list and describe some of the more important biblical virtues.

FAITH

WLC, 72, defines justifying (saving) faith as follows:

Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.

Scripture emphasizes faith in two contexts: as the way in which we initially receive God's saving grace, and as a mentality that pervades the Christian life.³ Initial saving faith is "the alone instrument of justification."⁴ It is not the basis or ground of salvation; Christ's atonement is the only basis or ground of salvation. Nor is faith the efficient cause of salvation; that can only be the grace of God. Rather, we are justified by faith alone in an instrumental sense. Faith is the instrument, or means, by which we receive the grace of God in Christ.

There is nothing in our faith that deserves or merits salvation. We should not think that exercising faith is the one good work we can perform to earn God's favor. Nothing that we can do deserves his favor. Even our faith is weak and defiled, contaminated by sinful impulses. In that respect, faith is no different from any other work we perform. Why, then, are we saved by faith, rather than by love or by long-suffering? Because the nature of faith is to receive grace. What saves is not faith itself, but what faith receives.

3. Here I enumerate Scripture's most theologically significant uses of *faith* and the corresponding verb *believe*. But there are other uses of these terms that do not imply the salvation of the one who believes. For example, in John 8:31–59, Jesus addresses some Jews who are said to have "believed in him" (v. 31). The later conversation reveals, however, that they are in fact opposed to him. Here, belief or faith is a kind of initial and superficial commitment, not based on any inward change.

4. WCF, 11.2.

How does saving faith receive the grace of God? By believing God's promise.⁵ *Believe* is the verb form of the noun *faith*. Paul says about Abraham, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Rom. 4:20–21). Paul adds, "That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness" (v. 22), and he presents such faith as a model of saving faith in Christ (vv. 24–25).

The example of Abraham connects the two phases of faith that I mentioned in the first paragraph: initial saving faith and faith as a mentality that pervades the Christian life. Paul's concern in Romans 4 is the doctrine of justification by faith. But Abraham's faith did not occur only at the beginning of his relationship with God. It continued through his whole life. Romans 4 describes incidents that occurred long after he first responded to God's call in Genesis 12:1–4. So Hebrews 11 lists Abraham among the many Old Testament saints who lived by faith. Like them, he trusted God's promise, despite the fact that it went unfulfilled during his earthly life. He looked forward to "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:16).

So Paul contrasts living by faith with living by sight (2 Cor. 5:7; cf. Mark 10:52). Many of God's promises remain unfulfilled. We cannot verify them by our experience. But we look forward to their fulfillment because we trust God's word above all other sources of authority, even above our own eyes. So "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). We trust in God, who made the world from no visible source (v. 3). With Moses, we see "him who is invisible" (v. 27), so the visible challenges to our faith cannot prevail. The world says that seeing is believing. Jesus says, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" (John 11:40).

So faith, in both its initial and its later expressions, is trusting God's promise above any other considerations.

That trust is shown through our works. To trust another person is not merely to commend his words, but to act on them. So James says, "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18). This is the

5. Following the main part of the Reformed tradition, I identify saving faith with trust, not merely with assent to propositions. See the relationship between them in the definition given earlier from the WLC. For the relationship between trust and assent to propositions, see DKG, 54–57. To summarize: it is not entirely wrong to identify faith with propositional assent, as long as that assent is strong enough to govern our behavior and attitudes. But it is far less confusing to say that faith is trust in Christ through his word. In our usual way of speaking, trust includes assent and more: covenant friendship, reliance, and a disposition to obey.

context of his later statement, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (v. 24). James is not contradicting Paul’s statements that we are justified apart from works (e.g., Rom. 3:27; 4:2, 6; 9:11, 32; 11:6; Gal. 2:16; 3:5, 10). He is saying that saving faith is necessarily a living, working faith. Faith justifies, not because it brings about good works, but because it is the means of receiving God’s grace. Yet it is not genuine unless it motivates good works. WCF, 11.2, tells us, “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.”

That fact should not surprise us, and we should not regard it as some kind of theological puzzle. The grace that faith receives is a grace that leads to good works. Scripture emphasizes this:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10)

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. (Titus 3:5–8; cf. 2:14)

So in Galatians 5:6 Paul speaks of “faith working through love.” God saves us by grace apart from works, but that grace produces works, for that is God’s intent, his reason for saving us. Our faith receives this grace and through it we begin to do good works, as God has planned.

Evangelicals are sometimes inclined to think of faith as an event that takes place in the mind, perhaps the experience of saying inaudibly, “Yes, Lord, I believe.” But when we say phrases like that in our heads, we may sometimes be deceiving ourselves. It is possible to say such phrases to ourselves as mere forms, without any intention of changing our behavior. In those cases, these words are not expressions of faith; much less can we identify them with faith. “Yes, Lord, I believe” may be an expression of true faith, or it may not be.

We should identify faith, not with that statement itself, but with the motive that underlies it, when it is uttered sincerely.⁶ It is misleading, then, to say that faith is a “mental act,”⁷ as much as it is misleading to call it a physical act (perhaps the act of coming forward in response to an altar call). It is rather a motivation underlying both mental and physical acts, when those are done to the glory of God. Faith can be seen equally, then, in faithful thoughts, words, or deeds. This analysis helps us to see more clearly both the distinction between faith and our other actions and the close relationship between them. They are not identical, for the motivation of an act is not identical to the act. But, as James teaches us, our only means of recognizing faith in ourselves and others is through good works. Or, as Jesus says of false teachers, “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16).

Scripture tells us that faith is both necessary and sufficient for good works. It is necessary because “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6), and because “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). It is sufficient because when we believe God, as did Abraham, God credits it to us for righteousness (Gen. 15:6). As Jesus said, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29). When our works (thoughts, words, and deeds) are true expressions of faith, they cannot be anything other than good and right.

So, in a sense, it is true to say, “Believe God and do as you please.” But, as we have seen, to believe God is always to believe his word, and that includes his law. So the existential perspective never permits us to transgress the normative.

But the existential perspective gives us an image of the Christian life that is different from the others. We are not only scribes, poring over God’s statutes (normative), and pilgrims, walking toward a goal (situational), but also children, trusting their heavenly Father, knowing that he will prove true, though everyone else is a liar (Rom. 3:4). So Scripture regularly

6. Notice that I am not defining faith as a motive. My definition of faith is that of the WLC, cited earlier. I am only trying to indicate how faith is related to good works. Since saving faith receives and rests on Christ, it motivates us to live as Jesus does.

7. Here I take issue with the position of Gordon Clark, set forth in his *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 94–100. If one wishes to divide the human being exhaustively into two parts, mental and physical, then faith, not being a physical action, would have to be in the mental category. But it is very different from those episodic experiences we usually call “mental acts”—experiences of visualizing things to ourselves, talking to ourselves, solving problems, etc. It rather seems that motivations, like faith, require another category in addition to the physical and the mental. But I am disinclined toward such categorizations in general (see DKG, 319–46, and the following chapter of this volume).

commends those who believe, who have faith, even amid temptations to disbelieve (Matt. 8:10; 9:2, 22; 17:20; 21:22; Rom. 4:20–21; Heb. 11). The Christian life is a wonderful adventure, as we live by God’s promises, even when Satan tempts us to doubt and fear.

REPENTANCE

Repentance is not just believing that one is a sinner, or feeling sorry for one’s sins, or even hating them.⁸ It is the very act of turning away from them. To turn from sin is to turn to goodness. So there is a very close relationship between repentance and faith. “Repentance that leads to life” in Acts 11:18 is virtually a synonym of faith. And in WCF, 15.3, the relationship between repentance and pardon (part of justification) is the same as that between faith and justification: “Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God’s free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.”

Repentance and faith are opposite sides of a coin. You can’t have one without the other. Faith is turning to Christ, and repentance is turning away from sin. These two turnings are the same motion. You can’t turn toward Christ without turning away from sin, and vice versa.

As faith is a motive for good works, so is repentance. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came for John’s baptism, the Baptist exhorted them to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). If repentance is true repentance, it issues in good deeds. Paul presented the same challenge to Gentile converts (Acts 26:20). See also 2 Timothy 2:25–26 and Revelation 2:5.

As the Christian life is a life of faith, so also is it a life of repentance. As we journey ahead by trusting in God’s promises, so we look back from time to time, noting how we have offended God and others, and asking for forgiveness. All Christians confess in at least a theoretical way that repentance is important. We believe that all are sinners. Practically, however, we find it difficult to admit—whether to others, to ourselves, or to God—that we have personally done wrong and need to change. When someone criticizes our behavior, our first instinct is, too often, to defend ourselves. Although we confess in general terms that we have sinned, we don’t want anyone to think that we have sinned in any specific way. That attitude is even more prominent among people in authority. For them, the

8. Nor is it the Roman Catholic concept of penance, which includes the idea that one may partially pay God back for transgressions by making sacrifices or engaging in various devotional exercises.

stakes are higher. For a prominent person, to admit to sin is to endanger the status that one may have carefully nurtured for a long time.

So when a Christian leader freely admits sin and asks for forgiveness, many of us find that strange. It is impressive, however, not only because of its rarity, but also because of its profoundly biblical character. It marks people who aim to lead as servants, rather than as masters (Matt. 20:25–28). It also enhances the leader's ability to deal with the sins of others, as Paul says in Galatians 6:1: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”⁹⁹

HOPE

Having looked at faith, and repentance as an aspect of faith, we now look at the other two of the three “theological virtues” that I mentioned in chapter 3 and that occur together frequently in the New Testament. There I suggested that faith, hope, and love correspond to the three lordship attributes: faith focusing on the authority of God’s Word, hope focusing on his control of the future, and love focusing on his intimate presence with us. Each of these involves the other two; neither can be practiced without the others.

Hope is faith directed toward the future aspect of salvation, the “not-yet.” Like faith, it is firm and sure, not tentative and wishful, as our English usage often suggests. It is “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Heb. 6:19; cf. Rom. 5:5) based, like faith, on the revelation of God.

As such, hope, like faith, is a motive for good works. Our hope makes us bold (2 Cor. 3:12). The hope of salvation is the helmet that keeps us from the attacks of Satan (1 Thess. 5:8). In Colossians 1:4–5, hope motivates faith and love! These passages review for us the teaching we considered in chapter 16, that God’s promises for the future motivate our behavior today. If we know that a wonderful reward awaits us, then we will let all our decisions be governed by that hope.

LOVE

In chapter 12, I mentioned that love is the center of biblical ethics. We saw there that the term *love* expresses the fundamental loyalty of the vassal

9. In this section, I have benefited greatly from the ministry of C. John Miller and his writings, particularly *Repentance and Twentieth-Century Man* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1980, 1998).

to the lord in a covenant. So love should be defined triperspectively as allegiance (normative perspective), as well as action (situational perspective) and affection (existential perspective). In that chapter, my main concern was to show the relationship of love to law. My conclusion was that there is no conflict between them. The command of love requires obedience to God, though it also serves as a “provocative characterization” of the law. We also considered, under the heading of “moral heroism,” the radicalism of love, that it goes beyond the surface meaning of the law to its depth, leading to extreme forms of obedience. The model is Christ’s love, for he gave himself in death for his people, setting us a standard of love that is far beyond what we normally set for ourselves (John 13:34–35).

Here I will consider various characteristics of love as a motive for good works. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3 makes clear that no human work (including faith) can be good unless it is motivated by love:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic
powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I
have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am
nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be
burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Without love, any attempt to do good will be a failure. Here are certain qualities of love that motivate good works:

Covenant Loyalty

As I indicated in chapter 12, the fundamental demand of a suzerainty treaty is love, in the sense of exclusive loyalty. The vassal is not to make treaties with any king other than his covenant lord. The same is true in the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. Notice how the term *love* is used in the great confession of the Mosaic covenant, the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4–5). Israel’s love for Yahweh is one that allows no competition and tolerates no rivals. So in the covenant document called the Decalogue, the first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). This first commandment is, in effect, a law of love. In its exclusiveness, this love is closely parallel to marital love, so that in Scripture adultery and idolatry are symbols of one another.

In the New Testament as well, love is covenant loyalty to Christ as Lord. He has loved us in an exclusive way, by giving his life for his sheep (John

10:15). He gives that love to us (John 17:26), and we return that love to him and to one another as members of his body (1 John 4:19–21). Our love for Jesus and for one another distinguishes us from those who are outside the covenant (John 13:34–35).

Here we find prominently that element of love I earlier called “allegiance.” God has chosen us, and we have chosen to be his servants, together with the body of his people. Love is being faithful to our covenant vows. Jochem Douma says, “We understand more clearly exactly what love toward God really is when we see *love is a choice*. Because only Yahweh is God, Israel and we must choose for Him. *To love means to stick with your choice.*¹⁰ Douma also draws out well the parallel with marriage:

When a marriage gets into trouble, the only path to resolution is the choice to love. The emotional element in that love may be wholly or partially absent, but faithfulness must come out. Concretely, then, love means that husband and wife form no relationships with third parties, but maintain the choice they made for each other with their wedding vows. The same is true with our relationship with the Lord.¹¹

In both divine and human covenants, loyalty is not only a negative requirement, forbidding rival alliances, but also a positive virtue, motivating us to serve the one to whom we are committed. So allegiance leads to action. In the Decalogue, the first commandment motivates the remaining nine, and in the New Testament, Jesus tells his disciples that if they love him, they will keep his commandments (e.g., John 14:15).

GRATEFULNESS

In the suzerainty treaty structure of the covenant document (see chapter 3), the love command follows the historical prologue, which sets out the gracious deeds of the great king. So in the Decalogue, the first commandment, requiring exclusive love, follows the statement of Yahweh’s deliverance: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). Here love is Israel’s grateful response to redemption.

Similarly, in the New Testament, we love because God first loved us in Christ (1 John 4:7–21), and we love as he loved us (John 13:34–35).

10. J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 21.

11. Ibid.

So the Heidelberg Catechism treats the Decalogue under the category of “gratitude” in its general outline of guilt, grace, and gratitude:

Q. 2. How many things are necessary for you to know, that in this comfort you may live and die happily?

A. Three things: First, the greatness of my sin and misery. Second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery. Third, how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption.

It is not that we can pay God back for salvation, or even try to pay back a small portion. God’s gift of salvation is too large for us even to begin to measure (Eph. 3:18–19). Nevertheless, the only appropriate attitude for those bought with so great a price is thankfulness (Luke 17:11–19). And thankfulness, like loyalty, is not only a feeling, but a disposition toward actions that express that thankfulness. Those who are thankful to God will not bow to idols, take his name in vain, violate his day, dishonor their parents, and so on.

Gratefulness and allegiance, therefore, are inseparable. But gratefulness adds to allegiance a further perspective on our love. Even on the human level, when someone gives us a large gift, we feel an obligation to please him. Ingratitude, though widely practiced, is universally despised. If our salvation is the greatest gift anyone has ever received, the greatest gift imaginable, then how can we do anything other than give ourselves wholeheartedly to our covenant Lord? How can we be other than deeply wounded at the very thought of betraying him?

COMPREHENSIVE REORIENTATION OF LIFE

The grateful allegiance we owe to God is comprehensive. That is, it reorients every aspect of life.¹² Earlier we saw in Deuteronomy 6:4–5 the command to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, and might. Jesus replaces “might” with “mind” in Matthew 22:37, and he adds “mind” in Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27. Certainly Jesus is not distorting the meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Love with the mind is implicit in that passage, the purpose of which is not to limit our love to certain specific human faculties, but to expand it to every area of life, centered in the heart. Similarly, we have seen the apostle Paul exhorting us, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Note also the comprehensiveness of love as a way of life in 1 Corinthians 13—its necessity for all other moral acts (vv. 1–3) and its connection with other

12. Recall the discussion of the comprehensiveness of Scripture in chapter 10.

moral virtues: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:4–7).

So covenant love reorients everything we say, do, and feel. People have sometimes said that the love described in Deuteronomy is a kind of political allegiance, which does not gain any emotional content until later in Israel’s history, as in Hosea’s love for his unfaithful wife. Certainly covenant love is allegiance, and I don’t object to the term *political*. But tension between the political and the emotional fails to account for the comprehensive language of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and the nature of our “political” allegiance to Yahweh. The covenant is a political relationship, at least metaphorically, but a political relationship of a unique kind. If our exclusive love for the Lord permeates all of our existence from the heart, as in Deuteronomy 6, it certainly permeates all of life: our emotions, as our intellect and will. The heart governs all aspects of human life. And if God is the greatest allegiance of our heart, he is our greatest passion as well. Our greatest desire is to serve him. One cannot love another wholeheartedly while remaining emotionally cool toward him.

So it shouldn’t surprise us when in Scripture God’s love for us takes on a passionate character (Ezek. 16), with marital and even sexual imagery. Similarly, note fatherly and maternal figures of God’s compassion in Psalm 103:13; Isaiah 49:15; 66:13; Hosea 11:3. Our allegiance to God should be equally passionate. A faithful heart creates faithful emotions. So, as I indicated earlier, biblical love is allegiance, action, and affection, existing together as a perspectival whole.

IMITATION OF GOD’S ATONING GRACE

We saw in chapter 9 that imitation of God is the fundamental principle of Christian ethics. We saw above how our love should image God’s, in its depth, comprehensiveness, and passion.

In the history of redemption, God reveals himself particularly as the gracious God, the one who delivers those who have no claim on his mercy, even at the price of the death of his beloved Son. The love that Scripture commands is a love that images God’s love, specifically his redemptive love. As he has given Israel rest in redeeming them from Egypt, so they should give rest to others (Deut. 5:14–15). As he has forgiven us, so we should forgive others (Matt. 6:12, 14–15; 18:21–35). And, more generally, as he has loved us, so we should love others (John 13:34–35; 1 John 4:7–21).

We might think that we can imitate Jesus in many ways, but not in his atoning love. After all, none of us can bring about the salvation of others by giving our lives. Remarkably, however, the atonement is the main point of comparison between Christ's love and the Christian's love. The love of God that we are to imitate is most fully displayed in the atonement, according to John 3:16; 15:13; Romans 5:8; 8:39 (in context); Ephesians 2:4–5; 2 Thessalonians 2:16; 1 John 3:16; 4:9–10; Revelation 1:5; cf. Mark 10:45; 1 Peter 2:18–25; Philippians 2:1–11.

God's love for us in the atonement is beyond measure (Eph. 3:18–19), in the depth of Jesus' suffering, including his estrangement from his Father, in the greatness of the blessing he bought for us, and also in our total lack of fitness for this blessing. As recipients of God's grace, we are supremely unattractive to him. We are the tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:9–13), "the poor and crippled and blind and lame" (Luke 14:21), those "still sinners" (Rom. 5:8) when Jesus came to die for us.

Truly, no sacrifice of ours can atone for the sins of someone else. But these passages make abundantly clear that our obligation is nothing less than to lay down our lives for one another, as Jesus did for us. Moral heroism, extreme self-sacrifice, as we discussed it in chapter 12, is the heart of the Christian's ethical obligation.

For examples, revisit the discussions in chapter 12 of the heroism of David's mighty men and of the poor widow who gave everything she had to the temple treasury. In general terms, to love in imitation of Christ is to put the interests of others ahead of our own: "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3–4). It is remarkable that he produces one of the richest Christological passages in Scripture in order to persuade people in the church to set aside their rivalries (perhaps especially Euodia and Syntyche, named specifically in 4:2).¹³

When we meditate on the cross, our rivalries with Christians of other traditions, denominations, and parties usually seem rather trivial. Jesus died for us; can we not just bend a little to accommodate a brother or sister? The demands of love upon us seem so little compared to what love demanded of him.

And when we consider how unattractive we were in God's eyes prior to the atonement, his love should move us especially to love the unlovely, especially those who don't seem to merit the compassion

13. This is another illustration of my general thesis (see chapter 16) that the redemptive-historical emphasis of Scripture is not opposed to ethical teaching, but is given for the purpose of ethical application, as is all Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

of the world: the poor, the weak, the disabled, hated minorities, and even the unborn.

IMITATION OF GOD'S COMMON GRACE: LOVING OUR ENEMIES

"Common grace," defined as God's kindness to the nonelect, is something of a misnomer, since the word *grace* in English translations of Scripture almost always has a redemptive meaning. Yet it is clear that God's love extends to the unregenerate and even to the nonelect.¹⁴ In Matthew 5:43–48, Jesus says that God loves his enemies and gives them good gifts. God's enemies certainly include the unregenerate and the nonelect. And Jesus presents this expression of love as an example to us:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This teaching is not unique to the New Testament. In Exodus 23:4, God tells us to return our enemy's ox or donkey if we find it wandering away. Enmity toward someone else, for whatever cause, should not keep us from showing kindness to him.

The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), following Jesus' affirmation of love as the heart of the law, shows that we are to offer help to people without putting them to a religious test. In Galatians 6:10, Paul says, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." He says "especially," not "exclusively." The household of faith, the church as our extended family, has first claim on our resources. But our hearts should be generous enough to help those outside the fellowship as God gives us opportunity.

Jesus' teaching on the love of enemies faces a major problem: the imprecatory psalms and other imprecatory passages in Scripture. In imprecation, one calls down God's judgments on others. Some of these passages even

14. For a systematic discussion of the doctrine of common grace, see DG, 429–37.

commend hatred of the wicked (e.g., Pss. 119:113; 139:21–22). It would seem that such passages are incompatible with Jesus' teaching that we should love our enemies.

But imprecations are found in the New Testament, as well as in the Old—on the lips of Christ and the apostles, as well as on the lips of the psalmist (see Matt. 23:13–39; Gal. 1:8–9; Rev. 6:10; 18:20). On the other hand, as we have seen, the biblical ethic of love is also found in both testaments. Scripture always proscribes personal vengeance and calls us to love our enemies: Exodus 23:4–5; Leviticus 19:17–18; Psalm 7:4–5; Proverbs 20:22.¹⁵ So the problem we have in reconciling these two biblical themes cannot be met by some view of dispensational change.

Jesus did refuse to exercise divine vengeance during his earthly life, because he came not to judge the world, but to save it. Thus, he rebuked his disciples who wanted to call down fire from heaven upon a city that rejected them (Luke 9:54–55), but he did promise judgment on unbelieving cities in the last day (Matt. 11:20–24). In these passages, we learn that Jesus' first advent was not to bring vengeance, but that ultimate vengeance is postponed until his return (2 Thess. 1:6–10). But these facts in themselves neither authorize nor forbid the use of imprecatory prayers today.

Nor is it a sufficient solution to say that the imprecatory psalms are prayers of Christ himself through his people.¹⁶ While this is true in a sense, that merely raises the same question (the love/justice relationship) again with respect to Christ's own motives, and it renders problematic the use of such sentiments in free prayer.

Meredith G. Kline suggests that imprecatory psalms represent an “intrusion” of the end-time into the present.¹⁷ In the final judgment, there will be no more common grace, but only eternal punishment for the wicked. In that day, we will not be called to love our enemies, for they will be manifested as God's eternal enemies, subject only to death. In imprecatory psalms, then, the speaker calls down God's final judgment upon his enemies.

Kline says that we may never call down God's wrath on people on our own initiative; the intrusion is exclusively God's prerogative. In the imprecatory psalms, God knows that David's enemies are eternally lost, so he inspires David to pronounce divine judgment upon them. But to make this view

15. Of course, the state is given the power to carry out divine vengeance in limited ways. See Rom. 13 and our later discussion of the fifth commandment.

16. As in James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1991). There are, however, a number of useful observations in this book.

17. Kline, “The Intrusion and the Decalogue,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 16 (1953–54): 1–22, reprinted in Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 154–71.

consistent, we should not apply the sentiments expressed in these psalms to anyone other than David's immediate enemies. And we should not compose other songs like them. Yet it seems obvious to most readers of Scripture that the book of Psalms is given for our present liturgical and devotional use, that they should be applied to analogous situations in our own experience, and that they serve as a model for our prayers and worship songs.

Imprecation does belong to the end-time, as an invocation of final judgment. Our own time is not that final time. But, as we saw in chapter 16, ours is a time in which the last days have begun. God's final dealing with mankind is, as of now, already as well as not-yet. Scripture sometimes seems to encourage, and sometimes to discourage, imprecation because of the tension between the fulfilled and the unfulfilled aspects of God's plan.¹⁸ The problem is that, contrary to Kline, Scripture does not clearly tell us when to use imprecations and when not to. There is nothing in Scripture that says specifically that we may pray imprecatory prayers only when they are divinely inspired, and only when we are not applying them to anyone in our own time.

Helpful insight is provided by J. A. Motyer, who reminds us of the larger biblical pattern: "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord."¹⁹ The imprecatory psalms, he points out, are prayers that call upon God to remedy those injustices that neither we as individuals, nor the state, are competent to remedy. They do not seek personal vengeance; rather, they leave vengeance to God, as God has demanded.

Imprecatory prayers, like all prayers, always carry the implicit qualification, "Thy will be done." When we ask for things, we should do so with the ultimate desire of glorifying God. If God will be glorified in giving us our request, then we thank him; if he is more glorified in denying our request, our prayer has not thereby become useless, for all prayer is a recommitment to God's purpose, his kingdom. The Lord's Prayer beautifully exemplifies this spirit.

Sometimes we are persuaded that someone is guilty of a great injustice that we are not able to deal with in our own strength. As in biblical imprecations, the believer is to share this concern with God. In doing so, he must share God's evaluation of injustice, that "because of these things the wrath

18. David's imprecations, of course, precede the resurrection of Christ, and so they cannot be analyzed in terms of two-age tension. In the Old Testament period, as Kline indicates, intrusion of the end-time was intermittent, occasional. But once the new age begins in Christ, the presence and absence of final judgment coexist in tension. One might even say that imprecation is therefore even more appropriate in the New Testament age, because there is a constant presence of the end-times.

19. Motyer, "Imprecatory Psalms," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 554.

of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 5:6). And so he calls for divine vengeance to be exercised—not by himself, but by God.

Can we *love* an enemy and still call for God's wrath against him? Is a desire for divine judgment consistent with a desire for our enemy's salvation? The psychology of it is difficult, to be sure. But consider this example: when Idi Amin went around in Uganda, killing Christians right and left, simply to satisfy his personal hatred, many Christians prayed that God would bring vengeance upon him. Such vengeance, of course, does not, either in the Psalms or in our example, necessarily entail ultimate damnation. The prayer is primarily for a *historical* judgment. Although historical judgment is not entirely divorced in the biblical mind from ultimate damnation, the two are not inseparably conjoined, either.

But what if God had converted Amin, instead of judging him? Would those Christians have been disappointed? Surely not; they would have glorified God for answering their prayer beyond their wildest expectations. Such a conversion would have brought vengeance against this man, a vengeance visited by God's grace upon Christ in his atoning sacrifice. Their prayer would also have been answered in that Amin the persecutor would have received the sharpest divine rebuke (cf. "Saul, why do you persecute me?") and a historical defeat for his murderous regime. Finally, their prayer would have been answered in that their deepest desire was the glory of God.

Should the Christians, then, have prayed for his salvation, rather than his judgment? No. Prayer is often somewhat immediate, and rightly so. Of course, Christians sometimes get into a mood where they start praying for all sorts of wild things: the conversion of people like Hitler, the conversion of all the members of the U.S. Congress, the coming of Christ this evening, and so on. I do not rebuke the naive, immature faith that motivates such prayers. God often gives special help to those who are children at heart. Indeed, there are even times when the prayer of mature believers properly anticipates the broad sweep of history: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." But most often, prayer is based on our hopes for the near term. And biblical prayer follows this pattern; it is often realistically short-term in its expectations. We see a situation before us, and we make a tentative judgment, based on our understanding of God's usual workings (from Scripture and providence), as to what help we might reasonably expect. When Peter was in jail, the church prayed for his release, not for the conversion of everybody in the prison system.

When Amin was ravaging the church, the immediate need was for judgment. Although one with a childlike faith might have anticipated the possibility of Amin's conversion, to most Christians that was not a

realistic expectation. Amin was a militant Muslim, a hater of all things Christian, and mentally irrational besides. Yes, God's grace has converted hopeless cases before, but this was not a time for considering extraordinary theological possibilities. It was time for an earnest cry for help, based on present realities in the light of Scripture. The best short-term possibility was judgment: the death of Amin or his expulsion from the country. So the prayer of these believers often did not explicitly include his conversion. But, as I said earlier, their prayer did not exclude that either. That possibility was always implicit in the nature of divine judgment (which provides for and offers atonement), in the nature of salvation (which is always a judgment upon sin), and in the qualification, "Thy will be done." I suspect that this is also the way the earliest believers prayed with regard to Saul the persecutor.

What about the "hatred" expressed in the imprecatory psalms (e.g., 139:21–22)? How is this compatible with Jesus's command to love, not hate, our enemies? Again, as we have distinguished between personal and divine vengeance, I think we must distinguish between two kinds of hatred. Love and hate in Scripture are patterns of behavior, as well as emotions.²⁰ To love is to seek another's benefit; to hate is to seek his destruction. When we pray for divine vengeance, granting all the above qualifications, we are seeking the destruction of an enemy of God. We are "hating" that person. But in our individual relationships with that person, in which vengeance is excluded, we are to love, to seek what is best for our enemy. So Scripture similarly distinguishes between good and bad anger: the quickly aroused, difficult to extinguish, murderous anger of personal vengeance (Matt. 5:22), and the slowly aroused, easily extinguished, righteous anger of God's servants defending his honor (Eph. 4:26)—like the anger of God himself. So hatred and love are not contrary to one another in every respect. It is possible to have a godly hatred and a godly love toward the same person, paradoxical as that seems.²¹

We today may be called to cry for divine justice: against abortionists and abortion advocates, against homosexual militants who try to destroy the church's freedom to proclaim God's Word, against the remaining anti-Christian dictators of the world, against those in bondage to false religions who think God has given them the right to kill innocent people. We crave great historical signs of God's displeasure with injustice. That desire is quite legitimate. But if God pleases instead to rebuke these movements by send-

20. In terms of our earlier analysis, love is action as well as affection, and hatred is action as well as revulsion.

21. For a more thorough analysis of the relationship between love and hatred, see the discussion of God's own love and hatred in *DG*, 460–63.

ing revival and converting the hearts of his enemies, our desire for divine judgment will be completely fulfilled. And in our cry for divine justice, the imprecatory psalms will rightly guide our prayers.

And, strange as it may sound, we do have a responsibility to cultivate the hatred of evil. In an age that takes the vilest behavior for granted, we are called to hate what God hates, as to love what God loves. Holy hatred and holy love are inseparable. If we love God, we will join him in his hatreds, both in our actions and in our feelings. So godly hatred, like godly love, is a virtue. And both serve as motives for Christian ethics.

SEEKING TO CARRY OUT OUR RESPONSIBILITY

In chapter 12, I emphasized that love is a disposition to keep all the commandments of God. If we love him, we should keep his commandments. So a characteristic of love is that it seeks to carry out our responsibility.

All the commandments of the Decalogue, except the fourth and fifth, are expressed in negative terms, and that is the predominant mode of legal instruction in Scripture. One might imagine, then, that Christian ethics is largely negative, that it is a matter of avoiding things. Now the negative focus of biblical law is not wrong. It provides a good warning that we live in a spiritually dangerous world, where temptation is rife. The Christian must learn to say no. However, the biblical ethic is very positive, and we learn that especially from the law of love. For love is, emphatically, not just a matter of avoiding this or that spiritual danger. Love seeks every possible way to serve God and one's neighbor. Love seeks, indeed, modes of moral heroism.

OTHER VIRTUES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Scriptures refer to many other virtues as well. There are several long lists of them, and others are noted here and there. These lists are not intended to be exhaustive, nor is it possible to define each virtue in sharp distinction from all the rest. The virtues overlap considerably. Each one implies and presupposes many others, perhaps all the others, just as faith, hope, and love imply one another. So the virtues are more like multiple perspectives on the whole ethical life than like independent atomic constituents of ethical rectitude.

I have focused on the three "theological virtues"—faith, hope, and love. These include one another, as we've seen, and they include all the other biblical virtues as well. Someone with perfect love would also be perfectly

joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled, to use the list of virtues in Galatians 5:22–23. Colossians 3:12–13 adds to this list compassion, humility, meekness, forbearance, and forgiveness, and then adds, “and above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (v. 14). Compare 2 Peter 1:5–7: “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.” Again, love is the conclusion and the summation. In each of these virtues, we see the workings of love, as in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, which I quoted earlier in this chapter.

Any of these virtues would reward further study, study that could be supplemented by a survey of the various vices, with which Scripture contrasts the virtues (as in Rom. 1:29–31; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 5:3–5; Col. 3:5–10). I shall not go through these lists here. If I did, much of that discussion would overlap our later consideration of the Ten Commandments.

However, I should report some impressions that occurred to my hyper-triadic mind as I perused these virtues. I would suggest that there are three major emphases in these virtues that parallel the three perspectives based on the lordship attributes. Looking only at the lists of positive qualities, I am struck by the following themes:

Acceptance of God's promises (normative perspective). We saw earlier that faith is directed toward the promises of God and toward the fulfillment of those promises, as in Romans 4 and Hebrews 11. The godly person trusts God's word, even when it seems to conflict with other sorts of evidence, even the evidence of the senses. We see this theme also in the virtues of faithfulness, steadfastness, godliness (piety), patience, joy, and knowledge. We might call these the virtues of faith. Here the child of God continues steadfast in his trust, faithful to God's covenant, patient to the end. Having knowledge of God's revealed truth, he worships God in all of life (Rom. 12:1–2), recognizing God as Lord in everything.

Humility before other people (situational perspective). If God's promises govern our lives, they free us from making any attempts to create significance for ourselves. Such attempts are always at the expense of other people. With God as Lord, however, we need not fear man, and we need not define ourselves by dominating other people. Hence, in the list of biblical virtues we see a prominent emphasis on humility, under such names as meekness, forbearance, forgiveness, gentleness, and peace. In Jesus' teaching, accord-

ingly, we return good for evil, turn the other cheek, and walk the second mile (Matt. 5:38–42; cf. Rom. 12:14–21).

Stretching our conceptual scheme a bit, these virtues might be called virtues of hope, which I connected earlier in this chapter with the situational perspective. The point is that God is in control of this world, and we are not. Therefore, we are free from the need to be in control of every situation and to dominate other people. We recognize ourselves as what we are, sinners saved by grace, and we honor one another, knowing that our own honor comes from God and not from any source in this world. We can be genuinely humble, knowing, as in the classic gag line, that we have a lot to be humble about. We can ignore offenses, be gentle in correcting others (considering our own proneness to temptation, Gal. 6:1–3), and seek peace with others, even when we are not entirely satisfied with the terms of peace.

Affection for others (existential perspective). As we trust in God and humble ourselves before him and other people, we find ourselves, not resenting others, but caring for them from the heart. So our list of virtues includes compassion, brotherly love, kindness, and goodness (benevolence). Although all the virtues display love in different ways, these affections seem to be most obviously virtues of love.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

I have so far been restricting my consideration of biblical virtues mainly to the New Testament. Lists of virtues are rare or nonexistent in the Old. The Old Testament teaches godly living mainly through laws, applying them by narratives, psalmody, wisdom teaching, and the admonitions of the prophets. It does not focus much on virtues as subjective elements of godly character.

Yet there is one virtue that the Old Testament mentions very prominently, and which the New Testament also emphasizes: the fear of the Lord. In a profoundly enlightening discussion of the subject, John Murray says, “The fear of God is the soul of godliness. The emphasis of Scripture in both the Old Testament and the New requires no less significant a proposition.”²²

He mentions that in Scripture the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7) and of wisdom (Ps. 111:10). Job’s exemplary piety

22. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 229. Much of this section summarizes Murray’s discussion.

is founded on the fear of God (Job 1:8). In Isaiah 11:2–3, the Messiah's unique endowment of the Spirit brings a delight in the fear of the Lord. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes, after describing alternative value systems, gives us his final word: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13). In the New Testament as well, the fear of God sums up the godly life (Luke 1:50; Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 7:1; Col. 3:22; 1 Peter 2:17). Murray observes:

This emphasis which Scripture places upon the fear of God evinces the bond that exists between religion and ethics. The fear of God is essentially a religious concept; it refers to the conception we entertain of God and the attitude of heart and mind that is ours by reason of that conception. Since the biblical ethic is grounded in and is the fruit of the fear of the Lord, we are apprised again that ethics has its source in religion and as our religion is so will be our ethic. This is to say also that what or whom we worship determines our behavior.²³

Murray then distinguishes between two senses of "the fear of God." The first is being afraid of God, which brings "terror and dread."²⁴ The second is "the fear of reverence" which "elicits confidence and love."²⁵ The first is appropriate when sinners stand in the presence of God, anticipating judgment. Murray says, "It is the essence of impiety not to be afraid of God when there is *reason* to be afraid."²⁶ He finds examples of this legitimate terror in Deuteronomy 17:13; 21:21; Psalm 119:120. This theme is not absent either from the New Testament (Matt. 10:28; Luke 12:4–5; Rom. 11:20–21; Heb. 4:1; 10:27, 31; Rev. 15:3–4). Considering how terrible the judgments of God are, it would be wrong for us not to dread them.

But this fear of judgment cannot of itself lead us to love God. It is not, Murray argues, the fear of God that is the soul of godliness. Rather, "the fear of God in which godliness consists is the fear which constrains adoration and love. It is the fear which consists in awe, reverence, honour, and worship, and all of these on the highest level of exercise."²⁷ Reverential fear of God is the sense of living in God's constant presence. In considering the life of Abraham, Murray argues that it was because Abraham feared

23. Ibid., 231. Note that Murray does not advocate an ethic of natural law, as that phrase is sometimes understood (see chapter 14).

24. Ibid., 232.

25. Ibid., 233.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 236.

God that he obeyed God's commands, even the command to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22:11–12). He continues:

The same relationship can be traced in the other virtues that adorned Abraham's character. Why could he have been so magnanimous to Lot? It was because he feared the Lord and trusted his promise and his providence. He had no need to be mean. He feared and trusted the Lord. Why could he have been magnanimous to the king of Sodom? It was because he feared the Lord, God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, and might not allow the enrichment offered to prejudice the independence of his faith; he needed not to be graspingly acquisitive. . . . *That* is all-pervasive God-consciousness, and it is God-consciousness conditioned by covenant-consciousness. This is the fear of God, or its indispensable corollary.²⁸

Murray concludes by presenting the fear of God as an antidote to the superficial Christianity of our time. The phrase "God-fearing" seems to have disappeared from the vocabulary of Christian virtues, reflecting a lack of understanding of God's majesty, glory, and holiness: "The fear of God in us is that frame of heart and mind which reflects our apprehension of who and what God is, and who and what God is will tolerate nothing less than totality commitment to him."²⁹

I have expounded Murray at length, because I think he provides a necessary and neglected perspective on the Christian life. What he says here, of course, must be balanced by other emphases that we have already considered, the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Although there is no contradiction between fearing God and loving him, we often find it hard to achieve an emotional state that incorporates both and neglects neither. Another reason for the difficulty that Murray does not discuss is the problem of relating the fear of God to the New Testament concept of the friendship of God (John 15:13–15), based on the redemptive work of Christ. Because Jesus has torn the temple veil by his sacrifice of himself, believers have bold access into the holiest place, such as was not known in the Old Testament (Heb. 10:19). How is this new intimacy, conferred by grace, compatible with the fear of the Lord?

It erases the need for fear in the sense of terror and dread (1 John 4:18), but not the need for reverence as we stand in God's presence. At the present time, however, it is not always easy in our experience to separate the two

28. Ibid., 139–40. Murray follows this discussion with an interesting reflection on God as "the fear of Isaac" (Gen. 31:42, 53).

29. Ibid., 242.

kinds of fear. Until the consummation, I suspect, there will always be some element of terror in our reverence for God. Thus, there will always be some tension between the fear of the Lord and our experience of sonship.

But as for the relation between reverence and intimacy, we need to remind ourselves that our new friend Jesus, our heavenly Father, and the Spirit who dwells intimately within us are God indeed, the majestic, sovereign ruler of heaven and earth. The praise of God in the Psalms and in the book of Revelation expresses both intimacy and reverence. For many of us, there is tension here. But we do sometimes feel these two qualities fuse together in times of worship, sometimes in surprising ways. Christians are often overwhelmed with the consciousness that our Father God is the Holy One who works all things according to his eternal plan. May that unity of fear and love extend to all aspects of our lives.

CHAPTER 20

The New Life as a Source of Ethical Knowledge

As I indicated in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, knowledge always involves a subject (the knower), an object (the known), and a norm (the standard or criterion). This triperspectival understanding of epistemology pertains to ethical knowledge, as well as to all other knowledge. In this book, from the normative perspective (chapters 9–13), I considered the criterion of ethical knowledge. From the situational perspective (chapters 14–17), I discussed the object of ethical knowledge, as well as such issues as general revelation, context, and goal.

Now, from the existential perspective, I shall talk about the subjective aspect of ethical knowledge. In this chapter, we shall see that the existential and normative perspectives overlap, for we shall see that the existential perspective is an indispensable means of coming to know ethical norms.

We cannot know anything without our minds, that is, without sense organs, reason, and other mental capacities. And we cannot know anything without these capacities functioning together in a subjective process by which we discover truth.

In one sense, these subjective capacities and processes are themselves revelational. In chapter 9, I argued that knowledge of God's revelation can be found through nature and history, through language, and through persons. Human beings are made in the image of God, and so they are themselves revelational. We find that revelation in everything human beings

are and do, including their thought processes. So we need not fear that in investigating these thought processes we are abandoning revelation.

Further, as we have seen, Scripture teaches that God actually writes his words on our hearts—inwardly, subjectively. Without this divine act, we cannot understand, believe, or apply the revelation of Scripture itself. Traditionally, Reformed theology has described this divine work as illumination, but in chapter 9 I argued that it is equally biblical to call it “existential revelation,” coordinated with “general revelation” and “special revelation” in a triperspectival set. So our own subjectivity is an important locus of divine revelation, and we examine that here from the existential perspective.

In all of this, we should not forget the primacy of Scripture, as I presented it when discussing the normative perspective. Although everything is revelational, including our own thought processes, Scripture plays a special role within the organism of revelation: (1) Scripture is the document of the covenant, the written constitution of the people of God. (2) It contains the gospel, which alone can enable us to see other forms of revelation rightly. (3) It alone is an infallible text, consisting of words and sentences authored by God himself. So, even though we come to know the content of Scripture through the processes of our own thinking, with the help of natural revelation (knowledge of languages, ancient culture, archaeology, etc.), the words of Scripture take precedence over any other source of knowledge. When, by responsible methods of exegesis, I come to believe that Scripture teaches a certain truth, I must believe it, even though other sources deny that truth.

So Scripture is our primary guide, even concerning the existential perspective, as it was concerning the situational and normative perspectives. But we have seen and shall see that Scripture gives great importance to the subjective side of knowledge.

ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE, A PRODUCT OF SANCTIFICATION

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

In *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, I argued that knowing God, in Scripture, is not merely learning additional facts or becoming familiar with an additional object. Rather, since God is a person, to know him is to enter into a personal relationship with him. His relationship to us is covenantal, for he is Lord. Therefore, to know him is to become his

covenant servant.¹ Here the meaning of *know* is very close to “have as a friend,” as in “I know Bill.” In the covenant, we are God’s people, and he is our God. He makes everything work for our good, and we seek to glorify him. Thus, obedience is a constituent aspect of this knowledge (see Jer. 22:16; Hos. 6:6).

As we grow in grace, we grow in the knowledge of God. We come to know God better as we become more obedient to him. Knowing God, therefore, is not merely an intellectual process, but an ethical one as well. And, as we shall see, the intellectual itself presupposes the ethical.

WISDOM

Wisdom is another virtue in Scripture that is both intellectual and ethical. Wisdom is a form of knowledge that penetrates to the deeper significance of things and therefore enables us to apply that knowledge to practical situations. Scripture often represents it as a skill, a knowing *how*, rather than knowing *that*. In Exodus 31:1–5, for example, Bezalel and Oholiab have wisdom (the ESV translates it “ability”) from the Spirit of God to produce designs and crafts for the tabernacle. In James 3:13–17, wisdom is clearly ethical, the skill of godly living:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

Specifically, wisdom is the ability to do the right thing in difficult situations (Luke 21:14–15), especially to say the right thing (Acts 6:10; 1 Cor. 2:6 [cf. vv. 1, 4, 13]; 12:8; Col. 1:28; 2 Peter 3:15).

Wisdom, personified as the wisdom of God, serves as an ethical guide (Prov. 3:5–6, 21–26). Wisdom is God’s own attribute, by which he made all things (Prov. 3:19; 8:22–31). He communicates it to us by his Word and Spirit (Deut. 34:9; Prov. 30:5; Jer. 8:8–9; Acts 6:3; 1 Cor. 2:6–16;

1. I am speaking here, of course, and throughout this chapter, of the believer’s knowledge of God. Scripture teaches (Rom. 1:21) that unbelievers also “know God,” but in a very different way: as an enemy, rather than as a friend. See DKG, 49–61.

Col. 3:16; 2 Tim. 3:16) on the basis of our union with Christ (1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:3).

Like the knowledge of God, then, wisdom is ethical in character, and our progress in wisdom is parallel to our progress in sanctification.

TRUTH

Truth has several dimensions in Scripture. There is “metaphysical” truth, which John Murray defines as

not so much the true in contrast with the false, or the real in contrast with the fictitious. It is the absolute as contrasted with the relative, the ultimate as contrasted with the derived, the eternal as contrasted with the temporal, the permanent as contrasted with the temporary, the complete in contrast with the partial, the substantial in contrast with the shadowy.²

Examples of this usage may be found in the Johannine literature, as in John 1:9, 17; 14:6; 17:3; 1 John 5:20, and in Hebrews 8:2.

The term *truth* is often used also in an epistemological sense, for statements that neither err nor deceive. This usage is far more common in our language. Note, for example, how the Johannine writings speak of an authentic witness as true, as in John 5:31–32; 8:13–14, 16–17; 10:41; 19:35; 21:34.

Then there is also an ethical meaning of truth. Truth is something we can walk in, according to 1 Kings 2:4; Psalm 86:11; 1 John 1:6–7; 3 John 3–4. To walk in the truth is to obey the commands of God. This language reflects the figure of the Word of God as a light on our path (Ps. 119:105). Because God’s Word is true in the metaphysical and epistemological senses, it can keep us from stumbling in our ethical pilgrimage.

Here too, then, we can see an ethical dimension to an epistemological term. We do not respond adequately to the truth until we apply it to life, until that truth changes our lives.

DOCTRINE

The Greek terms based on *didaskō* typically refer in the Pastoral Epistles to a teaching of the word of God that leads to spiritual health. This is “sound” or “healthy” teaching (1 Tim. 1:10; 4:6; 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9). So doctrine, defined as this kind of teaching, also has an ethical goal. It is not given to us merely for intellectual contemplation.

2. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 123.

Doctrine, or theology in this sense, comes to us in all parts of Scripture, not only in formal propositions, but also in narratives, poetry, prophecy, letters, and apocalyptic. In Colossians 3:16, Paul says that we teach one another in song. What distinguishes doctrine, then, is not an academic style or an intellectually rigorous approach, though the academic approach should not be despised. What rather distinguishes theology is its ethical goal, to bring the biblical message to bear on people's lives. That indeed is the goal of Scripture itself (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

In this brief look at four terms that are important to theological epistemology, we have seen that knowledge has an ethical goal, and that therefore God's regenerating and sanctifying grace is active in the processes by which we gain and deepen such knowledge.

INTELLECTUAL KNOWLEDGE AND ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE

We have seen that the knowledge of God, together with wisdom, truth, and doctrine, is an ethical knowledge. But the same is true even of "intellectual" or propositional knowledge, such as the knowledge that there is a bookstore on the corner. There is, indeed, no propositional knowledge without ethical knowledge. Let us look at this matter from two perspectives.

THE ETHICAL PRESUPPOSES THE INTELLECTUAL

It is common to hear Christians of various traditions (especially the Reformed) say that life is built on doctrine.³ This statement is based on passages like Hebrews 11:6 and 1 John 4:2–3. To live the Christian life, it is necessary (at least in the case of reasonably intelligent adults) to believe certain propositions: that God exists, that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, that Jesus died for our sins, and that he has risen from the dead (1 Cor. 15:17–19).

The statement that life is built on doctrine misleads us, I think, by equating doctrine with a set of propositions. See the previous section

3. "Life is built on doctrine" was a slogan of J. Gresham Machen and his movement to restore biblical orthodoxy to American Presbyterianism. This needed to be said, over against the liberals of the day (taking their cue from Friedrich Schleiermacher), who maintained the opposite view. However, neither the liberals nor the Machenites, in my view, presented the full biblical picture, though the Machenites were, in their overall theology, far closer to the truth than the liberals. The present chapter is an attempt to restore balance.

for a broader understanding of doctrine. But the intent of this slogan is biblical. Even if we define doctrine in a more biblical way, it is true that propositional beliefs are part of doctrine, that God calls us to believe those propositions, and that belief in those propositions changes our lives.

If the intellect is the organ that evaluates, believes, and disbelieves propositions (and I shall question that definition also at a later point), then it follows that Christian ethics presupposes intellectual beliefs. Certainly, as we saw in chapter 16, Scripture regularly motivates us to obey God's word by a narrative, a set of historical facts. And we can receive that motivation only if we believe that the events of that narrative actually took place.

THE INTELLECTUAL PRESUPPOSES THE ETHICAL

But the opposite relationship also exists between obedience and propositional belief. It is also true that propositional belief, in the context of the Christian life, presupposes obedience. That is, it is not only true that life is built on doctrine, but also that doctrine is built on life.

Romans 1:18–32, 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16, and other passages indicate that when people make an ethical decision to suppress the truth of God (Rom. 1:18), that leads them to believe lies (v. 25). So unbelief is defective, not only ethically, but intellectually as well. According to Romans 1:19–20, God makes himself clearly known through the creation. Those who refuse to acknowledge him are “without excuse” (v. 20). That response to revelation is stupid. Even Satan, who appears in Scripture to be intellectually superior to human beings, is a model of foolishness, when, knowing God's power, he seeks to supplant God's rule. Satan's disobedience infects his intellect and the intellects of all who follow him.

But if disobedience leads to stupidity, the opposite is also true: obedience leads to knowledge, to understanding. Jesus says, “If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority” (John 7:17). Here Jesus teaches that an obedient disposition can lead to intellectual assurance. So begins a general theme of the Johannine writings, that to know God we must keep his commandments (1 John 2:3–6; 4:8; 5:2–3). Those who do not love their brothers are in darkness (1 John 2:9–11), a metaphor of both moral and intellectual privation. Knowledge is dependent on love, according to 1 Corinthians 8:1–4; 13:7, 11–13; 1 Timothy 1:5–11. Jesus makes knowledge of the glory of God to rest upon faith in John 11:40.

So the knowledge of God, even in its intellectual dimensions, requires the same work of the Spirit that brings ethical transformation (1 John 2:20–27; 4:2–3, 13–17; Eph. 1:17–18; 3:14–19).

In *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, I discussed three passages that use the word *dokimazein*, meaning “to approve through testing”: Romans 12:1–2, Ephesians 5:8–10, and Philippians 1:9–11.⁴ In these passages, it is clear that we come to know the will of God, not only by reading the Bible or otherwise receiving propositional information, but through the process of ethical discipline: the sacrifice of our bodies (Rom. 12:1), nonconformity to the world, transformation by the renewal of our mind (Rom. 12:2), walking as children of light (Eph. 5:8), abounding in love (Phil. 1:9). In the Philippians passage, we learn again that love produces discernment.

Hebrews 5:11–14 makes a similar point, though it does not use the word *dokimazein*.⁵ Deep doctrinal discussion (in context, the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus) can be appreciated only by those who are ethically and spiritually mature, “who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” Theology is most helpful for people on the front lines of spiritual warfare, people who see in actual moral combat how important the doctrines are.

So sanctification presupposes knowing our duty; but the reverse is also the case.

The health of the intellect depends on the health of the whole person, both physically and ethically. As with all other human actions, intellectual actions are subject to the negative effects of sin and the positive effects of regeneration and sanctification. Thinking, like everything else we do, may be done in two ways: to the glory of God or to the glory of an idol. So thinking, like every other human act, is subject to God’s norms, should seek the glory of God, and should be motivated by faith and love. The intellectual is ethical, and epistemology may be seen as a subdivision of ethics.⁶

We regularly use practical tests to determine if someone understands a concept. If someone has the right concept of a triangle, for example, we expect him to be able to draw one. Having a concept entails a disposition to action. This is especially true of religious knowledge. One does not fully understand who God is unless he regards God as the most important person in his life, unless he is prepared to sacrifice his own pleasures for the blessing of knowing God in Christ. Here concepts and passions are not easily separated. Life and doctrine are interdependent.

4. DKG, 154–55.

5. See discussion in DKG, 154–55.

6. Cf. DKG, 62–64.

MORAL DISCERNMENT

So we are prepared to look more closely at ethical epistemology, at the process by which we learn God's will for our actions. This is the process that we often refer to as ethical guidance.

We saw in chapters 9–13 the importance of Scripture as the law of God. I argued that we gain knowledge of God's will by applying that law to our own circumstances, circumstances that I focused on in chapters 14–17. Here I focus on the process of application, the subjective experience of applying God's Word to circumstances.

To apply the Word of God to circumstances requires a kind of moral vision. Such applications require the ability to *see* the circumstances *in the light of* biblical principles. In moral quandaries, we often ask questions such as "Is this act murder?" or "Is this act stealing?" For Christians, the challenge is to give biblical names to human actions. Sometimes it is obvious: taking money out of a friend's wallet without authorization is what the Bible calls stealing. Sometimes it is less obvious: is it murder to remove this terminal patient from life support?⁷ Is it fornication for unmarried couples to engage in intimacies short of intercourse?

Although Scripture is sufficient as a source of God's words concerning our ethical life (chapter 11), it does not speak directly to every situation, especially to situations that are distinctive to modern life. It does not mention nuclear war, or Internet pornography, or even abortion. Hence, much of the work of application lies with us, led by the Spirit and by the general principles of Scripture. We also receive help from the church's traditional views, the preaching of the Word, parents, teachers, and friends. As we mature in the faith (Heb. 5:11–14, again), we are better able to make such judgments.

The process of learning how to apply the Word is somewhat mysterious, just as the workings of the Holy Spirit are always difficult to describe (John 3:8). But one crucial element is learning to see *analogies* between activities mentioned in Scripture and those of people today. Hijacking airplanes, for example, is different from stealing oxen, but the two activities are analogous. Similarly, we should ask how our dispositions compare with those

7. In chapter 11, I discussed moral syllogisms, in which the first premise is a moral principle, the second is a factual statement, and the conclusion is an application of the moral principle to the factual situation. For example: stealing is wrong; embezzling is stealing; therefore, embezzling is wrong. In the present context, I am referring to the same sort of application, but focusing on the formulation of the second premise. The question here, for example, is how we come to believe that embezzling is stealing, that abortion is murder, or that violating a speed limit is showing disrespect for our rulers?

of biblical characters who are positively or negatively exemplary: to what extent am I like Saul or David, or like Judas or Peter?

In the last paragraph, I mentioned “seeing” as the source of our knowledge of analogous moral patterns. But this seeing is not the same as physical sight. Rather, I am here using physical sight as a metaphor for the moral sensitivity described in Philippians 1:9 (“discernment”) and Hebrews 5:11–14 (“powers of discernment”).⁸

Even in nonmoral cases, there are forms of perception that transcend the powers of physical sight. In *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, I referred to the “duck-rabbit,” a drawing in which one can see a duck or a rabbit, depending on how one looks at it.⁹ One can have 20/20 vision, seeing all the lines in the drawing, without being able to identify it as a picture of a duck, a rabbit, or both. Indeed, it is possible to look at the drawing without seeing it as a picture of anything.¹⁰ So “seeing as” is different from seeing. One can look at the lines of a drawing without realizing how they together are analogous to a real animal.

The same is true in moral contexts. People with healthy sense organs may not be able to “see” moral patterns and analogies. Someone may be very much aware of something he has done, without being able to make the right moral evaluation of his act. For example, someone may assault another person, seriously injuring him, without understanding that what he did was wrong.

Even for believers, our inability to “see as” can lead to moral difficulty. Let’s say that I have a feeling of rage. I know how I feel, and I know what actions that feeling has impelled me to do. But what is the moral evaluation of that feeling? That may not be obvious. In part, I resist any negative evaluation of my own actions because of my pride. But there is also ambiguity in the concept of rage itself. Scripture says that rage, or anger, comes in two forms. One is righteous indignation, such as Scripture attributes to God and to Jesus when he cleansed the temple (John 2:17). The other is an outworking of murderous hatred (Matt. 5:22). How should I evaluate my own rage? Is it righteous indignation or murderous hatred?

These questions cannot be answered by simple factual perceptions, in the usual sense. I may be aware of all the relevant passages of Scripture (such as the two mentioned above) without knowing how they apply in my case. Further, I may be aware of my own feelings and actions, and of

8. In Phil. 1:9, the Greek term is *aisthēsis*, from which we get English words like *aesthetic*. In Heb. 5:14, the word *aisthētērion* comes from the same root.

9. DKG, 157.

10. One can imagine such a response from members of a tribe that did not know about rabbits or ducks, or that did not use drawings to represent objects.

the circumstances of those actions, without being able to make the right moral judgments. These judgments, therefore, are not merely the result of sense perception or intellectual reasoning. One can know the facts of the situation, without seeing the relevant patterns and analogies.¹¹

But it does often happen that moral discernment comes upon us, that we are compelled to note that something is good or bad, right or wrong. Sometimes that discernment coincides with the discovery of a Scripture text or a relevant fact, even though the discernment is not identical with such a discovery.

But sometimes moral discernment occurs in unexpected ways. In *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*,¹² I referred to David's adultery with Bathsheba, followed by his murder (in effect) of her husband Uriah (2 Sam. 11). After these events, David went through a period when he was complacent and unrepentant. We wonder how that can be. David, after all, was not ignorant of God's law (see Ps. 19:7–13, for example). And he certainly was not ignorant of what he had done with Bathsheba and Uriah. But somehow David did not make the connection between God's law and his own actions in a way that would impress upon him the wickedness of his actions and his obligation to repent.

What brought David to repentance was not the revelation of some fact about Scripture or the situation of which he was previously unaware, but an emotional shock. The prophet Nathan told him a story of a poor man who had one ewe lamb that he raised as a family pet. A rich man, who owned many sheep, stole the poor man's lamb and killed it to feed a guest. "Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, 'As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'" (2 Sam. 12:5–7).

That story, with Nathan's application, drove David to repentance. Nathan presented no new facts, but he told a story that made evident to David the ethical pattern of his actions. David had behaved as the wicked rich man, as one who took what was not his and who had no pity. Now David could see. Now he was able to apply the principles of God's law to his own actions.

Ethical discourse, therefore, is never merely a matter of setting forth facts and Bible passages. It is also a matter of wise counseling, of dealing with the subjective issues that stand in the way of moral insight. Scrip-

11. This discussion is related to the naturalistic fallacy (see chapter 5). Moral values are mysterious in that they cannot be sensed, nor can they simply be deduced from factual premises. Attempts to derive them from nonmoral premises are fallacious.

12. DKG, 156–57.

ture, therefore, teaches ethics in many ways: through laws and through narrative, as we have seen, but also through proverbs, parables, songs, personal address (as in both the Prophets of the Old Testament and the letters of the New Testament), eschatological promises (see chapter 16), and apocalyptic vision.

We can also learn from such considerations that spiritual maturity plays a major role in ethical understanding. Two people may know the same Bible verses and the same facts, but they may disagree on the application of the former to the latter. That sort of disagreement may have many sources, but one may simply be that one person is more mature spiritually than the other. One, more than the other, may have his “powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14). Such maturity comes through experience in fighting spiritual warfare, availing oneself of God’s means of grace in the Word, the sacraments, worship, and fellowship.

Some ethical arguments can be resolved by Bible teaching, or by learning more about the circumstances involved. But others cannot be resolved until one or both parties develop more spiritual maturity. So perhaps the best way to deal with some ethical controversies is benign neglect: set them aside until one or both parties gain more spiritual maturity, that is, until God provides more resources for dealing with the problem.

It is wrong to suppose that we must get all the answers to ethical questions before we engage in spiritual warfare, as if the intellect were in every respect prior to life. Rather, there may well be some ethical questions (like the theological questions of Heb. 5:11–14) that we will not be able to answer (or even fully appreciate) until we have been in spiritual combat with the forces of darkness.

THE DOCTRINE OF GUIDANCE

In John 8:12, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Here and elsewhere, Scripture promises that God will guide his people. We have seen that Scripture is an important aspect of that guidance, as it is applied to natural revelation. If my previous discussion is correct, he also guides us subjectively, enabling us to apply Scripture to the circumstances of general revelation. This is part of the nature of “existential revelation” (see chapter 9).

This view of divine guidance contrasts with two others that are generally thought to be opposite to one another. One is an intellectualist view,

that guidance is the process of studying the Scriptures. This view is often found, in practice if not in formulation, in Reformed circles. The other view is that God guides us by whispering in our ears, by giving us special revelation over and above the canon of Scripture. That view is often found among charismatics.

The interesting thing is that both of these views are intellectualist. Both agree that God guides mainly through revealing propositions and commands. On the first view, these are limited to those found in Scripture; on the second view, they are found outside of Scripture. Both views suppose that when we need guidance, what we need is more instruction.

But if I am right, then guidance also requires a subjective competence, the ability to recognize analogous patterns and to apply them to oneself. Scripture is a great help to us in this respect; after all, Nathan's parable is in the Bible. But the Spirit also operates on us from within, giving us new eyes and hearts, giving us spiritual perception.

So God's ethical guidance of his people does not add new sentences to the canon of Scripture. But neither is it necessarily an intellectual process. God deals with us personally, even inwardly. His operations within us are mysterious, not to be simply described or categorized. He can work through the subconscious, through dreams, through memory and intuition, as well as through what we usually call the intellect. Reformed theology has always acknowledged the necessity of the Spirit's illumination in enabling believers to understand the Word. But it is important that we see this illuminating work of God, not only enabling us to formulate doctrines, but also enabling us to apply Scripture to our circumstances, and to see our experiences and inner life in biblical terms.

CHAPTER 22

Introduction to the Decalogue

In part 3 of this treatise on ethics, we discussed ethical methodology, the way Christians should make their ethical decisions. In part 4, we shall discuss the actual content of godly decisions, focusing on the Ten Commandments. Our progress has been from introduction (part 1) to non-Christian ethics (part 2) to Christian ethical methodology (part 3) and now to substantive ethical principles (part 4). Parts 2 and 3 deal mainly with metaethics (see chapter 2), and part 4 deals with ethics as such. So parts 2–4 represent the situational, existential, and normative perspectives, respectively, as I indicated in chapter 5.

Part 4 will present biblical ethics in the form of a command ethic (see chapter 3), rather than as a narrative ethic or a virtue ethic. I have decided on this approach partly because it is the dominant one in the Reformed tradition, to which I belong. The Reformed catechisms and many systematic theologies, including Calvin's *Institutes*, include expositions of the Decalogue. I also think that it is easier (for writer and reader) to determine the applications of biblical commands than to work out the applications of the biblical narratives or to fully describe the biblical virtues. At least it is easier for me. But I reiterate that narrative ethics and virtue ethics are fully legitimate methods, and I hope that others will explore them, to supplement what follows in this book. Command ethics, however, is also legitimate. And, because it is a perspective, it is able in principle (whether or not I can bring it off) to cover all the ground that is covered by the other two approaches. Of course, to do that, it will be

necessary for us to read the commandments in the light of the history of redemption (narrative) and of our subjectivity (virtues).

In this and the following chapters, we will be asking of Scripture the normative question: what does God want me to do? We will also be relating that question to situational and existential contexts. We will be discussing the Ten Commandments, explained and amplified by other parts of Scripture, and we will be applying them to questions of current interest.

THE DECALOGUE IN THE HISTORY OF REDEMPTION

We begin our consideration of the Decalogue by relating it to its situational context.

As I mentioned above, the Reformed tradition has regularly turned to the Decalogue to summarize the law of God, God's requirements for our lives. There are some limitations in all summaries. When we study the Decalogue, for example, we must consult the whole Bible to understand what murder and adultery are. The Old Testament itself supplements the Decalogue by the Book of the Covenant, the case laws of Exodus 21–24, and by many other statements of ethical principle. The New Testament provides necessary correlations between the law and the redemptive work of Christ.

The same is true of summaries, such as the law of love. Scripture teaches us the meaning of love, not only in summary verses, but in countless narratives, proverbs, poems, letters, etc., particularly the narrative of Jesus' death for us (John 13:34–35; 1 John 4:8–10). Summaries must always be supplemented, in the nature of the case.

Some might argue that even among summaries the Decalogue is not the best. It is not, of course, the only summary of the law in Scripture. Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 are the two great commandments of the law, according to Jesus (Matt. 22:37–40). Jesus says, "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (v. 40); so they serve to summarize all the commandments of the law. The two great commandments relate the law also to the virtue of love (see chapters 12 and 19), which is the center of biblical ethics, but not explicitly mentioned in the Decalogue.¹ Love fulfills the law, according to Romans 13:8–10, and it is Jesus' new commandment to his disciples (John 13:34–35). First Corinthians 13 makes love a necessary and sufficient condition of good works. So love is itself a summary of the law,

1. I shall argue, however, that the law of love is implicit in the first commandment.

sufficient to define good behavior. According to Colossians 3:14, love “binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Still other summaries of the law can be found in Ecclesiastes 12:13 (“the whole duty of man”) and Micah 6:8 (“What does the LORD require of you?”). It is especially important to consider summaries of the law in the age of the new covenant, such as the references in the previous paragraph to the law of love. Matthew 5–7 presents Jesus’ exposition of the law in its deepest meaning. And Matthew 7:12 presents a principle (the so-called golden rule) that “is the Law and the Prophets.” Note also the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 and other lists of virtues that characterize the Christian life in general terms; we explored them briefly in chapter 19. We should ask, then, why we should use the Decalogue as a summary of the law, rather than another summary, especially one that is more recent in the history of redemption.

The Decalogue points beyond itself to wider contexts. It begins with the name of Yahweh and identifies him as the one who brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt (Ex. 20:1–2). So to rightly understand the Decalogue, it is important to understand the events that led to it and the covenant of which it is a part. And, as I discussed in chapter 19, it is important to understand that our place in the history of redemption is somewhat different than the place of Israel at the time God spoke these words. So some details of the Decalogue, at least, do not apply directly to us today. God did not lead us out of Egypt, as he did Israel (Ex. 20:2), and he does not promise us long lives in the land of Palestine for honoring our parents (Ex. 20:12).

Nevertheless, there are reasons in favor of using the Decalogue as our summary of God’s law:

Its historical importance in the church. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant catechisms and theologies have traditionally dealt with ethics by expounding the Decalogue. So this method is a convenient way to reflect on what Christians of various persuasions have most wanted to say about ethics.

The uniqueness of the occasion on which it was promulgated. God commanded Pharaoh through Moses to release Israel, so that she might serve (worship) God (Ex. 4:22–23; 5:1–3). Pharaoh hardened his heart, but God set Israel free, and he led the nation to a place outside Egypt to worship him. So Israel’s meeting with God at Mt. Sinai was a crucial aspect of her redemption.

Moses presents the setting dramatically: thunder and lightning (Ex. 19:16; 20:18), thick cloud and darkness (Ex. 19:16; 20:21; Deut. 4:11), a

mysterious trumpet sound (Ex. 19:16; 20:18),² smoke and fire (Ex. 19:18) “to the heart of heaven” (Deut. 4:11),³ and a quake (Ex. 19:18). Then came the most frightening thing of all, the voice of God himself (Ex. 19:9; Deut. 4:12, 33, 36; 5:22–26).

Like other miracles in Scripture, the Sinai phenomena did three things: they were exhibitions of divine power, they provided instruction, and they aroused fear.⁴ As manifestations of divine power, the texts emphasize the sheer enormity of the phenomena (Ex. 19:18, 20; Deut. 4:11) and the uniqueness of this experience (Deut. 4:32–36). Thus, the events on the mountain revealed God’s greatness and glory (Deut. 5:24).

As instruction, these phenomena reinforce God’s words (Deut. 4:10, 36). They serve to confirm Moses as the mediator of God’s covenant (Ex. 19:9; 20:18–19).⁵ They also confirm the content of the law (Ex. 20:22–26; Deut. 4:10), the certainty of God’s mercy and judgment (Deut. 4:24, 33 in context), and the identity of God himself (Deut. 4:35–36).

The phenomena also arouse fear, in the two senses that we considered in chapter 19: terror of judgment (Ex. 19:16; 20:18–19; Deut. 5:5, 25; Heb. 12:18–21) and sanctifying reverence (Ex. 20:20; Deut. 4:10; cf. v. 24).

So this particular occasion made a great impression on the Israelites. Deuteronomy reflects on this as the great “day of the assembly” (Deut. 9:10; 10:4; 18:16).

It is a great day also in the history of the New Testament church, for that event is also part of our own history. God has given to us the titles given to Israel in Exodus 19:6: see 1 Peter 2:9. We draw even closer to God in the new covenant, through Christ (Heb. 12:18–29), but this experience is parallel to that of Exodus 19. And Hebrews, like Exodus, reminds us that “our God is a consuming fire” (12:29).

The uniqueness of the relationship established by it. But the day of the assembly was important mainly because on it God established his covenant with the nation of Israel (Ex. 19:5–6). The frightening phenomena only reinforced the solemnity of this great event. God constituted them “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (v. 6). The people responded, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (v. 8). Then God established the

2. This was not the ram’s horn (19:13), but another sound that grows louder as God draws near.

3. This is evidently something enormous and unearthly. Other passages emphasize the fire (Deut. 4:33, 36; 5:4–5), perhaps reminiscent of Ex. 3:2, or even Gen. 15:17. The fire in Gen. 15 pierces the “dreadful and great darkness” (v. 12).

4. See DG, 245–60, on miracles as “signs, wonders, and powers,” reflecting God’s lordship attributes of authority, presence, and control, respectively.

5. Compare the signs of the apostles given in the New Testament period (2 Cor. 12:12).

mountain as a holy place, a place of his presence. In Exodus 20, he speaks the law to his special covenant people.

We should not miss the important fact that this was the one occasion in redemptive history (since Genesis 3) in which all the people of God were gathered together in one place to hear the word of God directly from his lips.

The uniqueness of its publication. The Decalogue was written down by the very finger of God (Ex. 24:12; 31:18; 32:15–16; Deut. 5:22; 9:10) and put by the ark of the covenant, in the holiest place of the tabernacle (Ex. 40:20; Deut. 10:4–5; 31:26).⁶ Other documents were added later (as Josh. 24:26), but the Decalogue was the seed of what became the biblical canon.

The uniqueness of its function in the covenant structure. The Decalogue is a covenant document, setting forth the terms of the covenant: the name of the Lord, the circumstances of the covenant, the laws Israel is to obey, and the blessings and curses that enforce those laws (see chapter 3). The Decalogue serves as the foundational document of the covenant between God and Israel under the mediatorship of Moses. It is Israel's written constitution, its highest law, the ultimate test of covenant faithfulness.

The uniqueness of its use in later Scripture. Although Scripture supplements the Decalogue, it nevertheless refers to it often as a foundational document of the people of God. As we have seen, Deuteronomy often refers to "the day of the assembly," and it refers specifically to the Ten Commandments (4:13; 10:1–5), even setting them forth a second time (5:1–27). Jesus' Sermon on the Mount expounds in depth the meaning of a number of the commandments (Matt. 5–7). When the rich young man asks Jesus what he must do to have eternal life, Jesus responds first by listing some of the commandments (Matt. 19:16–19). Paul lists several of them to show that they are fulfilled by love (Rom. 13:8–10). In James 2:8–13, the brother of Jesus cites Decalogue commandments to emphasize the unity of the law.

The uniqueness of its generality. As I indicated in chapter 13, the Decalogue represents an application of the creation ordinances to Israel's situation as God's covenant nation. As I mentioned earlier, there are a few details of the Decalogue that do not apply to us as new covenant Christians, but for the most part the Ten Commandments

6. The phrase "Book of the Law" in Deut. 31:26 suggests something more than just the Decalogue. But the Decalogue was certainly present, as the original document of the covenant between God and Israel under Moses.

express principles that will never change, that apply to all times and situations. The Decalogue presents these principles in general terms, thereby covering all of human life.

The uniqueness of its hermeneutical centrality. A general hermeneutical principle is that when we seek light on a biblical doctrine, we should first look at passages where that doctrine is most focally and clearly presented. So when we wish to study the doctrine of justification, we ought to focus on Romans and Galatians, though there is also relevant data elsewhere in Scripture. To understand Christology, we should focus on passages like John 1, Philippians 2, and Hebrews 1. For eschatology, Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians are a good place to begin. Then we can integrate other biblical data with the primary passages.

When we think about God's standards for ethics, therefore, we should look especially at parts of the Bible that are specifically and directly concerned with that. There is, of course, much teaching about ethics in the New Testament, but it tends to be unsystematic, and it is mainly concerned with the outworkings of salvation in Christ, rather than with defining right and wrong. Pursuing such definitions, the Old Testament often gives us more help. The Torah, of course, is the heart of the Old Testament law, and the Decalogue is the heart of the Torah. So it makes sense for those concerned with determining ethical standards to give special attention to the Decalogue.

So I will focus on the Decalogue, but I will also try to relate the commandments to many other parts of Scripture, in order to formulate the whole biblical teaching on these subjects. We should frankly acknowledge the limitations of any summary of the law. As we have seen, consideration of the Decalogue is not the only way to summarize biblical ethics, nor is it, in every respect, the best way. Yet it is one useful way, and, in some respects, it is uniquely useful.

DECALOGICAL HERMENEUTICS⁷

I intend in my discussion of the Decalogue to interact (sympathetically, for the most part) with Reformed catechetical formulations.⁸ But to do that

7. I'm not sure that *decalogical* is an actual word, but part of the fun of being a theologian is being able to invent new words.

8. I am not a "strict" confessionalist. That is, I don't believe that either members or officers of the church should be required to endorse a confession in toto, especially confessions as elaborate and as old as those of the post-Reformation period. Such a requirement makes it impossible to reform the confessions according to the Word of God, and so it gives the confessions, in effect, authority equal to Scripture. Such a requirement violates *sola Scriptura*, and it seems to me absurd for anyone to think that 350-year-old confessions should continue

immediately leads to problems of a hermeneutical sort. The Larger Catechism proposes rules as follow for the interpretation of the Decalogue:

Q. 99. What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments?

A. For the right understanding of the ten commandments, these rules are to be observed:

1. That the law is perfect, and bindeth everyone to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience forever; so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin.

2. That it is spiritual, and so reacheth the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures.

3. That one and the same thing, in divers respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments.

4. That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded: so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; and, where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included.

5. That what God forbids, is at no time to be done; what he commands, is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.⁹

6. That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto.

7. That what is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places, to endeavor that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places.

8. That in what is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden them.

to be regarded as inerrant statements of biblical doctrine. Nevertheless, I do subscribe to the Westminster standards, with a few exceptions that I deem minor. All this is to say that I do not feel bound by conscience or by ecclesiastical allegiance to defend the confessional documents at every point, and I will later be describing some of my exceptions. Nevertheless, in this section of the chapter, even though the Catechism's teaching seems quite vulnerable to modern criticism, I do think its teaching is biblical and should be defended.

9. I take this as confessional warrant for my comments about "priorities among ultimates" in chapter 13.

Seminarians who study biblical hermeneutics are likely to find these rules to be somewhat odd. The Catechism seems to be going far beyond the grammatical-historical meaning of the commandments. There is, for example, no statement in the Decalogue itself that it requires “the utmost perfection of every duty” and forbids “the least degree of every sin.” Rather, it seems that the Decalogue deals with ten specific kinds of sin and obedience. By what logic does the Catechism generalize these commandments to cover the whole terrain of morality?

Rule 4 states, “Where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded: so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; and, where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included.” In some cases, this rule makes sense: for example, when Dad tells Johnny to mow the grass, the command implicitly forbids his failing to mow the grass. But it is sometimes difficult to reason in reverse fashion, to derive commands from prohibitions. When the teacher says “Don’t write your name on the first line of the exam,” what is the “contrary duty” that is commanded? Writing on the second line? Printing on the first line? Writing someone else’s name on the first line? Writing somewhere else? However plausible the alternatives, none of them seems to be logically derived from the language of the prohibition. Another example: when a sign says “Keep off the grass,” what “contrary duty” is commanded? Keeping on the sidewalk? One student of mine (now well known) suggested (rather in the spirit of the Catechism) that “Keep off the grass” requires us to give some positive encouragement to the growth of the grass. How? By applying fertilizer or water? These would be rather large orders for passersby and in any case not logically derivable from the language of the sign.

And then rule 6 says, “That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto.” Some might feel that to interpret the commands this way is going too far.

If I were writing a catechism for today, I would not write it in quite this way. But I do intend to defend the Catechism’s procedure here. It reveals some important insights into the nature of biblical ethics. Note the following:

1. “Right understanding” in the answer should not be equated with the grammatical-historical method of exegesis typically taught in seminaries. To rightly understand the commandments of the Decalogue is to understand them in depth, to see how they apply to one’s heart and life in all situations. At this point and others, the Catechism practices “theology as application” (chapter 2).

2. Whatever we may say about the Decalogue itself, rule 1 is certainly true of the law of God in general. It is “perfect, reviving the soul” (Ps. 19:7). In chapter 11, I argued that Scripture is sufficient as a moral guide. Since God’s law in Scripture defines sin and righteousness, it therefore defines “the utmost perfection of every duty” and forbids “the least degree of every sin.”

3. If the Decalogue is, as we have argued, a summary of the law of God, then it summarizes that sufficient standard. Compare the law of love, an even more concise summary of the law. If we truly love God and one another, we will certainly want to seek the utmost perfection of every duty and avoid the least degree of every sin. If we love God, we will keep his commandments (John 14:15 and elsewhere; see chapters 12 and 19). But the same is certainly true of the first commandment of the Ten. If we are to have no other gods before him (Ex. 20:3), then we should seek to do his will exclusively, both his positive commands and his negative prohibitions. The same is true with the other commandments of the Decalogue. Those who are in covenant with God should desire the utmost perfection of, say, Sabbath keeping and parental honor, and avoid the least degree of murder or adultery.¹⁰

4. So understood, the Ten Commandments (again, like the law of love) deal with the heart, with our basic dispositions to good and evil (see chapter 21). This is, of course, how Jesus himself expounded the Decalogue. For him, the sixth commandment forbids ungodly anger (Matt. 5:21–22), failure to seek reconciliation (vv. 23–26), and vengeance (vv. 38–42). The seventh forbids lust (vv. 27–30). If we want with all our hearts to obey the commandments, we will seek God’s help, not only to avoid explicit, external sins, but also to avoid the attitudes of the heart that give rise to those sins. Thus, as the Catechism says, the Decalogue is a complete ethic, demanding purity of heart and all its external manifestations.

5. If we want to serve God, we will not only do what the commandments specifically say (determined by grammatical-historical exegesis), but will also seek, with God’s help, the inner motives consistent with those commandments. We will also avoid acts of the “same kind” as those prohibited, not wanting to grieve our Lord (rule 6). It is not always easy to define what sins are of the “same kind,” but Scripture usually gives us many examples. If I should honor parents (Ex. 20:12), I should also honor others God has put in authority (such as the emperor, mentioned in 1 Peter 2:17). Beyond the biblical examples, we should determine likenesses by “seeing as” (see chapter 20).

10. On how these can be matters of degree, see what follows.

6. If we love God, we should seek to avoid all “causes, means, occasions, and appearances” of sin, and “provocations thereto” (rule 6). Here the Catechism is on somewhat dangerous ground, though I am still inclined to defend it. The Pharisees sought to “fence the law” by adding all sorts of additional restrictions designed to keep people from any danger of sin—rules as to how far one may walk on the Sabbath, how heavy a load one may carry, and so forth.¹¹ The result was a loss of the sufficiency of Scripture. They erred in making these traditions equal in authority to God’s Word. I do think that the Catechism, in its later application of the commandments, sometimes errs in the same way. For the most part, however, the Catechism fences the laws of the Decalogue by invoking other biblical laws.

But there are other problems here. Certainly if I know that doing A will cause me to commit B, a sin, I should avoid doing A. But it is rarely the case that one act directly causes another act. Anger does not cause murder in any obvious sense, for one can be angry with someone without murdering him. The same can be said about what the Catechism calls “provocations.” Is anger an occasion of murder? *Occasion* can be a synonym of *cause*, but in the Catechism it most likely means “a favorable or appropriate time or juncture; an opportunity.”¹² But *occasion* in this sense is difficult to assess ethically. If I carry a gun, I have the opportunity to murder many people. Does that make it wrong for me ever to carry a gun?

What Jesus is concerned about in Matthew 5, I think, are not causes, means, and occasions in general, but attitudes of the heart that lead to sins and are therefore sins themselves. Carrying a gun leads to murder only if the heart of the carrier is so disposed. But the connection of such dispositions with outward sin is not always easy to describe.¹³ The language of cause, means, and occasion is somewhat inadequate. But attitudes are linked to actions, however difficult it may be to say how they are linked. A right attitude of the heart will lead us to form habits that make sin difficult and encourage righteousness.

Some actions are similarly linked to other actions. If Joe is beset by the sin of alcohol abuse, and if he regularly commits this sin when he enters a bar, he should prudently refrain from going into bars, though this might not be sinful for others. Entering the bar does not cause Joe to abuse alcohol, but it does present a source of temptation, given the dispositions of Joe’s heart. So the Catechism would not be wrong to tell us that, for a time at

11. See my discussion of casuistry in chapter 13.

12. *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 943.

13. This is the famous mind-body problem: how does the mind influence the actions of the body?

least, someone might need to avoid situations in which he often commits sin, even though it is not unlawful for people in general to enter those situations. But that principle is not well described in the language of rule 6.

As for appearances, it is certainly biblical to seek, not only to be righteous in fact, but also to appear righteous to fellow believers and to the world (1 Tim. 3:7). Nevertheless, it is not always possible to avoid appearing evil to somebody. Jesus himself was called a glutton and a drunkard (Matt. 11:19). The Catechism writers probably had in mind 1 Thessalonians 5:22, which says in the KJV, “Abstain from all appearance of evil.” But that is likely a mistranslation. The ESV reads, “Abstain from every form of evil.”

THE UNITY OF THE LAW

I have offered a qualified defense of the Catechism’s ethical hermeneutic. In short, the Catechism seeks to do what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount, linking each commandment with its heart-motive. The sixth commandment forbids murder, and also that anger which leads to murder.¹⁴ But the only alternative to murderous anger is love. So to expound the sixth commandment fully, as Jesus did, it is important for us to relate it to the heart-motive, whether that motive is sinful anger or love.

But at the deepest level, there are only two heart-motives. Human beings either love God or they hate him. Those who love God also love their neighbors. Those who hate God hate their neighbors as well. When we trace out the inward “causes” of sinful and righteous acts, therefore, ultimately there are only two. One attitude (setting the mind on the things of the flesh, Rom. 8:5) leads invariably to sin: “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:8). But setting the mind on the things of the Spirit (the “mind of Christ,” 1 Cor. 2:16) leads to righteousness. Jesus reduces every sin to the mind of the flesh, and every righteous act to the mind of the Spirit.

So there is a unity to godly character and to the law that governs it. All righteous deeds arise from the same heart attitude, and all God’s commands serve to commend that attitude. So love, the mind of the Spirit, inevitably fulfills the law (Rom. 8:10).

James says, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law” (James 2:10–11). This is a difficult passage, but I take it to mean that all obligations reduce to a single one.

14. There is also righteous anger, as we shall see.

Jesus describes that single obligation as the law of love. James describes it as “keeping the whole law.” Love and obedience, as we have seen, imply one another. One who loves God will keep all his commandments, not just this one or that one. So disobeying even one violates our fundamental obligation. This is why the apparently minor issue of whether or not to eat the fruit of a tree destroyed the integrity of Adam’s relationship to God. To disobey one command, even a minor one, was to become “a transgressor of the law,” a violator of our fundamental moral obligation. The law is one. We may think that we are relatively obedient if we obey God 95 percent of the time. But the 5 percent convicts us as rebels, just as one adulterous liaison destroys the integrity of the marital relationship.

So the main issue before us is, not whether we will keep this law or that law, but whether we will be law keepers or lawbreakers. Decisions about individual laws, of course, though not the main issue, are nevertheless very important, since to break any one of them is to become a lawbreaker. And the issue of law keeping is identical with the issue of covenant loyalty (as we shall see in the discussion of the first commandment) and with the issue of love.

The practical import of this is that you cannot decide to work on one area of your ethical life (say, submission to authority) while ignoring the others. Since ethics is a matter of the heart, compromise in one area entails compromise in others. You won’t be able to be fully subject to authority, in the biblical sense, unless you learn not to covet and not to lust. Positively, growth in holiness is holistic. It is a practice of the presence of God in all the situations of life, so that every decision becomes a godly response to his lordship.

TEN PERSPECTIVES ON ETHICAL LIFE

If the law is a unity, then in one sense each commandment requires of us the same thing. What each commandment requires is a loyalty toward God (i.e., a love for God) that issues in godly behavior. Of course, the commandments are not synonymous. Each one looks at the love of God from a different perspective. One focuses on one kind of behavior produced by love; another focuses on another kind of loving behavior. But we may expect that the content of each commandment considerably overlaps that of others. Keeping one commandment will lead us to keep others, and disobeying one will lead us to disobey others. For example, people who commit idolatry (disloyalty toward God), breaking the second commandment, are likely to commit adultery (disloyalty to their spouse), breaking the seventh commandment. Hence the Bible frequently uses adultery as an image of idolatry (e.g., Ezek. 16; Hos. 1–3).

LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD.



LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR.

Fig. 5. The Ten Commandments as Perspectives on the Whole Law*

Although this may be a bit of a stretch, it may be useful to see the Decalogue as containing ten perspectives on the ethical life. On this understanding, each commandment mandates the law of love (i.e., covenant loyalty) from a different perspective. So, as I illustrated the relationships of three perspectives by a triangular diagram in chapter 3, we might consider a decagon in the present instance (see fig. 5).

On this basis, each commandment requires complete righteousness (love) and forbids all sin, but each from its own particular angle. Each commandment describes from one perspective the nature of love and, at the same time, the nature of sin. In my expositions of the individual commandments, I shall show how this happens, but the following summaries may be useful at this point.

* Thanks to Linc Ashby for this artwork. I can draw triangles and rectangles with minor computer assistance, but I look in awe at people who can draw decagons.

1. In the first commandment, the “other gods” include mammon (money, Matt. 6:24) and anything else that competes with God for our ultimate loyalty. Since any sin is disloyalty to God, the violation of any commandment is also violation of the first. Thus, all sin violates the first commandment; or, to put it differently, the commandment forbids *all* sins.

2. In the second commandment, similarly, the sin of worshiping a graven image is the sin of worshiping anything (or worshiping *by means of anything*) of human devising. “Worship” can be a broad ethical concept in Scripture as well as a narrowly cultic one (cf. Rom. 12:1–2). Any sin involves following our own purposes, purposes of our own devising, instead of God’s, and that is false worship.

3. In the third commandment, “the name of the Lord” can refer to God’s entire self-revelation, and any disobedience of that revelation can be described as “vanity.” Thus, all sin violates the third commandment.

4. The Sabbath commandment demands godly use of our entire calendar—six days to carry out our own work to God’s glory, and the seventh to worship and rest. So the whole week is given to us to do God’s will. Any disobedient or ungodly use of time, on the six days or the seventh, may be seen as transgression of the fourth commandment.

5. “Father and mother” in the fifth commandment can be read broadly to refer to all authority and even the authority of God himself (Mal. 1:6). Thus, all disobedience of God violates the fifth commandment.

6. Jesus interprets the sixth commandment to prohibit unrighteous anger (Matt. 5:22) because of its disrespect for life. Genesis 9:6 relates this principle to respect for man as God’s image. Since all sin manifests such disrespect for life and for God’s image, it violates the sixth commandment.

7. Adultery is frequently used in Scripture as a metaphor (indeed, more than a metaphor) for idolatry. Israel is pictured as the Lord’s unfaithful wife. The marriage figure is a prominent biblical description of the covenant order. Breaking the covenant at any point is adultery.

8. Withholding tithes and offerings—God’s due—is stealing (Mal. 3:8). Thus, to withhold any honor due to God falls under the same condemnation.

9. “Witnessing” in Scripture is something you *are*, more than something you do. It involves not only speech, but actions as well. It is comprehensive.

10. Coveting, like stealing, is involved in all sin. Sinful acts are the product of the selfish heart. This commandment speaks against the root of sin, and therefore against all sin.

So we have in the Decalogue ten perspectives on sin: as covenant disloyalty, as false worship, as misuse of God’s revelation, as misuse of time, as

disrespect for authority, and so on. And similarly, we have ten perspectives on love: covenant loyalty, true worship, and so on. To keep any one commandment, in its deepest meaning, is to keep all the others, and to love, as Scripture says, is to keep them all. This perspectival approach, then, helps us understand and appreciate the Catechism's view of the unity of God's law.

BROAD AND NARROW

So each commandment has a broad and a narrow meaning. The broad meanings are listed above under each commandment: the first commandment requires covenant loyalty to God, the fourth requires a godly use of time, the fifth requires respect for all authority, and so on. Each of these meanings covers all sins, all good acts, all moral decisions. Any decision I make can be described as respecting or violating covenant loyalty to God, as a godly or ungodly use of time, and so on.

But of course each commandment has a narrow meaning as well. These are the more obvious meanings. The fifth commandment tells us broadly to respect all authority, but narrowly it tells us to respect our fathers and mothers. The seventh commandment teaches us to be faithful to God in all we do, but it also tells us specifically not to have sexual relations with someone other than our spouse.

We should never pit the broad meanings against the narrow ones, or vice versa. People sometimes get the impression that since the seventh commandment has to do with covenant faithfulness, we should not invoke it for the mere purpose of evaluating sexual acts. Some writers seem to think that the broad meanings are glorious and deep, while the narrow ones are somehow trivial, or that to insist on the narrow meanings is somehow legalistic. On such a view, the narrow meanings are brushed aside by the broad meanings.

But that is to misunderstand both the broad and the narrow meanings of the commandments. To continue our discussion of the seventh commandment, covenant faithfulness is not a conceptual blank line, to be filled in as anybody likes. Covenant faithfulness, rather, governs specific sexual actions—excluding some, commanding others. I argued in chapter 12 against Joseph Fletcher that love has specific content, for it is a disposition to keep God's commandments, specific as they are. What is true of the law of love is true of all the Ten Commandments. They all mandate love, and they also mandate the specific actions that are part of love. The eighth commandment, for example, forbids us to rob God of his honor, but it also forbids us to take donuts from the store without paying for them.

PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE DECALOGUE

If all Scripture testifies of Christ (Luke 24:27; John 5:39), then the law of God surely cannot be an exception. As we study the law, then, we should examine its witness to Christ. I assume that some readers of this book are preparing for Christian ministry. They especially need to know how to use the Decalogue in their preaching and teaching. But all of us need to learn how to see Christ in the law.

The law bears witness to Christ in a number of ways, some of which I shall discuss in the following points.

1. *The Decalogue presents the righteousness of Christ.* Jesus perfectly obeyed God's law. That is why he was the perfect lamb of God, why God imputes his active righteousness to us, and why he is the perfect example for the Christian life. He never put any god before his Father. He never worshiped idols or took God's name in vain. Despite what the Pharisees said, he never violated the Sabbath command. So the Decalogue tells us what Jesus was like. It shows us his perfect character.

2. *The Decalogue shows our need of Christ.* God's law convicts us of sin and drives us to Jesus. It shows us who we are, apart from Christ. We are idolaters, blasphemers, Sabbath breakers, and so on.

3. *The Decalogue shows the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.* In him we are holy. God sees us in Christ, as law keepers.

4. *The Decalogue shows us how God wants us to give thanks for Christ.* In the Decalogue, as we shall see below, obedience follows redemption. God tells his people that he has brought them out of Egypt. The law is not something they must keep to merit redemption. God has redeemed them. Keeping the law is the way they thank God for salvation freely given. So the Heidelberg Confession expounds the law under the category of gratefulness.

5. *Christ is the substance of the law.* This point is related to the first, but it is not quite the same. Here I wish to say that Jesus is not only a perfect law keeper, according to his humanity, but also the one we honor and worship, according to his deity, when we keep the law.

(a) The first commandment teaches us to worship Jesus as the one and only Lord, Savior, and mediator (Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5).

(b) In the second commandment, Jesus is the one perfect image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Our devotion to him precludes worship of any other image.

(c) In the third commandment, Jesus is the name of God, that name to which every knee shall bow (Phil. 2:10–11; cf. Isa. 45:23).

(d) In the fourth commandment, Jesus is our Sabbath rest. In his presence, we cease our daily duties and hear his voice (Luke 10:38–42). He is

Lord of the Sabbath as well (Matt. 12:8), who makes the Sabbath his own Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10).

(e) In the fifth commandment, we honor Jesus, who restores us to the divine family as he submits himself entirely to the will of the Father (John 5:19–24).

(f) In the sixth commandment, we honor him as our life (John 10:10; 14:6; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:4), the Lord of life (Acts 3:15), the one who gave his life that we might live (Mark 10:45).

(g) In the seventh commandment, we honor him as our bridegroom, who gave himself to cleanse us, to make us his pure, spotless bride (Eph. 5:22–33). We love him as no other.

(h) In the eighth commandment, we honor Jesus as the source of our inheritance (Eph. 1:11), as the one who provides everything that his people need in this world and beyond.

(i) In the ninth commandment, we honor him as God's truth (John 1:17; 14:6), in whom all the promises of God are Yes and Amen (2 Cor. 1:20).

(j) In the tenth commandment, we honor him as our complete sufficiency (2 Cor. 3:5; 12:9) to meet both our external needs and the renewed desires of our hearts. In him we can be content with what we have, thankful for his present and future gifts.

THE PREFACES TO THE COMMANDMENTS

As I indicated in chapter 3, the Decalogue is in its literary form a suzerainty treaty or covenant document. To review its structure:

1. Name of the great king (Ex. 20:2a)
2. Historical prologue (v. 2b)
3. Stipulations (vv. 3–17)
 - a. General stipulation: exclusive covenant loyalty (love) (v. 3)
 - b. Specific stipulations: the specific content of love (vv. 4–17)
4. Sanctions
 - a. Blessings for obedience (vv. 6, 12)
 - b. Curses for disobedience (vv. 5b, 7)

The fifth main section, called “administration” or “covenant continuity” is not present in the Decalogue, but it is a part of Deuteronomy, which Kline also identifies as a suzerainty treaty.

The bulk of our discussion in the remainder of this book will deal with the stipulations and sanctions, the commandments themselves, seeking to determine how these apply to our lives today. But we should not neglect

sections 1 and 2, for they place sections 3 and 4 in a proper context. We have looked at the overall context of Israel's meeting with God, "the day of the assembly." Now we should look at the context of the commandments in the Decalogue itself.

GOD'S NAME

The document begins with God's name: Yahweh, the Lord. As God so identified himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14–15, so he now identifies himself in the direct hearing of all his people. This identification ensures, first, that the covenant is a *personal* relationship.¹⁵ Ultimately, we are to obey the law, not just because its principles are true, but because of the one who commanded them. I have argued that the personality of God is indispensable to ethics. Worldviews that reduce the personal to the impersonal (as we saw in chapters 3–8, especially 5) lose any basis for ethics. Ethics is based on a family relationship. In this world, we learn ethical standards in the family, in a context of love and loyalty.¹⁶ Similarly at the ultimate level, we learn right and wrong from a heavenly Father, an absolute personality. Only such a personal relationship can communicate principles that are absolutely authoritative.

Notice also that Yahweh here is "the LORD thy God" (v. 2).¹⁷ First of all, this expression in effect makes Israel part of God's own name. Yahweh is "Yahweh thy God," Yahweh the God of Israel. How remarkable it is that the Lord of glory so profoundly identifies himself with his sinful people!

Second, this expression is the first of many uses of the second person singular pronoun throughout the document. God gives his commands, therefore, in an "I-thou" relationship. This language emphasizes both the unity of the people (as if they were one person) and the intimacy of their relationship to God.

So although the Decalogue is a legal and even political document, it is also a loving self-communication between the Lord and the people he has chosen to be his.

15. In chapter 3, I indicated that the Lord is a person, and also that he is supremely holy. Earlier in this chapter, we explored the holiness of the Lord by looking at the terrifying phenomena that kept Israel away from the mountain. So Ex. 19–20 is quite parallel to Ex. 3 in presenting God as holy, as personal, and as the head of the covenant.

16. This is, of course, a statement of an ideal, given the many disruptions of the family structure in our fallen world. But this is what God designed as a means of ethical instruction, and many of us have experienced it in some measure. If one has not experienced such bonds of loyalty and love in a home, perhaps one has experienced them in school, church, a sports team, or other group.

17. I use the KJV here, which, unlike modern translations, is able to render the difference between second person singular and plural.

Third, “Lord” calls to mind again the lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence. The treaty form can be analyzed in this way: the historical prologue emphasizes the Lord’s control over history; the stipulations emphasize his authority; the sanctions emphasize his presence in blessing and judgment. The Lord, then, presents himself to Israel as one who is sovereign over all things in heaven and on earth, whose word must be obeyed without objection, and who will be with his people to fulfill his promises and threats.

THE HISTORICAL PROLOGUE

In the historical prologue, God reminds Israel that he brought them “out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (v. 2). This statement makes the important point that God’s gracious deliverance *precedes* the demands of the law, and it forms the basis for Israel’s obedience. Grace precedes and motivates works. This relationship between grace and works is substantially the same as that in the new covenant.

Scripture emphasizes (similarly to the parallel secular treaties) that the making of the covenant *follows* the divine victory (Deut. 1:1–5; 4:44–49; 29:1–3). God’s grace is the cause of that victory (Deut. 4:20; 6:10–12; 7:6–8; 8:17; 9:1–6). He has sovereignly elected Israel, not because of her merits, but in spite of her stubbornness and disobedience (Deut. 7:6–8; 9:4–7; 10:14–17). Israel should obey because she is God’s elect (Deut. 27:9–10), and because God has delivered and blessed her (Lev. 19:36–37; 20:8; 22:31–33; Deut. 6:20–25; 8:1–6, 11–18; 10:21–11:7; 29:2–9).

This does not mean that these laws bind Israel only, and not other nations. As I argued in chapter 13, the laws of the Decalogue are, for the most part, identical to the creation ordinances that bind all mankind. The mere fact that God commands something is sufficient reason to obey.¹⁸ But the fact that God has delivered Israel gives them an additional reason to obey, the motive of gratitude. That God has given us an even greater deliverance in Christ should motivate our obedience all the more.

So God’s gracious blessing precedes Israel’s obedience. Nevertheless, there is also a sense in which blessing *follows* obedience. In Exodus 19:5–6, we read, “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Here Israel’s special relationship to God is conditional upon her obedience. Israel will not be God’s treasured possession if she does not keep

18. See chapter 3, under “Biblical Reasons to Do Good Works.”

the covenant. Even here, the covenant is in place before God even gives this admonition. Israel is to keep a covenant that already exists. But Israel's continuation in this favored position depends on her faithfulness.

And the blessings of the covenant, the favorable sanctions, also depend on Israel's obedience (Ex. 20:6, 12; 23:22–33; Deut. 5:32–33; 6:1–3, 17–19; 8:7–10; 11:10–12; 13:18; cf. Ps. 1). This is true also of the new covenant in Christ (Matt. 6:33; Mark 10:29; Eph. 6:1–3; 1 Tim. 4:8). As we saw in chapter 16, there are rewards for Christian believers, contingent upon their obedience.

So God's blessing appears twice in the treaty structure: the historical prologue (section 2) describes a blessing that precedes the covenant making itself, God's grace apart from works. But the sanctions (section 4) describe further blessings that are contingent upon obedience, with curses for disobedience. Ideally, grace leads to human good works, which bring further blessing (Eph. 2:8–10). But in fact, those who are initially chosen sometimes disobey and are subject to final rejection.¹⁹

19. When I speak here of a divine choice that can be rescinded, I am talking, of course, not about election as God's eternal plan for the salvation of individuals ("eternal election"), but about God's election of people in history to serve his purposes, which I call "historical election" in *DG*, 317–25. Those whom God elects for salvation in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), the "eternally elect," cannot lose their salvation. Their salvation is contingent only on God's unchanging purpose.

CHAPTER 30

The Fourth Commandment: The Sabbath in the New Covenant

In the previous chapter, we explored the general meaning of the Sabbath as Scripture presents it. We looked at this largely in Old Testament terms, not considering the role of the Sabbath in the new covenant. I did argue, however, that there is nothing about the Old Testament Sabbath that anticipates future abrogation. As a celebration of God's lordship in creation, we can expect the Sabbath to continue as a marker of the Creator-creature relation. As a rest from the toil brought about by God's curse on the ground, we can expect the Sabbath to continue at least until the consummation of redemption.

We saw that the Sabbath in Scripture is not a rest from our own attempts to earn salvation by our works, but a respite from the toil brought on by God's curse upon the ground. If it symbolized the abandonment of works as a means of salvation, then we might imagine that the Sabbath would be abrogated when salvation by grace is finally accomplished. But that reason for abrogation is not valid.

So our discussion so far suggests that the Sabbath will continue into the time of the new covenant. In the previous chapter, I also gave reasons for thinking that the basic character of Sabbath observance will not change until the last day. In this regard, I argued against Meredith Kline's contention that weekly cessation of work is appropriate only in certain redemptive-historical settings.

But in this chapter we must look more specifically at the new covenant in Christ, asking what role the Sabbath plays in it, focusing more sharply on New Testament teaching.

THE TEACHING OF JESUS

In chapter 29, I considered Matthew 12:1–14 as an example of Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees over Sabbath observance. We saw then that, on Jesus' view, (1) eating and preparing food on the Sabbath are works of necessity, (2) Jesus governs the Sabbath as the chief priest, one greater than the temple (v. 6), and as the lord of the Sabbath (v. 7), and (3) healing, a work of mercy, is especially appropriate on the Sabbath day (vv. 9–14).

We should note also the parallel passage in Mark 2:23–28, which adds another note to the discussion. Note verses 27–28: “And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.’” Here, as in Matthew 12, Jesus grounds the Sabbath ordinance in the needs of man as man, not in anything distinctive to the Mosaic economy. “Man” in verse 27 is *anthropos*, generic man, man as created by God. This term and the verb “was made” (from *ginomai*) take us back to creation, when God originated the Sabbath. So Jesus in this verse finds the origin of the Sabbath in creation, rather than in God's covenant with Israel. This saying, then, validates our emphasis on the Sabbath as a creation ordinance.

This understanding fits Jesus' overall argument in the passage, that God did not intend the Sabbath to make us hungry. Eating, including the preparation of food, is a proper Sabbath activity. God's concern for human health and strength even takes precedence over the holiness of the tabernacle's bread of the Presence (vv. 25–26).¹ The Sabbath, indeed, is “made for” man: it is God's blessing on us. Our bodies need rest, just as we need food, and the Sabbath provides it.²

When the wicked use the Sabbath as a means of oppressing people, God sends a champion to defend the weak. Jesus is the “Son of Man,” one who is himself man and who has a special sympathy for human need (Heb. 2:10–18; 4:15). But as Son of Man he also represents human beings before God and rules over all aspects of human life.³ So the Son of Man is “lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28). I noted earlier the momentousness of

1. Recall the discussion of priorities in chapter 13.

2. Recall footnote 20 in chapter 29 in which I emphasized that God's law not only honors himself, but also suits the needs of human beings, including the needs of the body.

3. For a discussion of the title Son of Man, see DG, 672–73.

this claim. The Sabbath is the Sabbath of “the LORD your God,” not the Sabbath of any mere created being. Jesus’ claim to this particular lordship is a striking claim to deity. But the humanity of Jesus assures us that God will administer the Sabbath with an understanding of our needs and weaknesses. The Sabbath is mercy, not oppression.

So in this passage Jesus underscores the foundation of the Sabbath in creation and the importance of the Sabbath to man as God’s creation. So works of necessity and mercy are appropriate.

Similarly, in John 5:1–17, Jesus heals on the Sabbath a man who has been an invalid for thirty-eight years. The Jews object both to the healing itself and to the fact that Jesus told the man to carry his bed.⁴ In this case, Jesus appeals, not specifically to his office as Son of Man or as High Priest, but simply to his identity with God: “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (v. 17). As with Mark 2:28, this is a claim to deity. Jesus claims the right to do whatever his father does (cf. vv. 19–24). The Jews understand, and they seek to kill him for making himself equal with God (v. 18). Jesus here appeals only to his own divine status, not, as in Mark 2:27, to the nature of the Sabbath as a gift to man as man. Jesus here invokes a rationale for his Sabbath activity that no other human being could invoke.⁵ None of us can say with Jesus that he has a right to do on the Sabbath anything that God does. But we do have the right and the obligation to do on the Sabbath what Jesus did as man, insofar as we are able. And here again Jesus’ example of showing mercy is a model for us.

We also read that Jesus attended Sabbath worship in the synagogues (Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 13:10). This was his “custom” (Luke 4:16). There is no record of Jesus ever violating any biblical ordinance concerning the Sabbath, though he had no respect for the traditions of the Pharisees.

So there is no suggestion here or anywhere in the gospels that Jesus intended to abrogate the Sabbath in the new covenant. This is an argument from silence, of course. But during his earthly ministry Jesus often indicated the changes that would come after his resurrection, how believers would serve him in that new era. He taught, for example, that in that day

4. As we have seen, the Sabbath ordinance does forbid heavy lifting, but “heavy” is a relative term. In any case, it boggles the mind that the Jews were more preoccupied with the weight of the bed than with the mercy of God in healing this sick man. Surely, to say the least, their priorities were badly distorted (see chapter 13).

5. I mentioned in chapter 29 that in Matt. 12 Jesus “overanswers” the Pharisees’ question. I think that is true here in John 5:17 as well. It would have been sufficient for Jesus to say that healing is appropriate on the Sabbath, or, as in Matt. 12, that basic human need transcends the demand for Sabbath rest (even if the Pharisees had rightly construed that rest). Here, anticipating the great Christological discourse in verses 19–47, he gives an answer that tells us more about his own nature and authority than about the Sabbath as such.

worship would not be centered in Jerusalem (John 4:21–24). He declared that the Old Testament dietary laws would no longer be binding (Mark 7:19). He predicted the destruction of the temple (Matt. 24:1–2). He established sacraments for the postresurrection church (Matt. 26:26–28; 28:19). He defined the authority of the apostles (Matt. 16:13–19; 18:18–20). He presented the worldwide task of the church (Matt. 28:18–20). Given the many times he clashed with the Pharisees over the Sabbath, he certainly had many opportunities to declare a coming end of Sabbath observance, if indeed he intended that. So it is significant that he did not make such a declaration. Rather, he affirmed the Sabbath as a blessing to man, a time of resting, worshiping, eating, drinking, and healing.

Jesus did not say specifically that the Sabbath would continue. But by his words and deeds he suggested that it would, and he never suggested the contrary. As in the case of infant baptism, Reformed theology assumes continuity between the covenants, except where Scripture clearly indicates discontinuity. So the overall pattern of Jesus' life and words should lead us to expect that the Sabbath will continue in the new covenant, under Jesus' lordship as Son of Man (Mark 2:28) and as God in the flesh (John 5:17).

HEBREWS 3:7–4:13

Beyond the teaching of Jesus, there is little explicit reflection in the New Testament on the Sabbath. Hebrews 3–4, however, is significant for our understanding of how New Testament Christians should understand the Sabbath in relation to Christ.

The purpose of the letter is to discourage Hebrew Christians from returning to Judaism. So the first two chapters emphasize that Christ is far greater than the angels who delivered the Mosaic law. Hebrews 3:1–6 adds that Jesus is also greater than Moses, who by God's power led Israel from Egypt nearly to the Promised Land. Moses died without seeing that land, as did a whole generation of Israelites, because they did not trust God's provision or believe his promises. They had tested God, even though God had done miracles for forty years in their midst (3:8–9, quoting Ps. 95:8–10). So God swore against that generation, "They shall not enter my rest" (Heb. 3:10, quoting Ps. 95:11). The psalmist, writing long after the wilderness years, admonishes Israelites of his own time, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion" (Heb. 3:15, quoting Ps. 95:7–8). So, even after Israel had entered the Promised Land, a further rest awaited them. (Joshua's conquests had

not given them the fullness of God's rest [Heb. 4:8].) If they hardened their hearts, as did the wilderness generation, they would not enter that second rest.

Now the writer to the Hebrews sees a parallel with the Jewish Christians of his audience. Like the Israelites of Moses' time, and the time of the anonymous psalmist, Christians have a rest to look forward to, and they are in danger of losing that rest by hardening their hearts (4:1–3). In 4:3–4, a new note enters: this rest is nothing other than God's own rest, the rest of Genesis 2:2, which God entered following the creation. "For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, 'As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest,'" although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.'"

God began his rest after creation. He invited Adam to join him. But because of the fall and the delay of redemption, man has not yet entered that rest. So for Israel in the wilderness, Israel at the time of Psalm 95, and New Testament Christians, our final Sabbath rest is still future. God still exhorts his people to enter that rest, which is a sharing of his own creation rest. "Today" (Ps. 95:7) is when we should "strive to enter that rest" (Heb. 4:11).

So "there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (4:9). "Sabbath rest" here is *sabbatismos*, which can be translated "Sabbath keeping," but here the term evidently refers to the future rest, of which Canaan is a type, the final reward of the believer. This final reward is to join God in the rest he entered into at creation.

This passage does not, therefore, tell believers explicitly to keep the weekly Sabbath in the new covenant age. The *sabbatismos* is future, not weekly. But that future rest is called *sabbatismos*, and the writer identifies it with God's creation rest, which we have seen to be the basis of Sabbath keeping in the fourth commandment. So we should see the future *sabbatismos* as the fulfillment of the weekly Sabbath. It is what the weekly Sabbath anticipates, the ultimate blessing of which the weekly Sabbath is a foretaste.

The *sabbatismos*, therefore, is not completed by Jesus' first coming, his atonement and resurrection. It is, rather, a future blessing, something we have yet to experience. If it were perhaps a symbol of the forgiveness of our sins in Christ, then it would be plausible to say that what the Sabbath symbolizes is already here, and therefore that no more symbol is necessary. If the symbolism of the Sabbath were exhausted in the past and present reality of redemption, then one could argue that it is no longer necessary

to keep the weekly Sabbath.⁶ But if what the Sabbath symbolizes is still future, then weekly Sabbath observance performs a vital function: it is a reminder of and participation in that final reality. Hebrews 4 tells us that what the Sabbath symbolizes and anticipates is still future.⁷ Thus, it establishes the continuing appropriateness of weekly Sabbath keeping.

Certainly nothing in these chapters suggests that the Sabbath is abrogated in the new covenant. That is an argument from silence, but, like my earlier argument from silence, it is significant. One major theme of Hebrews is that the new covenant is different from and better than the old. Christ is better than the angels, Moses, or Aaron. The sacrifice of Christ brings an end to the sacrifices of bulls and goats (10:4). So great is this disparity that the former covenant is “becoming obsolete and growing old.” It is “ready to vanish away” (8:13). So Hebrews is preoccupied with *discontinuities* between the old and new orders. If the Sabbath were abrogated during the new covenant period, it would be very strange that Hebrews takes no notice of it and indeed presents an argument congenial to the continuation of Sabbath observance.⁸

THE LORD'S DAY

As in Old Testament times, so in New Testament times believers observed a special day each week. John refers to it in Revelation 1:10: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day.” Christian writers following the time of the apostles tell us that the Lord's Day is the first day of the week, our Sunday, in which believers gathered to celebrate the resurrection of

6. Even this argument would not be ultimately persuasive. For the ground for keeping the Sabbath is not found exclusively in redemption. As I indicated in chapter 29, we keep the Sabbath to join God in his celebration of creation (Ex. 20:11; Gen. 2:2–3).

7. This coheres with my former point that the Sabbath symbolizes, not forgiveness of sins as such, but the release from toil that comes from redemption. The release from toil is still future.

8. In this section, I am much indebted to Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark*, ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 33–51. In this article, Gaffin counters the position of A. T. Lincoln in “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament.” The latter article is part of the book I mentioned in chapter 28 as representing the most anti-Sabbatarian of the six views discussed: D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 197–220. See also Lincoln's “From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” in the same volume, pp. 343–412. Heb. 3–4 is prominent in Lincoln's argument, hence in Gaffin's. Lincoln argues that the “rest” in view is not entirely future, but that it is present now in the believer's experience.

Jesus.⁹ These first-day meetings began with the resurrection appearances themselves (Matt. 28:1–10; Luke 24:13–49; John 20:1, 19, 26). These were, of course, times of worship, as is always the case when believers meet with the Lord.

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples gathered to await the promise of the Spirit (Acts 2:1). This was also most likely on the first day of the week. The wave and meal offerings for the Pentecost feast were made “on the day after the Sabbath” (Lev. 23:11, 16). Acts 20:7 indicates an occasion when the Christians at Troas gathered to break bread “on the first day of the week.” The apostles stayed seven days at Troas (v. 6). It is natural to assume that with this schedule they were able to attend two weekly meetings of the church. The first day is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:1–2: “Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.” Evidently, people in the churches of Galatia and Corinth were to bring their contributions to the meeting on the first day of the week. These biblical data are somewhat sketchy, to be sure, but there is no reason to doubt the church fathers’ account that the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, was the regular time of Christian worship.

These references to the Lord’s Day have raised three major questions in the discussion about the Sabbath: (1) Is the Lord’s Day a Sabbath? (2) If so, on what authority is the Sabbath changed from the seventh day to the first day? (3) Given that the change of day is legitimate, what is the meaning of the change?

IS THE LORD’S DAY A SABBATH?

Andrew Lincoln, whose articles in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* I have cited earlier, grants that the Lord’s Day is the first day of the week, the Christian day of worship, the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection.¹⁰ He denies, however, that the New Testament regards the Lord’s Day as a Sabbath. He finds no evidence that the New Testament regards this day as a day of rest or as a successor to the Jewish observance. He says,

The day can be said to be the Lord’s because it is the appropriate day for worshiping Him, and this is significantly different from the

9. *Didache*, 14:1; Ignatius, *To the Magnesians*, 9:1. For other references, see G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), under *kyriakos*.

10. Lincoln, “From Sabbath to Lord’s Day,” 383–86. He cites a number of patristic writers in addition to those I have mentioned above.

view that sees the day, by analogy with the Jewish Sabbath, as a full twenty-four hour period belonging to the Lord in a distinct way from that in which all the Christian's time belongs to the Lord.¹¹

On the other hand, there is the evidence from the term *Lord's Day* itself. It translates *kyriakē hēmera* in Revelation 1:10, indicating a day that has a special relationship to the Lord. The only similar construction in the New Testament is *kyriakon deipnon* (1 Cor. 11:20), translated "Lord's Supper." The supper is, of course, different from all other meals, a meal that belongs to the Lord in a unique way. So I believe that *kyriake* implies more than that this day "is the appropriate day for worshiping Him."

This is evident, not only from the parallel to the Lord's Supper, but also from the many Old Testament passages that speak of the Sabbath as specifically the Lord's day. It is "a Sabbath to the LORD your God" (Ex. 20:10). God says it is "my holy day" (Isa. 58:13), as opposed to man's; it is "the holy day of the LORD" (same verse). It is hard for me to imagine that people in the first century with a background in Judaism would not see the parallel between the Lord's day in Old Testament and the New Testament's Lord's Day. As the supper is a meal that belongs uniquely to the Lord, so the Lord's Day is a day that belongs uniquely to the Lord.

Consider also that the Lord's Day is, after all, a day, not merely a shorter period. Jesus' meetings with disciples on the day of his resurrection occurred both at dawn (Matt. 28:1–10) and in the evening (Luke 24:29). The church's meetings on the first day occurred in the morning, as the church fathers indicate, but also in the evening, as in Acts 20:7. So the Lord's Day involved activities that, like the Sabbath, must have required the setting aside of other responsibilities.

Further, if my earlier argument is right that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance and, with the other nine commandments of the Decalogue, a moral law, and if I am right to say that there is no reason why the Sabbath should be abolished under the new covenant, then there must be a place for the Sabbath in the new covenant. Either the Jewish seventh-day Sabbath continues into the new covenant (as is the view of Seventh-day Adventists and others) or (what seems to be the only other alternative) the Sabbath continues in the form of the Lord's Day. I shall defend the latter position in the next section.

Still, there are formidable problems in the claim that the Lord's Day is a Sabbath. For one thing, three Pauline passages speak against the observance of days; I shall discuss them later. For another, it is clear that the early Christians did not immediately recognize the Lord's Day as a day of

11. Ibid., 389.

rest. The early Jewish Christians observed the Sabbath on the seventh day and then joined in distinctively Christian worship on the first. Lincoln summarizes the historical evidence: “The majority of Jewish Christians in Palestine and many in the diaspora may well have kept the Sabbath and also met with their fellow believers in Christ for worship at some time on the following day.”¹²

The seventh day was the day of rest and of the synagogue service. The first day was the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection. But there was, of course, a contradiction in this dual practice. Lord’s Day worship was the true worship, the worship of God’s own Son. How could that day of worship be separated from the day of rest? We saw earlier that the two should coincide, for it is by enjoying God’s rest in his presence that we bow down before him.

Paul and other believers hoped initially that the Jews as a body could be won to Christ. Had that taken place, all Jews would have worshiped Jesus on the first day. But, in God’s providence, the mass conversion did not take place. Like Jesus, Paul attended the synagogue services and presented the gospel there (e.g., Acts 13:14–15; 14:1; 17:1, 10). But the number of Jewish converts was a disappointment, which brought much agony to Paul (Rom. 9:1–3). The hostile response of the Jews led him to take the gospel to Gentiles (Acts 13:42–48; 18:6; 28:28). So the churches outside Israel became increasingly Gentile churches, churches made up of people who had not historically kept the Jewish Sabbath. Further, Jewish Christians were either expelled from the synagogues or left voluntarily. So Christianity became less a sect of Judaism, more a faith independent of Judaism. The Lord’s Day became, increasingly, the main time of worship for believers, and observance among them of the seventh-day Sabbath declined. But how could this practice be reconciled with the fourth commandment?

For some centuries, it was not. In the time of the apostles, the church lived with the ambiguity; many Christians recognized the seventh day as the Sabbath and the first day as the Lord’s Day. It may be that Romans 14:5, Galatians 4:9–10, and Colossians 2:16–17 refer to a controversy between Jewish and Gentile Christians over the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath.¹³ If this is the case, we should read Paul as saying that the seventh-day Sabbath is no longer required. The Lord’s Day is its replacement, in effect, though Paul does not mention that in these contexts. But it is hard to tell what thought processes on either side lie behind these three passages. More will be said on this in a later section of this chapter.

12. Ibid., 384.

13. There are other ways, however, of dealing with these passages, which we shall explore later.

After the apostolic age, when the enmity between Christianity and Judaism became more pointed, Christians regarded the seventh-day Sabbath as something “Jewish,” which Christians should eschew, while embracing the Lord’s Day. Ignatius’s letter to the Magnesians says that Christians “no longer observe the Sabbath, but direct their lives to the Lord’s Day, on which our life is refreshed by him and his death.” The writings of the church fathers are interestingly parallel to the developments we noted (in chapter 28) from Calvin to Dort. They gradually begin to treat the Lord’s Day as a Sabbath. Dionysius of Corinth (170), like the Synod of Dort, speaks of the Lord’s Day as holy.¹⁴ Tertullian (160–225) describes Sunday observance as “a distinguishing mark of Christians,” and he is the first known Christian writer to speak about “laying aside daily business on Sunday.”¹⁵ The Council of Laodicea (360), like the Westminster standards, formalizes the Sabbatarian character of the Lord’s Day: “Christians must not live according to Jewish patterns, and therefore they perform work on Saturday; but they must respect Sunday and as Christians they should quit their work, if possible.”¹⁶

Does this history show that Christians generally violated the fourth commandment during the first four centuries? In observing this development, it is important to keep in mind that in the early centuries of the church, Christian believers, like the Israelites in Egypt (see my argument in chapter 29), were rarely able to set aside Sunday work altogether. Christians had to support themselves and their families, what I have identified as a work of necessity. Being largely poor and often persecuted, they could not simply take off a day of their choosing for worship and rest. Jewish Christians, at least, had support from the Jewish community and tradition to rest on the seventh day. But no one had such support for a first-day Sabbatarian observance. So Paul did not make an issue of this in the first century, though he may have defended Christians against those who would require them to rest on the seventh day.

It was not until later, when Christianity had grown more influential in society (and especially after Constantine became the first Christian emperor), that theologians and church leaders began to treat the Lord’s Day fully as a Sabbath and demand cessation of work on that day. This development, I think, largely accounts for the relative silence in the early centuries on the Sabbatarian character of the Lord’s Day. And, in my judgment, there is nothing in that development that undermines the fun-

14. Cited in J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 139.

15. Ibid. Quotations are of Douma’s paraphrases.

16. Ibid.

damental obligation of the fourth commandment, or the view that the Lord's Day is in fact the Christian Sabbath. Theologically, the case for a first-day Sabbath is strong. The historical facts can be understood in a way that does not contradict that theological understanding.

THE CHANGE OF DAY

But who authorized the change from the seventh day to the first? Jesus did, by rising from the dead on the first day and meeting his disciples on this and subsequent first days. And the apostles did also, by adopting Lord's Day worship and by failing to impose a seventh-day rest upon Gentile Christians.

This change of day does not represent a violation of the fourth commandment or an abrogation of its terms. The fourth commandment speaks of the Sabbath as "the seventh day," but Hebrew uses ordinal numbers (first, second, etc.) both as names for the days (like our Sunday, Monday, etc.) and also as numbers designating a sequence. Context determines which of these meanings is right. If someone is told on Wednesday to work six days and rest on "the seventh," the word "seventh" does not mean Saturday. Rather, in this context, it refers to Tuesday, the seventh day in the sequence beginning on Wednesday.

In Exodus 20:9–10, "seventh" is ambiguous; it could have either of these two meanings. It is natural to assume that the starting point is the first day of the week (Sunday), which would make the seventh day Saturday. But in fact the fourth commandment does not specify any starting point. It refers only to sequence: work six days and rest on the seventh.¹⁷

Is there reason to think that the sequence always began on Sunday, so as to end on Saturday? I think not. Consider the following points:

1. The commandment does not say specifically on what day of the week the sequence was to begin.
2. It is difficult for us today to know, given all the changes in the calendar over thousands of years, precisely what day of our modern week was the Jewish Sabbath in the time of Moses.
3. The sequence of Sabbaths may have begun on a different day each year. Curtis and Charles Ewing, for example, argue that the first day of Passover each year, the fifteenth day of Abib, is a Sabbath (Lev. 23:6–7).¹⁸ The

17. Ra McLaughlin's response to the question "Is the Sabbath Saturday or Sunday?" is very helpful here. See <http://reformedanswers.org/answer.asp/file/99959.qna/category/th/page/questions>.

18. Curtis Clair Ewing and Charles Wesley Ewing, *Israel's Calendar and the True Sabbath* (Velma, OK: National Message Ministry, 1958). Rousas J. Rushdoony accepts the Ewings' account in *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1973), 134–36.

seventh day after that is another Sabbath (v. 8), and the weekly Sabbaths for the rest of the year are counted from that (vv. 15–16). Now the fifteenth day of Abib occurs, of course, on the same day of the month each year, but on a different day of the week—like your birthday. So, on the Ewing hypothesis, the Sabbath occurs on a different day of the week each year. This view is somewhat speculative. It is not plain on the face of Leviticus 23.¹⁹ But Scripture doesn't rule it out either. So we cannot say dogmatically that the Sabbath always fell on the seventh day of the week during the Old Testament period, though it did always mark the end of a seven-day sequence.²⁰ Of course, at a later time, at least during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, it did fall regularly on the seventh day of the week.

4. The Ewings thought that God had at least required the Jews to begin the sequence of Sabbaths on a certain day of a month. But it may be that the calendar is a human decision, not given by divine revelation. Indeed it is impossible to exclude a human element in the determination of the calendar. For one thing, God has not revealed to us where to put the International Date Line. Human beings made that decision. But a day that is Sabbath on one side of the line will not be Sabbath on the other side.²¹ So, at this point, human beings decide what day is to be the Sabbath. The same happens whenever the calendar is changed.

Imagine people lost on a desert island, who have forgotten what day of the week it is. Surely it would not be wrong for them to choose a day, any day, and make that the Sabbath for that community, even if that day turned out to be Thursday elsewhere in the world, or even if that day happened to be the third day in the calendar used by Moses. But that kind of choice has been made whenever people have adopted a new calendar.

My conclusion is that human beings choose the days of the week, month, and year on which the Sabbath is to fall. This choice is not made by divine revelation. Divine revelation tells us only to observe the Sabbath as the seventh day after six days of work.

So Jesus and the apostles, by changing the day from seventh to first, were not contradicting the terms of the fourth commandment, which tells us

19. My own view, which is the common one, is that the Passover and Pentecost Sabbaths in Lev. 23 are first-day Sabbaths, in addition to the weekly Sabbaths, not replacements for the weekly Sabbath, nor points of beginning for the sequence of Sabbaths.

20. Several special ceremonial Sabbaths in Leviticus are clearly identified by day of the month, not day of the week: (1) the Sabbath connected with the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:24–25), and (2) that connected with the Day of Atonement, which is nine days later (Lev. 23:26–32).

21. Some Westminster Seminary students once put out a joke seminary catalogue, describing one course as "Problems of Sabbath Observance When Crossing the International Date Line."

only to work for six days and to rest for one. God still calls us to keep that commandment literally in the new covenant.

THE MEANING OF THE CHANGE

But why the first day? Did Jesus choose it arbitrarily to be the resurrection day and the postresurrection Sabbath day? I think not. The Old Testament already contains much symbolism concerning the first day, which the New Testament fulfills. Note the following:

1. Adam's first full day of life occurred on God's seventh day, God's Sabbath (Gen. 2:2–3). So God's seventh-day Sabbath (which he shared with Adam, as we have seen) coincided with Adam's first day. The completion of God's creative work was the beginning for Adam, the foundation of man's earthly life, just as the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our new lives in him, the new creation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). In both cases, the Sabbath is associated with the first day.

2. The Pentecost wave and meal offerings occur on days "after the Sabbath" (Lev. 23:11, 16), that is, on first days of the week. The day of the meal offering is itself a Sabbath, though it is not called that. Israel is to hold a holy convocation on that day and is not to do "any ordinary work" (v. 21). So on this feast of the firstfruits, we are reminded of Jesus, the firstfruits of the dead (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). Like the Lord's Day, Pentecost celebrates resurrection.

3. In the Feast of Tabernacles as well, there are first- and eighth-day Sabbaths (Lev. 23:35, 39).

4. Now, since Pentecost and Tabernacles each includes two first-day Sabbaths, it is likely that the two Sabbaths in the Passover feast are also on the first day (vv. 6–8). So all three of the annual feasts which look forward to the redemption of Christ feature first-day Sabbaths.

5. The Jubilee is most likely a year following a Sabbath year, culminating the system of years with a first-year symbol: a Sabbath after a Sabbath.

The Old Testament symbolism, therefore, tells us that when God fulfills his redemptive purpose, the first day will have some special significance. It will mark a new beginning, a new creation, new life from the dead. When redemption is accomplished, there will be an emphasis on looking back, not only on looking forward.

Even as symbolism, the difference is a matter of degree. In the Old Testament, there was a looking back (to creation and deliverance from Egypt) as well as a looking forward (to Christ). And in looking forward, the Israelites anticipated something new taking place, to which they would afterward look back. So there were both seventh-day and first-day Sabbaths. In the

New Testament, there is only a first-day Sabbath, indicating the overwhelming significance of the finished work of Christ. But there is still the pattern of six days of work and one day of rest. It is still literally true, as the fourth commandment says, that we work for six days and look forward to the Sabbath as a rest from that toil. There is still a looking forward as well as a looking back: a looking back to the resurrection and a looking forward to Jesus' return and the consummation of all things. But the symbolism in the Old Testament is weighted somewhat toward looking ahead, and in the New Testament toward looking back. The change between seventh-day and first-day Sabbaths is essentially *a change in symbolic weight*.

THE KEEPING OF DAYS IN THE NEW COVENANT

I have postponed as long as possible a discussion of three Pauline passages that have played a major role in the discussion of the Sabbath in the New Testament. But now we must look at them. They are:

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. (Rom. 14:5)

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. (Gal. 4:9–11)

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col. 2:16–17)

These texts represent the most persuasive rebuttal to the Sabbatarian position. To many, it is obvious that these texts are incompatible with Sabbath keeping. We recall Calvin's statement, "Who but madmen cannot see what observance the apostle means?"²²

But to others Paul's meaning here is not so obvious. Certainly, if the reader agrees with the argument so far—(1) that the Sabbath is a creation

22. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.8.33. I confess I often enjoy Calvin's invective when it is directed against views other than my own. When he attacks my own positions, however, I consider him immoderate.

ordinance, (2) that it is affirmed by Jesus, (3) that the Lord's Day is a Sabbath, and (4) that there are no other suggestions in Scripture that Sabbath observance is to be abolished in the new covenant—then these statements of Paul are somewhat perplexing. Even on the anti-Sabbatarian position of Andrew Lincoln, the Lord's Day is the “appropriate” day of worship, as opposed to other days. But that is itself a kind of day keeping. To recognize the Lord's Day as uniquely appropriate for worship could well be construed as “esteeming one day better than another” (as Rom. 14:5) or “observing days” (Gal. 4:10). But Lincoln insists that his view of the Lord's Day does not contradict the strictures of the three passages. For him, these passages do not ban every kind of day keeping, only the keeping of a day as holy, or as a Sabbath. But the passages themselves make no such distinction. Lincoln, like Sabbatarian interpreters, is forced to assume that Paul's original readers would have understood his words in a more precise sense than is obvious on the surface.

One of the frequent problems we have in interpreting Paul is that we hear only one side of the conversation. We often wish that we had not only Paul's letters to the churches, but also their letters to him, so that we could better understand what questions he is responding to, what controversies he is seeking to resolve. God in his good providence has chosen not to give us that information, so we often have to try to extrapolate from what Paul says the likely motivations of his remarks. The difficulty of that task should be taken more seriously than it often has been among interpreters of the three passages before us.

As I mentioned briefly at an earlier point, I think the best suggestion is that Paul is here addressing a controversy over the Jewish seventh-day Sabbath. The Jewish Christians generally observed the seventh-day Sabbath and then worshiped Jesus on the first day. Some of the Gentile Christians evidently attended the first-day celebration of the resurrection, but did not observe the seventh-day rest. In actual fact, the seventh-day Sabbath was no longer binding. God, Jesus, and the apostles had warranted first-day worship, and, implicitly, a first-day Sabbath.

But the apostles did not stress a full day of resting on the first day of the week, because it was not possible for most Christians during that time to take off a full day of work on the first day. In chapter 29, I argued that one may support his family by working on the Sabbath if there is no other way to do it, a work of necessity. I believe the apostles respected that principle, even though it meant that the Gentile Christians did not observe the first-day Sabbath in its full meaning. But Paul did not intend to impose the seventh-day Sabbath upon them either. The attempt to impose that observance was part of the Judaizing movement that Paul contravenes so emphatically in Galatians and elsewhere.

It is better, Paul thought, to observe practically no Sabbath at all, than to accept the Judaizers' practice as something necessary to salvation.

But there are other ways of reading these passages:

1. Some Reformed interpreters believe that in these passages Paul is not talking about weekly Sabbaths at all (either seventh-day or first-day), but about other feast days of the Jewish calendar, some of which are called "Sabbaths," as in Leviticus 16:31; 23:24, 32. The phrase "days and months and seasons and years" in the Galatians passage suggests that possibility, as does "a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" in Colossians 2:16. Note that Colossians 2:16 speaks of "a" Sabbath, which would naturally refer to something other than the weekly Sabbath, rather than "the" Sabbath, which would naturally refer to the weekly Sabbath. The texts do not necessitate this understanding, but it cannot be entirely ruled out.

2. The Romans and Galatians passages do not mention any "Sabbath," so the possibilities for interpreting them are fairly broad. Even pagan observances are not out of the question. The context of Galatians 4:9–10 makes reference to the Gentile Christians' pagan past and warns them not to return to it. But more likely Paul is rebuking them for accepting a Judaizing practice which he finds deeply *analogous* to paganism.

3. Any interpretation of Galatians 4:9–10 must be qualified by an understanding of the overall message of the letter: Paul's insistence that no Jewish observances, indeed, no works of any kind, are necessary for our justification before God. In Galatians 5:2–4, Paul says that "if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you." But in Acts 16:3, Paul himself circumcised Timothy. The difference is that in Galatians 5, Paul is denying circumcision as a requirement for salvation. In Acts 16, Paul is affirming circumcision as a way to avoid offense. But if we had only Galatians 5:2–4, we might conclude that circumcision is forbidden for any purpose at all. Similarly, Galatians 4:9–10 might be thought to exclude any kind of day keeping. But clearly what Paul has in view there is the keeping of days as a necessary means of salvation. The passage is not relevant to questions about keeping days with other purposes in mind.

4. Colossians 2:16–17 is the most difficult of the three passages for Sabbatarians, because, unlike the other two passages, it contains the word "Sabbath."²³ A rather ingenious Sabbatarian understanding of this passage is found in the "Report of the Committee on Sabbath Matters," which was presented to the Thirty-ninth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1972.²⁴ The Report observes that "food and drink" (v. 16) are often taken

23. Although, again, it speaks of "a" Sabbath, not "the" Sabbath.

24. It is published in the *Minutes of the Fortieth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (1973), 92–112, now available at <http://www.opc.org/GA/sabbath.html>.

to refer to Old Testament dietary laws, but in fact there are no dietary laws referring to drink. It is more likely, then, that “food and drink” refers to food and drink *offerings* made at the temple in Jerusalem. That sets the context for “a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.” This triad is found with references to meat and drink *offerings* in Ezekiel 45:17: “And upon the prince [of the ideal Israel] shall be the obligation of the burnt offerings, and the meat (offerings), and the drink (offerings), in the feasts, and in the new moons, and in the sabbaths, in all the appointed times of the house of Israel.”²⁵

The triad of “feast, new moon, and Sabbath” is found in other texts referring to offerings (1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 8:13; 31:3; Neh. 10:33; Hos. 2:11). The Report comments, “All of these are quite clearly derived from Numbers 28, 29.” In Numbers, it continues, “the subject is not the individual worshipper’s offerings, nor his personal acts of worship on those days, but the system of official sacrifices to be made for all Israel.” Therefore, the Report says:

We can only conclude that for Paul, “feast, new moon, and sabbath” meant those same official sacrifices the phrase denotes in the Old Testament usage. There is nothing in the phrase to require us to understand that Paul meant to abrogate the Fourth Commandment for Christians. What Paul did mean was that support of the temple sacrifices by Christians was a matter of indifference (“Let no man judge” applies both ways). These sacrifices were part of a “shadow” whose “body is Christ’s.” They were God-given for that purpose and thus permissible at least for Christians, but were no longer required since the reality had come.

This interpretation parallels quite closely the import of Hebrews 10 where similar language about the “shadow” is found, and where the context demands that “shadow” be understood in terms of Old Testament sacrifices. (p. 101)

This interpretation is not the last word, and I still prefer to regard this passage as a reference to a church debate about the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath. But the Report’s interpretation is a possible one.

Of course, it is my Sabbatarian belief, taken from other parts of Scripture, that leads me to seek an exegesis of these passages compatible with continued Sabbath keeping. The same sort of exercise is necessary on the other side. Those who believe that these three texts exclude new covenant Sabbath keeping must try to find interpretations of other texts, such as Genesis 2:2–3, Exodus 20:8–11, and Revelation 1:10, that are compatible

25. The brackets and parentheses are inserted in the Report.

with the Sabbath's abrogation. All of us are seeking to compare Scripture with Scripture in order to gain the best understanding of the texts. There should be no embarrassment about that on either side. It is not, at least generally, that one side or the other is trying to press texts into a dogmatic mold. At least we should not accuse one another of that.

I do believe, however, that the anti-Sabbatarians have a more difficult task on their hands. Given our ignorance of the controversies that Paul is addressing, it is more likely that the three Pauline texts have a meaning compatible with new covenant Sabbath observance than that all the other texts we have considered can be construed in an anti-Sabbatarian framework.

Having said that, I should add that I don't believe the argument is watertight on either side. People within the Reformed community have differed on this issue since Calvin, and I don't see any argument that will put the debate completely to rest. There should be tolerance among Reformed Christians over this issue. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Presbyterian Church in America have refused ordination to some for holding Calvin's view of the Sabbath, implying that Calvin himself was not sufficiently orthodox to minister in that denomination. I recognize that the Westminster standards, to which the Orthodox Presbyterian Church subscribes, holds a view other than Calvin's, but I think that to insist on Westminster distinctives as a test of orthodoxy in this case is sectarian.²⁶

FEASTS, SABBATH YEARS, AND JUBILEE

I have noted that in the Old Testament the weekly Sabbath is part of a system that also includes special festival Sabbaths, Sabbath years, and the Jubilee following seven sevens of years. Do these other Sabbaths have any bearing on new covenant life?

I believe that these other Sabbaths are not literally binding on new covenant believers. The festivals are celebrations of various events in Old Testament history: the deliverance from Egypt (Passover), the giving of the law (Pentecost), and the wilderness wanderings (Tabernacles). The Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement bring the Israelite near to God, to bring sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. These feasts are observed in Jerusalem, where God dwells in the temple.

But in the new covenant, God no longer dwells in a temple in Jerusalem, and the Old Testament redemptive events prove to be only shadows of the

26. Such sectarianism, in this case, is the necessary outcome of strict subscriptionism.

final redemption achieved by Christ. The animal sacrifices, which are the centerpiece of these Old Testament celebrations, are now transcended by the ultimate sacrifice of Christ.

The Sabbath years and the Jubilee also depend on the fact that Israel dwells with God in a particular land. In the Sabbath year, Israel is to rest that land (Ex. 23:10–11; Lev. 25:1–7), and in the Jubilee (Lev. 25:8–34) Israel is to return the land to its original family owners. But in the new covenant, we have no divine title to land in Palestine. Our promised land is the whole earth, into which Christ has sent us to bring the gospel (Matt. 28:18–20). Eventually, we will hold title to land in the new heavens and new earth.

Nevertheless, Israel's Sabbath calendar has much to teach us. For one thing, the Sabbath years mandate ecological responsibility. God is concerned, not only with people, animals, and plants, but with land. As Adam was to guard and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15), so Israel is to give rest to the land, so that it can continue to bear plants for food. Although the cultural mandate tells us to have dominion over the earth, that dominion is, like God's, to be a benevolent dominion. We are not to exploit the land, but to preserve it. God takes this responsibility very seriously. One reason why God sent Israel into exile was that they had not been resting the land as he commanded. The exile continued "until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths" (2 Chron. 36:21).

This does not imply, as in much secular environmentalism, that any land is to be kept pristine, untouched by human hands. God has given the earth to human beings. But we are to deal with it responsibly, which means in our time to control pollution and to use the land in ways that will bless, not curse, future generations.

Another application of the Sabbath calendar for contemporary life is its concern for the poor. We have seen that mercy is an important aspect of the meaning of the Sabbath. This is also true of the Sabbath years. In the seventh year, the land is to "lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat" (Ex. 23:11). In the seventh year, what grows by itself is for all people, rich and poor, owners and servants. The seventh year becomes an image of heaven in which everybody has enough. The Sabbath years also bring release of debts and freedom to Hebrew servants (Deut. 15:1–6, 12–18). And in the Jubilee, had Israel kept it, God intended a wholesale reorganization of the economy, a new beginning for many who had lost their possessions.

I shall say more about poverty under the eighth commandment. But Scripture is pervasively and passionately concerned about the way we treat the poor, even in its teaching on the Sabbath. We have seen how Isaiah 58, far from being a polemic against Sabbath recreation, is a powerful call to justice in society in keeping with the meaning of the Sabbath. Similarly, Amos 8:4–8 says:

Hear this, you who trample on the needy
and bring the poor of the land to an end,
saying, "When will the new moon be over,
that we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
that we may offer wheat for sale,
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great
and deal deceitfully with false balances,
that we may buy the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
and sell the chaff of the wheat?"
The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
"Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.
Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who dwells in it,
and all of it rise like the Nile,
and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?"

Israel's Sabbatarians kept the letter of the law, we should assume. But while keeping the Sabbath, they were plotting ways of oppressing the poor on the other six days.

God does not require us any longer to keep the system of sabbatical years. But he certainly will not tolerate among us the attitudes toward the land and the poor that that system sought to prevent. Still today there are those who use the land without any thought for the future, or for the use of it by others. And there are those who buy and sell and rest and worship without any thought of how their actions affect the poor. That is not only sin in general, but Sabbath breaking in particular.

We see how the fourth commandment, like the others, stretches out to cover all of human life. Narrowly, it teaches us to maintain a certain rhythm in our lives: six days of work and one of rest. But this is to look at all of life from a temporal perspective. Six days and one day: that includes everything. To act during the six days in a way that is inappropriate to the six days is a violation of the fourth commandment. The same is true of our behavior on the seventh. So the Sabbath commandment mandates not only rest, but worship (the attitude that is appropriate toward to God) and mercy (the attitude that is appropriate toward our fellow men). And mercy extends to both the land and the poor. So the fourth commandment covers everything. Like the others, it is equivalent to the command to love God and one another. Although it focuses on our attitude toward God, it also governs our attitudes and actions toward one another.

CHAPTER 46

Christ and Culture

In the last chapter, I defined culture as what we make of God's creation, or rather what God makes through us. Culture is the human response, in obedience or disobedience, to the cultural mandate, God's command to Adam and Eve to replenish the earth and subdue it. As such, culture expresses our religion, our service to God or to an idol. Since the fall into sin, described in Genesis 3, culture expresses unbelief, rebellion against God. But there is also good in culture, because of God's common grace and his special grace. By his common grace, God restrains human sin. By his special grace, he sends Christ to save us. And Jesus' saved people spread over the earth, preaching the gospel, winning others to Christ, and bringing the influence of Jesus into the cultures of the world. So in any human culture, we can expect to find both good and bad.

Here I want to look more closely at the relationship between Christ and human culture as Scripture presents it. I will be looking at five different historical models of this relationship, five ways in which Christians have understood the relation of Christ to culture. These are not my models. Everybody who discusses Christianity and culture discusses these. The first one to formulate them was H. Richard Niebuhr, in his book *Christ and Culture*,¹ probably the most influential twentieth-century work on the subject.

But I will try to evaluate these models biblically. When we're thinking about culture, of course, we must think about a lot of things outside the Bible. But the Bible is our ultimate norm, and our only ultimate norm—*sola*

1. New York: Harper, 1951.

Scriptura. As Christians, we should not seek to be autonomous, as Eve did in Genesis 3, to make our own wisdom supreme. To God, the best of human wisdom is foolishness. We must listen to him first, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of true wisdom.

I say that at this point, first, because it's always good to be reminded of it, and second, because it seems to me to be especially important to discussions of Christ and culture. When Christians evaluate culture, they often give a great deal of weight to various theories of historical development, of sociology and psychology, of aesthetic excellence, and so on. While knowledge in these fields and others can help us to *apply* scriptural principles, extra-biblical theories are never the final criterion. Only Scripture has the final word. And we must always be open to let Scripture criticize our theories. We must never force Scripture to say what our theories demand; rather, we must continually revise and even abandon our theories as we interact over and over again with God's Word.²

Niebuhr's five models are these: (1) Christ against culture, (2) the Christ of culture, (3) Christ above culture, (4) Christ and culture in paradox, and (5) Christ the transformer of culture. Let's look at these individually. Hardly anybody is a pure example of just one of these. Most of us mix up these models in our thinking. But they are guideposts by which we can compare our views to those of others and identify emphases in the great thinkers of the church over history.

CHRIST AGAINST CULTURE

In the early days of Christianity, there were many conflicts between the Christians, the Jews, and the pagans, often rising to the level of persecution. Christians often saw themselves at war with the surrounding culture. A number of the church fathers, the earliest Christian writers after the New Testament period, described the Christians as a "third race," distinct from both Jews and Gentiles. The Christians worshiped a different God, lived by a different law, and had a different inward character. The world was simply wicked. Tertullian (ca. 160–220) argued that Christians could not participate in the military, in politics, or in trade with the world. After we become Christians, Tertullian said, we have no need of Greek philosophy. Jerusalem and Athens have nothing to do with one another.

You can see the main outlines of this picture: Christianity and culture are opposites, opposed to one another, at war with one another. This view became

2. Cf. the discussion of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture in chapters 9–11.

less common after the Roman Empire became officially Christian under Constantine. But this sort of language emerged often later, in Anabaptist groups, among the Amish, and among some varieties of American evangelicals.

These groups have been able to appeal to some themes of the Bible. In the Old Testament, God wanted Israel to be strictly separate from the pagan nations. God's people were to be different from the pagan world, not only in their worship, but also in their diet, their clothing, their calendar, their patterns of work and rest, their planting and resting the land, and their laws. They were to be God's special people, his "peculiar" people, a holy nation, different from all other nations on earth (Ex. 19:5–6).

In the New Testament, we read of another holy nation, another special people of God, distinct from all the nations, but also different from the Jews. These are the people of Christ. In the New Testament, there is much emphasis on the conflict between Christians and the world.

Now the Bible uses the term *world* in different ways. Sometimes the world is simply the whole creation of God, the inhabited earth, without reference to sin or salvation. But Scripture often reminds us that the human world has fallen into sin. So it often uses the term *world*—either the spatial term *kosmos* or the temporal term *aion*—to designate everything opposed to God. The world hates Jesus, because he testifies that its works are evil (John 7:7). Jesus' Jewish opponents are "of this world," but he is not (John 8:23). Satan is the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 John 5:19). The world cannot receive the Holy Spirit (John 14:17). The world will rejoice when Jesus is killed (16:20). In the world, the disciples will have tribulation; but take heart, Christ has overcome the world (16:33). Jesus has chosen his disciples out of the world (John 17:6). He prays for them, but not for the world (17:9). The disciples are not of the world, even as he is not of the world (17:14).

Paul picks up the theme: don't be conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2). The wisdom of the world is foolishness with God (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:20–21; 2:6–8). Remember that the saints will judge the world (1 Cor. 6:2). Paul says the world is crucified to him, and he to the world (Gal. 6:14). James says that true religion is to visit widows and orphans and to keep oneself unspotted from the world (1:27). But the most arresting antithesis is in 1 John:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of his eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (2:15–17)

So there is an antithesis, an opposition, between Christ and the world, and therefore between the believer and the world. Significantly, however, Scripture never tells Christians to leave the world. Obviously we can never leave the world in the sense of God's creation. But should we try to stay away from other human beings, from human society contaminated by sin? Perhaps a little surprisingly, the Bible's answer is no. Jesus prays, not that the Father will take the disciples out of the world, but that he will keep them from the Evil One (John 17:15). They are not of the world, but as the Father sent Jesus into the world, so he sends his disciples into the world (17:11–18). Paul did not forbid the Corinthians to associate with people who are immoral, greedy, swindlers, or even idolaters, for, he says, "then you would need to go out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:10). Like Jesus, we are to shine as lights of the world (Matt. 5:14; cf. Phil. 2:15). So we are to be *in* the world, but not of the world—a very difficult balance to maintain, to be sure.

So there is a biblical basis for thinking in terms of antithesis. Should we, then, adopt the model of "Christ against culture"? Well, for one thing, *culture* and *world* are not synonymous. As I argued in the previous chapter, culture is a mixture of good and bad. It includes the effects of sin as well as the effects of God's grace. But *world*, used in that negative ethical sense, is entirely bad. The *world* is the kingdom of the Evil One, and Christians should not be conformed to it even a little bit. We should not have any love for it. Our only concern should be to rescue people out of it. The world is a great snare and delusion.

Culture is a broader term than *world*. *World* is the bad part of culture. It is the culture of unbelief, taken in its essence, without the effects of common grace and special grace. The early church, looking out on a world untouched by the gospel, often saw worldliness as something pervasive and inescapable. It was a systematic kind of unbelief that tried to bring everything under its sway. So Christians didn't always make fine distinctions between the evils of the world and the mixed good and evil of culture.

But sometimes they did. In 1 Corinthians 9, for example, Paul says that to the Jews he becomes as a Jew, to the Greeks as a Greek. To the weak (to people with special religious scruples) he becomes weak, in order to gain the weak. Paul accommodates his behavior to the customs of different groups, to their culture, so that he can win them to Christ. He doesn't commit sin, but he conforms his behavior to their cultural expectations in nonsinful ways. This assumes that not everything in Jewish and Gentile cultures is evil. And, as I mentioned before, every culture contains some good products, customs, and institutions, such as crops, marriage, government, and language. The Greek language is a product of Greek culture, for example. But it's not wrong for Paul to use it in his preaching and teaching. The Greek language is cultural, but it is not *worldly*.

So: Christ against the world, yes; Christ against culture, no. There is, of course, much for us to oppose in culture, but God doesn't call us to oppose culture as such.

THE CHRIST OF CULTURE

As we've seen, the church fathers tended to see Christ and culture in conflict. But they were not entirely consistent about that. When they defended Christians against the attacks of the pagans, they tended to seek common ground. They pointed out how Christians were a vital part of the larger society and brought many benefits to the general culture. So even Tertullian says to the pagans:

We sojourn with you in the world, abjuring neither forum, nor shambles, nor bath, nor booth, nor inn, nor weekly market, nor any other places of commerce. . . . We sail with you, and fight with you, and till the ground with you; and in like manner we unite with you in your traffickings—even in the various arts we make public property of our works for your benefit.³

Niebuhr, however, quotes this section and adds: "This, however, is said in defense. When he admonishes believers his counsel is to withdraw from many meetings and many occupations, not only because they are corrupted by their relation to pagan faith but because they require a mode of life contrary to the spirit and the law of Christ."⁴

But Tertullian's attempt to seek common ground with paganism was not isolated. Justin Martyr, for example, and later Clement of Alexandria recommended Christianity to the pagans as the fulfillment of Greek philosophy. Plato, they thought, lived according to the *logos*, according to rational speech; and of course the *Logos* in John 1:1–14 is Jesus Christ. So, said Justin, Socrates and Plato were Christians. Just as the Old Testament prepared the Jews for Christ, so Greek philosophy prepared the Greeks for Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment of all that is highest and best in the philosophies of men. The Greeks should have no problem in accepting Christ, because, in effect, they are Christians already.

Niebuhr also mentions the medieval thinker Peter Abelard and the liberal Protestants who followed Albrecht Ritschl in the nineteenth century as examples of this tendency. They presented Jesus exclusively as a moral

3. *Apology*, xlvi.

4. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951), 55–56.

teacher. To them, Jesus doesn't oppose human culture; rather, he teaches all that is noblest and best in the cultural traditions of mankind.⁵

Certainly these thinkers are not wrong in saying that Christ affirms what is right and good in all human culture. But it is unbiblical to limit Jesus to those things he shares with human culture. Jesus' wisdom is far greater than any Greek philosopher or modern moralist ever dreamed. And, indeed, he is far more than a philosopher or moralist. No moral teacher can save us from sin, for we have in ourselves no power to act morally. But Jesus died to satisfy the wrath of God, so that we might live eternally and so that we might be able to please God. And the preaching of this good news makes foolish the wisdom of the world.

Further, the "Christ of culture" position tends to neglect the biblical doctrine of sin. It identifies Christ with culture, because it doesn't see how bad culture is under the influence of the fall and the curse.

Nevertheless, Christians have often had a hard time distinguishing between Christ and culture. One common criticism of Western missionaries over the last two centuries has been that they have tried to impose Western culture on other countries in the name of Christ. They have brought not only the gospel, but also Western clothing, Western hymns, and Western politics. But drawing these lines is not always easy. When a missionary counsels a tribe about clothing, where does he draw the line between a biblical concern for modesty and Western aesthetic standards? When he recommends music for their worship, how much of his thinking is governed by biblical standards and to what extent is he merely homesick for the music he grew up with? When you grow up in a Christian society, or in a culture deeply influenced by the gospel, it's tempting to want all other societies to be like that.

This problem even enters into our understanding of Scripture. When Paul says that women praying or prophesying should have a particular hairstyle or head covering, is this command limited to a particular culture, or is it a universal norm? It's easy for us to criticize Abelard and Ritschl for their easy equation of Christ and culture, but we face the same problem.

CHRIST ABOVE CULTURE

Niebuhr has special names for views three through five. Those who hold the third view are "synthesists," those who hold the fourth are "dualists," and those who hold the fifth are "transformationalists."

5. Ibid., 89–101.

The third view recognizes that Christ and culture are different, and, unlike the first view, recognizes that there is good in both. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) is the chief representative of this view, and the Roman Catholic Church adopted his position in a somewhat official way. At the heart of Roman Catholic theology is the distinction between nature and grace. Nature is the world as God made it. Grace is the name for special gifts that God gives to human beings beyond nature.⁶

Natural reason, for example, is part of our nature, as God created us. It enables us to understand the world around us—and even to prove the existence of God, according to Aquinas. But by natural reason, we can never understand the Trinity or understand how to be saved from sin. For that we need a higher means of knowledge, divine revelation and faith. Natural reason belongs to nature; faith belongs to grace.

By our natural abilities, we plow the soil, marry and raise families, and achieve various kinds of earthly happiness. But to reach our highest purpose, a supernatural purpose, we need God's grace.

We must make the same distinction among authorities. The state administers nature; the church administers grace.

So how does Christ relate to culture? Generally speaking, culture is man's development of nature. Christ supplements nature with something higher. The higher then mingles easily with the lower, in a "synthesis."

This doesn't sound so bad when you first hear of it; in fact, it seems to make good sense. The trouble is that the way it is sometimes put is that you really don't need Christ at the lower level, only at the higher level. Natural reason, for example, works perfectly well without the help of divine revelation. Aristotle learned many valuable things through his natural reason. His problem was not so much that he was wrong, though sometimes he was. His problem was that he needed to know more than his reason could tell him. He needed a supplement.

And you can do just fine at making your living and raising your family without Christ. But if you're interested in eternal life, then you need something more. Indeed, if you're *really* interested in eternal life, you'll quit your job, promise never to marry, and become a monk, taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The problem, however, is that it is unbiblical to separate nature and grace in this sort of way. Remember that God intends us to live our natural lives for his glory. When we eat and drink, do our jobs, and raise our families, we should be doing that for the glory of God. But apart from grace, we are sinners. "Every intention of the thoughts of [our] heart [is] only

6. Cf. the discussions of nature and grace in chapters 17 and 32.

evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). So without grace we cannot live our natural lives as God intended. We need far more than a supplement. We need a complete change of direction.

The same is true for natural reason. Yes, it's true that we can know God through the world around us. But without faith, we hate that truth and suppress it. We cannot rightly understand the world, then, apart from God's grace, his revelation.

The state can maintain order through force. But it has no sense of its true powers and limits apart from God's Word. Without that, its force becomes tyranny.

So in Scripture, nature and grace are quite inseparable. Grace is not just a higher level, a supplement to nature. Rather, nature is hopeless, apart from grace. And so we must understand culture. Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon, and the degenerates of Romans 1 are examples of what culture is like without Christ.

CHRIST AND CULTURE IN PARADOX

Each view that we've discussed recognizes something important about the relation of Christ and culture. The first view recognizes the reality of spiritual warfare. The second recognizes that there is good in culture. The third recognizes that Christ is different from even what's best in culture. The fourth view, now, what Niebuhr calls "dualism," recognizes far more than the third the intense sinfulness of culture. This view is usually associated with the Lutheran tradition, but it has been held by many Reformed people too, especially in recent years. I confess I find it harder to understand and to describe than the other views, but I will do my best.⁷

The heart of this view is that, as Gene Veith puts it, God exercises a "double sovereignty."⁸ He has "two Kingdoms." He rules one way in the church and a different way in the world in general: "In the church, God reigns through the work of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit, expressing his love and grace through the forgiveness of sins and the life of faith."⁹ In the world in general, God "exercises his authority and providential

7. This position is closely related to the Lutheran view of law and gospel (which I discussed in chapter 12), natural law ethics (chapter 14), the doctrine of the twofold end (chapter 17), Kline's view of common grace (chapter 29), and his view of the state (chapter 32).

8. Gene Edward Veith, "Christianity and Culture: God's Double Sovereignty," from *Modern Reformation*, 6.1 (January–February, 1997): 15–19, available at <http://www.issuesset.org/resource/archives/veith2.htm>.

9. Ibid., 5–6.

control" through "natural laws" (of physics, chemistry, etc.). "Similarly, God rules the nations—even those who do not acknowledge him—making human beings to be social creatures, in need of governments, laws, and cultures to mitigate the self-destructive tendencies of sin and to enable human beings to survive."¹⁰ Veith also describes these two sovereignties or two kingdoms as gospel versus law and spiritual versus secular. Luther used the metaphor of the spiritual as God's "right hand," and the secular as God's "left hand."

So far, I can agree with most all of this. Certainly God does rule the church somewhat differently from the way he rules the secular world. I do miss something, though. Of Veith's two divine sovereignties, neither one is what we usually call "divine sovereignty" in Reformed theology. In Reformed theology, God's sovereignty is comprehensive. All things come to pass according to the good pleasure of his will (Eph. 1:11). And God's general sovereignty is not exercised primarily through natural laws, though those may play a role, but primarily by his own direct involvement in history, by Christ, in whom all things hold together, and the Spirit, who makes life abound on the earth.¹¹ Scripture never speaks of natural laws in the sense of impersonal forces through which God works. It may be useful in science to speak of such things, but that can only be a way of speaking in shorthand of God's direct, personal action. So I think there is a unity in God's sovereignty that the two-kingdom doctrine somewhat obscures.

A more serious problem is that the two-kingdom doctrine claims a duality, not only in God's providence, but also in God's standards. There are secular values and religious values, secular norms and religious norms. Secular society is responsible only to follow natural laws, the morality found in nature. So, he says, "morality is not a matter of religion."¹² The church, however, is subject to the whole Word of God. Therefore, although the Christian can participate in the general culture, he should not seek to Christianize it, to turn it into a Christian culture. There is no such thing as a Christian culture; there is only secular culture and a Christian church. Nor, of course, should he try to bring secular standards (e.g., secular music) into the church.

Secular society is governed by the principle of justice, and therefore by the sword. The church is governed, not by the sword, but by God's Word and Spirit. Veith argues that we should not ask civil governments to show forgiveness to criminals, but to punish them according to justice. Justice is the natural morality; forgiveness is found only in the church. So there is some inconsistency between the secular ethic and the ethic of the church.

10. Ibid., 6.

11. For more on this, see DG, chapters 13–14.

12. Veith, "Christianity and Culture," 6.

Now, I have all sorts of problems with the idea that there are two different sets of divine norms:

1. To be sure, non-Christians have what might be called a “natural knowledge of morality”; and, to be sure, that knowledge consists of law rather than gospel. But there is no inconsistency between what God commands through this natural knowledge and what he commands us in Scripture. God’s moral standards are one, even though they come through two media.

2. Contrary to Veith, morality certainly is a matter of religion. The moral law is binding because the true God requires it of us. If God did not exist, there would be no right or wrong. That includes natural morality. In Romans 1, people know right and wrong, because they know that the true God exists, however much they try to repress that knowledge. So even in the non-Christian’s conscience, morality is a matter of religion. And insofar as they do repress that knowledge, they fall into idolatry and unnatural lust, says Paul. Errors in religion lead to errors in morality. Nevertheless, enough of that natural knowledge shines through that nonbelievers often do pay lip-service to it even when they are violating it (Rom. 1:32).

3. Through the Scriptures and through their regenerate insight, Christians have available to them a fuller understanding of God’s law than non-Christians have. They ought to bring that Christian understanding and insight to bear upon culture and government as best they can. But when we do that, aren’t we in one sense working to “Christianize culture”?

4. It is true that the state has the power of the sword and that the church does not. But that is not because there are two different moralities, one secular and one Christian. Rather, that distinction comes out of the Word of God. God tells us in Scripture that the state has the power of the sword and the church does not. This doctrine is what we earlier called “sphere sovereignty” (chapter 32), and although people sometimes try to make more out of this principle than it deserves, it certainly is the case that God gives to the church and to the state different areas of authority and different means of enforcing that authority. There is no inconsistency here, no paradox. It is simply a distinction that God in his Word has asked us to make. The relation between Christ and culture is often confused, I think, with the relation between church and state. Although these two distinctions are related, they are not synonymous.

5. So the use of the sword by the state is not an alternative to Christian morality, but part of Christian morality. It is not an impediment to a Christian state, but the very essence of a Christian state. A Christian state would not be a state where love and forgiveness replace justice. It would be a state that expresses the justice of God.

6. This does not mean that the state may force people to become Christians, even though some Christians in the past have mistakenly drawn this implication. That is not a proper role for the state in a biblical understanding.

7. Similarly, the Christian should seek to bring biblical standards to bear in all areas of society and culture. Our motive is not to try to make non-Christians live the Christian life, but simply to work out the implications of our faith in all areas of life.

8. The conventional criticism of the two-kingdom theory is that it is too conservative. According to this criticism, the two-kingdom view avoids any kind of Christian activism, because it wants to just let the secular be the secular. So some have blamed the two-kingdom view for the passivity of the German church in the Nazi era. Veith defends the two-kingdom view against this criticism by saying that it does permit Christians actively to promote justice in society, if that justice is seen in a properly secular way. Here I tend to agree with Veith rather than with the critics. But I wonder what standard the two-kingdom Christians are to use for their activism. May they use the Scriptures to define the nature of justice in society, or are they somehow limited to natural revelation? And how do we distinguish between what is scriptural and what is merely natural? The two-kingdom doctrine leaves it unclear. And perhaps that very lack of clarity has kept Christians in some situations from being as active as they should have been.¹³

9. Veith says that just as we should not bring the standards of the church to bear on culture, so we shouldn't let secular standards—for example of art and music—invade the church. On the other hand, this theory also says that there are no distinctively Christian standards of art and music, only secular standards. Veith says, “There is no need for a distinctively Christian approach to music, plumbing, computer science, physics, or wood-carving,”¹⁴ so we have no choice but to employ the standards used in secular art and music schools. Most who write in this way advocate a kind of artistic conservatism, holding to classical standards in church music and so on. But the secular world is very confused about what constitutes “good” music, for example. If we must listen to them, who should we listen to, and why should we listen only to the conservative voices, rather than the radical ones? This whole position is very confusing. I shall have more to say about standards for church music in a later chapter.¹⁵

13. Recall Budziszewski's admission that statements about natural law must be verified by the Scriptures (chapter 14).

14. Veith, “Christianity and Culture,” 8.

15. See also my articles, “In Defense of Christian Activism” and “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient to Govern Culture?” appendices E and F in this volume.

CHRIST, THE TRANSFORMER OF CULTURE

So, by process of elimination, but not only that, I find myself supporting the fifth view, that Christians should be seeking to transform culture according to the standards of God's Word. This simply means that if you are a Christian artist, car repairman, government official, or whatever, you should be seeking to do your work as a Christian, to apply God's standards to your work. As Paul says, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Christians have always sought to do this, and in seeking to do this, they have had a huge impact on culture. They haven't turned earth into heaven, or the world into the church. And sometimes they have made tragic mistakes. But they have also done a great deal of good, as a book like the one by Kennedy and Newcombe indicates.¹⁶ Here are a few responses to common criticisms:

1. Seeking to transform culture in this way does not mean trying to save the world apart from God's grace. It simply means obeying God as our thankful response to his grace.

2. A transformational approach does not assume an unrealistic optimism about what is possible in fallen society. We know, just as much as the dualists do, that the world is fallen, deeply sinful, and totally depraved. But we also have confidence in God's common grace and his special grace. Real change for the better can occur, and history shows that it has occurred—not perfection, but real change for the better.

3. To apply Christian standards to art, for example, does not mean that we must turn our artistic works into salvation tracts. The Bible doesn't require that. I do believe that the gospel of salvation is a fit subject, indeed a glorious subject for artistic treatment. Bach's Passions and Da Vinci's *Last Supper* are proof of that. But art should deal with all aspects of God's creation.

4. A transformational approach does not mean that every human activity practiced by a Christian (e.g., plumbing, car repair) must be obviously, externally different from the same activities practiced by non-Christians. There is always a difference, but often the difference is that of motive, goal, and standard, rather than anything external. The Christian seeks to change his tires to the glory of God, and the non-Christian does not. But that's a difference that couldn't be captured in a photograph. When changing tires, Christian and non-Christian may look very much alike.

5. Critics have often bemoaned the lack of high standards in Christian art, music, and other cultural activity. To some extent, these crit-

16. D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994).

ics are right. But the answer to this problem is not to accept secular standards uncritically. (Again, even if we did, which ones should we accept?) The answer is rather to be more faithful to God, both in his special and in his general revelation. We ought to be humble enough to learn what we can from the knowledge in these areas that God has given to unbelievers. But we should always be challenging it on the basis of our knowledge of the true God.