Autonomy

The term *autonomy*, from the Greek *auto* (“self”) and *nomos* (“law”), refers to the right of self-direction. It requires agency (the capacity to act as one intends) and liberty (freedom from external control). Originally a political term applied to self-governing nations, *autonomy* now more commonly applies to an institution or individual following a self-chosen plan. The autonomy of ethics indicates the independence of moral thinking from other influences, such as religion, culture, and tradition.

Ethicists as early as Aristotle addressed the political autonomy of the city-state; individual autonomy gained prominence much later, in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant defined autonomy as the capacity to make moral decisions based on universalized maxims, without regard to external circumstances, potential outcomes, or personal desire.

Since Kant, the concept of autonomy has been applied in practical ways. In the helping professions, carefully crafted policies protect patient autonomy, preserving human dignity and preventing abuse where imbalance of power exists. In healthcare ethics, for example, informed consent protects patients’ rights to make decisions about their own health. In business and legal ethics, practices such as performance reviews and judicial action hold individuals and institutions accountable and assume the ability to self-regulate behavior. Politically, acknowledging self-government means rejecting paternalism.

Despite the importance of autonomy to contemporary ethics, however, theological ethicists caution that overemphasis on autonomy may lead to unchecked individualism, reduce human relationships to contractual obligations, and especially undermine human dependence on God.

Extending autonomy to the point of individualism is a modern Western tendency, whereas many other cultures subordinate the autonomy of the individual to the well-being of the community. This may create tension when, for example, Western healthcare ethics emphasizes patient autonomy to the extent that it disregards practices of corporate decision-making (common in many Latin American cultures) or protecting patients from the gravity of their situation (as in some Asian cultures).

Scripture affirms individual autonomy but also values community. The divine image and likeness of God in human beings (Gen. 1:26–27) bestows human dignity and demands our honor and respect for self and others. At the same time, human beings exist in community with God and with other persons. Only God has absolute autonomy in the sense of being free from all authority; human autonomy is always in the context of appropriate submission to God and to human authorities (Matt. 9:8; Rom. 13:1–4; 1 Thess. 4:8).

Indeed, Scripture always speaks of human autonomy against the background of our total dependence on God. The Bible also has much to say about how we use our freedom and toward what end. Romans 6 equates freedom from sin with freedom for righteousness, for example. The author of 1 Cor. 9 says that he is free but makes himself slave to all. Autonomy that is consistent with Scripture is not freedom to indulge one's self-interests, but rather freedom from all that hinders one's service to God and other persons.

See also Freedom; Healthcare Ethics; Image of God; Individualism; Moral Agency; Self

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Amy Renee Wagner

Collective Responsibility

Moral responsibility is one of the fundamental questions of philosophy. According to major philosophical theories, individuals are judged morally responsible for their own actions. In antiquity there was a major debate over this issue, and it is found in biblical texts from the OT through the NT. Establishing the biblical basis for the concept of collective responsibility is not easy. In Exod. 20; 34; Num. 14; Deut. 5 the concept of "visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children" is found, and it is interpreted as allowing for multigenerational divine punishment. The concept is also often found in Hittite texts.

The passage in Exod. 34 suggests that there are no conditions or mitigating circumstances for the visiting of the sins of parents on their children. The standard of collective responsibility is found in what modern biblical criticism identifies as early and later pentateuchal materials (ninth through eighth centuries BCE) and is also assumed in narratives and legal materials of the OT (e.g., Josh. 7:24–25; 2 Sam. 21:1–9). The standard of collective responsibility was challenged in prophetic and in late biblical texts. The challenge is found in Lam. 5:7 and also in Job 21:19–21 (and Job 27:14), where the book of Job takes collective responsibility as a matter of debate. The standard apparently was modified by the time of the sixth-century prophets Ezekiel (18:1–4) and Jeremiah (31:29), where the exile of the Judeans as punishment for all future generations of Judeans is challenged. In addition, Ezekiel (3:18–20) seems to be against what might have been a standing counterpart to intergenerational punishment: intergenerational merit, a concept that will reemerge in importance in the rabbinic period and early Byzantine Christian sources. Modern biblical criticism assumes

that the debate over the idea of intergenerational punishment meted out by God took place by the end of the seventh century BCE (the Deuteronomistic law code) because in Deut. 24:16 there is a standard of individual responsibility (similar to Ezekiel and Jeremiah) in the Pentateuch.

The mixture of the two positions (collective versus individual responsibility) continues from the period of the OT through the intertestamental period (third century BCE through the first century CE). In Wis. 3:10–4:6; Sir. 41:5–7; Jdt. 7:19–20; *4 Ezra* 7:118 the standards of both collective and individual responsibility mixed together and sometimes are presented in the same verse (as in *2 Bar.* 54:15–19). An active continuation of the issue is found in various Dead Sea Scrolls. The Deuteronomy scroll *4QDeuteronomy*^{n} has the "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons" citation, and other Dead Sea Scrolls texts contain references to a concept apparently derived from this biblical verse. The scrolls even refer to a time of *HaPequdah*, the multigenerational punishment or purification process. In addition, an eternal purification process is mentioned in the scrolls that stretches backward through the generations. It is found throughout the general rules of the community, but also in a liturgical text known as *Words of the Luminaries*^{a} (4Q504). Intergenerational punishment is also found in *4QHosea Pesher*^{a} (4Q166), and the *Damascus Document* contains multiple references, as do the *Thanksgiving Hymns*, the *Wisdom Poems*, and the *4QPurification Rules*.

The first-century CE Jewish writers Philo and Josephus make little or no reference to the standard of collective responsibility despite having comprehensive interpretations of the biblical citations where the idea appears. In the same period, the Targumim (Aramaic renderings of the Hebrew texts) wrestle with the two conflicting concepts and resolve

them in a variety of ways.

One clear first-century use of the concept of collective responsibility appears in the NT. The text is crucial to any discussion of the concept. Its appearance in the NT implies that the standard of p 149 "visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children" was still relevant in the time of the Gospel writers. Matthew, describing the events leading to Jesus' crucifixion, reports, "When Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowed, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children' " (Matt. 27:24–25). This verse in Matthew gains importance because it does not appear in the other Gospel accounts of the crucifixion, and the fact that this scene is paralleled in Luke and Mark without this exchange between Pilate and the crowd is relevant. The verse in Matthew is often cited in church literature and sermonizing starting in the Byzantine period as part of anti-Judaic arguments (and even in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anti-Semitic polemics) justifying ill treatment of Jews living in later periods. It is important to note that the Ante-Nicene church fathers (first through the third centuries CE) cite the two biblical standards from the OT of divine punishment of the individual and multigenerational punishment in different ways in discussing the concept of theodicy.

See also Anti-Semitism; Covenantal Ethics; Moral Agency; Punishment; Reparation; Responsibility

Richard Freund

Common Good

The notion of the common good has long been central to Catholic social teaching and has had several connotations.

First, there is reference to the good of all people, all classes, and of each individual (Korzen and Kelley xxi, 4–18). The most influential papal encyclical for social teaching, Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* (1891), on justice for workers, says, "Civil society exists for the common good, and hence is concerned with the interests of all in general, albeit with individual interests also in their due place and degree" (§51). The common good is referred to twenty-five times in Pope John XXIII's *Mater et magistra* (1961), and forty-eight times in his *Pacem in terris* (1963), often as the "common good of all" (§§48, 56, 58) and the "universal common good" (§§7, 100, 125, 133, 134, 135, 137, 138, 139, 140) of all persons (see McCann in McCann and Miller). Its clear meaning for social justice is seen in the United States Catholic Bishops' *Economic Justice for All*, which cites "common good" thirty-four times. This is echoed by the climax of the US Pledge of Allegiance, "with liberty and justice for all."

The human dignity of all persons in Genesis reverberates throughout the encyclicals as a basis for the common good. *Pacem in terris* (§3) begins by quoting two psalms (8:1; 104:24) and Gen. 1:26, which states that God created humankind in his own image and likeness, endowed them with intelligence and freedom, and made them lord of creation. The document's first pronouncement is "Peace on earth … can be firmly established only if the order laid down by God be dutifully observed" (§1). This is both biblical and natural-law basis for the "universal common good." Additional support for the common good from the Ten Commandments, the book of Jonah, and the letters of Paul

is developed by McCann and Miller.

Workers and all humans, body and soul, with special attention to less fortunate persons, including immigrants and political refugees, and underdeveloped countries should share in the common good (*Pacem in terris* §§91–108, 121–25) (see Hollenbach, esp. 93). *Gaudium et spes* (1965), promulgated by Pope Paul VI, emphasizes a special obligation to make ourselves neighbors to abandoned elderly persons, underpaid foreign laborers, refugees, suffering children, and hungry persons, quoting Jesus' words in Matt. 25:40: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." *Mater et magistra* (§§43, 78–80, 139) associates the common good with economic rights of all citizens, especially the weaker—workers, women, and children. Public and universal authority "must have as its fundamental objective the recognition, respect, safeguarding and promotion of the rights of the human person" (*Pacem in terris* §139). Pope Benedict XVI writes, "Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor.... Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40)" (*Deus caritas est* §15).

Therefore, the common good requires government intervention, incentive, and regulation to stop the powerful from aggrandizing far more than their fair share for themselves. It requires that governments "increase the degree and scope of their activities in the economic sphere" and "devise ways and means and set the necessary machinery in motion for the attainment of this end"; otherwise, there occurs "unscrupulous exploitation of the weak by the strong" (*Mater et magistra* §§54, 58 [see also *Pacem in terris* §§63–66]). John Paul II p 152 says that we need to pay attention to the universal common good because of "the structures of

sin" in the world (see McCann and Miller 142–43).

Nations need to provide employment for as many workers as possible, to maintain a balance between wages and prices, to make the goods and services for a better life accessible to as many persons as possible, to limit the inequalities between different sectors of the economy, to have regard for future generations, and to give effectively to the economically underdeveloped nations (*Mater et magistra* §§79, 150–65). However, this must be balanced by freedom and private initiative of individuals (*Mater et magistra* §§57, 66).

The good is "common" in the sense that we are created to share it, as by nature social beings, in solidarity, with interpersonal communion, unable to live or develop human potential unless related to others (*Gaudium et spes* §§12 [based on Gen. 1:26–27, 31; Ps. 8:5–6], 25).

The common "good" includes the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby people are able to achieve the kind of life that God has created us for, including bodily, economic, moral, and spiritual development, our own perfection, human dignity and development, with individual members encouraged to participate in the affairs of the group (*Mater et magistra* §§65, 149). The perfectionist teleology of *Mater et magistra* shifts to an invocation of dignity and human rights in *Pacem in terris*, *Gaudium et spes*, and *Dignitatis humanae* (O'Neill 173).

Catholic moral theologian David Hollenbach argues in *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* that we will not solve the glaring injustices to the poor and their children in inner cities and we will not act justly toward the hungry of the world unless we identify with them as our children and members of our human family. He also commends the public role of black churches in advocating civil rights and economic justice for all, and the inclusive understanding of the common good in

the activities of evangelical Christian groups such as the Sojourners community and leaders such as Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary. Hollenbach is right that evangelicals are increasingly emphasizing the common good. The recent book *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy* is replete with references to "the common good," and its summary, "For the Health of the Nation," strikingly resembles the 2003 statement by the United States Roman Catholic bishops, *The Challenge of Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*. Other Christian traditions are increasingly adopting the "common good" because they sense its helpfulness for healing the politics of division and injustices caused by ideologies of private self-interest that divert normal human compassion from caring for other humans (Korzen and Kelley).

See also Government; Image of God

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Glen H. Stassen

Freedom

A traditional Epiphany prayer reads, “Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ.” This captures well the scriptural view of freedom, which differs considerably from Western, post-Enlightenment thinking on the topic. Whereas Western modernity understands freedom as the autonomous decision of the individual will, Scripture sees it as harmony with the divine will, a divine-human communion enabled by divine deliverance from bondage. One might argue that the scriptural view is an outdated product of antiquity, but Christian theology insists otherwise: true freedom is “a response rather than an initiative, as one accepts the invitation to fulfill the original orientation” of one’s desire for God (Burrell 49; see also Hütter). In short, freedom is the realization of the creature’s divinely intended telos, the “abundant life” of union with the Creator. As Augustine notes, “There is no true liberty except the liberty of the happy who cleave to the eternal law” (*Lib.* 1.32).

The OT’s most foundational story describes divine liberation in precisely this way. God frees the Israelites from bondage in Egypt (Exod. 1–18); yet the true telos of that freedom comes on Mount Sinai, where God’s covenant summons them to collective obedience (Exod. 19:1–Num. 10:10). While source-critical analysis might yield a different chronology—the law emerging well after the wilderness sojourn—this only serves to underscore the significance of the story in its final form. Regardless of historical chronology, in other words, Scripture insists that the very founding of Israel is its having been freed to live in harmony with God. Psalm 119 reflects this same dynamic: “Redeem me from

human oppression, that I may keep your precepts" (v. 134).

The NT claims that this freedom has been fully revealed and realized in Jesus Christ. In certain Pauline Letters, for instance, the elucidation of key christological themes concludes with ethical exhortations (see especially Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians). So the very structure of the letters suggests that conformity to God (through Christ) is the very telos of the deliverance gained (through Christ). Nowhere is this clearer than in Gal. 5:13–14: "You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' " Likewise, the Gospels' presentation of Jesus includes not only acts of deliverance but also repeated calls to conformity to his entirely self-giving life (e.g., Mark 8:34–35; John 13:1–20). This freedom to love—or, better, freedom *as* love—is hardly the self-autonomy lauded by so much of Western culture; yet it is, according to the dominant scriptural pattern, the very form that salvation takes.

Moreover, for Scripture, divine deliverance is never a purely individual or spiritual matter. It carries sociopolitical connotations as well. In the first place, as liberation theologians have insisted p 313 for decades, both Testaments insist that God's salvation entails freedom from sociopolitical bondage (see De La Torre). So, for instance, God frees the Israelites from violent enslavement in Egypt, while Jesus frees the infirm and outcast from their physical and social oppression (in line with the classic prophetic concern for "justice," lifting up the poor and needy). Thus to be "set free … from the bondage of our sins," as the Epiphany prayer puts it, entails the transformation of oppressive social patterns. It is freedom not only from "my" sins but also from "our" sins.

Whatever the precise form of divine liberation, the possibility of its telos—communion with God—begins within and is sustained by a divinely created community. While in the OT this community is Israel, in the NT it is the church, the "body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12). The Synoptic Gospels set as the church's vocation the extension of Jesus' public ministry of liberation into the world. When they describe the sending out of apostles on mission, for instance, they make sure to model that mission on the liberating activities of Christ himself (Matt. 9:35; Mark 6:13; Luke 9:1–2). Yet the church extends Jesus' ministry only because it is, first and foremost, a community gathered around Christ, the very agent of divine liberation, just as Jesus calls the disciples to "be with him" (Mark 3:14) and "abide in" him (John 15:1–17). As Paul writes, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). And when he exhorts the Philippians, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12), Paul does not make salvation a human work. Rather, he lifts up the church as the communal locus of salvation, where Christ's abiding presence empowers members to live out their freedom from sin in the only way possible: transformed interpersonal relations modeled on Christ's own self-emptying (e.g., Phil. 2:1–11). The book of Revelation, written to Christians persecuted by Rome for their allegiance to Christ, envisions this freedom in its ultimate form: the martyrs surround God in heavenly worship, "day and night without ceasing" (Rev. 4:8). Far from a mere promise, this eschatological vision describes what worship effects here and now (see Campbell): true freedom from bondage, the realization of creation's telos in submission to its Creator. The church, after all, is but a witness to the freedom intended for all of creation (Rom. 8:18–25; 1 Cor. 15:20–28; Rev. 21:1–22:7).

See also Autonomy; Emancipation; Free Will and Determinism; Individualism; Liberation; Moral Agency; Salvation; Slavery

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Brent Driggers

Individualism

The term *individualism* refers to the tendency across a broad array of spheres—politics, religion, psychology, philosophy—to make the individual person and the individual's fulfillment the locus of concern and measure of success. In secular ethics or moral philosophy, for example, each person becomes the final arbiter of what is true, good, and moral. Individualism also describes an ethos or belief system within cultures such as the United States that have historically protected and promoted individual liberty and the pursuit of each person's own vision of happiness. As such, individualism arguably supports political and economic values that Westerners consider self-evidently invaluable, such as representative democracy, economic creativity and expansion, and concepts of equality and personal liberty. However, this viewpoint and language has largely fallen out of favor in the postmodern academic milieu. Some social and moral philosophers aver that individualism's natural fruits are seen in the relativism that marks modern ethical discussion, in self-centered psychology and a "me first" culture, and in the fragmentation of societies now marred by isolation, loneliness, and greed.

Overall, the term *individualism* is best understood as a cultural value or bias, remarkably fruitful in Western civilization, that, despite heated discussions, is unlikely to be entirely displaced even as it is necessarily critiqued and honed by the discussions from within and outside the church. Utilized from within the Christian story, individualism provides a useful lens and acts as an interpretive key. It helps us read our culture, understand its development, and, when we are aware of its potential pitfalls, question ways we frame moral questions. Awareness of the bias

of individualism can also help us read Scripture so that we remain tethered to important ethical commitments as we approach questions of morality. Just as no one tool proves sufficient for all needs, the biblical witness must correct individualism so that the church can truthfully witness as the body of Christ within individualistic societies.

Christian ethicists, especially those concerned with political theology, debate whether individualism can or should be rescued, as well as its legacy in political and moral theory. Understood as raw [p 404 selfishness, atomism (i.e., the self as independent of others), or egoistic self-promotion, surely it should be rejected. But many Christians argue that a focus on the individual also upholds the protection and flourishing of persons. For many Christians and non-Christians, individualism as a belief in the value of each person encourages and nourishes justice, particularly as it is enshrined in the conception of natural or human rights. On the one hand, Christians can affirm an individualist lens in social and personal ethics if it focuses our attention on persons qua persons, created in the image of God with accompanying inherent dignity and individual responsibility (Gen. 1:26–28). On the other hand, if it is the primary lens through which we read human experience or determine morality, individualism skews our vision and fails to account for our relationality, our nature as beings who finally become individual "selves" only in community with others and with God.

Many philosophers, social theorists, and ethicists agree that Christianity historically fostered individualism, although they disagree about whether this development is positive or negative. These arguments highlight how individualism determines and frames ethical issues. From

Augustine's deeply personal autobiography (*Confessions*) through the Reformation and its emphasis on conscience and a personal relationship with God, Christianity coupled with Western culture laid the groundwork for the ethos of individualism, especially the sense that persons are moral agents. Although secular humanism developed during the Renaissance and blossomed in the modern period, its confidence in the human person and preoccupation with the individual as the locus of concern in literature, politics, and economics probably would not be possible apart from Christianity's supporting role.

Within ethics, no single philosophy encapsulates the attractiveness and limitations of individualism as does the ethics of Immanuel Kant. He eloquently and powerfully argued for the autonomy of the individual, and his work remains one of the most influential articulations of morality today. Kant asserted a duty-based morality that focused on an individual's motivation; as a rational being, each person discerns the universal principles on which he or she ought to act. In order to be truly free, each must act as an autonomous (self-governing) person; Kant insisted on the value and dignity of every person. His rich work undergirds modern concepts of individual rights, personal liberty, and self-determination.

Some Christian ethicists find Kant's influence to be damaging on a number of fronts. They assert that "rights" language unwittingly birthed a society of individuals who seek entitlements and protect themselves in competitive or even violent self-promotion and possessiveness. This is evidenced not only in economic and political spheres but also in intimate ones, such as bioethics (as in the right to reproduce or the right to choose abortion) and sexuality (such as the right to sexual satisfaction or personal fulfillment in marriage). Community becomes difficult if not

impossible in such an environment, encouraging each individual to pursue personal good at others' expense.

They also question Kant's conception that individuals are capable of, or should even strive for, disembodied and impartial rationality. Rather, we must consciously approach questions of morality shaped by our commitments, especially our faith. Additionally, if Christians affirm Kantian autonomy as the ideal mode of ethical reflection, the church forfeits a central countercultural aspect of its witness: we find our freedom and truest end not in self-determination but in submission to Christ and one another (Luke 17:33; John 12:25; Rom. 6:17–18; 2 Cor. 10:5–6).

Others consider such worries overblown, a caricature of Kant and the Enlightenment's legacy. They commonly accuse critics of being sectarians who enjoy the fruit of these concepts themselves while denying its protective framework for social justice to others. Christian criticism of individuality and in particular of human rights leaves the weak and marginalized, whom God commends to the church for particular care and concern, at the mercy of those who falsely claim that traditional ideals and community trump individual well-being, as in theologies that justified slavery, patriarchy, colonialism, anti-Semitism, and apartheid. Aspects of individualism provide the language and rationale for Christians and others to seek each human's flourishing within personal and social spheres. It does not demand denial of shared or common goods, nor does valuing the individual necessarily result in possessiveness or atomism.

Like any cultural value, individualism often presses out of its proper place and claims too much of our loyalty. Only if Christians maintain a critical distance from cultural biases can they find the wisdom to critique

or support such values. From within the Christian story, such knowledge comes through humility before God, Scripture, and others; from such a location we must temper individualism so that it becomes a tool for nourishing just and truthful communities.

p 405 *See also* Collective Responsibility; Common Good; Democracy; Feminist Ethics; Human Rights; Image of God; Political Ethics; Self

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Erin Dufault-Hunter

Liberation

The word *liberation* appears rarely in English Bibles (see Esth. 4:14 NET; Ezek. 46:16 MSG). However, the proclamation of liberty and release appears often, and the concept of liberation is deeply rooted in the Bible and is an essential component in ethical and theological discourses of the Christian message and life.

In the biblical narrative, God liberates people from social and political oppression, as well as from the bondage of sin, from temptations and attacks of the evil one, from dangerous places, and from death itself. God's "liberative" acts deliver those who are suffering and/or experiencing persecution. When humans are subjected to these conditions, God intervenes on their behalf to bring about wholeness, justice, equality, and full participation in the affairs of their respective communities; at the end, through these actions, God liberates those who were oppressed and/or in bondage. The basic premise of God's "liberative" acts is to protect human dignity, restore oppressed persons to full participation in the decision-making process in their communities, and bring all components of society into harmony.

God's liberation process is intrinsically connected to the creation narrative, in which "in the p 481 beginning" there is a sense of perfect harmony in all aspects and with all participants of the universe (Gen. 1). In this original organization of the universe and society in general, oppression does not exist. Furthermore, it is not just the absence of oppression that makes it perfect; it is also the way in which all components of creation—humans, animals, vegetation, and the universe in general—interact with one another in perfect harmony. Each component is dependent on the other in a system of equality and perfect

social and environmental balance. It is this picture-perfect image that God's "liberative" acts are attempting to replicate now in a fallen world, in which humans use and abuse their freedom of will to disrupt this balance and to promote their self-centered agenda by subjecting others to suffering and persecution. In this fallen world, not only are humans the perpetrators but also the forces of evil and the evil one are at work, oppressing and persecuting persons to ultimately destroy them.

Under these circumstances, God's liberation for Christians is a call to restore the original harmony in all aspects of the universe and to restore the original order by renouncing evil, denouncing oppressive forces and structures, and confronting evil forces. God's liberation is a general call to all humanity and a particular appeal to Christians to change their ways and the oppressive structures that they have created, which produce destructive results. God's liberation is also an invitation to all humans to trust in Christ as the model and source for holistic (spiritual, physical, social, and personal) deliverance that leads to an abundant life.

The biblical narrative affirms that God desires liberation, and that liberation is an essential component of the biblical message in general and the Christian message in particular. The challenge posed by this understanding concerns the means of obtaining liberation. Some prefer to take a "spiritual" approach and simply make liberation equal to spiritual salvation, which is liberation from personal and private sins. In this way, liberation is a private practice commonly expressed through the sinner's prayers. At the other extreme, some see liberation as limited to political and social actions to promote equality and social justice. Hence, liberation is concerned with social change and transformation, its goal being to transform social structures and systems that create, maintain, and promote corporate practices that prevent some members of society

from full participation in the decision-making processes in their respective communities. Both representations fall short of an accurate interpretation of God's liberation in the biblical narrative, simply because this dichotomy does not exist in the Scriptures. Although there are particular instances in which liberation seems to be centered on social transformation, such as the Jubilee Year, the exodus narrative, and prophetic discourses such as Rom. 8:20–22, there are other passages, such as Ps. 33; Rom. 8:1–2; 10:9–11, in which their common interpretation seems to affirm a spiritual liberation. Despite these polarized notions and interpretations, the biblical narrative as a whole begins and ends with a state of perfection, which sets the framework of reference for God's liberation. Thus, God's liberation is intrinsically connected to the creation narrative, in which all aspects of the human being and society are crafted in perfect harmony, and to the eschatological images of the book of Revelation, in which the promise of perfect harmony comes to fruition. Then, the "in-between" time is precisely God's call to liberate—that is, to resemble the perfect harmony described at the beginning and at the end of the biblical narrative. God's liberation, then, encompasses all aspects of the human being and all elements of the universe and society.

Finally, recent developments in ethical and biblical scholarship have highlighted another area in which liberation plays an important role by pointing out the need for liberation from ideological oppression. In this sense, an ethic of liberation questions those who are in control of interpretive processes and the dissemination of what is considered the dominant/predominant biblical interpretation. The assumption here is that those who are in power or belong to the dominant group, consciously or unconsciously, incorporate their self-centered agenda in

their interpretations, which leads to the marginalization and oppression of groups and individuals whose interpretations are ignored and seen as erroneous simply because they are not part of the dominant norm. But even this case is included and addressed in God's liberation when it is grounded in the creation and apocalyptic narratives as described above, leading to, in this case, ideological harmony, tolerance, and mutual respect.

See also Emancipation; Freedom; Jubilee; Liberationist Ethics; Slavery

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Hugo Magallanes