

CHOOSING THE GOOD

CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN A COMPLEX WORLD

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It is these questions that have sometimes led to the charge that ultimately character/virtue ethics is relativistic.⁴⁶ By reducing ethics to the community and its story, we seem to be left with a kind of postmodern assumption that all truth claims are bunk or merely parochial. Hauerwas wants to direct the truth questions away from a foundationalist perspective that begins with understandings about God, Christ, or the church and toward a perspective in which our “convictions form our character to be truthful.” The first task of ethics is to help us rightly see the world, but “if we somehow discover the world is not as that story suggests, then we have good grounds for not believing in, or more accurately, not worshipping the God revealed in the life, cross, and resurrection of Jesus.”⁴⁷

But can this perspective really help us discern which narratives are worthy of our commitments? And what happens if we find ourselves in a community that is blatantly racist or flagrantly violates human dignity, supported by its own narratives? On what basis do we reject the operational narratives, practices, and dispositions of a given community? These are the kinds of questions we must face if we opt for a fideistic approach that does not allow the central questions of truth to emerge, except as they are tied to narrative formulations. In rejecting a Kantian, universal, rational ethic, this paradigm goes too far in the other direction by insisting that truth can be tested only within the confines of a community’s narrative, to which it is then to be truthful. As Christians we must assert that there is transcendent reality beyond the community’s self-understanding and that reality can be known and experienced through God’s self-disclosure in the written and incarnate Word. That divine revelation is itself a reflection of the ultimate foundation for ethics—the Triune God. Certainly, we most adequately discern that foundation and its moral directives within the community that commits to live in accordance with transcendent reality. But the reality always transcends the community that names the name of Christ; otherwise Christ and divine revelation are nothing more than the community itself. A community and its narratives alone can never be the foundation of a Christian ethic.

Conclusion

Character or virtue ethics comes much closer as an adequate approach and foundation than does consequentialism or deontological ethics. Its focus on character and virtue, its insistence on a larger vision beyond the moral directives, and its recovery of the role of narrative in moral nurture are to be lauded. But ultimately it is too one-sided in its formulations, and it fails to deal adequately with the following questions: Why be moral at all? What is the basis for saying that one virtue or disposition or action is more laudable than another? How do we respond, as a people shaped in Christian character, to the tough, complex, moral issues that call for a decision? We must move beyond character ethics as we seek a foundation for the moral life.

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A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW FOUNDATION FOR ETHICS

Several years ago, Princeton University created quite a stir when it appointed the Australian philosopher Peter Singer to a tenured professorship in bioethics. Singer had become infamous for his view that killing a live baby may not be as serious as killing a happy cat. He believes that the human treatment of animals is nothing short of tyranny and that animals deserve every bit as much, if not more, protection as a *Homo sapiens*, since animals are self-aware while infants are not. For Singer, infanticide (the killing of an infant) is justified when the child faces a life of suffering and pain. Down’s syndrome and spina bifida children are among the candidates for such treatment as is a handicapped baby, if his or her death would both relieve the burden of the child and bring greater happiness to the rest of the family. In similar fashion, Singer believes that euthanasia is morally justified on the grounds that it relieves a person of suffering and misery.

Given the views of Singer, it is not surprising that a large number of protestors showed up at the doors of Princeton, including people with disabilities who by Singer’s calculations might never have lived. Many critics have focused on his ethical commitment to utilitarianism as the primary factor in his controversial positions; Singer does indeed approach ethics with a commitment to the maximizing of personal happiness and the minimization of personal pain. But while utilitarianism is one component of Singer’s ethical foundation and method, something else is going on in his thinking.

Singer deviates from many traditional norms and sentiments primarily because of his worldview. A worldview is the way we put our world together. It embodies our sense of God or transcendence, our understandings of human nature, our beliefs about what is wrong within the world and how to fix that wrong, and our perceptions about where history is headed. When Singer argues that the sufferings and pleasures of human beings are not necessarily of greater

moral significance than the sufferings and pleasures of other species, he is reflecting a worldview different from those who argue that all human life has an inherent dignity. Singer rejects the notion of a moral order “which supposes that human beings are extraordinarily precious because God made them so. He also rejects secular philosophies that depict human beings as possessing a unique and exalted dignity that sharply distinguishes them from, and justifies their ‘tyranny’ over, other species of animals.”¹

At the foundation of Singer’s ethic is a worldview that believes humans are no different from animals and thus of no greater moral significance. Human life has no intrinsic dignity and worth because there is nothing in the universe beyond humans to grant them that worth. As Singer sees it, “We have no need to postulate gods who hand down commandments to us, because we can understand ethics as a natural phenomenon that arises in the course of the evolution of social, intelligent, long-lived mammals who possess the capacity to recognize each other and to remember the past behavior of others.”² While he employs a utilitarian calculus to justify his moral positions, his own brand of utilitarianism arises from a particular narrative about reality—a worldview about life, death, and human/animal existence on earth.

Worldviews play a significant role in ethics. This is well demonstrated in the following portrayals of two distinct worldviews:

One, we are a people by blood relationship, who dwell in a sacred universe inhabited by other creatures, including plants, animals, and seldom-seen spiritual beings. The created harmony between us all is constantly jeopardized by human failure to observe the Creator’s law. Dangerous and sometimes devastating results follow. Harmony must be restored by appropriate ceremonies and a return to the Creator’s law.

Two, we are individuals who have formed societies. We live in a universe that consists of other beings (plants and animals) who are somewhat like us, but inferior. The rest of the universe consists of arrangements of energy and matter devoid of any purpose except for that which we decide to invent. We are in jeopardy as individuals, as a society, and as a species from internal conflicts and wars and the natural environment, unless we can further develop and use our superior intelligence more rationally and effectively.³

The first of these portrayals broadly represents the worldview of Native American peoples in North America, while the second represents a secular, scientific, modern worldview of many people in dominant Western cultures. These two ways of conceiving the world engender different directions in environmental ethics and the moral life in general. Both stand in contrast to a Christian perception of reality.

To assert that worldviews are always at the heart of ethical reflections and moral actions is not a peculiarly Christian understanding. Many social scientists believe a profound relationship exists between worldview and ethics. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that there is always an interplay between metaphysics and morals, or worldview and ethos. The worldview of a religious

group is the “picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concepts of nature, of self, of society.”⁴ The ethos is the group’s tone, character, or moral style, and it is never divorced from the larger perceptions of reality. Geertz writes: “The source of its [a religion’s] moral vitality is conceived to lie in the fidelity with which it expresses the fundamental nature of reality. The powerful coercive ‘ought’ is felt to grow out of a comprehensive factual ‘is.’”⁵

All moral reflection, character, and actions are part of a larger drama. As Alister McGrath notes, “Every movement that has ever competed for the loyalty of human beings has done so on the basis of a set of beliefs. Whether the movement is religious or political, philosophical or artistic, the same pattern emerges: a group of ideas, of beliefs, is affirmed to be in the first place true and in the second place important.” Thus, for McGrath, “A recovery of Christian doctrine is fundamental to a recovery of Christian ethics.”⁶

The foundation of Christian ethics is the Christian worldview, ultimately rooted in the nature and actions of the Triune God. If worldview is the foundation of ethics, then obviously a Christian worldview, our theology, leads to a distinctive approach to ethics, though at points its moral positions may overlap with those of other worldviews. Some Christians throughout history have tried to downplay the role of theology and unite primarily around ethics. But Dorothy Sayers, the great British writer, was on target when she asserted, “It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality, unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously.”⁷

The Christian worldview or theology is manifested in three ways: through a narrative component, a rational component, and a ritual component. All worldviews tend to manifest themselves in these forms. The narrative component, as seen in the last chapter, embodies the stories we tell to make sense of reality. In the Christian faith, this involves the particular biblical stories as well as the overarching biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—a paradigm that will be explored in depth shortly.

The second component is the rational or discursive one in which we attempt to give more analytic formulations to our beliefs and commitments. Here we seek to understand systematically the nature of God, humanity, salvation, the work of Christ, the nature of the church, the kingdom, and so on. Traditionally, this is what is known as systematic theology. It is of major significance for ethics because it seeks to show the interrelationship of ideas and the relationship of those ideas to the moral life.

The third component involves rituals. The symbols we use and the rituals we perform both embody and reinforce our worldview. For example, every Sunday in worship we are reenacting our view of reality and thus considering the implications for everyday life. When a marriage is celebrated, we ritualize our beliefs and moral commitments about marriage, family, sexual intimacy,

and children. And when we gather as a church community at a funeral, we reenact and reinforce our beliefs and moral commitments regarding the meaning of life, death, and divine providence.

All three components of the Christian worldview play a role in Christian ethics, and all three are needed for the richness of theological commitments. It will not suffice to build theology and hence ethics on only the stories we tell (narrative ethics), for as humans we need all dimensions of the self and all forms of communication to articulate our worldview and then live it out in the moral life. Likewise, to isolate only the ritual component or the rational component is to miss much of the content, motivation, and means for moral enablement.

God, the Foundation of Ethics

Though a worldview provides the immediate foundation for any ethics, Christians will insist that there is something more. The ultimate foundation is the Triune God. Our worldview as believers is not rooted in or derived from human experience or natural sentiments; rather, it is rooted in ultimate reality and made known through the self-disclosure of God in the written Word, the Bible, and the incarnate Word, Christ. From divine revelation it is clear that what ultimately determines the good in human life is God. Geoffrey Bromiley has suggested that Christians should think of God as the ground of ethics, the norm of ethics, and the power for ethical living.⁸

God, the Ground of Christian Ethics

God as the ground of Christian ethics means that our understandings of the moral good, right, wise, and just emanate from the nature and actions of God. As the creator of the universe and the sovereign over all life, God's own goodness becomes the ground or foundation of all human goodness. Goodness is not self-derived but emanates from the fountainhead of all reality. Thus, the good does not exist "independent of the will of God. The source of the good lies not in an idea in the mind of God but in the living God himself who embodies and personifies the good."⁹

This means that Christian ethics is not rooted in principles such as love or justice, nor in virtues embodied in the narratives of communities, nor in the existence of social structures deemed to be part of the created order. All of these may be important elements in Christian ethics, but they do not form the foundation of moral thought, character, and actions. This becomes clear in the biblical patterns of moral teaching, for many parts of Scripture reveal that moral injunctions have a larger grounding that forms the basis for their acceptance. Thus, ethics in the Bible is not blind obedience to laws, principles, or virtues but rather a response to the living, all-powerful God of the universe, who is

himself the foundation of those moral guidelines. The content of our moral responses are certainly known and shaped by the biblical norms in their various forms, but ultimately they are reflections of God's character, purposes, and actions in the world.

A good example of this biblical pattern can be seen in the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. Many Christians jump immediately to the commandments themselves with a view that these form the heart and basis of the moral life. But the Decalogue, as noted in chapter 1, begins with a statement that forms the grounding for these commands: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2). This preamble gives the foundation: The Hebrew people were to follow these moral laws because God had acted in grace and formed a covenant relationship with them. The heart of the ethic is not following the commands or keeping universal laws but responding to God's covenant and grace. The commandments then spell out what it means to respond to God and neighbor.

This pattern is seen frequently in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 15, generosity and justice for the poor are commanded on this basis: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today" (v. 15). The pattern is also abundantly clear in the New Testament. For example, Romans 1–11 is essentially Paul's theology describing the fallen human condition, God's response in grace, our justification by faith, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. After the delineation of all that God has done for us in Christ, chapters 12–16 move to the "therefore" and lay out the ethical responses to God's character and actions. In those chapters, Paul deals with life in community, relationships to the state, and matters of conscience on which believers are sometimes divided. Many of the New Testament epistles follow a similar pattern of the imperative flowing from the indicative.¹⁰

Love has long been heralded as one of the primary principles or virtues of the moral life. Choosing the good means choosing a life of love—toward God and neighbor. But love in the biblical framework is not an abstract principle isolated from a larger context. It is a reflection of the very nature and actions of God. First John 4:7 admonishes, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." And later John writes, "Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (v. 11) and, "We love because he first loved us" (v. 19). Love, therefore, is not a nebulous notion that we determine by our own passions or personal sense of how love is best served in a given situation. Love is grounded in God, and "the content of love must be defined by Divine revelation."¹¹

In 2 Corinthians 8:7, Paul writes, "Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking." He then provides the foundation for a virtue of giving or mercy: "For you know the generous act of

our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (v. 9). And in Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." Mercy, love, forgiveness, and justice are not normative because they are universal laws that produce the best results, though they indeed may do so. They are not normative because they are part of an abstract moral order known by reason, though by reason we may know something of their moral worth. For Christians, they are normative because they are rooted in the very nature and actions of the Triune God.

If indeed God is the foundation of Christian ethics, how we perceive God (our theology) will make a difference. For example, our understanding of God's work in human creation has a bearing on how we might respond to certain ethical issues, such as cloning. Jonathan Cohen writes:

The possibility of cloning human beings challenges Western beliefs about creation and our relationship to God. If we understand God as the Creator and creation as a completed act, cloning will be a transgression. If, however, we understand God as the Power of Creation and creation as a transformative process, we may find a role for human participation, sharing that power as beings created in the image of God.¹²

Cohen, in his defense of the latter view, seems to have caricatured the traditional view of God as creator, but his point is well-taken: Our perceptions of God make a difference.

Christian theology has long emphasized that God is both transcendent (beyond us) and immanent (near us). In practice, however, many strands of Christian thought have tended to accentuate one side over the other, as is sometimes particularly evident in church rituals such as music, prayers, and liturgy. To emphasize only or primarily the transcendence of God often turns ethics into an abstract moral law of the universe in which God is essentially not needed. Deism in the eighteenth century was a prime example of transcendence without immanence, and while its moral content was in some ways similar to Christian ethics, it lacked the personal foundation of a God who cared deeply for people, forgave them of their sins, and empowered them to moral living. Conversely, if our conceptions of God are primarily immanent, we will tend to turn our own human purposes into divine purposes, and "God becomes virtually a label for . . . [our] highest values, ideals, and aspirations."¹³

God, the Norm of Christian Ethics

God is not only the ground of Christian ethics. The norms for ethical reflection and moral action and character are reflections of God's own actions and nature. Leviticus 20:26 summarized the broad normative content of the Old Testament this way: "You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I

have separated you from the other peoples to be mine." God's own set-apartness or holiness formed the normative framework for the people's journey in the world. Similarly, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples to love their enemies, for if they loved only those who loved them, they would not be different from the pagans or the scandalous tax collectors. Then Jesus gave this norm: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). The perfection of which Jesus speaks is essentially wholeness or completeness, and thus he was indicating that just as the Father in heaven "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (v. 45), so they are to show love to all humans, even their enemies. In essence, "Don't discriminate concerning whom you love, because God does not discriminate in his love."

In a sense, we can say that God's character and actions are the standard before us as we live our lives. There is to be an infusion of the very nature of God's patterns in us, as we are in Christ and he in us, to use the Pauline language. When we think about faithfulness to the covenants we make in life, such as marriage, God's own covenant of faithfulness is the norm. God's truthfulness becomes the norm for our integrity in relationships and responsibilities. God's action of justice on behalf of the oppressed and disenfranchised is the norm for our justice. God's purity is the norm for our purity of heart, mind, and behavior. God's action of forgiveness through Christ is the norm for our forgiveness of those who sin against us. And God's grace is the norm for our mercy toward those in need.

When we think about God as the norm of ethics, it is important to recall that he is the Triune God. Certainly, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son, is the most visible expression of God in human history and plays a significant role in Christian ethics. Followers of Jesus are called to reflect his likeness (Rom. 8:29, 1 Cor. 15:49). It is quite telling that for much of the twentieth century Christian ethics as a discipline carried on much of its discourse as if Jesus had never existed. As John Howard Yoder in *The Politics of Jesus*, one of the most significant ethical works of the twentieth century, put it, mainstream ethics operated on the assumption that "Jesus is simply not relevant in any immediate sense to the questions of social ethics."¹⁴ Yoder played a significant role in reminding Christians of the normativity of Christ for life within the world. Some critics have felt that Yoder may have fallen prey to a functional unitarianism of the Second Person of the Trinity, and to the degree that this charge may be true, it is a reminder that Christian ethics must embody Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The givenness of created realities, the divine commands of Yahweh at Sinai, the life and teachings of Jesus, the discernment of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church must all be operative if we are to embody a trinitarian ethic in which God is the norm.¹⁵ But clearly Jesus, as the very "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15), is a concrete and vital norm for Christian action and character. He is the clearest expression in

human history of what it means to be good and the most explicit revelation of God's glory (Heb. 1:2-3) and fullness (Col. 1:19).

God, the Power for Christian Ethics

Christians should never be content only to speak about justice, holiness, righteousness, goodness, and wisdom. We must be committed to *being and doing*, and therein lies a major hurdle: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15). Many people give cognitive assent to doing the good but find both internal and external restraints in actually accomplishing it. Thus, empowerment is clearly an issue to consider in Christian ethics, though it has not been a mainstay in much of the discipline. While humans have certain native capacities for achieving virtue and moral actions, our fallen nature turns us away from the good in both our understanding and behavior. Paul's struggle with his own natural inadequacies (Romans 7) is a universal reality in all human beings. Self-deception and failure of the will are constant threats to the moral life. Biblically speaking there are two main sources of power for ethical living: God's grace and God's presence in our lives, most notably through the Holy Spirit.

The inability of human nature to choose righteousness and goodness leads us to the only solution for both salvation and the moral life: the grace of God manifest in Jesus Christ. After Paul expresses his great struggle in Romans 7, he turns to the remedy of grace: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son" (Rom. 8:1-3). God's grace is not only the mechanism whereby human sin and moral failure are dealt with through forgiveness but also a motivating factor in life for the recipient of grace. As Martin Luther so powerfully reminded the church, God's grace justifies sinners who accept it, and in doing so, Christ's righteousness becomes our own righteousness, a righteousness that overflows into a transformed will and good works. Luther, like St. Augustine, placed "the fundamental ethical problem in the will rather than in the intellect. Hence, the greatest need of man is not to know the good, but to experience a forgiveness to which he can respond so as to draw him beyond his self-concern into a life of joyful service."¹⁶

Certainly all humans, being made in the image of God, have a general capacity to love, seek justice, maintain orderliness, show mercy, and act with regard to conscience. But as Jonathan Edwards, the great eighteenth-century theologian, philosopher, and preacher, argued, those are a secondary kind of virtue or beauty that are distinct from true virtue, which comes from divine grace. The secondary virtues arise from self-love, and "though self-love is far from being useless in the world, yea, it is exceeding necessary to society; yet every

body sees that if it be not subordinate to, and regulated by another more extensive principle, it may make a man a common enemy to the general system. . . . a system that contains millions of individuals."¹⁷ For Edwards, "A truly virtuous mind, being as it were under the sovereign dominion of love to God, above all things, seeks the glory of God, and makes this his supreme, governing, and ultimate end." This is "true grace and real holiness. And no other disposition or affection but this is of the nature of virtue."¹⁸

Along with grace as an empowerment to the moral life there is the presence of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the Bible the Father and the Son certainly play a role in empowerment, but it is particularly the Holy Spirit who is emphasized in this task. After Paul describes his inner moral dilemma in Romans 7, he turns not only to grace but also to the gift of the Spirit. He asserts that God condemned sin in humans:

so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. . . . Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. . . . To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. . . . You are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

Romans 8:4-6, 9

And, of course, before Christ left this earth he gave this promise to the disciples: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The Holy Spirit receives scant attention in most ethics texts. One exception is Carl F. H. Henry's *Christian Personal Ethics*, in which he devotes an entire chapter to the Holy Spirit and concludes the work with a chapter on prayer. For Henry, "The Spirit is the dynamic principle of Christian ethics, the personal agency whereby God powerfully enters human life and delivers . . . from enslavement to Satan, sin, death, and law."¹⁹ Henry seems to neglect the role of the Spirit in the moral discernment process, but he is certainly right to remind us that "it was the Holy Spirit alone who had transformed the inescapable and distressing 'I ought' which philosophical ethics was compelled to acknowledge and the tormenting 'thou shalt' which Hebrew religion adduced as its complement into the 'I will' of New Testament ethical dedication and zeal."²⁰

Thus, Christian ethics is not a natural enterprise. The moral good is defined by God. The Triune God is the ground, the norm, and the power for Christian ethics, and therein is its ultimate foundation. But there is a secondary foundation that is derived from God and provides perspective, normative guidance, and basic orientation to the moral life. This is the Christian worldview, our theological understandings.

The Christian Worldview: The Biblical Story

As soon as we turn to the specifics of a Christian worldview, we are immediately aware of the theological differences that have existed throughout the centuries in the various strands of the Christian church. People are prone to raise the question, Which Christian worldview? Yet there have long been essential core points of agreement in classic Christian understanding. Obviously, the details may get nuanced in different ways, but there is a “big story” undergirding the many particulars of the Old and New Testaments. Most Christians throughout the centuries have accepted this grand narrative, though they may not have spelled it out in quite the same manner. Essentially, it is the story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. These aspects form the core of a Christian worldview and the second level of the foundation for Christian ethics.

Creation

Too often when Christians reflect on creation they become embroiled in how it happened, when it happened, and to what degree God may have utilized natural processes. In the midst of the debates, its theological significance is often lost. The Christian worldview, based on divine revelation, embodies several themes regarding creation that are pivotal foundations for ethical reflection and moral thought.

THE GOODNESS OF CREATION

In the creation account of Genesis 1, God pronounces his work good after each day of creative activity. At the end of the chapter comes the grand summary, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (v. 31). The goodness of the material created world stands in stark contrast to many competing worldviews of the ancient world and other periods. As Vinoth Ramachandra from Sri Lanka puts it:

Contemporary world-views would have understood “salvation” as an escape from the sensory, empirical world of human existence. There was no value or purpose attached to the physical realm of space-time events. Meaning has to be sought in detachment from the external world which . . . was less real than the “spiritual” realm. This view is contradicted by the doctrine of creation which sees the world as possessing an intrinsic worth and meaningfulness.²¹

Many competing views of creation see the material world as illusory or the unfortunate result of a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. But the biblical story begins with a strong affirmation that the material world, including the materiality of human beings, is intrinsically good. While the fall

into human sin marred that goodness and perverted the mind and the will of humans, there remains as St. Augustine argued a metaphysical goodness to the created world. God created humans as whole beings in which the material and immaterial (soul or spirit) dimensions are crowned with goodness.

Unfortunately, the Christian church has often lost this affirmation. Gnosticism and neo-Platonism, with their denigration of the material and lauding of the “spiritual” and esoteric, introduced into the early church an unhealthy asceticism that undermined an important foundation for the moral life. Over the years asceticism has denigrated a positive holistic view of sex, heralded the monastic life over physical or mental work, and debased the calling to live in the midst of culture and society. The disparagement of the physical was already evident in New Testament times, for John had to go out of his way to affirm a real, material incarnation of Jesus: “What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 John 1:1). And Paul combated the forces of ascetic ethics in relation to false teachers peddling their theological wares to churches: “They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:3–4).

Asceticism, in contrast to the goodness of creation, has had a profound impact on sexual ethics. Many of the Gnostics argued that the sexual act was a sin, and even some mainstream leaders of the church, such as Jerome in the fourth century, so exalted virginity that they believed “the only good of marriage is that it produces virgins.”²² Much of the church came to believe that the only purpose for sexual intercourse in marriage is to produce children, and in so doing it lost the other divine purposes that accompany procreation: the consummation of marriage (“one flesh”), the expression of love, and the experience of pleasure as a good gift of God (Prov. 5:18–19; Song of Solomon). Obviously, sin has twisted sexual desires and caused humans to turn away from God’s designs for physical intimacy, but the first and most important thing to be said in a Christian perspective is that sex is good. However, like all of God’s good gifts, sex is made for certain purposes and intended for a particular context. In other words, its goodness is fully experienced only in a marriage between a man and a woman.

CREATION IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

At the apex of the creation account, God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26–27). Theologians

have long debated the exact nature of the *imago Dei* in humanity, but it should be clear from a casual reading that this part of the story stands in direct contrast to the worldview of Peter Singer, with whom we introduced this chapter. All creation is not the same; humanity stands apart in a distinct manner. At least three major themes for Christian ethics can be found in this dimension of creation.

First, the text is clear that part of the image involves a stewardship over the created order. Only God creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, but God grants to humans a kind of cocreating and co-caring role for the rest of creation. Because all of creation is good, this “dominion” is not a coercive pillaging for one’s own selfishness but rather a tender care so that the needs of all humans might be met and that we might experience joy, aesthetic pleasure, and creativity in our stewardship of the good resources of the earth. Herein is the heart of an environmental ethic for Christians. In the Christian worldview, there is a demarcation between the creator, those created in God’s image, and the rest of creation. The distinction between humans and animals, for example, is clearly taught by Jesus when in affirming the value of a sheep who needs our care, he states, “How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep!” (Matt. 12:12). Nonetheless, the rest of creation is a good gift of God, and those who bear a likeness to God should oversee it with justice and care.

Second, the image of God seems to reflect a relational dimension to life that is to be guarded and nurtured. In his image God “creates them male and female.” Many theologians have argued that just as there is relationality within the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), so part of the image in us is our relational capacity. As Genesis 2:18 states, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” This is not only an establishment of marriage but also an affirmation of human relationships for making us the kind of people God has designed. Our true nature is found not in individualism or autonomy but in mutual relationality whereby we reflect our interdependence with others.

Third, the image of God clearly implies an inherent dignity and worth in all men and women. Even after the fall, humans are said to bear God’s image, and this is the basis for treating others with respect and dignity. Genesis 9:6 states, “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.” And James appeals to the *imago Dei* in his discussion of the misuse of the tongue to hurt another person: “With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9). All humans have a dignity and a worth that are not to be defaced. This forms a major foundation for a Christian ethic of race relations, economic life, human rights, gender relations, and bioethics.

The inherent dignity of all humans stands in contrast to the kind of functional dignity that is part of the ethic and worldview of many thinkers such as

Peter Singer. In a functional dignity, one’s value is postulated on the basis of performance, whether that be a particular level of rationality and self-awareness or a certain capacity for relationships. In the classical Christian understanding, our dignity is alien in the sense that it comes from God, but it is then inherent within our very being, simply because we are human. This has profound implications for contemporary bioethics issues such as organ transplants, death and dying issues, abortion, and genetic engineering. While the issues are often complex and by no means solved by monolithic norms, human dignity must always be guarded. Thus, one does not receive a kidney transplant over another person on the grounds that he or she plays an important role in society or the community. Rather, in matters of life and death, all persons should come to a triage situation (e.g., who gets the goods when there are not enough for all) on equal footing. And when it comes to a handicapped child, such as one with Down’s syndrome, that child is the bearer of God’s image and possesses a dignity that must be protected and nurtured.

A GIVENNESS IN CREATION

The creation of the world and humanity by God implies that reality is not a mere chance happening in which we then create our own meanings, values, and ultimate commitments. In our fallen state, we do, of course, create our own meanings and commitments, and therein is the problem of humanity and society. But creation implies that God has spoken, given, designed; we as his special creatures are then called to mesh our lives with the ultimate purposes and designs of the creator. Our very capacity to act within the world comes because God has acted with form and order. As the literary scholar George Steiner puts it, “There is aesthetic creation because there is *creation*. There is formal construction because we have been made form. . . . The core of our human identity is nothing more or less than the fitful apprehension of the radically inexpressible presence, facticity and perceptible substantiality of the created. It is; we are. This is the rudimentary grammar of the unfathomable.”²³ There is a givenness to creation in which we properly find the meaning of true moral and spiritual goodness.

Of course, the difficulty comes in declaring exactly what is given within the world to which we ought to be congruent in our lives. The idea of a givenness in creation has sometimes been used to legitimize tyrannical governments, unjust economic structures, and the oppression of particular groups of people. “Creation mandates,” as they are sometimes called, have often been described in rather static terms that reflect the social and cultural status quo of a given time and place. But just because there has been misuse of a concept does not automatically render it null and void. Oliver O’Donovan reminds us that creation is “not merely the raw material out of which the world as we know it is composed, but as the order and coherence *in* which it is composed.” He contends that “by virtue of the fact that there is a Creator, there is also a creation

that is ordered to its Creator, a world that exists as his creation and in no other way, so that by its very existence it points to God. But then, just because it is ordered vertically in this way, it must also have an internal horizontal ordering among its parts."²⁴ For O'Donovan, this ordering is not a static rendering of creation realities, for the resurrection of Christ, which vindicates creation, moves us toward an end in which all things are being made new. Though there are varying interpretations of the exact nature of creation's givens, it makes a huge difference in ethics to affirm them. Without a foundation of creation givenness in some form, we are left with a subjectivistic ethic in which humans, history, or culture become the foundations and norms.

An attempt to delineate the givens of creation would necessitate another book. But two realities that are clearly affirmed in the Genesis account of creation can serve as examples: work and marriage/family. Many Christians seem to view work as a curse and a result of the fall. But work is clearly ordained by God from creation, for God grants to Adam and Eve "in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15; also 1:26-28). The fall into sin clearly affected the working of the "garden," but from the beginning God gave to humankind the responsibility and privilege of work, through which they would meet their own needs, the needs of others, and experience the creativity inherent in God's creation. The givenness of work means that humans then have both a right and a responsibility with regard to work. If we are by creation *homo faber* (the person as doer or maker), then we are less than human when we refuse to work, are not granted the opportunity to work, or seek to find in work more than what God intended it to be. No wonder the Protestant Reformers so strongly emphasized the doctrine of vocation, which sees God's calling for human life set in the context of work. Any Christian ethic for society must give a priority to the importance and meaning of work, both for the good of the individual and the good of society itself.

A second given of creation is family, understood biblically as the relationships stemming from the marriage of a man and a woman (Gen. 2:23-25). Marriage and family are the means through which human life comes into the world and the means by which humans are socialized and hopefully nurtured in the faith. At the heart of marriage is a one-flesh relationship between a man and a woman, symbolizing a unique and profound relationship that is consummated through sexual intimacy and thus set apart from all other relationships. The givenness of marriage and family has produced a fairly universal reality throughout history and around the world, though the particular forms of family (i.e., extended versus nuclear) and the particular roles within the family have often varied. One of the primary givens is that procreation, socialization, love, commitment, and a one-flesh relationship are to be held together in unity.²⁵ Today, this givenness is being pulled apart in myriad ways: procreation apart from a marriage commitment, sex without any sense of responsibility for the potential fruit from the act, some of the new reproductive tech-

nologies, and the large number of serial marriages through divorce in which children are socialized outside the context of the one-flesh bond. As is evident in societies today, we bear the consequences for living contrary to the givenness of creation.

The Fall

Though God created a good world, and humans were made in his image, things are "not the way [they're] supposed to be."²⁶ The givens of creation are ignored, the goodness of creation has been distorted, and human actions and character defy God's likeness. The fall, or human sin, is sometimes said to be the one biblical doctrine that is empirically verifiable, for everywhere we see and experience its menacing effects. This is the second part of the biblical story that shapes the Christian worldview and hence Christian ethics.

It is quite clear in any system of ethics that the account of human nature has a profound impact on one's sense of moral thinking and action. Adherence to an Enlightenment, humanistic view of human nature will invariably have consequences concerning expectations for human behavior and political, economic, and cultural outlooks. Essentially, according to this view, moral goodness is an inherent trait in humans that merely needs a bit of prodding through education and positive-reinforcement carrots. Conversely, adherence to a negative, bestial view of human nature will likely result in stringent controls over both society and human life, often without regard for human dignity, value, freedom, and justice. The worldview of the Christian faith is that humans are wonderfully made in God's image, but because of the fall their will is bent, their thinking is deluded, and their character is by nature self-seeking. Such a view rejects both humanistic and bestial (i.e., Machiavellian/Hobbesian) views of humanity. As Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician, observed, the philosophers talk about the dignity of humanity, and they tempt us to pride, or they talk about the misery of humanity, and they tempt us to despair. "The Christian religion alone has been able to cure these two vices, not by expelling the one through means of the other according to the wisdom of the world, but by expelling both according to the simplicity of the Gospel."²⁷ Only here, says Pascal, do we find both our dignity and our misery.

The fall into human sin and our subsequent actions and character do not negate either the goodness or the givenness of creation. As Albert Wolters reminds us, "Sin and evil always have the character of caricature. . . a distorted image that nevertheless embodies certain recognizable features." For example, "A human being after the fall, though a travesty of humanity, is still a human being, not an animal. A humanistic school is still a school. A broken relationship is still a relationship. Muddled thinking is still thinking. In each case, what something in fallen creation 'still is' points to the enduring goodness of creation."²⁸ Thus, human sin means there is a distortion of creation but not nega-

tion or obliteration of its essential qualities. The Bible speaks of sin in many ways: missing the mark, transgression (the breach of a relationship), ungodliness, rebellion, blindness, wandering from the path, unrighteousness, and perversion. At the heart of human sin is a rebellion against God and his grace, but the effects of sin are cosmically felt. One of the best ways to understand the nature of sin and its implications for ethics is to examine the story of the fall in Genesis 3.

THE NATURE OF THE FALL AND HUMAN SIN

The essence of human sin in Genesis 3 is “a grasping for spiritual and moral autonomy rooted in unbelief and rebellion.”²⁹ Though it is primarily a revolt against God, the historic fall, which is affirmed in the experience of all human beings, is widely felt throughout all the world and all relationships. No dimension of humanity, culture, society, or the physical world is unaffected by the pangs of sin. Thus, a major presupposition of Christian ethics is that a wide gap exists between God’s designs and human and institutional realities. One of the best ways to understand the story in Genesis 3 and the subsequent human experience is in terms of alienation. In the text, alienation is experienced in four ways.

First, there is an alienation from God, the ground and norm of human goodness. In the Genesis account of the fall, as soon as Adam and Eve turn from God’s givens to seek their own autonomy (“when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” [Gen. 3:5]), the sense of alienation from their maker is felt. Indeed, alienation from God becomes the primary reality of human experience.

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”

Genesis 3:8–11

No longer do humans by nature seek and enjoy the presence of God. “As the film maker Woody Allen said in 1993, trying to explain his controversial affair with the young daughter of Mia Farrow, ‘The heart wants what it wants.’”³⁰ Humanity defines goodness over against God and his good givens. God comes to be experienced and seen as enemy, not friend. Humans, of course, have an innate drive for transcendence, but their fallen nature tends to create false gods in their own image, often elevating good divine gifts (i.e., money, sex, power) to gods that are neither transcendent nor personal and were never intended to be the source of life, meaning, salvation, and hope.

The second alienation concerns fellow persons. “The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate’” (3:12). Rather than harmony between the man and the woman there is now blame of another for one’s own actions. Other people are used as a means of extracting oneself from sinful proclivities and self-created circumstances. The givenness of distinctions between male and female in creation no longer beckons partnership but now turns to domination, inverted desires, power plays, and manipulation, for “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16b).

In the alienation that occurs between fallen human beings there is, as Cornelius Plantinga Jr. puts it, a masquerading that distorts the givenness of creation. “Vices have to masquerade as virtues—lust as love, thinly veiled sadism as military discipline, envy as righteous indignation, domestic tyranny as parental concern. . . . Deceivers learn how to present something falsely, and they exert themselves to make the presentation credible.”³¹ Fallen creatures see in another not a fellow creature bearing God’s image but an obstacle to one’s own self-defined version of goodness and one’s own self-centered passion for autonomy. In the midst of this alienation, we never lose sight of our created need for the other nor lose a native capacity to in some measure love those with whom we have natural bonds. But the relationships are always divided and filled with selfish ambition. We seek to manipulate the other to fulfill our own psychological needs and personal wants.

That, of course, leads to a third dimension of alienation: alienation from oneself. “They [sinful creatures] do not really know themselves, flee no less from self than from God, and try to make this unknown self the center of life in place of God.”³² This alienation was evidenced in the Garden and continues to be evidenced in the form of shame and guilt: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (3:7). Humanity not only feels ill at ease with God but ill at ease with one’s own self, the self that has become the central point of reference in rebellious autonomy.

The alienation from self is further seen in self-deception: “Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate’” (3:13). Eve, and subsequently all people in their fallenness, have a propensity to distort reality and so deceive themselves into believing things that are not the way they really are. Our self-deception attempts to foil truthful accounts of reality about the world, self, and others. Personal narrative triumphs over a metanarrative that is grounded in God, the truth and truthful one. It is through self-deception that fallen humanity with all its education and sophistication is able to do evil and not wince. George Steiner reminds us that a person can be intellectually brilliant and artistically sensible and at the same time morally bankrupt through self-deception. We know, writes Steiner, “That a human being can play Bach in the evening, and

play him well, or read Pushkin, and read him with insight, and proceed in the morning to do his job at Auschwitz.”³³ After all, Paul Joseph Goebbels, the chief architect of Nazi propaganda, had a Ph.D. in literature from one of Germany’s distinguished universities.

The fourth alienation as a result of the fall is alienation from nature. At creation there was a clear distinction between creator and the created. As noted earlier, there were also distinctions within the created world: humans made in God’s image, the animal world, and the inanimate world of nature. The world of nature was not the same as either God or the human world, but clearly it was a good gift of God to be cared for and used with temperance. At creation, nature and humanity were not identical but were clearly in harmony. Because of the fall, even nature itself experiences the reverberations of sin and alienation: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. . . . By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:17–19). What was meant for human enjoyment and stewardly care now stands over against humanity as a threat, and in turn men and women rape God’s good creation. Indeed, many troubling ethical issues in the modern world stem from the alienation between people and nature.

The story of the fall, therefore, provides the most basic understanding of what ails the world. Not all ethical dilemmas are a direct result of specific sinful actions (John 9:1–3), but the moral context must always come to terms with global fallenness. Christians must always be suspicious of utopian social schemes, for they do not take account of the fundamental problem within the world. Human sin is understood first with reference to God, but it manifests itself in all relationships within the cosmos. Thus, God’s solution, redemption, involves all relationships as well.

STRUCTURAL OR CORPORATE SIN

When we think about sin, we tend to think of individual actions or personal dispositions. Scripture clearly states, however, that individuals are not the only ones to experience sin; structures and corporate realities also bear the scars of sin and manifest the fall. Christians may not always feel at ease with this understanding for a number of reasons. As Greg Foster points out, “We instinctively and rightly value individual freedom and responsibility, and it seems that talk of ‘structural sins’ in society reduces the responsibility and value of individuals.”³⁴ We feel that such a conception will negate personal responsibility and put the blame on society. As they sang in the musical *West Side Story*, “We’re deprived because we’re deprived.” Moreover, says Foster, “We may disregard structural sin because of a feeling of helplessness. Something may be done for individuals; brands may be plucked from the burning, but the blaze cannot be stopped.”³⁵

But the biblical worldview clearly embodies a sense of corporate or structural sin, and it is an essential concept for Christian moral judgments. Psalm 94:20–23 speaks of misery by decrees and laws, Isaiah 10:1–2 of unjust laws and oppressive decrees that deprive the poor of their rights, and Amos 5:10–15 commends justice in the gate, the symbol for the judicial process. In these and many other texts, the actions and character of individuals are certainly involved, but we lose much of the passages’ ethical significance if we do not also understand that the laws, policies, and social patterns themselves are unjust and sinful. Personal responsibility is not lessened in these situations, but if the structural dimensions are not addressed, we will not penetrate the full reality of the moral problem. In the Old Testament, one of the primary examples of corporate sin involved the unjust consolidation of the land (i.e., Isa. 5:7–8), which not only led to great accumulation of land by unjust means but also left many without the primary means of economic sustenance in that culture.

In the New Testament, corporate sin is particularly evident in the concepts of “world” and “powers.” The term *world* (*kosmos*) in the classical world meant order, and it was seen as the protectorate of values and life within society. In the New Testament, however, “world” represents the twisted values, patterns, and thinking of the culture and social order. Like many words it can have several meanings: the physical world, people, and a principle of evil that is related to the order of things within culture and society. It is the last usage that applies here, for *kosmos* is “human society insofar as it is organized on wrong principles.”³⁶ Thus, the apostle John wrote: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever” (1 John 2:15–17). And the apostle Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to “deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31). Paul and John were describing not the physical universe or merely the actions of individuals but patterns that were embedded in the cultural values and social processes.

The other New Testament concept that speaks of structural sin is “the powers.” There are actually at minimum three words that are pertinent and inter-related: rulers (*archai*), powers (*exousia*), and principles of this world (*stoicheia*). In recent years, New Testament scholarship has begun to understand these terms not only as demonic forces or angelic powers but also as forces that are manifest within the patterns of societies and institutions. There are varying interpretations of these concepts, but the general consensus is that in some way the powers, rulers, and principles of this world are related to structural realities within societies. This in no way minimizes the role of Satan or demonic forces within the world. It simply means that forces within the societal and cultural fabrics undermine God’s righteousness and goodness.³⁷ Of course,

Christ has “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in [the cross]” (Col. 2:15), and believers are called to bear witness to the powers (Eph. 3:10) of that triumph. But their very existence reminds us that sin resides in places of power, institutional realities, and the patterns of social forces. Without a corporate understanding of sin, we cannot address the full reality of ethical problems.

A Christian worldview then understands sin to be the major problem in human and societal life. From a Christian standpoint, the ultimate problems are neither psychological nor political, neither educational nor economic—though sin is always manifest in and through these realities. Humans fail to live up to God’s standards, let alone their own standards, because of the fall and sin. Our fallen condition raises the moral specter in many realms of life, though clearly not every dilemma we face involves a direct assent to sin. Rather, sin is the condition of our lives and the world in which we live. The concept of the fall is at the heart of how we as believers understand human life, the societies and cultures in which we live and work, and the cosmos in which we find ourselves.

Sin, as has been shown, is not just the actions and dispositions of individuals; it is also the reverberations of societies, cultures, institutions—the world. Addressing only personal morality will leave much of the world to its own devices and vices. Thus, for example, the evils of slavery should be seen not as the mere actions of individuals stripping others of their freedom and dignity but as a system that subjugated others. Often slavery was sanctioned because many who held slaves were otherwise morally upright citizens of their communities (even Christians) who treated their slaves fairly well. Slavery came to an end only when the institution itself was called into question and made illegal. Individual morality alone was insufficient. Such is the case for a host of issues today ranging from economic injustices to institutional racism to unethical business practices to the legal snuffing out of innocent human life while still in the womb.

Redemption

After the fall and the distortion of God’s good world through sin, God the gracious creator began a process of redemption to bring his creatures back to himself and to the designs he originally intended. Sin is still a pervasive reality in all domains of existence, but it does not have the final say (1 Corinthians 15). Redemption was God’s solution to the fall, and it is the third part of the biblical drama.

Immediately following the fall there was a kind of *protoevangelium*, or first glimpse of the gospel, as God cursed the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15). The serpent here embodies and

symbolizes evil and the ultimate source of evil. Though the forces of sin and evil will wreak havoc in the woman’s offspring, there is envisioned a victory through one of the woman’s descendants, a victory that will come through the suffering of one who will crush the power of sin and evil.

God’s redemption is further seen in the calling of Abraham and the divine promise that through him and his descendants, “All the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Through Abraham and his descendants God began an explicit process not only of revealing himself to humanity but also of calling out for himself a people to live in covenant relationship. This covenant was most powerfully demonstrated in the exodus as God redeemed his people from slavery, guided them toward the Promised Land, and gave them the basic contours of his designs for living, the law (Exodus 20).

Divine redemption is always through grace, but its effects are always moral in nature and most clearly demonstrated in those who accept God’s grace. “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:4–6).

The rest of the Old Testament is the story of God’s dealing with this covenant people, their moral and spiritual victories and failures, and God’s abiding faithfulness. As the story unfolds there is an ever increasing awareness that this covenant offer was being widened to all humanity and that its focus was moving toward an apex of redemption in the person of the Redeemer.

The climax of God’s redemptive acts came in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. His life and teachings were the embodiment of God’s goodness and designs for humanity, but it was in his death and resurrection that sin and the fall were dealt with most explicitly and forthrightly. The death and resurrection of Christ were not only the means by which humanity was reconciled to God and sins were forgiven but also the means by which new patterns of life were forged. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17). Salvation in Christ is through divine grace, experienced by trust and faith in his work and person. God’s redemption is not experienced by human moral effort or righteous character; rather, “Just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. . . . By the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:18–19).

Though salvation does not come through human moral efforts, it clearly manifests itself in ethical character and living. One of the classic statements of justification by faith in the New Testament is Ephesians 2:8–9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” But the text

then immediately reminds us that justifying faith must always evidence itself in works of righteousness: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (2:10). Such works of righteousness are demonstrated not only in personal moral actions but also in social realities, for Paul goes on to address the first great social ethic issue facing the early church, the cultural/racial divide between Jews and Gentiles. Justifying faith is then to be manifest in personal and corporate actions that overturn the effects of sin in cultural, ethnic, and racial divisions, "That he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it" (Eph. 2:15b-16).

The ultimate moral fix in the Christian worldview is God's redemption made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. All solutions to the problem of sin that bypass this redemption are only partial solutions that never get to the core problem of sin. Thus, when churches offer mere moral reform outside the context of Christ's redemption, they are failing God, the world, and human beings who desperately need that redemption to be both made right with God and made anew morally through Christ. The heart of the gospel is the good news that in Jesus Christ the old alienation between humanity and God has been overcome.

But the gospel, while eminently personal, does not stop there. Those who have experienced redemption are then called to participate in God's cosmic process of redemption, which will ultimately overturn all forms of alienation from the fall—alienation from others, self, and nature. The New Testament envisions that the redemptive work will be cosmically felt, for "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). Thus, redemption compels believers to engage in acts of mercy, justice, and stewardship that reflect and participate in God's redemption of all things. As Albert Wolters puts it, "In the name of Christ, distortion must be opposed everywhere—in the kitchen and the bedroom, in city councils and corporate boardrooms, on the stage and on the air. . . . Everywhere humanity's sinfulness disrupts and deforms. Everywhere Christ's victory is pregnant with the defeat of sin and the recovery of creation."³⁸

Redemption through Christ then has clear links to ethics. The righteousness of Christ through faith becomes our own righteousness, which is manifest in both moral actions and inward dispositions of the heart. While justification begins that process by establishing a right relationship with God, there is an ongoing process in which righteousness and holiness grow in the lives of believers, transforming them into the likeness of Christ. There have been many understandings of this process, commonly called the doctrine of sanctification,³⁹ but most understandings encompass both an inner mystical element and an out-

ward behavioral element. While the common stereotype sees sanctification, or the growth in holiness, as a highly individualistic enterprise, the doctrine has historically often embodied strong links to social ethics as well. As John Wesley, probably the person most linked with the idea of holiness, put it, "Solitary religion is not found [in the gospel]. 'Holy solitaires' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than 'holy adulterers.' The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness."⁴⁰ Such sanctification, however, should not be set over against the givens of creation; rather, it should be understood as a renewing of those givens that have been distorted by the fall. Thus, "Marriage should not be avoided by Christians, but sanctified. Emotions should not be repressed, but purified. Sexuality is not simply to be shunned, but redeemed. Politics should not be declared off-limits, but reformed. Art ought not to be pronounced worldly, but claimed for Christ."⁴¹

Though redemption is to be demonstrated within the world, its most particular demonstration should be in the redeemed community, the church. The most widely used biblical metaphor for the church is the body of Christ, which connotes an extension of the visible reality of Christ on earth. Christ is "head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness [i.e., the full expression] of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:22b-23). While we may expect the larger world to contain glimpses of God's designs for humanity, made known through reason and experience, the redeemed community is the primary place in which God's covenantal framework is accepted and by grace the primary locus of redeemed empowerment for moral living.

Because Christian ethics is effected by redeeming grace, known by divine revelation, and empowered by a transcendent presence, it is not an ethic for everyone. It is the ethic of the believing church. "Christian ethics is . . . the ethics of the church against the world, it is not a living possession of the unbelieving community, but of the community of faith."⁴² The church, therefore, exists within the world as a sign of the ultimate solution to the human predicament and a sign of God's will for humanity. Thus, as the church and Christians live in the midst of a fallen and pluralistic society, they clearly cannot expect their ethical commitments, rooted in a particularistic worldview, to be the prevailing norm.

Consummation

Though Christ brought redemption to the world through his death and resurrection, it is quite clear that redemption of the moral life is not yet fully evident, even in the redeemed community. The realities of sin and the fall are prevalent everywhere, including in those who by grace have received forgiveness and moral empowerment. And though a cosmic redemption is envisioned through the work of Christ, one at times has to look hard to find glimpses of it within a broken world. Thus, the Christian worldview understands that the

completion of Christ's redemption awaits the eschaton, when a final consummation will bring all things under his feet. Christians have always understood that history as we now know it will not go on forever. There is movement in history toward God's ultimate reign, when his designs from creation will be brought back to completeness and wholeness. Only then will the effects of the fall be fully overturned and God's moral ideal fully achieved on earth.

Eschatology is not just the domain of Christianity. Almost every religion and ideology has an account of where history is headed and what "the end" will be. For some worldviews, history moves in endless cyclical fashion to which humans must fatefully succumb, while for others history is moving toward a climax. Christianity clearly falls in the latter category and is by no means unique in its linear, climactic understanding. Marxism, for example, embodies a worldview in which history is moving in dialectical fashion toward a climax—a classless society brought on by the salvation of economic transformation, revolution, and the innate forces of history. For Marxists, the ultimate fix is economic. The account one gives of eschatology then has a powerful impact on ethics, for humans live in accordance with their understanding of where history is headed.

Christianity, of course, contains no monolithic understanding of consummation and eschatology, though almost all strands have affirmed the Apostle's Creed: "He [Christ] will come again to judge the quick and the dead." Interpretations of eschatology usually depend on conceptualizations of the kingdom of God and the notion of hope. Some Christian groups envision hope and a future kingdom as an ethereal reality in discontinuity with history and the realities of the created world. In such cases, the eschaton is primarily an escape from an evil world in which there is little temporal hope for change and improvement. Dispensational premillennialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected this sentiment, for only Christ's second return held out any hope for an end to the moral evils of this world. The kingdom of God was deemed to be a future reign with no relevance to life in the present. Thus, as one critic of such thinking in the early part of the twentieth century put it, they "say that the church has nothing to do with reform in society. Its only business is to preach the gospel, exhibit holy and unspotted lives, and thus bear witness to the grace of God."⁴³

Other Christians have emphasized a "fully realized eschatology" that is quite positive about history, because the kingdom of God is becoming more and more a reality on this earth. Here the kingdom is seen to be in continuity with space, time, and history. Often called postmillennialists, these Christians believe that the second return of Christ will come after the kingdom spreads throughout the world. In the early days of American history, many perceived the New World to be the primary locus of God's reign and the primary symbol of hope for the rest of the world. In our own time, this kind of eschatology is evident in the reconstructionist or theonomist movement, which believes that the Old

Testament law is the norm for all societies and that eventually this norm will become a reality on earth as the gospel and its corresponding law reach to all areas. As Rousas Rushdoony, one of the primary leaders, sees it, "The saints must prepare to take over the world's government and its courts,"⁴⁴ and then the kingdom will come in its fullness. Such conceptions clearly see a relationship between eschatology and ethics, but they often herald either an optimistic idealism about the forces of history or a triumphalism that fails to comprehend clearly the nature of the kingdom as taught in God's Word and the fallen nature of all social and political endeavors in this world.

There is another way to understand Christian hope and the kingdom of God: "There is a tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' of the Christian hope, but each is essential to the other. In the language of the seer of Patmos, the Lamb that was slain has by death won the decisive victory (Rev. 5:5), but its final outworking . . . lies in the future (Rev. 22:12)."⁴⁵ It is quite clear that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, and thus his reign has a present dimension. At the same time, it is equally clear from Scripture and observations of the world that it has not yet reached its final climax. When Christ returns, the kingdom of God will be consummated and the reign of God will become full and final on earth.

The kingdom climax is not separate from history and this world, for otherwise God would not win "the ball game" of history. This conception of eschatology thus sees continuity between the created world and the eschaton, for the final liberation of this world "cannot occur through its destruction but only through its transformation."⁴⁶ As Miroslav Volf has noted, "It makes little sense to affirm the goodness of creation and at the same time expect its eschatological destruction."⁴⁷ This affirmation of a real future hope is continuous with God's creation and redemption through Jesus Christ.

According to the Christian worldview, history will not go on in endless fashion, nor is there despair in light of the future forces of history. In contrast to secular utopian hopes or eschatologies of despair, "Hope of a properly transcendent sort (i.e., hope which is invested in something lying beyond the horizons of nature and history . . .) is not only compatible with but actually furnishes the most adequate source of and resources for action designed to transfigure the here-and-now."⁴⁸ Eschatology then has great significance for ethics.

David Gill has suggested three primary implications that flow from the Christian understanding of eschatological hope. First, this hope relativizes the world and all present human efforts to change it. "Absolute justice (or equality, peace, etc.) will occur at the return of Christ and only then. This frees us in the present from idolatries, perfectionism, utopian schemes and absolutizing of positions, parties, nations and ideologies. Perfection comes only at the end."⁴⁹ Second, hope motivates ethical behavior in the present world. "And all who have this hope in him purify themselves" (1 John 3:3), and, "You ought

to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God" (2 Peter 3:11–12 NIV). Third, notes Gill, hope guides ethical behavior in the present world. "This present world era remains fallen, and only the return of Christ can and will resolve the problems of the world as a whole. Nevertheless, it is our future hope which guides our present particular action. While we are not called upon to purge, reform and manage the world as a whole, we are called to find ways of acting as faithful 'signs' of God's promised future."⁵⁰ The consummation is not a theology of escapism and abdication of responsibility within this world; it is a reminder to live now in light of the coming kingdom of God when justice, peace, righteousness, truthfulness, and purity will be made complete.

Conclusion

Christian ethics is ultimately rooted in the nature and actions of the Triune God of the universe. Moral goodness is defined by and flows from the ultimate source of goodness. God is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end of all reality including moral reality. But God has been at work in this world, and this work, revealed in Scripture, forms the second foundation for ethics. The Christian worldview is encompassed in the story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

A good God creates a good world with man and woman at the apex of that creation. Humanity, however, chooses its own path, and the good world is infected with sin in every dimension. The gracious God begins a process of restoration to overcome the alienations from the fall, and redemption reaches its apex in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. Christ dies and rises again to bring us to God but also to renew us morally. But that complete renewal of our lives and of the world awaits the final consummation of his kingdom when Christ shall reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. That is the heart of the biblical story and the Christian worldview, and along with the ultimate reality of the Triune God, it is the foundation for our moral life in the world today.

PART 2

THE CONTEXTS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

The understanding of ethical foundations, the making of moral decisions, and the application of ethical commitments always occur in a context, or better, a set of contexts. Some people believe context plays no role in ethics. Moral absolutes are the same yesterday, today, and forever, and thus, context is merely the changing scenery in which we apply the non-changing standards of God. The way we discern moral vision and apply ethical convictions is the same in all places and all times.

Others believe context plays a determinative role. According to this perspective, ethics is situational or contextual, in that the norms, virtues, and moral frameworks themselves arise from the context. This means that changing cultures, times, and circumstances preclude any moral absolutes or constants. Hence, we are left with a form of ethical relativism.

A third view is that context plays a mediating role. According to this perspective, there are transcendent realities, known through divine revelation, in which we ground our ethics and moral universals. The context, however, determines how we appeal to these transcultural norms and virtues and how we seek to apply them within the world. If we are honest, we must admit that context even influences our understanding of the norms and virtues themselves. The Bible, the source of a Christian worldview and moral guidelines, is never read in a vacuum.

This latter perspective is the one assumed in this book. It is imperative to understand the way context shapes our perceptions as well as the moral understandings of others. Furthermore, context plays a significant role when we seek to apply our ethical commitments to the cultures and societies in which we live. Indeed, neglecting context is the surest way to be co-opted by it.

There are really two forms of context related to ethics. The first form is a micro-context, a smaller and more immediate setting in which we make moral judgments. Micro-contexts include nations, races, geographic locations, church