

# Christian Ethics, Second Edition

## *A Historical Introduction*

J. Philip Wogaman

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

---

# Contents

<i>Preface to the Second Edition</i>	ix
<i>Introduction to the First Edition</i>	xiii
<b>I. The Legacies of Christian Ethics</b>	<b>1</b>
1. The Biblical Legacy of Christian Ethics	3
2. Philosophical Legacies	17
<b>II. The Ethics of Early Christianity</b>	<b>25</b>
3. The Formative Years	27
4. Seminal Thinkers and Transitions	39
5. The Moral Vision of Saint Augustine	53
<b>III. Medieval Christianity</b>	<b>63</b>
6. Monastic and Mystical Contributions	65
7. The Confessional	78
8. The Thomistic Synthesis	86
9. Late Medieval Forerunners	100
<b>IV. The Era of Reformation and Enlightenment</b>	<b>113</b>
10. The Reformers: Luther and Calvin	115
11. Catholic Humanism and Counter-Reformation	132
12. The Radical Reformation	144

<b>V. Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Rationalism and Evangelicalism</b>	<b>155</b>
13. Rationalism and Revival in the Eighteenth Century	157
14. Nineteenth-Century Philosophical and Christian Ethics	170
15. Nineteenth-Century Slavery and Feminist Controversies	191
<b>VI. Christian Ethics in the Twentieth Century</b>	<b>203</b>
16. The Social Gospel Movement	207
17. The Social Encyclicals	223
18. Formative Christian Moral Thinkers	231
19. The Vatican II Watershed	259
20. Orthodox Christian Ethics	270
21. Liberation Theology	282
22. Ecumenical Social Ethics	293
<b>VII. Christian Ethics in the Third Millennium</b>	<b>305</b>
23. Changed Realities	307
24. Unresolved Issues	315
25. Concluding Reflections	333
<i>For Further Reading</i>	341
<i>Index</i>	345

---

## Preface to the Second Edition

In venturing a new edition of this volume, I am encouraged by critical response when the book first appeared in 1993 and to the readership it has found in subsequent years. Nevertheless, time moves on, and “new occasions teach new duties.” In some respects, these intervening years have confirmed the relevance of the gathered insights of thinkers and movements, but now is also a time for updating and looking ahead.

It remains true that a book of this kind—surveying two thousand years of history—must be highly selective. I share the frustration of some early reviewers that significant figures were omitted. One British reviewer, for example, had kind things to say about the work but wished to call attention to more than thirty figures that do not appear (ranging from Cervantes to Walker Percy and such literary figures or musicians as Handel, Donne, Faber, Walter Pater, Hardy, Chesterton, Frank Sheed, and C. S. Lewis). Yes! Some other reviewers had other names to add to this company of the neglected, and I could, of course, add my list of those I considered but ultimately decided not to include. Part of my own frustration is in having to bypass scores if not hundreds of twenty- and twenty-first-century figures whom I have known and highly respect. Moreover, as acknowledged in the original introduction, a historical survey of this kind does not permit the serious study of individual thinkers that is necessary for a rounded understanding. A further limitation is in relative neglect of social/cultural history. Some of that will be found here, but this cannot be a cultural history of the past two thousand years.

Despite the inevitable limitations of space and judgment, historical surveys of this kind have proved useful as road maps through a vast terrain. I am sometimes comforted by one of G. K. Chesterton’s famous paradoxes: “Anything worth doing is worth doing badly.” Better to do something needful, despite all limitations, than not to do it at all. I am ever more conscious of the extent to

which any written history reflects the decisions of the writer; but I trust that the limitations of this volume will be addressed by the work of others.

So what is new here?

After careful restudy of the book and the comments of others, I have edited the first four parts of the book only lightly. Most changes occur in later parts of the book, particularly those dealing with the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I have added a few thinkers and movements and made a few other modifications. One substantial addition is a new chapter on Orthodox Christian Ethics, which appears in part VI. I consider the lack of such a chapter in the first edition to have been a significant shortcoming. Part VII, "Christian Ethics Toward the Third Millennium," obviously needed a new title, since we are already a decade into this new century. Rather than making this part of the book a survey of thinkers, I have decided to cast it as an examination of new twenty-first-century realities and key thematic issues confronting Christian ethics in this new day. I have ventured at that point to note some historical antecedents as a reminder that (with apologies to James Russell Lowell) time does not make *all* ancient good uncouth! In the concluding chapter 25, I have ventured, more directly, my own reflections on what seem to be key issues.

A personal note: the first edition of this book was published just as I was beginning to serve as pastor of the Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC, a post I continued to hold for the following decade. Most of my career had been as a professor of Christian ethics, but I found the pastoral experience a wonderfully enriching source of additional insight into why ethics matters. Subsequent to retirement, this two-sided personal experience was reinforced by an interim presidency at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver and an interim year pastorate at the St. Luke United Methodist Church in Omaha.

A recurrent debate in Christian ethics concerns the difference between the formation of moral selves and the process of actual decision making and action. In part, that is the difference between willing the good and knowing the good. I have an ever-deepening sense that neither of these can be neglected. That is one of the issues I will address in the concluding part of this book, but I wish to state here that pastoral experience has helped me see why both willing and knowing are important and that the task of the Christian community is not only the formation of persons of good conscience but the careful framing of the issues and problems such people are called upon to address in the real world.

I wish to thank in a special way those who have offered critical insight through reviews of the first edition and through words of advice about this revision: Michael Long, Michael E. Allsopp, Edward LeRoy Long Jr., Donna Yarri, Michael Hoy, Douglas F. Ottati, Mary Deeley, Ian C. M. Fairweather, Leonard S. Kravitz, N. Leroy Norquist, Joe E. Trull, John Howard Yoder, Newton B. Fowler, Roy J. Enquist, and Charles Curran. Helpful readers of the manuscript of the first edition are listed in the introduction to that edition that follows. I take all such responses to my work seriously, but without holding any of these good people responsible for errors or mistaken judgments. Westminster John

---

Knox Press has been a source of encouragement and technical assistance. I think especially of my editor Stephanie Egnotovich, who initially pushed this revision along. And with all who knew her, I grieve her untimely death before the task could be completed. Editor David Dobson has helpfully continued in that supportive role. In addition to the resources of the excellent Wesley Theological Seminary library, I am grateful to the community library at Long Lake, New York, my place of retreat in much of the preparation of this revision. This spot, in the beautiful Adirondacks, is an ever-present reminder that we are all beneficiaries of a gracious Creator. In this place, just four years ago, Carolyn and I were surrounded by family and friends for the celebration of our fiftieth anniversary. I continue to be sustained by her loving support.

---

## Introduction to the First Edition

I welcomed the publisher's invitation to contribute this history of Christian ethics, not out of any illusions about how easy such a task would be, but because I think it important for each generation of Christians to be reintroduced to its immense legacy. The legacy is not altogether positive. In defining and addressing moral problems, Christians have sometimes illustrated James Russell Lowell's line that "time makes ancient good uncouth." But if Christians are to accept the responsibilities of their own era, they need to know something of the mistakes as well as the insights and triumphs of Christian witness in previous generations.

We stand, now, at the conclusion of two thousand years of Christian history. That is a vast expanse of time, in human if not in cosmic terms. But there has scarcely been a moment in those two millennia when Christians have not had to confront moral questions. The result is a rich legacy of thought, much of which proves strikingly relevant to contemporary issues and most of which can at least help us address our own time with greater clarity. My hope is that this volume will open the door on a treasure house no one book can hope to contain. It is designed to introduce, not to conclude, the history. A history of this kind, while it cannot be encyclopedic, must at least be dependable, and if it is to accomplish its purpose, it must be interesting.

In striving to make the book dependable, I must acknowledge my dependence upon the prior work of many scholars. There is a sense in which all of us who work at Christian ethics should be historians of ideas. But in that we are particularly dependent upon those whose full-time work is historical study.

In writing a book such as this, I am freshly conscious of how inadequate even the most thorough work of history must be. For one is selecting out of an immense sea those buckets of fact and insight that seem, to the writer, to be particularly significant. There is so much that must be neglected! But if it is a sin to be more superficial than we have to be, it may even be worse to allow

ourselves to be paralyzed by the fear of necessary incompleteness. If incompleteness is inevitable, so too, lamentably, is bias. One does not have to attribute all knowledge to social location to grasp the point that we are deeply influenced by our social situation, with its peculiar pattern of needs, interests, and privileges. One cannot write a history of anything, and particularly a history of Christian ethics, without selecting out what seems most important. And we do not always know why we regard something as more important than something else! Church history, like all history, is so often the chronicle of those who prevailed. It sometimes neglects the losers or the disregarded. A result of this is that the children of the losers may find little with which to identify in the remembered story of the community. In our own century that is dramatically the case for oppressed ethnic groups and women, who have had to struggle to reclaim their proper share in the past.

I do not know whether this book will prove helpful in enlarging our understanding of the story. But I will not hesitate to bring twentieth-century questions and problems to bear in examining the thinkers of earlier periods. That is, in a sense, unfair. But if our purpose is less one of judging the morality of earlier times and more one of appropriating a history into contemporary existence, the issue of fairness may not be so important. We must not allow ourselves to be distracted by the question whether Paul or Augustine or Martin Luther was better or worse than Christians today. We do need to learn from the experience and insights of earlier Christians while coming to understand more clearly how their thoughts have helped shape what we are.

One point should be stressed at the outset. Few, if any, Christian thinkers have been perfectly consistent. It is possible to quote most thinkers against themselves. One could almost argue that the more profound a thinker is in challenging the root assumptions of an age, the more likely there is to be a gap between the central insights and the way in which that thinker responds to particular problems. Paul's understanding of women may be a case in point. At the deeper levels of his theology, Paul acknowledges that there is no essential difference between women and men: "there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). But in his response to practical problems (as he saw them) in the life of the church, he can still write that women "are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate" (1 Cor. 14:34). Which is the "real" Paul? Both, probably. But we do have to form a judgment as to which represents Christian ethics in the more profound way.

Such complexities mean that sorting out the history of Christian moral thought cannot be reduced to technical exegesis of the work of a few key figures. We are challenged to encounter that history from the depths of our own spirits, seeking, if indeed we may, the truth that an earlier time may have conveyed without fully understanding it. Still, while technical accuracy is not a sufficient objective, it is a worthy goal to avoid inaccuracy! In that respect, the present work seeks to be dependable even as it endeavors to draw the reader into the deeper treasures presented by a great inheritance.



I wish to acknowledge my specific indebtedness to the following scholars who have read all or part of the manuscript: Mark S. Burrows, Victor Paul Furnish, Alan Geyer, John D. Godsey, James A. Nash, Douglas M. Strong, Leo Maley III, and (my ever-helpful editor) Davis Perkins. Such improvements as have been made in the manuscript are to be counted to their credit; remaining flaws are my own responsibility. I am grateful to Ann Rehwinkel, Shirley Dixon, Susan Bender, and Jane Martin for secretarial assistance, and to my wife, Carolyn, for her typical supportiveness throughout the writing process.

Christian ethics, while largely an academic undertaking, is unthinkable apart from the community of faith, the church. My writing of this book was begun at Wesley Theological Seminary and concluded after I had begun serving Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC. I have found both institutions wonderful places in which to engage in dialogue about issues that matter, and I gratefully dedicate this volume to my colleagues at the seminary and to the great congregation I now serve.

---

# PART I

## THE LEGACIES

### OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

The New Testament, as the product of earliest Christian thought and tradition, is itself part of the history of Christian ethics. It is possible, by careful study of the setting, date, and authorship of New Testament writings, to form some initial impressions about the developing moral traditions of the early church in its formative decades. Such a study also reveals that the earliest Christian writers depended heavily upon Hebrew scripture, eventually known among Christians as the Old Testament. Indeed, when earliest Christian thinkers referred to “scripture” they invariably meant the Hebrew scriptures, for at that time the New Testament canon, as such, did not exist.

But even though the biblical materials are part of an evolving story, they constitute en bloc the most important source for the work of subsequent Christian moral thought. In this first part of our study, we shall look at the Bible in this way—as a received tradition that has exerted formative influence on all Christian ethics through the centuries.

It is also evident that Christian ethics was, perhaps from the very beginning, substantially influenced by ancient philosophical traditions. It may help to set the stage for the later history for us to be reminded of essential contributions of some of those traditions, while noting that the degree to which such sources should be used in Christian moral thought is itself a matter of dispute.

---

## Chapter 1

# The Biblical Legacy of Christian Ethics

The product of more than a thousand years of development, the Bible presents us with an extraordinary mixture of materials with which to think ethically. The span of time encompassed in biblical writing tends to be compressed in our minds because it took form so long ago. How long ago? While nobody knows for sure, the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt may have occurred around 1300 BCE (with the stories about Abraham, Sarah, etc., referring to a still earlier period). The reign of King David began around 1000 BCE. The Babylonian exile began around 587 BC. The latest of the writings of Hebrew scripture came around 300 BCE. The life of Jesus spanned about the first third of the first century CE. And the last of the New Testament books were written toward the end of that century. After due consideration, I have decided to continue in this edition to refer to the two parts of the Christian Bible as “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” But “Old” is not taken to be inferior to or superceded by “New.” Rather, “Old” is what came first. Indeed, careful study of the New Testament reveals a very large number of direct—and not always acknowledged—repetitions of material from the Old Testament. The Old Testament is properly Hebrew scripture, but it is also Christian scripture. (That it is held in common by Jewish and Christian faith communities illustrates a particularly

close relationship between the two.) It might be helpful to think of all that has happened in the Western world in the five hundred years since Columbus first set sail from Spain in 1492—and then to remember that it took more than twice that length of time for the Bible to take shape.

Impressed by the different periods of history, the different social settings, and the different genres of the writings themselves, many biblical scholars today are happier to speak of diversity than of unity in the scriptures. The Bible does not have a single theology—it has a number of theologies. The Bible does not have only one ethical perspective—it has a variety of ethical perspectives. To do justice to the actual texts, one must first acknowledge the diversities, letting them speak for themselves.

Yet those who regard the Bible as speaking with some authority in theology and ethics cannot be content to leave it as a collection of diverse writings. For the Bible to be appropriated into the work of Christian ethics, it must be seen to have some core of unity. Otherwise, there would be no basis in the Bible itself for dealing with apparently conflicting elements in the biblical canon.

One way of establishing such an essential core is to impose arbitrary uniformity upon the writings, running roughshod over the evidences of difference and inconsistency. Few biblical scholars countenance such intellectual dishonesty, whatever its values may seem to be in protecting the pieties of the innocent. Another way is to interpret the Bible on the basis of a moral hermeneutic, recognizing that by doing so one necessarily gives higher priority to some texts or passages than to others. In a word, one has established a kind of canon within the canon. That approach is clearly followed by most Christian ethics. For instance, a pacifist Christian is likely to emphasize the Sermon on the Mount and all other teachings about loving one's enemies while discounting or disregarding the wars of the ancient Israelites and the prospect of an eschatological Armageddon.

One way or another, the figure of Jesus Christ is central to Christian faith and its moral teachings. Not surprisingly, large numbers of Christians and some of the ethicists we will encounter in these pages consider the explicit teachings of Jesus to be primary—and possibly the exclusive—source of Christian ethics. Particular teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), portrayals of the kingdom of God, and parables like the Prodigal Son, become the defining center of Christian ethics. Obviously, Christian moral thought cannot overlook the teachings attributed to Jesus. There are, however, two problems in treating these as the only basis and source of Christian ethics. First, there is the problem of determining which of the recorded teachings accurately express the actual words of Jesus. There are sometimes different versions of the same teaching situations (for instance, compare Matthew 5–7 with Luke 6 and 12); often the teachings are similar, but the differences make clear that they are not precisely recorded. Teachings in the Gospel of John are often theological interpretations of Christ and even less likely to represent his actual words. Teach-

ings attributed to Jesus are to be taken seriously, but not without thoughtful interpretation.

The other problem with focusing exclusively on the reported teachings of Jesus is that it may cause us to overlook the importance of Jesus' own life. From the beginning, Christian thinkers have considered the character of Jesus to be, one way or another, decisive in our understanding of the nature and purposes of God. Thus the apostle Paul devotes substantial attention to the self-giving love of Christ on the cross. Even the Gospels devote more attention to the climactic last days of Jesus, with stories of the Last Supper, the crucifixion, and resurrection, than to any comparable period of time in Jesus' ministry. Christian ethics can properly draw conclusions for human life from this deep insight into God. The unfolding history of Christian moral thought illustrates how different thinkers and movements have reflected on both the teachings and example of Christ.

So in telling the story of Christian ethics it is well not to press any given set of interpretations upon the Bible too soon. It is better, when we speak of the Bible as a legacy upon which Christian ethics has drawn through the centuries, to try to understand the tensions within which creative thought has occurred. These are the points of conflict, where both "sides" have to be taken into account. Six of these biblical points of tension may be especially helpful to us in understanding the Bible as a legacy for Christian ethics.

## TENSION ONE: REVELATION VERSUS REASON

In one sense, the very first question to ask about the biblical legacy is the basis of its moral claims. In part, it makes claims for special revelation—knowledge or insight that has been given to persons of faith and that is not available to those who are outside the community of faith. But in part it also relies upon knowledge that is available to any person of normal intelligence, reflecting on experience common to humanity.

It might seem, at first glance, that the biblical tradition rests entirely upon revelation. The story of the ancient Israelites is the constant narration of God's interaction with a chosen people. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Deborah, Samuel, David, Ezra, Nehemiah—all are depicted as basing their judgments and actions upon direct communication from God. The Ten Commandments are presented as the gift of God to Moses on Mount Sinai. The great prophets validate their moral teachings with "thus says the LORD." The New Testament picks up with Mary's special communication from the angel Gabriel and includes a variety of miracle stories bespeaking God's intervention in human history. Jesus Christ is, himself, seen to be the perfect revelation of God—"The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). Paul's moment of truth is depicted as a flashing confrontation with the risen Christ on

the road to Damascus. Paul, whose New Testament writings plainly indicate a penetrating mind, still seems to disdain rational argumentation:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. (1 Cor. 1:20–24)

Of course, the term “revelation” itself need not be restricted to dramatic interventions, special miracles, and communication with angels—though the biblical legacy has much of that. The claim is also implicit that we gain the really important truths not through reasoning but through encounter with moral realities in human form. So Paul understands “Christ crucified” to provide a more compelling moral vision than any rational analysis could possibly hope to do.

Still, while the biblical narrative rests decisively upon revelation, it also appeals to reason. In most rudimentary form, that includes the delightful stories of Hebrew herdsmen, rulers, warriors, and so on bargaining with or reasoning with their trading partners, subjects, fellow rulers, or adversaries. The rationale for commandments and moral admonitions is not infrequently pragmatic—the negative consequences of not doing what is commanded. Some of the great prophets, notably Amos and the unknown prophet of the exile (Deutero-Isaiah), develop a universal understanding of God in contrast with crude polytheisms. The books in the Hebrew wisdom tradition—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job—are more philosophical in cast than the rest of the Hebrew scriptures. And much of the rest could be said to make sense to a non-Jew on grounds of human justice.

While Jesus Christ is understood by the New Testament writers to be the decisive revelation of God to humanity, it is interesting how even this revelation is presented in the thought categories of Hellenistic philosophy. Thus, in speaking of Christ as the “Word” made flesh, the allusion of the Fourth Gospel may be to the Greek Logos, understood by the Stoic rationalist tradition as the universal structure of reason. Paul’s Mars Hill address (Acts 17:22–31) is similarly couched in Stoic language, though it is punctuated by appeal to the resurrection. In that address, Paul ridicules the pretensions of idolatry, while appealing reasonably to a universal conception of God. Indeed, Paul also appealed to a universal conscience (Romans 1) and argued against certain practices as being unnatural (especially in 1 Corinthians).

The biblical legacy, taken as a whole, would seem to suggest that serious thought about ethics must employ both revelation and reason, although the meaning of revelation, the nature of reason, and the proper way to employ the two together have been elaborated in very different ways through Christian history.

## TENSION TWO: MATERIALISM VERSUS THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT

Viewed from one standpoint, the biblical legacy is very “materialistic”; viewed from another, it is quite “spiritual.” The materialistic side is anchored in the traditions of creation. God created the world in all of its material detail, observing that “it was good.” The nature psalms proclaim this work of God the Creator (“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established”—Ps. 8:3). Nor is this materialism only on the grand scale of creation; it is reflected in the earthiness of the heroes of faith and ordinary people alike. The Song of Songs depicts the sensual aspects of human love. The blessedness of divine favor is depicted in terms of material prosperity. The loss of material well-being, as in the story of Job, is depicted as outright disaster. The neglect of the material well-being of ordinary people is treated by the great prophets as altogether contrary to the will of God. Nor is this materialistic theme suddenly reversed by the New Testament. The ministry of Jesus depicts the healing of the sick, the feeding of the multitudes, the celebration of God’s loving concern for the sparrows, and the use of other images drawn from nature. Jesus’ followers are taught to pray “give us this day our daily bread,” and Jesus is characteristically known in the “breaking of bread.” When the Fourth Gospel refers to the advent of Jesus, it is in the proclamation that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” When Colossians sought to interpret the meaning of Christ, it made connection with the inherited Hebrew tradition by asserting that he is “the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible” (Col. 1:15b–16a). However such passages are interpreted, they certainly are not a denial of the divine origins and purposes of this quite material world.

But biblical materialism does not value the material as the end purpose of human existence. The first sin cataloged in the Ten Commandments is the sin of idolatry—worshiping something else in place of God. The great prophets, while affirming the importance of material well-being, were clear about the corruptions of idolatry and materialism. Amos was especially clear: “Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp . . . but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” (Amos 6:4–6). Amos thus would not allow materialistic self-indulgence to compensate for loss of deeper human values identified with the well-being of the community.

The many New Testament references to the life of the spirit preclude any altogether materialistic interpretation of Christian scripture. Thus the Fourth Gospel insists that true worship is “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). And Paul characteristically contends that “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7–8). New Testament warnings against worldliness appear quite antithetical to any materialism. Thus, as reported in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus admonishes that it is a dangerous thing to gain the

whole world at the cost of one's life; and Jude refers to "worldly people, devoid of the Spirit" (Jude 19).

So here we have a biblical tension between strong affirmation of the goodness of created, physical, even sensual existence, on the one hand, and the assertion of spiritual values transcending the material, on the other. Much of the work of twenty centuries of Christian ethics has also been occupied with creative efforts to resolve this tension.

### TENSION THREE: UNIVERSALISM VERSUS GROUP IDENTITY

The question here is whether one's ultimate significance is established by membership in the chosen or redeemed community (Israel or the church) or by being created and loved by the God of all people. Hebrew scripture is, of course, deeply grounded in the notion of the chosenness of Israel. This elect nation is liberated from Egypt, formed by the special covenant of Sinai, and given the promised land. The tension between universalism and group identity as conflicting interpretations of the meaning of Israel is played out in various ways in Hebrew scripture. Thus Amos, acknowledging that this is the chosen people, can nevertheless bring a word of judgment with universalistic overtones: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). There is a kind of universalism implicit in Isaiah's announcement that "all the nations shall stream" to "the mountain of the LORD's house" and that "out of Zion shall go forth instruction" (Isa. 2:2–3; paralleled in Mic. 4:1–3), although this smacks of triumphalism or even imperialism and might be taken to be a heightening of group identity. Such pronouncements do at least suggest that God is God of all peoples and that Israel's mission—its reason for existence as a group—has universal significance. In the case of Isaiah and Micah, this is emphasized by the theme of universal peace among the nations: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares."

The tension between universalism and group identity is perhaps most strongly felt in the crisis of the exile of 587 BCE, when the nation Israel was devastated and all hope of real group identity appeared lost ("How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" Ps. 137:4). The reassertion of faith in that moment of defeat took a strongly universalistic turn in the writings of Ezekiel and the unknown prophet who wrote several chapters beginning with Isaiah 40 (the so-called Deutero-Isaiah). Ezekiel is a good reminder that universalism is often expressed as individualism. Personal responsibility before the universal God can be substituted for a relationship with God that is mediated through the group. Ezekiel takes pains to assert personal moral responsibility and to repudiate the notion that anyone is to be blamed for the actions of others.

The contrast between universal and group-centered forms of identity is nowhere more vividly expressed in Hebrew scripture than in the period of



restoration under the Persian Empire during the fifth century BCE. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther emphasize Jewish group identity almost to the point of chauvinism, with genealogies making it easier to establish who did and who did not belong and with Ezra's high-priestly prayer and its call to the men of Israel to put away their foreign wives and children. The books of Jonah and Ruth can be taken to represent a reaction against such chauvinism. The book of Ruth portrays the goodness and faithfulness of such a foreign wife, even depicting Ruth as great-grandmother to King David. The book of Jonah pokes fun at an explicitly chauvinistic character named Jonah, contrasting his narrowness with God's compassion for even the hated Assyrians.

The tension between universalism and group identity is expressed in two ways in the New Testament. First, in Paul's struggle with the "Judaizers," the issue was whether newly converted Gentile Christians should be required to observe Jewish ritual requirements. In practical terms, that issue was settled through the successful missionary efforts of Paul and others in establishing Christianity among Gentiles. Theologically, the issue was addressed in Paul's doctrine of grace, to which we shall return below.

But if being a Christian does not require that one be a Jew, there remains the question whether Christianity constitutes a new group identity of its own. Is Christian identity now grounded in the church and, if so, is the church understood in broadly universal or more narrowly sectarian terms? Again, one may note a tension. The God of the New Testament is clearly universal. Through Christ, the "dividing wall, that is, the hostility" (Eph. 2:14), has been broken down, the alienations overcome, both between humanity and God and among persons. But to the extent this is seen as an event in the life of Christians within the church, a new form of group identity could be seen to have replaced the older Jewish one. Here and there, Christians are referred to as the "elect" (e.g., Rom. 8:33 or Matt. 24:22), implying that God has chosen some to be saved within the church while others are excluded. But the strong evangelistic, missionary theme implies that the gospel should be proclaimed to all—a point that becomes quite explicit in Luke–Acts. Interactions between Christians and non-Christians on substantive moral and legal questions imply New Testament recognition of a wider community of discourse.

#### TENSION FOUR: GRACE VERSUS LAW

A related tension concerns the basis of salvation itself. In one sense, biblical religion emphasizes morality throughout. The prophets all stressed moral action as essential to faithfulness and human fulfillment. God, as seen by them, utterly rejects unrighteousness and injustice and blesses the lives of all who obey God's moral demands. The Hebrew law codes, such as expressed in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, embody this prophetic standard, applying it to the circumstances of life in the Hebrew community. Even the Psalms celebrate righteous

behavior. Unrighteousness is, throughout Hebrew scripture, subject to the stern judgments of God. A variety of offenses are taken to merit harsh punishments, including stoning to death, while long life, prosperity, and many children are considered the reward for a good life. God, as lawgiver and judge, has high moral expectations. The Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:2–17; Deut. 5:6–21) represent the essence of these expectations. The moral requirements, such as the commandments against murder and adultery, are combined there with the fundamental insistence upon single-minded worship of the one God. Thus the moral commandments are set in the context of devotion to God, and violations of those commandments can now be understood as forms of idolatry.

That picture, while sometimes contrasted with the New Testament emphasis upon grace, is actually presupposed and expressed in much of the New Testament. At points the New Testament even appears to increase the moral demand. For instance, Matthew reports Jesus' sayings:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. . . . Therefore whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17, 19–20)

To emphasize the point, that passage is followed by the assertion that attitudes of anger and lust are the moral equivalents of killing and adultery. Paul makes clear that certain forms of behavior and attitude are inconsistent with life in the spirit. The Epistle of James reads like the Old Testament prophets in its emphasis upon righteousness. And moral demands are typical of the other New Testament writings as well.

In some tension with this long, rich biblical tradition of moral law, there is also a deep expression of God's love for undeserving sinners. Nor is that exclusively a New Testament emphasis. The formation narratives of Genesis and Exodus portray this love, often in contrast with the moral weakness, even the unscrupulousness, of Israelites. Hosea is depicted as loving and redeeming a faithless, licentious woman, and finding in her a metaphor for Israel's own faithlessness in contrast to the steadfast love of God. A similar sense of God's forgiving love activates Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah as well as other Hebrew writings.

The transforming, redeeming love of God permeates New Testament writings, such as the parables of Jesus and the letters of Paul. Often this love is portrayed as utterly undeserved—a love given prior to considerations of merit. Paul's own word for it, derived from Roman law, is "grace": being treated as innocent when one is in fact guilty. And this is a "gift," given freely to humanity through Jesus Christ: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through

the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith” (Rom. 3:22–25).

This biblical emphasis upon unmerited love is in obvious tension with the portrayal of God’s moral demands and judgments upon the unrighteous. The tension is reflected more or less directly in the Epistle of James, where the writer responds to a certain interpretation of Paul with caustic words:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (Jas. 2:14–17)

Part of the biblical legacy of Christian ethics is the necessity somehow to do justice to both sides of the tension.

## TENSION FIVE: LOVE VERSUS FORCE

A somewhat related conflict is between reliance upon love and trust in God and the acceptance of coercive power and political authority to gain moral objectives. Love itself is central to the ethics of both Old and New Testaments. Both Testaments emphasize the love commandment, grounding love of neighbor with love of God. Through the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus specifically applied the commandment to love one’s neighbor to an alien people.

Superficially, the Old and New Testaments appear to be in conflict over the question whether it is ever permissible to use force. Hebrew scripture is, after all, the expression of a nation, a political community. The ancient Hebrews are depicted as fighting wars, with Yahweh leading them to victory. Joshua, in obedience to God, obliterates the men, women, and children of Jericho—and many other residents of Canaan, whose country has been given as the “promised land” to the Israelites. Deborah, a judge and prophet, urged the Hebrews on into battle, then celebrated the victory (and a subsequent act of treachery) in what scholars consider to be one of the oldest oracles of the Old Testament (Judges 5). King David, despite human flaws that the Bible does not pass over, is depicted overall as God’s servant for the upbuilding of the nation. Within the nation, law is presented not simply as moral exhortation but as commandments that are to be enforced by the community with real sanctions.

The New Testament is not the product of a political community. The first Christians were subjects of a political empire encompassing most of the world known to them; they were definitely not in charge. There was no occasion for their writings to deal with problems of state on the grand scale, no Jeremiah advising a King Zedekiah nor a Nathan confronting King David. It is noteworthy, however, that New Testament writings occasionally express respect for the

Roman authority and its agents. Even the ascetic John the Baptist is not portrayed as requiring Roman soldiers to change careers, but only to “not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages” (Luke 3:14). Jesus, in the familiar story, advises his clever questioners to “give . . . to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s” (Matt. 22:21; etc.), without any suggestion of the illegitimacy of the Roman state. Paul commands his readers to “be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God,” and he identifies the ruler as “God’s servant for your good” (Rom. 13:1, 4). In this famous passage, Paul makes clear that even the coercive power of the state has divine sanction: the ruler “does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer” (v. 4). The theme is echoed in 1 Peter: “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right” (1 Pet. 2:13–14).

These and other biblical writings suggest that political authority, even when expressed through the power of the sword, is part of the divine scheme of things.

But here too there is another side to the biblical story. It begins with a strong theme of criticism of kings in Hebrew scripture; one tradition conveys strong opposition to establishment of monarchy in the first place, implying that by doing so the people have rejected God. The story is worth quoting:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, “Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.” (1 Sam. 8:4–7)

Samuel then predicts in detail the abuses to be expected from monarchy, but the people nevertheless insist upon the naming of a king. Concrete Hebrew experience with monarchy, possibly reflected back into the Samuel narrative, amply bore out his dire predictions. Hosea may have been thinking of this when he declared, “Since the days of Gibeah you have sinned, O Israel” (Hos. 10:9). Gibeah was the place where Israel’s first king, Saul, made his headquarters. In the Chronicler’s catalog of the virtues and vices of Israel’s kings, there were many more of the latter than of the former, and a large majority of the kings are put down as evil.

Still, even this tradition cannot exactly be said to oppose political power as such. The development of the Hebrew monarchy was against the background of the rule of charismatic judges, designated more or less democratically by the people who were convinced that these special people possessed the Spirit of God. The fundamental design was theocratic; the question was not whether God would rule through certain people but who those people would be, how they would be chosen, what limits would be placed upon them.

The real contrast, within the biblical narrative, is between reliance upon state power (however designated and restrained) and trust in God and obedience to the ways of peace and love. It is difficult to interpret the Old Testament from any angle as pacifist literature. But there are poignant appeals to the ways of peace all the same. Isaiah is particularly noteworthy, with memorable passages such as “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (2:4), and “the wolf shall lie with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. . . . They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (11:6, 9). In prospect is a time when “all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire,” for the government will be in the hands of one who will be called “Prince of Peace” (9:5, 6). Isaiah’s vision of such a peaceful future is combined with sharp criticism of reliance upon military methods: “Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD” (31:1).

While the Old Testament vision of divine presence often uses military metaphors (such as “the LORD, mighty in battle,” of Ps. 24:8), such imagery is replaced by the concept of a suffering servant who was “despised and rejected” (see especially Isaiah 53). The unknown writer(s) of the great exile concluded that God’s deeper purposes for the redemption of the people could come through loving vulnerability that is very different from reliance upon physical power. And, echoed by some late New Testament writings, the book of Proverbs argues, “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the LORD will reward you” (Prov. 25:21–22).

Such a conception comes to full flower in the New Testament with passages calling for love of enemy. The Sermon on the Mount contains some of the most remarkable words in ancient literature: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. . . . You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:38–39, 43–45).

The theme is echoed by Paul in a similar passage, which comes immediately before the call in Romans 13 for obedience to governing authorities: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:14, 17, 21).

How are such passages to be reconciled with the acceptance of force and state authority, even within the confines of the book of Romans? That question has fueled debates through twenty centuries of Christian history! Clearly, this is a tension to struggle with.

## TENSION SIX: STATUS VERSUS EQUALITY

I have already referred to the different conceptions of political authority in the Bible. Those who support Hebrew royalty and Roman emperors obviously accept great differences of human status. That is also true of attitudes toward wealth and poverty. Stories of the patriarchs in Genesis treat their relative material wealth (flocks, retinue, etc.) with deference. The Bible does not apologize for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and other such figures—at least not for their wealth. At various points in the Old Testament wealth is even portrayed as a sign of God's favor. For instance, Psalm 1 praises those whose "delight is in the law of the LORD" and who "do not follow the advice of the wicked," concluding of such people, "In all that they do, they prosper." Adversity and poverty, however, are sometimes taken as *prima facie* evidence of God's disfavor—an attitude that helps set the stage for the probing drama of Job.

Nor can the New Testament be described as altogether egalitarian. In his parables, Jesus sometimes depicts persons of wealth and power without interjecting that such status is, as such, to be rejected. At points in the New Testament narrative, wealthy people like Joseph of Arimathea are portrayed in an altogether favorable light (Mark 15:43), and not all of the personal interactions between Jesus or Paul and such persons are treated negatively. In the celebrated attempt by James and John to curry special favor (status) with Jesus, the rebuke is not based on the denial of status as such but upon the exclusive power of God to decide questions of rank (Mark 10:35–40).

Nevertheless, the theme of equality is also emphasized to a remarkable degree in both the Old and New Testaments. It can be called remarkable because it is so at variance with the culture of most of the ancient world. We have already noted this in relation to questions of political power. It is also true of economics. The Hebrew prophets do not appeal to an abstract principle of equality, but they are obviously offended by existing inequalities and especially by the indifference of the rich over the plight of the poor. Amos condemns the heartless practices of those who "trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land . . . buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals" (Amos 8:4, 6). Micah, in the same vein, condemns those who "covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance" (Mic. 2:2).

Reflecting this tradition, the Levitical laws made important provisions for the poor: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 19:9–10). The Hebrews were commanded not to oppress their neighbors and, reflecting upon the practical plight of the poor, wages were to be paid promptly, the very same day on which they were earned (19:13). Provision is even made for the forgiveness of debts and the redemption of indentured servants in the year of

“jubilee”—specified to occur every fifty years. And those who are forced to borrow should be charged no interest (Leviticus 25). A high standard of justice was to be maintained: “You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor” (19:15). Nor is such a sense of justice understood in merely abstract terms; it is grounded more deeply in the moral reality of interpersonal life: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18).

New Testament writings emphasize these themes. The Magnificat of Mary reflects the leveling implications of belief in the biblical God: “he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51–53). Jesus commands a rich ruler to “sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor” as a condition of inheriting eternal life. When this man turns away sadly, Jesus remarks on “how hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:18–25). In his parable of the rich man and the poor man Lazarus, the earthly stations of wealth and poverty are absolutely reversed after death, and Jesus makes clear that this teaching is fundamental to the whole Hebrew religious heritage (Luke 16:19–31). In the parable of the Last Judgment, the true test of religious commitment is seen to be whether one has aided the suffering, including the poor, the sick, the stranger, and the imprisoned (Matthew 25).

The practices of the earliest church, as reported in Acts, evidently included a sharing of material resources: “and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4:32–35). Emphasizing the point, Acts tells of a man and woman who withheld some of their resources and then lied about it, who spontaneously died upon being confronted about this deception (5:1–11). The Epistle of James, reflecting a somewhat different church situation in which status distinctions had begun to be made, speaks of this with bitter sarcasm:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? (Jas. 2:1–7)

Paul's writings in the New Testament do not emphasize the theme of equality, but the equality is implied at many points: All are sinners; none should boast, except of the saving act of Jesus Christ on the cross; "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28); the church is the "body of Christ" in which "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).

So there also exists some tension between status and equality in the biblical legacy—enough to provide grounds for enduring controversy in subsequent Christian ethics.

A brief recital of these six tension points in the biblical legacy does not exhaust the possibilities, for that legacy is vast and it has been drawn upon in many different ways. Nevertheless, this will serve to illustrate the richness of the biblical reference points to which Christian moral thought has constantly returned.