

THE BIBLE AND MORALITY

Contemporary Moral Issues in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's Document The Bible and Morality. Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct, May 11, 2008.

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MORE THAN A generation ago James Gustafson alerted theological ethicists to problems with the term 'revealed morality.' It had become the source of contention between the fundamentalist, radical, liberal and humanist wings of American Protestantism who all used it their own differing ways.¹ Perhaps for these reasons it was not much employed by nor was it very familiar to Catholics. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's recent document *The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct* introduces it to explain Scripture's bearing on moral matters. Starting from Vatican II's definition of revelation in *Dei Verbum* as God's self-communication in word and deed recorded in Scripture it situates morality within a biblical theology of God's action in creation and Covenant culminating in Christ. 'Morality is not primarily the human response but the revelation of God's purpose and of the divine gift' (no. 4). Assuming this perspective means that revelation can be employed to define and discern the moral character of today's urgent moral problems. Morality therefore flows out of an experience of God and his loving attitude toward us. It is concerned less with making sense of worldly experience than with learning the way of salvation, the *imitatio Dei* taught by God.

The main problem addressed is the deep fissure opening up in contemporary society as it becomes ever more distant from such an experience of God so that many are now Christian only in a sociological sense. When Scripture is put aside people's moral perception of God's goodness and concern for them is dulled. A flood of rapid changes has overwhelmed society, a shock wave that disrupts

traditional moral certainties and institutions, breeds a culture of relativism, and renders the Church's mission as moral teacher harder. New technologies extend man's dominion over nature and the exponential expansion of financial systems gives access to global political and military power. The result is violence against the environment, a widening gap between rich and poor nations, and new ways of exploiting the human person. The authors have no intention of examining such problems in detail, leaving the task of rational analysis to moral theologians. They are interested in the basic intuitions of conscience that arise from and are refined by contact with God's word as it progressively reveals his intentions in history, e.g., respect for life in all its forms, particularly the absolute prohibition against the deliberate killing of an innocent person, and the life-long validity of monogamous marriage for both man and woman support this contention. Improvements in the condition of slaves, strangers, the oppressed and women, and the awareness of the need for social justice have all come about under the powerful influence of God's word in Scripture as it dynamically transforms and shapes society. The horizon of Scripture is relevant to every moral problem even when no solution is clearly evident. The document asserts that God's word and action determines (cf. nos. 7, 8, 138, 142) human action as a response to the divine initiative. People only become responsible agents by participating in and cooperating with God's action in history. There seems to be an implicit premise in the document: its starting point is in God's word and not in the *humanum*. No matter what occurs in the fluctuating adventure of human history the inexhaustible riches

of revelation will provide an adequate answer since God's word is forever active and actual. Interpreted through the Church's teaching it can supply the response needed in the present situation.

How does the document approach contemporary moral problems? The first part provides an initial answer at three levels. In creation everything comes under God's transcendent lordship, especially problems of ecology and of humanity as the *imago Dei*. In the Covenant we discover the 'underlying driving force' (no. 73) of salvation history and 'the basic theological structure <<gift-law>>' (no. 151) that characterise the Decalogue. Interpreted in the horizon of the whole of Scripture, e.g. of Christ's love commandment and the beatitudes, the Decalogue forms the axis of a universal revealed morality. It has more to do with God's rights than with human rights claims as in the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*. It is relevant to a postmodern age and especially to the Western world for the way it lays down foundations for the juridical and legislative order. In Christ the Covenant comes to perfection. His unconditional love for his Father and commitment to us put the above concerns on an utterly different level. The document emphasizes two effects of his act of reconciliation: spiritually he heals the wounds inflicted on creation by sin and his resurrection breaks through the last barrier to human destiny, death.

The second part of the document answers our query about the use of Scripture in contemporary moral matters, first in the form of a paradigm, and second by its application. The quotation from the then Cardinal Ratzinger (no. 95) sets out a paradigm that is programmatic for the whole document. Revelation and contemporary moral problems are connected by means of a process of assimilation wherein faith purifies the elements making up a culture so as to discern the genuinely human in them. This statement sums the pivotal issue, 'Whenever a judgment is required on the Christian morality of any action the immedi-



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ate questions to be asked are how far this practice is compatible with the biblical vision of the human being, and to what extent it is inspired by the example of Jesus' (no. 103). The paradigm's purpose is to show how Christian morality is constituted. Its originality cannot come from its content, even from Scripture, since the content in question may be common to various cultures and religions, e.g. the golden rule. What is specific is the Holy Spirit's power to bring a culture to maturity and to eschatological fulfillment in God. 'The contribution of scripture is therefore originality, together with relevance to our own times, in which the complexity of many problems and the faltering of some of our certainties requires a deeper understanding of the sources of our faith' (no. 95). Contemporary moral problems are not to be solved by merely humanistic means but from the resources of the faith. Jesus wanted to protect his disciples, 'against the error of shutting themselves within an earthly perspective' (no. 138). Scripture in both Testaments 'prohibits us from ever treating a moral problem as if it were entirely self-contained; it must be viewed in the context of the great threads of God's revelation' (no. 154).

The above paradigm arises out of a profoundly spiritual discernment process. Its 'theological foundation' (no. 151) is established by distinguishing values that belong to one particular culture from those that are genuinely transcultural. The essential criteria for scripturally based models of moral judgment that meet today's conditions are enumerated

in no. 151. This implies both that such judgments always have a sociological dimension and that an alternative paradigm might be chosen. In selecting a model 'an *a fortiori* argument' can be valid even if it leads to a 'provisional compromise' as we see in Acts 15. Prudence is the primary virtue that the community exercises in the discernment of contingent historical situations (cf. no. 152). The document argues that the permanently valid criteria discovered in Scripture are to be applied to contemporary moral problems. It goes on to assert that, 'History must be read with one eye on the religious principles and values which God has revealed and continues to reveal, and the other on concrete events.' This gives Christians the ability they need, 'to discern this transcendental wisdom in their day to day activities' (no. 72).

Because of sin's influence the faith community is caught up in a tension between continuity and discontinuity with the surrounding culture. This tension focuses our perception on the profound paradox that underlies the 'human inability to act in accordance with accepted ideals and its consequence - death' (no. 106). Discontinuity should not, however, be allowed to determine the conception of human nature so that it can be constituted only by the sovereign free gift of God's grace. This stance is reflected in no. 159 which leaves natural law an open question. The document's second part seems to let the pessimism one finds in

Scriptures predominate over the goodness of creation and genuine secular values.

The Book of the Apocalypse provides a paradigm for reading the signs of the times as the conflict between 'the kingdom of God with Jesus at its centre together with his followers and the anti-kingdom of Satan' (no. 116). It is invoked to prophetically denounce the evil in our world, from the crimes against humanity committed by totalitarian regimes to the abuse of human dignity among democratic nations, e.g. abortion, euthanasia, and the like. Against this onslaught 'the Crucified and Risen Christ exerts his direct influence first on the Church, and through various activities of the Church, on the rest of the world' (no. 142). The faithful mediate Christ's Covenant love experienced in the Church in order to spiritually build up his Kingdom in the world till the marriage of the Lamb and the bride is consummated in heaven.

The task of the moral theologian in the face of today's problems is to become a *Doer of the Word*.² This is achieved, first by welcoming God's gift, his word in Scripture. It is only then that practical reason can perform its multiple tasks of dialoguing with culture, contesting and transcending its weaknesses, so as to refine and bring conscience to maturity. It proposes a vision that would yield fruit for both Church and civil society by opening them to their authentic fulfillment, the eternal destiny promised them by God (no. 154).

NOTES

1. 'The Changing Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics' in *Readings in Moral Theology* No.4, C. Curran and R. McCormick (eds.), Paulist, New York 1984.

2. Terence Kennedy, *Doers of the Word*, 2 vols., St Pauls, London 1996 and 2002 is a manual of moral theology.