

A working definition of Christian ethics is suggested by Stanley Hauerwas: “a form of reflection in service to a community, and it derives its character from the nature of that community's convictions.”¹ This essay takes the position that Christian ethics is inseparable from Christian narrative, centred in the life and death of Jesus, and expressed primarily in scripture. Any adequate Christian ethic must take full account of the implications of a post-Holocaust world. Ethical reflection is however no guarantee of ethical practice, and mainline traditions have often been less successful than minority traditions. It will also be argued that Christian ethics arise out of diverse communities with their own specific theological weighting.

Christian ethics as a discipline is a recent development. There was no Moral Theology before the end of the sixteenth century.² “Christianity didn't have an ethic in the sense of a theory of creative and constructive this-worldly and historical action.”³ There is no indication of a distinction in the Bible between belief and behaviour:⁴ the Ten Commandments are inseparable from the covenant with Israel,⁵ while the Sermon on the Mount is part of the wider proclamation of the Reign of God.⁶ Law-like pronouncements appear frequently, but never as independent, free-standing units.⁷

Abstractions – the isolation of rules, principles and doctrines from the narrative – can distort and mislead. In contrast, newer approaches view doctrines more as functional tools that serve to throw light back upon the narrative. The perils

1. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, second ed. (London, SCM, 2003), 54.

2. Charles E. Curran, “Moral Theology,” in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1995), 891-892.

3. Don Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics* (London, SCM, 1988), 5.

4. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 53.

5. *Ibid.*, 23.

6. *Ibid.*, 53.

7. *Ibid.*, 19.

of a deontological reading of scripture and the reification of doctrine will be illustrated by the use in the 1930s of Luther's formulation of the two kingdoms, and in the current discourse in New Zealand on parental discipline.

Christians have often cited scripture, New Testament as well as Old, to permit evil to flourish in some kind of Faustian bargain between church and society, and sometimes to actively endorse evil. Samuel Wells writes:

A church whose members believe that the true location of theology lies in their own private knowledge and experience is desperately vulnerable. It is defenseless against an ideology that calls them to corporate commitment and sacrifice. So long as that ideology makes no demands on their doctrinal purity... it can persuade Christians to perform ghastly injustices and cruelties without realizing their error.⁸

Wells refers to several examples, and later expands on the situation in Chile following the overthrow of the Allende government.

The senior figures in the church were so concerned to promote the organic unity of Chile that they identified their interests with the regime, seeing church and state as twin guardians of the national heritage ... How could it be that even while priests and religious were being brutally killed, their bishops were condoning the regime that was devising a widespread program of torture?⁹

The capitulation of Lutheranism in the 1930s is admitted and confessed by post-War Lutheran writers.

Deplorably, it took the horrors and suffering of a major economic depression and two World Wars to tear most of Lutheranism... out of its ecclesiastical ghetto into the full exercise of its public responsibility.¹⁰

In this tradition issues of justice and social responsibility have traditionally been viewed through Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms,¹¹ an adaptation of

8. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2004), 40.

9. Wells, *Improvisation*, 159.

10. William H. Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics*. (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2001), 3.

11. "The Two 'Kingdoms'." Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions, 2001, 10-11 <<http://www.lca.org.au/resources/csbq/twokingdoms.pdf>> (14 April 2007).

Augustine's City of God.¹² Anders Nygren asserts that “the concept of the two realms... expresses an essential Christian truth.”¹³ A 2001 Australian statement maintains that it is “foundational for Christian ethics.”¹⁴ Luther's *Small Catechism* provides justification for political and social quietism simply by bringing together New Testament texts in Section IX (Table of Duties) under the headings “Governing Authorities” (Rom. 13: 1-4) and “Duties Subjects Owe to Governing Authorities” (Matt. 22:21, Rom. 13: 1, 5-7, 1 Tim. 2: 1-2, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2: 13-14).¹⁵

The Lutheran Confessions frequent attribute coercive qualities to “the left hand of God”: “[God] rules through the secular government with the sword to restrain evil and coerce obedience.”¹⁶ Paul Althaus (author of *Outline of Ethics*, 1931) and Werner Elert, scholars whose reputations survived the Nazi regime, proclaimed:

[W]e as believing Christians thank the Lord God that in its hour of need he has given our people the *Fuehrer* as a “good and faithful sovereign,” and that in the National Socialist State, God is endeavouring to provide us with disciplined and honourable “good government.” Therefore we acknowledge our responsibility before God to assist the work of the *Fuehrer* in our vocations and callings.¹⁷

The Pauline exhortations of Romans 13 along with the household code of the Pastorals underlie such submission to tyranny, and even its endorsement. In consequence we find “duped seduction, prudent complicity, and even active religious support” for a neo-pagan, racist ideology,¹⁸ and the New Testament texts stand at the centre of its justification.

12. *The Two 'Kingdoms'*, 4.

13. Anders Nygren, “Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” *Ecumenical Review* 1:3 (1949): 301-2, cited in Lazareth, *Christians in Society*, 2001.

14. *The Two 'Kingdoms'*, 2.

15. Tappert, Theodore G., ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1959), 355.

16. *The Two 'Kingdoms'*, 6.

17. Lazareth, *Christians in Society*, 8.

18. *Ibid.*, 7.

This use of scripture embodies the deontological view. Duty to secular authorities is required by their God-given mandate. There is little sympathy for utilitarianism in the sense of the best balance of good over evil.

J. Oehmke's popular guide to Luther's Small Catechism taught obedient German children that Romans 13 demands the blind political submission of all loyal Christians. "Is it true, then, that cruel and despotic rulers, revolutionists, and wild conquerors come from God? Answer: Yes, indeed! Like sickness, hailstones, wars, and other conflagrations, so also do all godless rulers come from God."¹⁹

A more recent example can be illustrated by Christian discourse on proposed anti-smacking legislation. Michael Drake repeatedly calls on the sanction of scripture in his publication *By Fear and Fallacy*:

Such chastening is implicit in a range of biblical books... According to the Bible, God the Father disciplines those he loves for their good with discipline characterised by measured pain... The Bible teaches that God's discipline does not create a relationship of love; it arises from it... The Bible teaches that loving discipline requires submission... The Bible teaches that loving discipline leads to "a harvest of righteousness..."²⁰

Craig Smith states:

I freely admit that I do not understand the connection between a physical smack on the bottom and a rebellious spiritual condition of the heart, nor how the first drives out the latter. But the scripture declares it is so, therefore I am obliged to believe and practice it.²¹

This second statement is clearly unreflective. The rule has a life and authority of its own. There is arguably no ethical content present.

The division between Christian communities on this issue was most obvious on May 2, 2007 when separate rallies were held under Christian sponsorship to promote opposing views on the bill. The *Dominion Post* carried the front page

19. Ibid., 30.

20. Michael L. Drake, *By Fear and Fallacy: The Repression of Reason and Public Good by the Anti-Smacking Lobby in New Zealand* (Auckland, Wycliffe Christian Schools, 2006), 55.

21. Craig Smith, *The Christian Foundations of the Institution of Corporal Punishment* (Palmerston North, Family Integrity, 2005), 7.

headline “Church against church.”²²

A Christian ethic, then, that is grounded in a literal reading of the Bible, or a systematic theology divorced from the contingency of narrative, leaves itself open to distortion. A Christian ethic will share the assumptions, strengths and weaknesses of the theology that under-girds it. Hauerwas rejects the idea that natural law might provide a corrective.

The result, I fear, is that too often natural law assumptions function as an ideology for sustaining some Christian's presuppositions that their societies – particularly societies of Western democracies – are intrinsic to God's purposes.²³

Ethics, Wells maintains, “cannot, like King Lear, be read off the page of the text.”²⁴ Because life throws up unforeseen circumstances, Christians are called on to improvise, based on the church's narrative.

[T]here is a dimension of Christian life that requires more than repetition, more even than interpretation – but not so much as origination, or creation de novo. That dimension, the key to abiding faithfulness, is improvisation.²⁵

If however the narrative is the determinative element in making Christian ethics Christian, it then needs to be asked whether the ethic that arises out of that particularity is particular also, or whether it points toward a shared, universal human ethic. There is continuing debate on whether Christian faith ultimately contributes anything distinctive to ethical thought.²⁶ While Hauerwas passionately defends the former position, many Catholic moral theologians have tended to the latter view maintaining that, following the logic of natural law, non-Christians will arrive at the same ethical positions held by Christians. What is distinctly Christian then amounts to intentionality and

22. Lane Nichols and Martin Kay, “Church Against Church,” *Dominion Post*, 2 May 2007, A, 1.

23. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 59.

24. Wells, *Improvisation*, 60.

25. *Ibid.*, 65.

26. Robert P. Kennedy, “Kant,” in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1995), 732.

motivation, not the goal.

Christians are not the only ones who value forgiveness, mercy, care for the poor, justice, and love ... there can be no dichotomy between grace and nature. The history of the world is the history of salvation. Authentic human progress in the struggle for justice, peace, freedom, and so forth, is an intrinsic part of the movement of, and toward, the final Reign of God.²⁷

From this perspective it could be asked whether those forms of ethical thought that shun natural law “can be more than the inner discourse of religious communities.”²⁸ If this is so, can we say that Christian ethics then has any adequate word to speak in response to the complicity of Christians in events such as the Holocaust? To say, as Hauerwas does, that “the truth is a conversation for which Scripture sets the agenda and boundaries” does not seem to be sufficient.²⁹

Further objections remain. Given the anti-Judaism and supercessionism inherent in the Christian scriptures, what stance is appropriate towards Jews and Judaism in a post-Holocaust world?

[T]hat year a friend on the school bus said to me, “You killed our Lord.” I did not,” I responded with some indignation. Deicide would be the sort of thing I would have recalled. “Yes, you did,” the girl insisted. “Our priest said so.” Apparently she had been taught that “the Jews” were responsible for the death of Jesus. Since I was the only one she knew, I must be guilty ... When that horrible trip from school was finally over... I was in hysterics ...³⁰

N.T. Wright refers to this issue in a discussion of metanarrative.

It is a story that runs from creation to new creation ... The New Testament declares with one voice that the over-arching story reached its climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.³¹

27. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, new ed. (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1994), 886.

28. Duncan B. Forrester, “Social Justice and Welfare,” *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 195-208 (204).

29. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 98.

30. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 2006), 2.

31. Tom Wright, “The Book and the Story,” *The Bible in Transmission*, Summer 1997 <<http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/exploratory/articles/wright97.pdf>> (14 April 2007).

Wright goes on to explain that the metanarrative “challenges and subverts” other world views, specifying paganism, idealism (abstract values), the aphoristic world (postmodernity), pagan power structures (political rivals), and rival eschatologies. To these he pointedly adds the “non-Christian Jewish” metanarrative (Judaism), and other religions. An exclusionary stance, despite nuanced language, is surely open to abusive interpretation. Ronald M. Green, writing with reference to a view of Christian ethics which places “renewed attention to the historic communities of faith in which we dwell” notes:

[W]hen Jews hear such criticism of Enlightenment ideals, they quiver... Jews also know that in any social order based on community identity, they are likely to be defined as outsiders.³²

Another objection is to the privileging of certain peoples within the narrative. The Exodus event is a formative section of the Jewish and Christian story, yet while it has been empowering in Afro-American and Latin American culture, it has been perceived very differently by victims of colonialism.³³ John Collins notes that, “The tendency of Western readers, both Jewish and Christian, to identify with the Israel of the biblical story undeniably prejudices attitudes towards the modern Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in a way that is detrimental to the Palestinians.”³⁴ More broadly, the biblical idea of election “whether of Israel, the church, or any other entity, is not exempt from criticism because it is strongly affirmed in the Bible.”³⁵

Is it possible for those marginalised within the narrative to then live with integrity within this same story as it is rehearsed, re-enacted or improvised upon? Letty Russell asks this question from a feminist perspective, “Are

32. Ronald M. Green, “Christian Ethics: a Jewish perspective,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 138-153 (143)

33. Robert Allen Warrior, “A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY; Orbis, 1995), 277-285.

34. John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005), 66.

35. Collins, *The Bible after Babel*, 73.

[women] to be faithful to the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures, or are they to be faithful to their own integrity as human beings?"³⁶

Dale Martin also sounds a further caution by observing that the idealised community of reflection that Hauerwas and others posit (a servant community, and a community of virtues) is far from a convincing portrait of the church as he and others have experienced it.

All actual Christian communities are just as prone to sin and self-deception... The invocation of Christian "community" may appeal to those who have experienced Christian groups as open-minded, loving, and benevolent. But to many of us... Christian communities have just as often been a source of hatred and sin.³⁷

The diversity of Christian belief and experience means that no single approach is likely to find full acceptance. Rowan Williams notes: "local Christian communities gradually and subtly come to take for granted slightly different things, to speak of God with a marked local accent."³⁸ Samuel Wells' "ecclesial ethic,"³⁹ for example, with its emphasis on sacraments and a continuing post-scriptural narrative, will have limited appeal to those with a low-church heritage. It is also relevant that it is these minority traditions (e.g. Friends, Mennonites) that have often been more successful in maintaining a distinctive Christian focus on moral concerns.

It is no accident that some of the most enduring contributions to Christian social ethics have come from sectarian groups or otherwise oppressed religious communities. A commitment to Christian ideals often brought with it marginalisation that sustained and reinforced those very ideals.⁴⁰

36. Letty M. Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1985), 137-146 (137), cited in Collins, *The Bible after Babel*, 78.

37. Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 167.

38. Rowan Williams, "Making Moral Decisions," *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3-15 (9).

39. Wells, *Improvisation*, 37ff.

40. Green, "Christian Ethics: A Jewish Perspective," 146.

Christian ethics, then, is best understood in the context of Christian community. There is no one agreed basis, historically or in the present, for Christian ethics, however the significance of the narrative of scripture and Christian history is a common element. It cannot be reduced to a set of rules. Christian reflection, like the narrative, must find its centre in the life and death of Jesus. Christian ethics is shaped in particular Christian communities by their “local accent” and theological assumptions. “Christian ethics is never the kind of reflection in which you ever “get it all straight”.”⁴¹

41. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, xiii.

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