

# **The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct**

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The Pontifical Biblical Commission had felt for some time that it would be opportune to make some statement about the use of the Bible in moral teaching. After all, the teaching of the Church should be founded on the Bible as understood in the tradition of the Church. But what has the Bible to say on the burning moral questions of the day? It is striking that, while in modern parlance of today 'morals' and 'morality' refers almost exclusively to sexual morality, the Bible is seldom even mentioned on such issues. Is not the church's teaching on sexual ethics founded on the Bible? What has the Bible to say on the wider questions of medical ethics, questions from birth control to euthanasia, questions about social inequality, about war, about responsible government and the rights of individuals? Already at the quinquennial renewal of half the membership of the Commission in 1995<sup>1</sup> the moral teaching of the Bible had been proposed as a possible topic of study, but in the end the Commission decided to respond to the Pope's request for something on Judaism, in preparation for his proposed visit to the Holy Land. So in 2001 a report on *The Jewish People and its Sacred Writings in the Christian Bible* was produced.

The moral teaching of the Bible had to wait for the next quinquennium. After discussions over five years, the session intended to finalise the report was cancelled on the eve of the meeting by the death of John Paul II. Despite the removal to higher office of the President of the Commission, Cardinal Ratzinger, whose wisdom had contributed so much to the elaboration of the report, the report was finished in the following year and finally published in 2008 as *The Bible and Morality*:

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<sup>1</sup> This Commission has twenty members, drawn from eighteen countries. Each member is commissioned for five years, renewable for another five years. Half the members therefore change every five years. This particular body consisted almost entirely of priests, including only one layman. The President is, *ex officio*, the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

*Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct*. This short presentation can do no more than outline what seem to me salient points.

From the beginning of its deliberations the Commission had ruled out two approaches. The members of the Commission were biblicists, neither moral theologians nor philosophers. It would be beyond their limits to make statements about detailed solutions to moral problems or about philosophical ethical systems. More suitable to present the teaching of the Bible, and leave it to experts in other fields to decide the application of that teaching to their own particular issues. There were many stops and starts along the way, and particular difficulty was found in organising the material.

In the end it was decided to divide the document into two parts, *Revealed Morality, a divine gift and human response* and *Biblical criteria for moral reflection*. After discussions spread over six years, there was finally still a feeling that the document had not attained its perfect expression, but that the final editing, entrusted to three scholars, would just have to be sufficient! I myself, for instance, felt that the six 'specific criteria', which formed the framework of the second part, would be better expressed as five specific criteria, followed by the application of these criteria. There must be an end to discussion somewhere! Collegiality was also something of a difficulty: in the first division of work most of us were allotted a book or group of books of scripture to study and present to the Commission. In the final document a more severe editorial axe would have cut out some of the resultant presentations as peripheral to the overall thrust of the study, despite the inevitable feeling of colleagues that their labour had gone unregarded or been wasted.

### **A Revealed Morality**

The document takes its starting-point from the Vatican II Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. Revelation is God's gift of himself in friendship, inviting human beings to imitation of this divine love. To this the human response is faith and love. From this point of view the banner headline of the Old Testament proposed is therefore, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy,' and of the New, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' In the Old Testament the primary foci of this revelation are creation and covenant.

The creation narrative with which the Bible opens is not the beginning of Israel's knowledge of God, still less an account of what happened long ago. It is Israel's reflection of her experience of God, and an analysis in story form of the relationship between the world we know and God. At

the climax stand the human couple, who are to be God's representatives in continuing the divine work of creation by caring for it and furthering God's gifts of life, human dignity and freedom. Creation in the image of God therefore carries the basic implications for human moral conduct as God's representatives: an obligation to act in continuity with God's act of divine, life-giving generosity. Elsewhere in the Bible, notably in the psalms, the human reaction of praise and thanksgiving for creation is celebrated in wonder and appreciation of its beauty and variety. The New Testament adds a Christological dimension to this view of creation, in presenting Christ as both the first-born and the fullness of all creation.

The second basic focus of biblical morality is the notion of covenant. Spread across the Old Testament, and reaching its completion in the New Testament, is a series of covenants of God with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David. This series reaches its climax in the new covenant promised by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and fulfilled in Christ. Two features of these covenants are underlined: each is a covenant emerging from evil, and so a covenant of forgiveness, and each carries its own moral obligations. The stress on forgiveness reappears constantly: it is seen in the analysis of human grandeur and misery pictured in the Garden of Eden, in the basic revelation of the divine nature on Sinai (after the idolatrous worship of the 'Golden Calf'), in the promises of Jeremiah in the face of the disaster of the Babylonian Exile.

In the Old Testament the obligations are encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, which are therefore placarded at the beginning of the document. In the New they are encapsulated, perhaps less exclusively, in the Beatitudes, whose Matthean version is similarly placarded. The Ten Commandments, often regarded as a purely negative series of prohibitions, are expounded as a positive, life-giving code of values. By contrast to many modern estimates of values, they begin with divine values before descending to human values and finally material ones. Thus the first two commandments express the incomparable and unchallenged position of God. The next group sums up the values of freedom to worship, and secondarily freedom for leisure (III), the values of family (IV), furtherance of life (V), promoting and continuously deepening the bond of marriage (VI), of individual human dignity (VII), the importance of truth and reputation (VIII). Finally comes the respect for individuals expressed in freedom from exploitation and in respect for their material goods (IX-X). A further development is given in a study of Old Testament teaching on care for the unfortunate and on social justice, particularly in the prophets. Attention is also drawn to Jesus' use of, and therefore commentary on, these commandments in three details. Firstly,

in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus perfects these commandments in a series of different ways. He perfects the old commandments, not merely limiting revenge but outlawing it completely, forbidding not merely physical adultery but unbridled lust. Secondly, Jesus builds on the notion of cultic purity to focus on purity of heart, that which emerges from the human heart. Thirdly, he stresses the limitless generosity and care for others involved in the human expression of God's own love.

Corresponding in the New Testament to the Old Testament Decalogue are the Beatitudes. These are expressed in two ways: Matthew's eight Beatitudes concentrate on the dispositions, spirit and intentions of the Christian, while Luke's four Beatitudes stand in the line of the constant biblical preference for the poor and underprivileged. The document also gives a characterization of the principle moral teaching of each of the writings of the New Testament (#42-73). The synoptic gospels show how the ministry of Jesus demonstrates the Kingship of God in action, a revelation through his Person. The Johannine writings concentrate on the radical ethic of love. Paul concentrates on the internal guidance of the Spirit of Christ in each believer, rather than external norms of conduct, a positive liberating impetus rather than the negative restriction of prohibitions – though it must be admitted that Paul can also stamp his foot and insist on traditional norms, as in the case of women's headgear. Nevertheless, Paul's moral teaching takes as its starting-point the life of Christ in the believer and the implications of the Christian community which forms the Body of Christ. The Letter of James is described as 'a manifesto for social justice'. These individual studies of the moral teaching of the documents which make up the New Testament are valuable as showing the breadth of variety of their concerns and the different moral attitudes to which the Christian mystery can give rise, though some of them may seem disproportionately long.<sup>2</sup>

The first part concludes with a rich expansion on the interrelated subjects of Eucharist and forgiveness (#74-84). The Eucharist is a covenant of forgiveness, constitutive of the Body of Christ which is the Church. In the story of human wickedness and divine forgiveness which is the Bible, the institution and repetition of the Eucharist is the supreme moment in which Jesus seals the forgiveness of God by his gift of himself in

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<sup>2</sup> This criticism may be made of the sections on the Letter to the Hebrews (#62-66) and on the Book of Revelation (#67-73, plus 88-91), in neither of which is moral teaching at the forefront of the author's message. The same is true of some of the studies of morality in individual Books of the Old Testament in #38-40. Nevertheless, these careful studies provide valuable and original insights for the professional biblical scholar.

obedience, and invites sinful humanity to share in that forgiveness, not as a reward but as a gift.

### **Biblical Criteria for Moral Reflection**

The second part puts forward general principles on which moral decisions should be made. These are in the manner of a reflection on the way moral guidance is presented in the Bible. First come two very general, overarching principles which have guided discussion in the first part. These are the dignity and task of the human person as image of God in the world, and the imitation of Christ as the perfect expression of divine action in the world. After this, more specific considerations are given. As already indicated, six of these are proposed, which might also be regarded as five criteria, followed by a way of applying them.

1. *Convergence.* Is biblical morality out on a limb? No! To a certain extent it converges with non-biblical morality. In the Old Testament the early prescriptions of the Torah, or Teaching, very largely coincide with prescriptions of the surrounding Near Eastern Lawcodes. There are, however, important differences. While the Code of Hammurabi is sometimes more sophisticated (it lays down penalties for careless surgeons and for jerry-builders), it does not show such zeal to protect the rights of the poor, nor such concern for the equal rights of every individual (different penalties for killing a slave, a free man and a nobleman). Similarly the Pauline lists of virtues and vices largely coincide with those of the popular Stoic morality, though this lacks the concern for the importance of every individual contributing to the community. It is striking that Paul continues to accept slavery despite his own teaching, whose logical conclusion is the abolition of slavery.

2. *Contrast.* Obviously biblical moral teaching contrasts with such systems as idolatry and consumerist materialism. More interesting is the opposition to totalitarian regimes and particularly the violence they do to consciences. This is skilfully illustrated from the Book of Revelation.

3. *Advance.* A particularly far-reaching criterion is the advance of morality within the Bible itself, from early acceptance of polygamy and revenge – not to mention the theory (doubtfully a historical fact) of the *herem* or ban of destruction – to a more sensitive morality in the teaching of Jesus and of Paul. This is especially important in that it leaves the door open to further advances, such as the abolition of slavery, the outlawry of war and the more equitable treatment of women.

4. *Community Dimension.* Israel was always a community, aware of its obligations to all members of the community, and also to others living among them. This awareness that Israel has a mission also to those outside its boundaries grows stronger in the course of the Old Testament. These aspects are reinforced respectively by the New Testament teaching on the body of Christ and on the mission of the Church, making Christians vividly alive to others within the Church and to the needs of the whole world community, and of their duties of care to each.

5. *Finality.* With the development of the hope in an after-life, and the new perspective on death which it introduces, the values of this transitory world diminish in importance and the call to heroism for the sake of the Kingdom becomes stronger. While it does not negate the values of this world, it does give them a certain provisional quality, which may lead to martyrdom and other sacrifices in imitation of Jesus himself.

6. *Discernment.* This final criterion, which seems to me more aptly considered as the application of the earlier criteria, concerns the evaluation of these criteria, and their relative strength when they clash. In some ways, therefore, it is the most important of all. It sketches guidelines for resolving such clashes. First to be considered are the biblical data, the way in which moral guidance occurs in the Bible. Attention must always be paid to the literary genre and context, and the weight which these give a passage, whether this be in the explicit Torah, a proverb, the Sermon on the Mount or a casual recommendation. Secondly, attention must be paid to a theological foundation for a rule rather than a merely cultural basis, such as on grounds of hygiene in a particular society or special ethnic customs. Examples given of a theological foundation are the closeness of the Lord to the poor, which runs throughout scripture, and family relationships within the Body of Christ. Thirdly, the cultural background is important, so that the food-regulations imposed on gentile Christians to make commensality possible with Jewish Christians need no longer be observed. Other considerations, which have already been mentioned, are also important, such as the persistence of a teaching throughout the Bible (the preference for the poor), and the refinement of conscience.

The process of community discernment is then studied; two examples are given, one from the Old, the other from the New Testament. They are biblical examples of how the conscience actually works. The latter example is the decision on the observance of clean foods, given in Acts 15: the community meets together, listens to the leaders, takes advice, and then makes decisions in the light of the Holy Spirit: 'It has seemed good

to Holy Spirit and ourselves...’. This example of community discernment is followed by examples from Paul of individual discernment or the operation of conscience. The first example concerns eating meat previously offered to idols: Paul rules out any complicity in idolatry, but invokes the community dimension of morality: out of love for other members of the community one should not put pressure on their conscience. Other examples then come from Paul’s teaching on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 (#153). These are valuable as showing how the individual conscience operates in the case of a clash between values. They are given in diminishing order of strength. Divorce he forbids, acting on the commandment of the Lord. The ‘Pauline privilege’ he concedes on his own apostolic authority. Virginity he commends, by means of two arguments and concluding that ‘I too have the Spirit of God’. Finally, temporary sexual abstinence between married partners he concedes with arguments from prudence. Not all problems are solved by these examples, for instance, the glaring questions of Paul’s dispensation from the Lord’s prohibition of divorce. What are the principles on which he makes this dispensation? Has anyone else – or the Church itself – a similar right?

### **Conclusion**

This reflection by the Pontifical Biblical Commission makes no claim to be more than a stimulus to discussion, ‘a seed’ which might burgeon in a renewal of moral discussion. It does not have papal authority, but only the authority given by the careful and prolonged consideration by its members, appointed by the Pope. It is offered to the Church, not promulgated by the Church. It stands, limps or falls by the strength and perceptiveness of its arguments, attempting to give a truly biblical view of morality, avoiding the short-cuts of legalism, casuistry and fundamentalism. The English version was translated, I hope adequately, from the original Italian in which the document was elaborated.