

STUDY 18

Kingdom Ethics in the Present World

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When was the last time that a representative of ‘the church’ was asked by the media, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ or ‘What is the reason for your hope in the face of all that is happening around you?’ For the apostle Peter, this latter question was evidently one which he thought could be a real possibility (1 Pet. 3:15).¹ The context of course was significant, namely, the suffering that the readers were facing or would face because they were Christians, and the way that they responded to it.

Given the situation being faced, Peter is urging ethical behaviour in the face of accusations of wrongdoing. But he has specifically reminded the readers of the reason for this:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God’s people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy (1 Pet. 2:9–10).

Part of the proclamation of the mighty acts is the gospel, but within 1 Peter it definitely seems also to involve ethical living. This is seen in such areas as abstinence from ‘the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul’ (1 Pet. 2:11) and, as the sentence continues, it appears that such abstinence is a testimony against false accusations levelled against the believers. In 1 Peter 4:1–4 he fills out this admonition. Peter also mentions submission to the state authorities, the attitude of slaves towards their masters, and of believing women towards their unbelieving husbands. Along with these areas there are others which have primary reference to relationships inside the church, such as brotherly love and Christ-like leadership. All these are the marks of the ‘kingly community’.

There is a feature which must also be noted: the kingly community is a community of hope:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,⁵who are being

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pet. 1:3–5).

The active holiness of the community exists not only because they are ‘saved’ but also because of what they are presently receiving and will receive. So:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:8–9).

Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God (1 Pet. 1:21).

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation (1 Pet. 2:1–2).

‘Glorious’ joy (1 Pet. 1:8) is an anticipatory experience of the salvation to come. The word Peter used is δεδοξασμένη (*dēdoxasmēnē*), ‘having been glorified’. But Peter is insistent that ‘glory’ for us is as it was for Christ, a ‘post-suffering’ glory (1 Pet. 1:11), so he speaks to the elders as a sharer ‘in the glory to be revealed’. Present humbling has in mind that ‘in due time’ proper exaltation will come (1 Pet. 5:6):

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you (1 Pet. 5:10).

Here is a situation where people are suffering because they are Christians. They are exhorted to a way of life that is not only pure before the holiness of God (1 Pet. 1:15ff.) but also irreproachable before the world. And evidently, the world is watching and even surprised at the ethical stance of these believers.

A JUMP AHEAD

We are not living in the first century, though it is evident that there are many believers today to whom 1 Peter does speak directly. But the situation in many western churches is that of the end of Christendom, that world where the Judeo-Christian ethic had been the foundation of social mores, even if the gospel on which that ethic is based has been submerged by other things. Once the church was urged to ‘live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ’ (Phil. 1:27), whereas now it seems that so often the church is nothing more than a bastion of moral conservatism. Nowadays things are different. In the words of Andrew Cameron:

The battle-lines are so well-worn: journalists ring around for a ‘church comment’ (usually published with a mention of church attendances ‘in decline’). Christians reliably oppose what are characterised as exciting new innovations, and we do so, we are told, because we are really very frightened by change. An unrelated meta-discussion then flares about the ‘separation’ of church and state, since religious people have no right to ‘impose their views’ on others, for religion is ‘a comfort’ in private but a hindrance to the public political process.²

² Andrew Cameron, ‘How to Say YES to the World: Towards a New Way Forward in Evangelical Social Ethics’, in *Reformed Theological Review*, vol. 66, no. 1, April 2007, p. 23.

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But ‘church comment’ is still requested (or, at least, provided by way of press release), as if the church has an ethic that should somehow be mentioned. What is assumed, however, is that the church is, in some way, the moral guardian of traditional values, and that assumption comes from both sides. However, the church as an institution has a fair degree of responsibility in all of this. Cameron continues:

All this activity is not so much depressing as it is boring. We could blame a news media that love stereotypes and a paradigm of conflict, except that Christians willingly allow themselves to play out their allotted role in the drama as the nay-saying opponent who has nothing to offer by way of an alternative social vision.³

Is there a genuine, alternative social vision? Cameron’s suggestion is that ‘the ethic usually espoused by conservative evangelicals . . . owes more to Kant than to the Bible’,⁴ and he then proceeds to offer an alternative which is more affirming and less carping and negative than is sometimes the case. In developing his argument, Cameron refers first to Michael Hill and his ethic of ‘mutual love’:

an action or trait of character is right if and only if it promotes (creates or maintains) mutual love relationships between (a) God and humans, and (b) humans and humans.⁵

This was based on the revelation of the Godhead as revealed in Christ. Cameron suggests that:

[Hill’s] contribution to the rehabilitation of serious reflection in evangelical theological ethics has been inestimable. He has released several generations of theological students at Sydney’s Moore College from a Kantian deontology⁶ that is still seen in much biblical commentary, and which has caused Christians to labour under the illusion that Christian practices are mere arbitrary impositions forced upon us by the power of God’s will (‘theological voluntarism’), without any connection to the structures of God’s world, which he founded in wisdom.⁷

I am not certain that this approach actually achieves the ‘deKanting’ to the extent assumed.⁸ Certainly it resonates more with Evangelical Christians, at least because of its language, but we are still left with rather ‘categorical’ imperatives. For instance, in place of a self-evident sense of ‘ought’ there is a somewhat static view of reality that is based on the ‘truth’ that God is love. Of course, Hill has cheekily adapted Kant’s language, while recognising that love is the overriding reality not only of God himself but also of the world which he made.⁹

Cameron then refers to Michael Banner as another who releases us from Kantian captivity. Banner says:

³ Cameron, ‘How to Say YES’, p. 23.

⁴ Cameron, ‘How to Say YES’, pp. 23f. I have referred to this article because it stimulated my thinking in areas where I had not been previously focussed. However, it was the biography of John Stott and especially the story of the establishment of The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity which was first caused me to face this topic. See Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 2001, pp. 285ff.

⁵ Cameron, ‘How to Say YES’, p. 29.

⁶ The study of the nature of duty and obligation.

⁷ Cameron, ‘How to Say YES’, p. 29.

⁸ Cameron suggests that it ‘retains some affinities with Kantian idealism’ (Cameron, ‘How to Say YES’, p. 30).

⁹ I have to admit that I have not read Michael Hill’s work. I trust I am not doing him a disservice. My main resource is Andrew Cameron’s article.

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the task of Christian ethics lies in the description of human action called forth by the reality of the action of God to which dogmatics bears witness.¹⁰

This means that Christian ethics is seen as a form of praise, evoked by the action of God. We will doubtless recognise these sorts of arguments and, equally doubtless, they contain strong elements of truth.

When these approaches are translated into press releases or their equivalent, though, I generally find that the reasons given are far more pragmatic. The argument is that if certain proposed behavior takes place, then unwanted consequences will almost inevitably follow. Some issues, such as global warming and environmental degradation and so on, have now become obvious. Other issues, such as the changed attitude towards unborn children, are more difficult, since what we regard as rational arguments are no longer seen that way by those with whom the church has its debate. Our pragmatism and theirs are actually in contradiction.

In discussing the Old Testament's witness to God's action and speech to his people, Karl Barth discusses the answers that come to that action and speech:

The Old Testament deals with Yahweh's action and speech in relation to the men of his people and the problematical answer that these give to his action and speech. This answer is positive, corresponding to the purpose of Yahweh, only in the sense that their being and work is at all events confronted and engaged by his claim, decision, and judgment. From the standpoint of these men, it is always the answer of their unfaithfulness and disobedience. The Old Testament bears witness to the ensuing acts of this contradictory drama. Primarily in this form the biblical witness points back to the beginning of the history of God and man, *to creation, which is above the contradiction and resists it from the very first*.¹¹

The fact that creation actively serves the purposes of God does not mean that the human contradiction ceases. Far from it, it may even intensify. As 1 Peter 4:4 puts it: 'They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme'. Other translations treat 'blaspheme' as 'speak evil of' and interpret that as a reference to the readers, while the literal 'blaspheme' may indicate that hatred of God is actually stirred by the opposition.

Sadly, the testimony of the church is often dulled by its own ungodly behavior, so that hatred of God and so of his people is made so much more 'logical'. For instance, how can anyone take seriously the statements of a church concerning sexual ethics when the impression is given (by whom?) that the church is filled with predatory pedophiles? Of course, the *need* for that impression will never be admitted by those who rely on it, but it is tragic that it is even possible that it could be given. And that is the point of the exhortations of 1 Peter.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Is it appropriate to say that the church is 'the light of the world'? The phrase comes from Matthew 5:14, where Jesus was addressing his disciples (and/or the crowds?). It is also found in John 8:12 and 9:5 where Jesus speaks of himself. There is a similar

¹⁰ Cameron, 'How to Say YES', pp. 30f.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt 4—Lecture Fragments, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1981, p. 10, emphasis mine.

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expression in Philippians 2:15, ‘you shine like stars in the world’, as well as the comment in 1 Peter 2:9–10. Also, there is the description of Noah as ‘a herald of righteousness’ in 2 Peter 2:5.

Generally, the answer is ‘yes, it is appropriate’. But we are not, therefore, ‘moral policemen’; to assume that we are to tell the world to live moral lives (or, not to live immoral lives) is not what is meant, mostly because the biblical picture is far larger than that. To begin with, the enormity of sin must be taken seriously when issues of morality are being addressed. True, restraints on immoral behavior may be helpful, but we may be assured that people will find alternative ways of demonstrating their rebellion once particular routes are blocked.

We turn, then, to Matthew 5:14. It is not mere theological pedantry to say that Jesus was actually addressing Jews, members of the covenant people. The Sermon on the Mount was first and foremost a call to those people to be the people of the Kingdom of God. They, as Israel, were called by God to be the light of the world. They were called to be a testimony to the truth of God’s reign over the whole world by the way they themselves submitted to the instruction (*Torah*) of God. Hence, from their very beginning as a nation, they were to be God’s ‘priestly kingdom’ (Exod. 19:6). Within the Old Testament, Israel’s role was to ‘be’, not to ‘go’. The ‘going’ was done by the other nations, in their going to Israel to learn the wonders of Israel’s God and his *Torah* (see 1 Kings 10:1, 24; Isa. 2:2–4). If there was to be a ‘going’ for Israel, it was to be in terms of Genesis 1:28 and the creational command to ‘fill the earth’.¹² Furthermore, I suggest that that is the sense of Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15. The issue is not just of going, but the fulfilment of the original creational mandate by men and women of the new creation, in particular, by the Man of the new creation, which is why the phrase ‘the light of the world’ (cf. Isa. 42:6, ‘a light to the nations’) is used of Jesus.¹³

Paul’s description of the Philippians as ‘[shining] like stars in the world’ (Phil. 2:15) is in the context of them working out their salvation (not ‘nutting’ it out—‘outworking’ might be less ambiguous), without murmuring and arguing so that they ‘may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation in which [they] shine like stars in the world’ (Phil. 2:12–15). Salvation has come, and they outwork that by ‘holding fast to the word of life’ (Phil. 2:16). They shine by holding on to the word of life, a phrase used only here by Paul, a reference to the gospel, and also in 1 John 1:1 where it refers to Jesus.

What does it mean to call Noah a ‘herald of righteousness’? ‘Noah found favor [γῆ, *chen*; LXX χάριν, *charin*, ‘grace’]¹⁴ in the sight of the LORD . . . [Noah] was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God’ (Gen. 6:8–9). Hebrews 11:7 tells us how Noah proclaimed righteousness:

¹² Diaspora Jews were, in a sense, the fulfilment of that command, albeit the result of judgement on Israel’s disobedience. However, the presence of Jews throughout the world meant that in just about every place there could be a ‘Jew first’ gospel.

¹³ The word in Matt. 28:19 and Mark 16:15, ‘Go’ is πορευθέντες (*poreuthentes*), technically an aorist participle, meaning ‘having gone’. Two possibilities present themselves. The traditional translation as ‘Go’ is based on the practice of a participle functioning in terms of the main verb, in these cases the imperatives ‘make disciples’ (Matt.) or ‘preach’ (Mark). The other alternative is that the participle carries its own weight, so the implication would be that ‘having gone’, in fulfilment of the original creational command, this is what they are to do.

¹⁴ We should be wary of only understanding this word in terms of our Reformed theology; the word has a far wider range of meaning, so that the following description of Noah does not need to be modified by the addition of ‘total depravity’ qualifiers.

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By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

Noah proclaimed righteousness by building the ark. He proclaimed righteousness by doing righteousness, and by doing it he condemned the world. There is simply no evidence that Noah did or said anything beyond that.

In an interview conducted recently, it was put to John Stott: ‘... you’re not despairing of the West’, to which he responded:

I’m not despairing. But I believe that evangelism is specially through the local church, through the community, rather than through the individual. That the church should be an alternative society, a visible sign of the kingdom. And the tragedy is that our local churches often don’t seem to manifest community.¹⁵

The church *as the church* should be the testimony to the world of the truth of the kingdom of God.

SO WHAT OF SOCIAL CHANGE?

Social change is unquestionably needed in many areas. In recent months there has been the celebration of the achievements of William Wilberforce who procured, on 25 March 1807, the abolition of the slave trade on British ships:

Mr Wilberforce was sure society was not working in a way consistent with the Kingdom of God and desired to change everything to make it so. You will recall that when, after 21 years of struggle, he succeeded in abolishing the slave trade, he asked what can we abolish next? The gospel must result in the liberation of all, mustn’t it? So Mr Wilberforce committed himself not only to the liberation of slaves, but also to the liberation of prisoners from the gallows, which were all too frequently used at the beginning of the [eighteenth] century, and liberation from the worst of gaol conditions as he was committed to prison reform, the liberation of convicts from transportation, the liberation of indigenous peoples from exploitation, the liberation of children from ignorance through the provision of public education, and the liberation of settlers from repressive government, hence self-government—quite a social reform program.¹⁶

While this was a laudable achievement, the question remains as to why it took Christians 1800 years to actually do it. (There are still many millions of people in physical slavery in the world today.¹⁷) If slavery was evil in 1807, surely it was evil in the time of the early church. I would offer the following comments.

First, it was not ‘the church’ but men and women who belonged to the church who did it. I have every reason to doubt that had the church not nurtured Wilberforce in the gospel, Wilberforce would not have done what he did.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Evangelism Plus: John Stott reflects on where we’ve been and where we’re going*. Interview by Tim Stafford, posted 13/10/2006, 09:10am. Source unknown.

¹⁶ Dr Stuart Piggin, *Public Lecture on William Wilberforce and his impact on Australia: Celebrating 200 years since the Abolition of Slavery*, 26th March 2007, see webpage:

<http://www.guybarnett.com/index.php?page=show_article&artid=669>.

¹⁷ See <<http://www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/main/09/index.shtml>>.

¹⁸ Piggin, *Wilberforce*, pp. 1f.—‘The Clapham Cabinet’.

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Then there is the problem of the New Testament records. As we saw in 1 Peter, submission was enjoined on slaves and Paul did the same thing in Ephesians 6:5–8, adding a complementary command to masters in the following verse (cf. Col. 3:22–4:1). Most revealing of all is the letter to Philemon, where a runaway slave, Onesimus, who had subsequently become a Christian, was sent back to his master who was himself a believer.

Perhaps 1 Corinthians 7:21–24 clarifies things:

Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.²²For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ.²³You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters.²⁴In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.

The real issue was not whether a person was a slave or free but whether a person is free in Christ. Of course, if the opportunity to gain freedom arises it should be taken, but in the meantime ‘make use of your present condition’ (v. 21. This NRSV reading helps avoid an apparent contradiction between verses 21 and 24). But the obvious issue was that there was no way that Paul or anyone else could have worked to abolish slavery. Rather there was the transforming power of the gospel by which a person became ‘a freedman of the Lord’ (v. 22, RSV; cf. Acts 6:9).

Paul’s advice was realistic:

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Rom. 12:18).

So then, *whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all*, and especially for those of the family of faith (Gal. 6:10).

Perhaps deep change cannot be effected, but social restraints can, perhaps, be put into place which will limit the tragic effects of human evil. There are occasions when something can be done and others when nothing can be done. What matters is being alive and alert to the real issues. Naturally that does not excuse inaction, when the opportunities are there and not taken through laziness or sheer disobedience.

WHAT SETS THE AGENDA?¹⁹

Returning to 1 Peter, this question might be asked concerning ‘the hope that is in you’ (1 Pet. 3:15). If we ask what humanity wants, we may well find that people want security and community. Society’s laws and regulations, where those are free from evil intent, are aimed at providing security against the uncertainties of life and at ensuring that humanity lives and works together in harmony. Of course, the results are often that we become over-governed and that, when mixed with human perversity, usually makes the human situation more complex and consequently more uncertain.

So my question is, what is the agenda that God has for his world and for his people, the bride of his Son? The answer to that is surely that we will be conformed to

¹⁹ It would be good to have as a conclusion to this session Geoffrey Bingham’s paper, ‘All in All—The Compassionate Community’, which was given as the conclusion of the 2001 Ministry School, *Christ’s Gospel to God’s World*. At least, I can highly recommend that it be read and absorbed.

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the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29), we will be brought to full glory (Heb. 2:10) with him (Rom. 8:17–18; etc). In all of this, having been called *to*²⁰ his own glory and excellence, we will be participants of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3–4) which accords with the hope specified in Romans 5:2, ‘the glory of God’.

But we also know that God’s glory is seen in the truth of his Trinitarian being, as true community, as love. So the agenda for living is that goal of full and unhindered participation in the divine nature as the bride of the eternal Son who unchangeably became flesh as the last Adam. Ethics are not just ways of living together successfully but are the deliberate ordering of our lives so that we are anticipating in practice all that will be. Those things cannot be known by unredeemed humanity, indeed they will be as foreign as Saul’s armour was to David. Yet unredeemed humanity is still created for those things and consequently strives to have as close a representation of them as possible, while not surrendering their presumed independence.

For that reason, godliness and holiness of living is hardly an option for the redeemed. They are the truth of humanity and though saved in hope we are still truly saved and caught up into holiness now. That makes John Stott’s sad observation so significant: ‘And the tragedy is that our local churches often don’t seem to manifest community’. It is not togetherness but ‘the unity of the Spirit’ which is not manifest. It is of course there, but where it is not deliberately known in the action of the fellowship then it cannot be shown as the determining hope that draws us on. Kingdom ethics will be dynamic as we are living in powerful hope of what is yet to be revealed, and in faith in the one who has promised these things and in the love which is the identifying mark of those who are one with him.

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:24–25).

²⁰ So AV. The Greek has a simple dative *iδίᾳ δόξῃ καὶ ἀρετῇ* (*idia doxē kai aretē*).