

CHRISITAN ETHICS

J. Philip Wogaman, *CHRISITAN ETHICS* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993),

PART I.	<u>THE LEGACIES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS</u>	
	1. The Biblical Legacy of Christian Ethics	-2
	2. Philosophical Legacies	-16
PART II.	<u>THE ETHICS OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY</u>	
	3. The Formative years	-25
	4. Seminal Thinkers and Transitions	-37
	5. The Moral Vision of Saint Augustine	-51
PART III.	<u>MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY</u>	
	6. Monastic and Mystical Contributions	-63
	7. The Confessional	-75
	8. The Thomistic Synthesis	-82
	9. Late Medieval Forerunners	-96
PART IV.	<u>THE ERA OF REFORMATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT</u>	
	10. The Reformers: Luther and Calvin	-109
	11. Catholic Humanism and Counter-Reformation	-126
	12. Radical Reformation	-138
PART V.	<u>EIGHTEENTH-AND NINETEENTH-CENTRY RATIONALISM</u>	
<u>AND</u>		
	EVANGELICALISM	
	13. Rationalism and Revival in the Eighteenth Ctry	-148
	14. 19 th -Century Philosophical and Christian Ethics	-161
	15. 19 th Century Slavery and Feminist Controversies	-180
PART VI.	<u>CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY</u>	
	16. The Social Gospel Movement	-194
	17. The Social Encyclicals	-209
	18. Formative Christian Moral Thinkers	-217
	19. The Vatican II Watershed	-237
	20. Liberation Theology	-248
	21. Ecumenical Social Ethics	-257
PART VII.	<u>CHRISTIAN ETHICS TOWARD THE THIRD MILLENNIUM</u>	
	22. Conflicting Tendencies	-270
	23. Can Christian Ethics Find a Creative Center	-277

PART I. THE LEGACIES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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| 1. The Biblical Legacy of Christian Ethics | -2 |
| 2. Philosophical Legacies | -16 |

Legacies of Christian Ethics

Exodus – 1300 BC

King David – 1000 BC

Babylonian exile – 587 BC

Latest writing of Hebrew Scripture – 300 BC (Economics p. 2)

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. (Economics p. 3)

1. Revelation versus Reason

2. Materialism versus the Life of Spirit. (Economics p. 5)

The material 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 thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established” – Ps.8). 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 Songs 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 for 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 dwelt 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 first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (Col. 1:25b-16a). However, such passages are interpreted, they certainly are not a denial of the divine origins and purposes of this quite material world. (Economics p.5)

But the biblical materialism does not value the materials as the end purpose of human existence. The first sin catalogued in the Ten Commandments is the sin of idolatry – worshiping something else in the place of God.

The great prophets, while affirming the importance of material well-being, were clear about the corruptions of idolatry and materialism (Economics p. 5). Amos was, perhaps, especially clear.

“Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon the couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the midst of 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. (Economics p.6)

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 Jesus’ admonition, as reported in the Synoptic Gospels, that it is a dangerous thing to gain the whole world at the cost of one’s life; and Jude’s reference to “worldly people, devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 1:19).

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 world of twenty centuries of Christian ethics has also been occupied with creative efforts to resolve this tension. (Economics p. 6)

3. Universalism Versus Group Identity

4. Grace Versus Law

5. Love Versus Force

6. Status Verses Equality (Rich and Poor). (Economics p. 13)

At various points in the Old testament wealth is 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 follow² the advice of the wicked,” concluding of such people that “in all that they do, they prosper” (NRSV). 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 carry special favor (status) with Jesus, 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. 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 practice of those “who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end ... (who) buy 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; and houses, and taken them away; they oppress a man and his houses, a man and his inheritance” (Micah 2:2) (Economics p.13).

Reflecting this tradition, the Levitical laws made important provisions for the poor:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 19:9-10) (Economics p. 13-14)

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 each 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 do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you 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) (Economics p. 14).

New Testament writings emphasized these themes. The Magnificat of Mary reflects the leveling implications of belief in the biblical God: “he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away” (Luke 1:51-53). Jesus commands a rich ruler to “sell all that you have and distribute 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 riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man 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 practice of the earliest church, as reported in Acts, evidently included a sharing of materials 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, NRSV). 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 better sarcasm : (Economics p. 14)

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 come 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? (James 2:1-7, NRSV) (P. 15).

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 savings act of Jesus Christ on the cross; “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal.3:28);

the church is the “body of Christ” in which “if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together (I 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. (Economics p. 15)

PART II

The Ethics of Early Christianity