Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry Vol 4 No 2 • Mar/Apr 1998

The Centrality of Holiness to Christian Faith:
Why Holiness Has Become Irrelevant in Postmodern Religion

by David F. Wells

The greatest dangers to evangelical faith, I believe, lie as much in what we do know as in what we don't. They lie not only in the doctrinal fog represented on many a church pew each Sunday but also in the great truths of Christian faith which are professed on those same pews but which, nonetheless, now lie dormant. It is, then, the problem of weightlessness that troubles me, the fact that truths which are owned—like the majesty of God, his love, his holiness, and his work of giving us an inspired Scripture—are losing their power to rearrange our lives and may even inoculate us against moral and spiritual correction.

This is but a particular case of a more general problem. The general problem is that God, in this deeply secularized culture, is now inconsequential for how life is actually lived. He is irrelevant to its essential dilemmas and its endless bafflements. Even the "oh, my God!" exclamations that pepper so many conversations are themselves meaningless and largely unnoticed. The difference, though, is that those who are secular do not profess that God is anywhere but on the periphery of their internal radar but in the Church we are declaring that he is at its center. And when, in this circumstance, it turns out that he is not then the salt of his character loses its saliency in the life of the Church, a fact which is then compounded by the Church's blindness to what has happened.

I blundered onto this problem almost inadvertently. Like so many other people I had had the sense that the ground was moving beneath the evangelical world beginning some time in the 1970's. Initially, this was just an uneasy sense. In 1989, however, I was the recipient of an extraordinarily generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts which sprang me loose to ponder this question in a more deliberate way. The result was my book, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* which came out in 1993. I did not know it at the time but that grant had, in fact, launched me on a trajectory for this book needed to be followed by a second which came out in 1994, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams.* And now, in 1998, the third volume is appearing and is entitled *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church must Recover its Moral Vision.* One way or another, though, each of these books is concerned with truth's lost saliency in the life of the Church today.

In this essay, I want to juxtapose what I wrote about the holiness of God in *God in the Wasteland* with what I have

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done in *Losing Our Virtue.* This last book is examining how our moral culture has worn very thin in society. It is asking what happens in the Church when its own virtue becomes as thin as that in society? What does Christian faith mean when we can no longer speak meaningfully of sin? And what happens to the reality of God, to God as holy, when our understanding of moral absolutes has gone? What it means, of course, is that God's holiness becomes inconsequential and our virtue correspondingly becomes empty. However, we need to understand the dynamics at work here far better than we do. In short, we need to understand why holiness has become irrelevant. So, first, I want to consider briefly holiness in God and then, second, I want to ask what happens to our understanding of that holiness when we live in a society which has been morally gutted and, as a consequence, has replaced the older moral universe which we once inhabited by one that is dominantly therapeutic.

The Holy

What the holiness of God means is rather clear; it is what it means *to us* that is problematic and obscure. After all, do we really knit our brows and cock our heads when we read David's exhortation to "extol the Lord our God" for "the Lord our God is holy" (Ps. 99:9)? Is it a mystery as to what David had in mind? And do we wonder why Jesus names his father "Holy " in the great prayer in Jn. 17? Or that when the curtain is pulled aside and we glimpse the worship of heaven, the words in which God is worshipped are these: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty who was and is and is to come" (Rev. 4:8).

The holiness of God we know is his absolute purity, his incomparable goodness. It is all that is in God that stands over against all that is wrong, bent, fallen, broken, and corrupted in our world. Yet his holiness is more positive then negative, more active than reactive. It is God, going out in all his moral excellence to do his work. It is this that Ananias and Sapphira learned the hard way (Acts 5:1-11); it is this that the writer to the Hebrews had in mind when he said that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb.10:31); and it is this which was most profoundly exegeted for us in the Cry of Dereliction at the Cross.

God's holiness emerged in two lines of thought in the Old Testament. In the first, God was revealed as being elevated, exalted, and lifted up; in the second, we are given the reason for this. It is because of his burning purity that he is separate from us, cut off from us, and lifted up over us. When Isaiah saw God "high and lifted up" (Is. 6:1), he knew himself to be a dead man. Indeed, those who know most about God are those upon whom the sentence of death is felt most acutely. When Luther offered up his first Mass, prior to his understanding of the doctrine of justification, he shook like a leaf at the approach of the Holy. He could barely complete his sentences so weak had he become. And in a number of places in his works there are poignant reminiscences of these earlier days when, as he put it, he used to tremble and turn pale at the name of Christ. His sense of God's holiness was deep and despairing and afterwards his sense of gratitude because of Christ's Cross was correspondingly breathless and ecstatic.

I wonder if we moderns can even enter into Luther's experience, so remote have we become from the moral world which he inhabited. That mental world has been replaced by one which is, for us, psychological. In a moral world, people believe; in a therapeutic world, they feel. In the one there is a moral texture to life and in the other there is not. In the former, people therefore seek salvation; in the latter, they merely seek to be inwardly relieved and pleased. Today, we have churches filled with the nicest people who know nothing of the soul's breathless wonder in the presence of God's grace but who are, nevertheless, intent upon feeling right about themselves and their world. It is this transition from a moral reality, at the center of which is God's holiness, to a therapeutic world, at the center of which are our feelings and intuitions, which now frames our understanding of ourselves, of reality, and of Christian faith. It is this which we must now explore.

The Therapeutic

The transition from the older world which we once inhabited culturally to the newer one in which we now find ourselves today has taken place through four major shifts in our thinking in the twentieth century, each of which feeds into the others. These I have developed more fully in *Losing Our Virtue* and can only summarize here.

First, we have moved from thinking about virtues to thinking about values. Virtues, last century, were the aspects of good character which people believed should be cultivated. Whether in the traditional form—wisdom, courage, self-control, justice—or in the more explicitly Christian form produced by the Holy Spirit of say honesty, kindness, and compassion, virtues made up the essence of the Good. They were absolutes. They were the marks of desirable character that people believed were norms for all. The transition from this moral order to our psychological world has therefore seen the Good eclipsed, even in our understanding, and replaced simply by private preference. With 67% of Americans no longer believing in moral absolutes, and with American society drowning in its own individualism, values are simply what is personal, desirable or important. One person's values may be entirely different from another's. In short, virtues have now been replaced by values.

Second, we now see personality as more important—and certainly more saleable—than character. Last century, when the virtues were prominent in peoples' discussions, and central to their vision of what life was about, character was preeminent and personality as we think of it today was unknown. This was to be one of the creations of the twentieth century. In fact, the first sign of things to come was the sudden shift of interest in the advice manuals as the century turned. They had formerly dwelled on character and its functions—citizenship, duty, morals, manners, integrity—but now personality came into focus and words like charming, dynamic, exciting, stunning, magnetic, forceful, and creative began to describe the personalities

which were most desirable. Thus it was that the self-sacrifice of the old, which was a function of character, was replaced by the self-realization of the new. This shift was given a visible embodiment in 1936 when the nation's imagination was captured by Dale Carnage's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. This book really took the techniques which traveling salesmen had perfected in using their personalities to clinch sales deals and applied these to all of life. It was the first major piece in what has become a floodtide of self-help literature and it was a clear signpost to the new thinking.

This literature rode the wave of the third major change which occurred. It is the shift from thinking about nature to thinking about self. Human nature has been variously described, but common to all of these descriptions has been the thought that whatever it is it is common to all people. In its Christian version, human nature has been understood in terms of the *imago Dei.* It is the belief that despite the particularities of age, gender, or ethnicity, of place, culture, or civilization, and regardless of the different gifts that are possessed and the occupation which is followed, human nature and sin remain essentially the same the world over. If this were not so, the Christian gospel would be different in the first century from what it is now, different in Africa from what it is in Asia. The fact that there is only one gospel, applicable to all people, in all times, and all places means that the surface particularities of gender, ethnicity, and culture do not change or disturb what we all have in common: that being human means that we share the same nature made in the image of God and now marred in the same way by sin.

The self, by contrast, is unique to each person and is not the same in any two people. It is interesting to note that one can hardly find a reference to the self in Freud and technical psychology was subsequently slow to develop a vocabulary around the self. What appears to have happened, though, is that the popularizers of psychology, many of whom had been raised in or had connections with Liberal Protestantism, successfully launched this understanding in the culture and the more technical psychology and psychiatry were forced to follow suit and had to develop a vocabulary for the self.

Today, when we think of the self we think of our own unique interior, our individual perceptions of life, that combination of experiences and circumstances which are ours alone and which are woven together somewhere within ourselves. This is what gives us a sense of being a self unlike any other self in the world.

These popularizers who launched this cultural revolution also parted company with Freud on another matter. Carl Rogers, for example, who had grown up on the idealism of the Y.M.C.A., found the earlier Freudian talk about the dark, twisted, subterranean urges that lurked within entirely distasteful. Indeed, this talk was as incomprehensible and as revolting to him as Calvinism had been to his forebears. It was a far sunnier view of human potential that he adopted and in time this fed into a broadly accepted "liberation psychology," as John Rice calls it. This is not a view that is adopted by one particular school of thought but, rather, is a set of assumptions common to many. These assumptions, now believed across the entire culture, are as follows: first, the self can be found; second, it is essentially benign; third, it contains within itself, as does the body, its own sources of healing; finally, others are a threat to its reality. It is this last point which lies behind the trashing of many a marriage bond because the other spouse is "no longer able to meet my needs." However innocently all of this may be stated, this quest for the self, this personality ethic, this readiness to charge malice to anyone who stands in the way of one's desires, is as dangerous to the preservation of our society as some of the madcap schemes hatched in our most subversive militias. In fact, this is the solvent which single-handedly has the power to dissolve everything which holds together our society.

The final change is that of moving from speaking of guilt to talking of shame. It is true, of course, that we also use these two words interchangeably as, for example, when someone might say: "the guilt and shame I felt in having to turn my brother in to the police was excruciating." Today, however, there is also a growing difference in what these words mean. Guilt comes from the older moral world. And while we are now thoroughly aware that there is such a thing as false guilt, it is also the case that there is such a thing as real guilt. This kind of guilt is the violation of an external, objective norm. It is the inward reflex of our moral nature to knowingly having sinned, of having broken a moral law. Guilt is the compass point which lines up our actions in the *moral world.* In the emerging psychiatric literature today, however, shame is quite different. It is what lines up our actions in the *social world.* The compass direction is horizontal, as it were, and not vertical at all. Shame is the sense of internal embarrassment which we might feel about who we are or what we have done. But, in the absence of a transcendent reference point and in the twilight of our moral world, this sense has no moral understanding. We therefore believe that it can be resolved by psychological technique and that the atonement is unnecessary. Furthermore, the most liberated person is the one who is most shameless. Thus it is that our moral life has become entirely secularized.

And thus it is, too, that the therapeutic has triumphed, replacing the older moral concerns with those that are psychological. We now translate many of life's wrongs into diseases; we focus these in the self; we think that their remedy can be found within; and, as we shall see, insofar as there is a religious dimension to all of this, it takes the form of recasting God as the source of our inner healing. We are therefore more interested in wholeness than in holiness, more interested in happiness than in righteousness, and more interested in feeling good than in being good.

The Disappearance of Sin

Twenty five years ago, Karl Menninger wrote his *Whatever Became of Sin?* In this book, he argued that the language of sin that had been used to describe our moral disorder was fading fast. On the one side, what were once called sins had now become crimes. On the other side, what were once called sins had now become diseases. And what lay

between these two realms were only the most inconsequential of matters. Thus sin contracted in its range of meaning as well as in its moral importance. What Menninger described has, since then, only accelerated. In 1952, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* listed sixty mental disorders. By 1960, these had swelled to one hundred and forty five and by 1993, we found in our midst no fewer than four hundred and ten. Is the explanation that we are now more adept at recognizing these diseases or is it that we are trying to understand more and more of our moral disorder in terms of disease?

Is there any doubt that this loss in our understanding of sin is what makes the entire therapeutic enterprise seem plausible? I do not have in mind here the professional therapists, psychologists and psychiatrists but, rather, the way in which psychological language has escaped this professional confine, entered the culture, and spilled out in all directions, in the process giving us the concepts by which we commonly process life's most difficult and painful problems. This is, in fact, a secular spirituality, one which came to cultural prominence in the encounter groups of the 1960's, the flood of self-help literature that began to engulf us in the 1970's, and the recovery groups of the 1980's, all of which has become big business, nourishing numerous writers, publishing houses, and dispensers of advice. In the process, we have all become both our own clients and our own therapists.

Philip Cushman, in his *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*, has spoken of psychotherapy as one of our two principal healers, the other being advertising. What advertisers do is, in varying degrees, to offer both a product and the reasons to buy that product. The reasons which are offered, however subtly, often have to do with the inadequacies which we feel and which are skillfully surfaced: we are not as beautiful or as handsome as we would like, not as important, not as socially prominent, not as sought after, not as personally attractive. And the wonderful thing about this is that our inadequacy can be resolved simply by the purchase of a product! Advertisers are the priesthood of our prosperity, as devoted to the good things in life as pastors should be to the Good in life. And yet, in a strange way, they are plying the same waters down which our cultural psychotherapy is moving. The difference is mainly in the means. For the one, it is a technique; for the other, it is a product. For in an affluent age the gospel gets boiled down to this: to have is to be and to have not is to be damned.

In any culture, it is important to know who the healers are. In ours, as has been suggested, the healers are cultural psychotherapy and advertising. It is revealing to ask of them to what it is that they are offering their services; for if we know what the malady has been we know what the diagnosis was. If we know what the cure is, we know what the ailment is understood to be. And here none of the aches of the modern (or postmodern) self—its emptiness, its boredom, its rages, its insecurities, its hopes and hopelessness—are thought to be connected in any way with the moral world in which, by creation, we actually are embedded. And the regeneration which our two most prominent healers are offering can therefore be had by purely human means.

Preach It!

This secularized doctrine of regeneration poses, I believe, the most formidable opposition to a biblical understanding of ourselves and of the world current in the marketplace of ideas and experiences. It is more formidable than New Age because it is less obvious and more ubiquitous. It is more dangerous than Islam which, in America, is largely contained in Black communities where it has actually accomplished what the Black church has failed to do: it has brought some semblance of order to communities ravished by moral disorder and that is no mean benefit. And it is more formidable than the various gospels emanating from the liberalized end of Protestantism because it is common, ordinary, and everyday, and not tied in to the intellectual elite of the Left. So, how is the Church meeting this powerful challenge? The answer, I'm afraid, is " not very well."

In her study, *All is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism,* Marsha Witten examined a number of recent sermons all preached on the prodigal son and his brother. These sermons were gathered from only two denominational groups: Southern Baptists and Presbyterians (PCUSA). This probably reduces the extent to which her conclusions can be generalized but they do, nevertheless, show the mechanism at work in many a pulpit today rather clearly.

Between these two groups there were some differences. For example, the Southern Baptists, for what would appear to be obvious reasons, were drawn to the prodigal son and his experience; the Presbyterians were rather more taken with the older brother which is probably also telling! However, the similarities far outweighed the differences.

What we see in these sermons is preachers who are caught between the secular idea that the self can be found, crafted, developed, actualized and healed and the biblical idea that the self (insofar as the Bible speaks of the self) is corrupted, fragmented, rebellious, and incapable of healing itself. It was here that the battle was fought and, for so many of these preachers, lost. What emerges from their attempt to negotiate these tricky waters is a secularized gospel message. What is the human problem? So many of these preachers, having imbibed the cultural atmosphere replete as it is with assumptions about the self, said that the basic problem in life is that the self's capacities for relations is not being realized. Alternatively, we are not in touch with our feelings which are our guide to who we are and, indeed, to reality itself. That we are not in touch with our feelings was the most pervasive understanding of sin in these sermons. And salvation was then configured to take account of this understanding. Salvation is really feeling better about ourselves. In 82% of the sermons, therefore, the value of God to people lay in the benefits he provides by way of calming our jangled nerves, taking the uncertainty out of some of our decisions, and placing us in

a stable family, the Church (well, a somewhat stable family!).

Witten wryly remarks that the God of Calvin and Luther has, in these sermons, disappeared. In his place is one far less transcendent, far more mellow, one who feels our pain as any good Boomer might, and who is so much more user-friendly. This is, indeed, a different God because we have entered a different universe. In a moral universe, you believe; in a therapeutic universe, you feel. In the former, you are preoccupied with what is true and right; in the latter, you are preoccupied with what will make you feel better.

Holiness for Healing

It is not wise in our world filled with so many tortured and unhappy people to appear to be opposed to feeling better! And that is not my point here. The real question is how this happens and what part the moral life plays in it.

I believe our contemporary culture has stood the truth on its head. We typically imagine that we must be healed in order to become holy. If the Bible assumes anything on this it is the reverse, that we must become holy in order to be healed. Yet even this is not quite right. For is it not the case that in this fallen life wholeness is never actually promised to us? We live in a world of sometimes ghastly evil, a world where wrongs are done to us that may never be righted, where virtue may never be rewarded and may be punished, where the wear and tear of life finally brings us down, and where we will know in some degree the whole range of painful emotions from fear to despair to sorrow. The Bible promises no respite from any of this. What it does promise is that in the midst of life's perplexities and losses the God of holiness and love will walk with us and that he will enable us, as we lean upon him, to do right by others and not simply feel right within ourselves. It is this virtue, this right being with God, that is the key to the holding together of our inner life and this may not produce bullet-proof healing as we so desperately want.

This understanding of ourselves as primarily moral beings actually also provides us with our best *entree* to contemporary culture. The preachers in Witten's study, and the more extreme exponents in the Church-marketing movement, foolishly think that the great ally of the gospel today is culture, that if they can simply surf the wave of current thinking about life, or the self, or what is important, the gospel will become irresistible. The problem is that the postmodern culture which these preachers are trying to surf destroys that gospel as Witten shows. No. It is not the culture which is the great ally of the gospel but creation. It is the moral world of which we are inescapably a part through the *imago Dei* which is the ally. Strange as it may be, then, it is an understanding of life that is couched in biblically moral terms that actually unlocks life's mysteries and opens the way to believing the gospel. And the lynch pin of this world is the holiness of God. It all hangs and hinges upon him and his character.

The holiness of God therefore reaches across the entire front of biblical faith, linking the nature of the gospel to his being, the meaning of life to the meaning of the Cross. Unless the Holy returns to our faith, to our lives, and to our preaching, grace will be emptied of its meaning and our worship of its reality. "Neither love, grace, faith, nor sin has any but a passing meaning," P.T. Forsyth wrote, "except as they rest on the holiness of God, except as they arise from it, show it forth, set it up, and secure it everywhere and forever. Love is but its outgoing; sin is but its defiance; grace is but its action on sin; the Cross is but its victory; faith is but its worship."[1] Without the holiness of God, our believing loses its fiber, our piety its sinew, our gospel its mighty deliverance. Without it, evil is trivialized and, in the end, left without an answer in a world that cries out for answers today with a level of pain and desperation not heard in generations. Let us, then, "exalt the Lord our God" for "the Lord our God is holy" (Ps. 99:9).

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1. P.T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 23.

Westminster Confession of Faith on Discipline from the *Book of Confessions*:

Church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren; for deterring of others from like offenses; for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel; and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders. (6.171)

Rules of Discipline from the *Book of Order*: Preamble

a. Church discipline is the church's exercise of authority given by Christ, both in the direction of guidance, control, and nurture of its members and in the direction of constructive criticism of offenders. Thus, the purpose of discipline is to honor God by making clear the significance of membership in the body of Christ, to preserve the purity of the church by nourishing the individual within the life of the believing community, to correct or restrain wrongdoing in order to bring members to repentance and restoration, to restore the unity of the church by removing the causes of discord and division, and to secure the just, speedy, and economical determination of proceedings. In all respects, members are to be accorded procedural safeguards and due process, and it is the intention of these rules so to provide.

b. The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing. It should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath so that the great ends of the church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ.

A Word of Hope for a Church in Pain:
Biblical and Theological Dimensions of Ecclesiastical Discipline

by Teresa M. McAnally

Among the curiosities of the post-enlightenment, post-Christian era is the degree to which the role of discipline in human community has fallen upon hard times. Standards and limits, it would seem, have no place in a culture that has seen the circling of planets and the exploration of the world under the seas in less than one century. We have made such a virtue of the ability to "think outside the box" that we have effectively demolished the sides of the proverbial box in the process. In that view, then, discipline becomes nothing more than putting up limits where none need exist. Yet few of the wonders of our age would exist without the disciplined efforts of their discoverers, men and women who never quite lost sight of where the box was or when to return to its bounds.

The community of faith in recent times has also adopted a rather negative assessment of discipline as judgmental, confining, punitive and incompatible with grace. Yet the Church's history has demonstrated a universally positive impact of the right use of discipline. Is there still a place for ecclesiastical discipline within the contemporary or future church? If we think of the role of discipline as a gift from the gracious hand of God to his people, can we perhaps recover its rightful place among us? The writer to the Hebrews must have been confronting similar tensions in the congregation to prompt these words: "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. " (Hebrews 12:11, RSV)

A Necessary Component of Human Development

Much contemporary research into the way the human brain functions to make us who we are centers on how newborns and young children acquire the necessary knowledge for making sense of and relating to their world. It seems that our brains become established in well-worn paths by a series of explorations—some voluntary, many involuntary—into the fine art of defining consistent boundaries. A child learns early where the line is drawn between self and other, the rules of cause and effect, the distinctions of pleasant and unpleasant results, acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Such an ongoing learning process is equally true of physical, social and moral development.

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This process of disciplined growth, continual correction by the presence of the boundaries and our interaction with them, is evident in the biblical record. In both the Old and New Testaments, the language of discipline (*yasar* in the Hebrew and *paideia* in the Greek) carries the concepts of correction and teaching toward the end of the wholeness of life. Rather than the negative idea of punishment, biblical discipline becomes the positive method by which those who have wandered outside the boundaries are turned back from destructive paths and redirected toward the fullness of God's purpose for them. A life thus shaped is always God-defined rather than self-defined.

The Act of a Loving God

From the moment our first parents appeared on the earth, God acted to protect them and to keep them directed to his holy purpose by establishing a boundary between them and the source of the knowledge of good and evil. That knowledge, without the capacity to overcome evil, was bound to make humans miserable. Knowing what God knows without also having the power God has is a recipe for destruction. In that interaction they learned to draw the line between God and humanity.

God's decision to remove his rebellious children from the garden has historically led us, their descendants, to characterize the expulsion as the punishment of a vengeful power. Yet Genesis does not convey God's anger. Inquiring into the circumstances that caused the man and woman to hide from him, God moves first to clothe them before establishing the next boundary. The source of life is now off limits to them because God chooses not to allow (or perhaps compel) them to live forever in the misery that their actions inevitably unleash on the world. In what may be God's only intentional abrogation of human freedom, he makes sure they cannot transgress that boundary (the forbidden tree of life) by surrounding it with his spiritual protection. They cannot return to the garden. They have come to learn that eternal life is only desirable in the presence of God. These are acts of love, not of vengeance; acts of correction and instruction, not of arbitrary reprisal.

The most obvious account of God's established boundaries is found in the giving of the commandments. The ten on the tablets set the basic limits by which we are to relate to God and to one another. The remainder of the Mosaic code represents the inspired efforts of the community of God's chosen to refine and apply the dynamics of the original list. Through generations of transgression, discipline, repentance, forgiveness and reclamation the people of Israel

learned what living according to God's purpose could mean, as well as the meaning of thwarting those purposes.

Jesus as Loving Disciplinarian

Many of our most beloved stories of Jesus' ministry cast him in the role of divine teacher. Supporters and detractors alike addressed him as rabbi, a title that conveyed all the dimensions of a beloved instructor. If we are honest with ourselves we will acknowledge that those teachers from whom we learned the most were the ones who not only imparted information, but also set standards, corrected mistakes, and held us accountable for amending our behaviors. Jesus was just such a teacher. While the lessons he taught sometimes seemed harsh, their goal was always to restore his students to the right relationship with God.

Jesus methods sought to re-establish some standards and redefine others in the minds of his hearers. In the temple precincts he taught the money changers (and a few spectators) in an unforgettable way the meaning of prohibitions against stealing, honoring the Sabbath, the holiness of God. Many of Jesus' direct confrontations with the Pharisees were intended to help them understand how their accommodating interpretations of the law were actually perversions of God's intentions in giving the Law. Throughout the parables, the rather dire consequences of disobedient behaviors demonstrated to his students that amendment of life was possible, that faithfulness was always more desirable than the short-term gains of faithlessness.

Ecclesiastical Discipline as Loving Legacy of the Holy Spirit

In the post-resurrection appearance as recorded in John's Gospel, Jesus first invited the disciples to receive the Holy Spirit, then gave them the authority and the *responsibility* of the exercise of discipline within the emerging mission of the community of disciples. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:23) In classical theology this is known as the "power of the keys", but it is no indiscriminate power. Rather it is a reminder to the disciples that, because they possess the power of the gospel message, they also bear the responsibility for bringing others to a knowledge of Christ's saving work. In Christ repentance, forgiveness, regeneration are all available. Therefore, no one must be captive to sin. Yet in order that we might be led to repentance, we must know the boundaries God has set for us and the ways in which we have violated those boundaries. This is the responsibility of those entrusted with the care of Christ's Church, guided by the Spirit.

No wonder John Calvin set his discussion of this "power" in the context of his book on the Means of Grace. (*Institutes*, Book IV) We understand the dimensions of God's grace and the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ when another believer helps us to confront that reality. The Church in every age has been equipped by the Spirit and charged with the responsibility of conveying the means by which we understand that truth. Ecclesiastical discipline is one way by which we are called and enabled to appropriate that reality as our own. We are to bring the corrective and instructive elements of the gospel to bear on those within our community who have placed themselves outside the established boundaries to the end that those outside the community may find our life compatible with our message.

Indeed there is precedent for understanding the exercise of community discipline in the stories of the Old Testament assemblies of God's people. Aaron the priest, entrusted with the care and direction of the children of Israel while they waited for Moses to return from the mountain, made the decision to allow the people to do whatever they wanted with respect to the idol they wished to build. He actually helped them do it, bringing his own expertise to the project to create the golden calf. Aaron labored under the assumption that his role was to serve the people rather than to serve God. His response to their demands suggests that correcting their misunderstandings of faithful worship was not in his job description as he understood it. Moses' question on returning is most telling: "What did this people do to *you* that *you* have brought a great sin upon them?" (Exodus 32:21, emphasis added) It was Aaron's responsibility as God's representative to help them distinguish God's holy will from human self-serving willfulness. Did Aaron hate these folks so much that he would refuse them instruction in the right? It is *not* a loving act to tolerate sin.

Matthew records that Jesus even established a method for correcting offenses within the fabric of church's life. The early church also understood the value of this kind of loving discipline. The Acts of the Apostles shows that the earliest communities had as much difficulty with the disobedience of believers as they did with the persecutions of hostile elements in the surrounding culture. Much of Paul's correspondence had to do with instructing his readers in those areas of their individual and collective behavior which served to compromise the community's witness in the world.

The State of Discipline in the Church Today

"As the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place." (Calvin, *Institutes* IV.xii.1) Calvin may have been writing those words for us, for it seems that a primary question in the church of today is: "Can the body hold together?" Across denominational lines there is a great concern that the fault lines within the churches are compromising the witness to a world in need of the gospel. It would seem then that discipline and discipleship have more than simply an etymological relationship. Correction and instruction are to lead us to honor Christ's boundaries, to follow his path. "Therefore, all who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration—whether they do it deliberately or out of ignorance—are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church." (Calvin)

Two things seem to hinder the right exercise of discipline for modern church people. The first is cultural, the second

grows out of the heart of the theological enterprise. We live in a consumer age which has infected every aspect of our lives including our religious life; we are no longer schooled in the "saving doctrine of Christ" nor can we agree on its truth claims. The movement of the consumer mind, to which not even Christians are immune, leads us to find a compatible message at the expense of communal relationships which would allow for mutual accountability. If I don't like what one church has to offer, I may go elsewhere. Even absenting oneself from organized religion is an option when one can get a spiritual fix from the television or the library. The Internet assures us that virtual community is an acceptable substitute for physical community, and far less demanding of our faithfulness. In that scenario we need not acknowledge any boundaries, nor anyone's claim to tell us where they are.

Coincidental with the consumer mindset is the growth of theological relativism. Truth has become negotiable within the framework of human experience. The substance of belief is individualized. Is our need for salvation an indispensable teaching at all? We seem to have substituted a personal *definition* of Christ for a personal *relationship* with him. Therefore, what Christ has taught only has value if the individual believer finds it valuable. Since we cannot agree on the meaning of the gospel, specifically on the person and work of Jesus Christ, we don't feel bound by its constraints. We will not accept doctrinal correction if we cannot affirm a common doctrinal standard.

In the midst of these forces the church seeks a renewing and unifying word of hope. Our passionate desire is for the health of the Body of Christ. As we await God's timing, we can be bold enough to hold one another accountable, and humble enough to be accountable to God's instruction. We will no longer absolve ourselves of this necessary work on the grounds of universal sinfulness. If we still have the grace-filled will to care enough about sisters and brothers to seek their good rather than their approval, our future is secure.

When Everything is Permitted

by Wolfhart Pannenberg

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It is a striking oddity of our modern circumstance that the subject of morality and ethics is assumed to be a matter of public significance, while the subject of God is thought to be an esoteric matter of interest to theologians and "people who go in for that sort of thing." It was not always so, and it is very much worth asking how we arrived at this present circumstance, and what might be done about it .

Today's public talk about moral values is usually framed in terms of a search for a moral consensus that is no longer self-evident—indeed that to many people is not evident at all. The search for a moral consensus based on a common human nature has, for some time now, replaced the social function of religious belief, which was long thought to be the indispensable foundation of social peace. For most of history, unity of religion was deemed essential to the unity of society and culture. That assumption was shattered in the religious wars in Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a consequence of the wars of religion, precisely the opposite conclusion was drawn: Social peace requires that religious beliefs, and disagreements over religious beliefs, be determinedly disregarded. Although established religion continued for some time in most of Europe, religion no longer served its earlier function. In the place of religion, concepts of human nature became fundamental in theories of society and public culture.

Among German thinkers, it was Wilhelm Dilthey who, toward the end of the nineteenth century, underscored the ways in which, beginning in the middle of the seventeenth century, human nature had replaced religion in European thought. Building on the reformulation of natural law by Hugo Grotius and on Thomas Hobbes' social contract theories, conceptions of natural morality and natural religion became fashionable and were increasingly pitted against revealed religion and morality. Nonetheless, for some time concepts of morality continued to employ a belief in God as the origin of moral norms and final judge of human behavior. The necessary connection between God and morality was preserved, for instance, in the thought of Herbert of Cherbury and John Locke. With Anthony Shaftesbury, however, the moral sense was treated as autonomous. Even in his case, however, while the moral sense was independent from religion, his ideal of harmony

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finally required harmony with God and the order of the universe.

The eighteenth century witnessed different approaches to whether there is human autonomy in morals or whether the moral sense depends on belief in God. David Hume argued the autonomous character of moral feeling, while Rousseau took the other course. While Rousseau thought conscience is the source of our knowledge about the duties of natural law, he also thought the conscience of man is in a bad way. In Rousseau's *Emi1e*, the Vicar of Savoy argues that the voice of conscience has almost been extinguished in most of us because of the overwhelming experience of human perversion and injustice. A purification of conscience is required, and that is possible only if we believe in God. If God does not exist, the vicar contends, then only the wicked are acting reasonably. It makes no sense to be good. In that event, the success of the wicked in this life would undermine the moral sense also of the good. This can be prevented only by the belief that there is a final recompense beyond this life in which everyone receives his due. Religion is therefore of public importance in Rousseau's *Social Contract*, although it is not revealed religion. Rather, he proposed a "civil religion" with only enough articles of faith to motivate moral behavior—belief in God as the origin of social order and law, in divine providence, and in a future recompense.

Although it is sometimes downplayed, Immanuel Kant was an admirer of Rousseau, and in his *Critique of Pure Reason* he adhered to the idea that moral conduct presupposed religion. Kant affirmed the autonomy of reason as the only source of our consciousness of moral law, but in his view the motivation of moral conduct presupposes a moral order in which each person will ultimately receive the measure of happiness or unhappiness appropriate to his merit. For this to be the case, there must be a harmony between the moral order and the course of nature, and that can be guaranteed only by a creator who, in his capacity as highest reason, is also the source of moral obligation. Without the existence of God, reason would be compelled to conclude that its intuition of moral law is a mere fiction.

This view of things posed the problem for Kant that it makes our moral sense dependent upon the existence of God, which contradicts the claim for the moral autonomy of reason. In his later years, therefore, Kant felt forced to attenuate the importance of religious belief in the sense of moral obligation. He now argued that religion is a consequence of moral consciousness, not a presupposition of moral obligation. In this case, belief in God and immortality only play the role of reconciling the demands of the moral law with our natural desire for happiness. This, however, looks an awful lot like eudaemonism—the theory that the highest moral goal is happiness—which was otherwise abhorrent to Kant. It is little wonder that Kant's philosophy of religion was soon considered the weakest part of his thought, while his principle of the autonomy of reason in moral philosophy was hailed as an epochal breakthrough.

II

In our situation today, there is little chance that the appeal to autonomous reason will bring about a broad consensus on moral norms. Even Kant would not expect that to happen, since he assigned to religion the task of introducing the moral principles of social conduct. He insisted only that the moral law should be the hermeneutical principle in transmitting religious belief, with the result that moral philosophy would take the lead in forming the moral consensus of society. Whether as Kantianism or as some form of utilitarianism, moral philosophy in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries did in fact replace religion among the intellectual elite and those whom they influenced. Both the Kantian and utilitarian forms of moral philosophy continued to affirm the public authority of moral norms, as well as their rational power to convince.

The authority of moral philosophy was dealt a severe blow, however, by Nietzsche's psychological analysis of the genealogy of moral values. What we call moral values, Nietzsche contended, are in fact in the service of deeper inclinations, propensities, and desires, especially the will to dominate others. The history of culture is the history of a struggle between different sets of moral norms. As a result, moral norms are relative, and the voice of conscience is in fact the voice of cultural context. This way of thinking was popularized and powerfully reinforced by Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis, where we encounter the doctrine of the superego as the source of moral consciousness.

The relativizing of the formerly absolute authority of moral norms converges today with the emphasis upon individual freedom as the final authority in the conduct of life. In John Locke's philosophy, freedom is rooted in the concept of law. Today, freedom and law are pitted against each other. Moral and civil law are viewed as limits on the freedom of the individual. This is evident, for instance, in the constitution of my own country, Germany. There the freedom for self-realization is said to be limited by three factors: the justified claims of others, the moral law, and the order of positive law. Note what has happened, however, and I need not add that it has not happened only in Germany. Of the three limiting factors, the concept of moral law is no longer usable because there is no agreement about its content or obliging authority. It follows that "the justified claims of others" cannot be unequivocally asserted either, since we do not know what is and what is not justified. The end result is that the only limits on the exercise of individual freedom are the requirements of positive law. Morality and law are conflated, indeed equated, so that what is not illegal is not immoral. If it is not proscribed by law, others are expected to tolerate what the individual considers necessary to the exercise of his freedom. An unsurprising consequence of this is that positive law is often viewed as an arbitrary limitation of personal freedom.

Moral philosophy does not offer much help in this situation—not since 1903 when George Herbert Moore in *Principia Ethica* reduced moral judgment to intuitions that can be neither demonstrated nor refuted by rational

argument. If that is the case, it is reasonable to view moral norms as emotion-driven preferences rather than the proper subject of rational argument. This is the intellectual and cultural circumstance brilliantly depicted in Alasdair Maclntyre's book of 1981, *After Virtue*, in which he shows how intuitivism and emotivism have caught up with Nietzsche's deconstruction of moral norms.

All that being said, however, we need not despair of the future of moral consciousness and moral argument. They are not going to disappear. There are several reasons why this is the case, not the least being the invincible propensity of human beings to judge the conduct of others. We are not going to stop judging, in private and in public. This is not due simply to our inclination to be "judgmental." Moral judgment is inextricably entangled with our very nature as social beings. We have no choice but to judge how people should behave in different situations. Situations demand it, whether we want to judge or not. It does not matter, at least at this level, whether the normative ideas presupposed in our judgment of the conduct of others are correct or fair. It is enough that such normative ideas are employed, and there is no getting around them.

Reflection on how we judge can lead to basic concepts of natural law. Our judgment, for instance, evidences a demand for some form of mutuality in social relations: *pacta sunt servanda*—both sides should keep their promises. This is the "golden rule" of mutuality: What you don't want others to do to you you shouldn't do to them. Of course, the rule calls for further specification with respect to how people are differently situated, but in one way or another the principle of mutuality underlies our judgments of others. Human beings have a common interest in the basic requirements of social life, and mutuality is the basis of the basics.

This is not to suggest that people always act according to the golden rule of mutuality. Far from it. It is obviously easier to judge the conduct of others than to judge our own conduct. With respect to our own situation, we are marvelously adept at claiming exemptions from general rules. This is not only because we tend to be self-serving creatures. It is also because individual situations are indeed unique and do not always fit the general rules, and each of us can more easily perceive the uniqueness of our own situation than the uniqueness of the situation of another person. This is not a fault. It is natural. We should not be surprised that a person can have a strong sense of the general rules while, at the same time, being inclined to claim an exemption for himself. The temptation, of course, is to overstate the importance of individual particularity. Our knowledge of the norms observed by the majority can function as a condition for successfully claiming an exemption for ourselves. After all, none of us is the majority.

Precisely at this point the dissolution of the absolute authority of moral norms percolates into the conduct of individual lives. The crisis of moral consciousness is not that people no longer know about the general conditions and requirements of life together in society. The crisis comes in applying such knowledge to individual cases, and especially to our own. This includes the question of how the formulation and observance of general norms can be made subservient to individual preference. As a result of the inability to agree on the connection between general rules and individual cases, there is no consensus on the idea of justice. Justice requires that each person or group receives and contributes according to their placement within a social system. There is a cacophony of claims to justice, typically articulated in terms of "rights." But there is at present no consensus about the requirements of justice. In the absence of such a consensus, cries for justice appear as empty and self-serving moralism.

III

Conflicting claims about justice are not uniquely modern. There have always been such conflicts within societies and between societies, with the result, of social disruption and wars among nations. In the biblical vision, the condition of lasting peace is a settlement of conflicting claims, a settlement that can come only from a higher authority recognized by all the parties in conflict. In Isaiah and Micah we have the vision of a pilgrimage of all the nations to Mount Zion, where the God of Israel settles their conflicting claims and establishes eternal peace. Of course the vision has to do with the last days. At present, the nations of the world do not seem inclined to have their claims adjudicated by the God of Israel. Some might appeal to the President of the United States, and a few might appeal to the Pope, but even those nations that share a Christian heritage do not acknowledge the authority of the God of Israel to settle their differences. Nor can the secularized societies of the West be expected to resolve their internal conflicts by recourse to the authority of God.

It may well be the case that the moral crisis of modern secular societies is attributable to the fact that God is no longer publicly recognized as the source of moral norms. As long as such a recognition was intact, the absolute validity of moral norms and the individual sense of obligation to those norms were secure. Historical experience demonstrates that, for societies and for individuals, the autonomy of reason cannot successfully replace the authority of God. In this respect, Rousseau is fully vindicated. As is Dostoyevsky, whose Ivan Karamazov observed that, without God, "everything is permitted." In a 1970 interview, the Marxist philosopher Max Horkheimer declared that, at least in the West, everything related to morals is ultimately traceable to theology. We may want to qualify that by noting that the tradition of moral philosophy goes back to classical Greece and therefore does not have all its roots in the Judeo-Christian faith in the God of Israel. And qualify it further by noting that a disposition to benevolence, a benevolence that takes pleasure in the happiness of others, is part of human nature. Nonetheless, the sense of moral obligation as it was cultivated for the last fifteen hundred years is hardly conceivable apart from faith in the God of the Bible.

The fact remains that in our Western and secularized societies the public authority of religion, meaning mainly Christianity, will not easily be restored. The more

promising prospect is for a renewal of a specifically Christian morality within the Christian community itself. Here attention must be paid to a Christian way of living that is clearly distinguished from the conventional ways of the surrounding culture. There are important objections to what seems to be a turn inward that focuses moral reasoning on the development of a distinctive ethic for the Christian community. The most important objection is that morality, by its very nature, is related to what is universally human. There is something inherently wrong with a sectarian ethic. Moral discourse in Christian theology, as in philosophy, attends to human nature, the needs and aspirations of all. It does not attend only, or even in the first place, to the special concerns of Christians. In the history of Christian ethics, Christian ethics is not only for Christians.

This universal concern is overwhelmingly evident from the time of the early Church Fathers. Christian ethics addresses all human beings as creatures of the one God; all are involved in the fall of Adam, and all are called to reconciliation with God, liberation from the bondage of sin and death, and final glorification in communion with God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This understanding of the nature and history of mankind explains the missionary imperative of Christianity. It is grounded in the belief that all humanity and the entire universe is created by the God of Israel who revealed himself definitively in Jesus Christ. True, this understanding is no longer shared by everybody in our societies, and it therefore does not characterize the spirit of our public culture. It is viewed as an understanding peculiar to Christians. But it is nonetheless a Christian understanding that embraces all human beings.

Christian ethics, then, is not limited to Christians but is related to the moral situation and calling of all. This is the connection between the particular and universal in Christian thought, and it is a connection that must be honored also today in Christian moral reasoning. There can be no turning inward to the Christian community that excludes Christian claims and Christian concerns about the universal condition and destiny of human beings as such. As the early Church integrated the classic catalogue of virtues into the Christian doctrine of virtue that culminates in the Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love, so Christian ethics today must comprehend all that is true in moral reasoning beyond the formal boundaries of Christianity itself. We dare not forget that John 3:16 begins with, "God so loved the world . . ." Christian ethics that is worthy of the name understands itself to be a moral account of and for the world.

We have now addressed the first objection to a Christian ethics that addresses itself specifically to the conduct of the Christian community. A second objection arises from the peculiar history of Protestantism. While Roman Catholic moral teaching has traditionally been articulated in tension with modernity, Protestantism has understood itself to be working in tandem with the development of the modern world. This is notably true of liberal Protestantism, what is often called the "cultural Protestantism" once dominant in much of Europe and North America. This Protestantism is reluctant to differ from the prevailing values of the general culture. Indeed, it feels it has a proprietorial interest in those values. This attitude can be traced to the Reformation, and especially to Luther's doctrine that the Christian is fulfilling his divine vocation by doing the work he is called to in the secular sphere. This was in sharpest contrast to the Roman Catholic view that there are, for instance in monasticism, special vocations to holiness. Moreover, and very important to our discussion of moral authority, Protestantism took credit for the development of modern ideas of liberty and human rights. As a result, Protestants viewed adaptation to modern culture not as a course of moral compromise but as a course of fidelity to their heritage.

Examples could be multiplied to illustrate the ways in which Protestantism identified with the general culture, even when it also attempted to transform it. That identification appears to be jeopardized when Christian ethics turns its attention to the community of faith rather than the general culture. Such a turn to the community is suspected of sectarianism, especially when the accent is on Christian separation from the ways of the world, or when the commandment to love one's neighbor is understood chiefly as a responsibility to Christian brothers and sisters. Yet we must entertain the possibility that a seemingly sectarian turn to the community, and away from a general culture that is alienated from its Christian heritage, may contribute very significantly to the moral renewal of that culture. In the early Church, Christians lived a very different morality from that of the surrounding culture, and their courage to be different became one of the powerful attractions of Christianity. People recognized that the Christian ethic was superior and worthy of emulation. We should not discount the possibility of that happening again.

A third objection to the proposal that Christian ethics should turn to the community of faith arises from the Christian idea of love. Does not the call to unconditional love require us to accept people just as they are? That unconditionality seems to be compromised if we discriminate between Christians and non-Christians or make demands of people. In the name of love, the apostolic admonitions not to have fellowship with people who live in violation of apostolic teaching are easily disregarded. But Christian love has a critical edge. It cannot be equated with unconditional "acceptance." Love is ready to accept everyone, but also calls everyone to change. To the adulteress of John 8, Jesus said, "Go, and sin no more." When, in telling the story of his acceptance of the woman, we omit that admonition, we break the connection between the commandment to love our neighbor and the prior commandment to love God. One cannot love God without obeying his will, and in the teaching of Jesus the love of God is both the source and criterion of our obligation to love others. People are to be loved in light of the destiny intended for them by their Creator.

In the Old Testament, the love of God is expressed in his electing a people for himself and in his persevering in that act of election. This is the source and criterion of all moral obligation. Because God wants his elect people to flourish, every member of that community is required to observe the minimal conditions of the community's flourishing. This explains the correspondence between the second table of the Decalogue and the truths of natural law that are

essential to communal life. No human community is possible where people murder one another, steal one another's possessions, violate their marriages, dishonor their parents, or injure one another by slander.

The moral teaching of Jesus was also derived directly from the authority of God and his love, not from the authority of the tradition's legal and moral teaching. In Matthew 6, for instance, the love of the Creator for his creatures is evident in that "he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Thus are we to follow God's example, loving not only our friends but also our enemies. Again and again, Jesus taught that, as the love of the heavenly Father is expressed in his forgiveness of us, so also are we obliged to forgive others. Thus he taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." God's forgiveness is prior, as the source and criterion of our forgiving.

This understanding of love is the Christian contribution to ethical discourse and universal morality. Christian love enriches and strengthens the natural inclination of human beings to benevolence, which is always in desperate need of being strengthened. This is the most important Christian contribution to moral life in general, also under the conditions of modern secular societies. But Christians also need to point out that benevolence and the joy that comes with it are evidence of a deeper longing of human nature for the good. The good for which the human being longs is not limited to the moral good. It is the good understood in the Platonic sense, meaning the good that is the source of happiness. It is, in short, a longing for God, the source of ultimate and lasting happiness. In benevolence, there is a glimpse of that ultimate good, accompanied by the experience of happiness. It is a hint of the kingdom to come.

Our sighting of that kingdom, however, does not lead to indifference to the quotidian conditions of human community. On the contrary, where mutual benevolence holds sway, those conditions are met without further ado. In the words of Paul, "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." If Christian ethics attends to the living out of this new way—a new way that is the fulfillment of our nature from the beginning—the world may again take note. Then, at last, we may overcome the striking oddity of our modern circumstance that the subject of morality and ethics is assumed to be a matter of public significance, while the subject of God is thought to be an esoteric matter of interest to theologians and "people who go in for that sort of thing." Then, at last, our culture may be renewed by understanding that we do not need to choose between nature and religion, and that freedom, far from being limited when ordered to moral authority, is not possible without it.

The Discipline of the Church:
Its Chief Use in Censures and Excommunication

by John Calvin

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1. Necessity and nature of church discipline

The discipline of the church, the discussion of which we have deferred to this place, must be treated briefly, that we may thereafter pass to the remaining topics. Discipline depends for the most part upon the power of the keys[1] and upon spiritual jurisdiction. To understand it better, let us divide the church into two chief orders: clergy and people. I call by the usual name "clergy"[2] those who perform the public ministry in the church. We shall first speak of common discipline, to which all ought to submit; then we shall come to the clergy, who, besides the common discipline, have their own.[3]

But because some persons, in their hatred of discipline, recoil from its very name, let them understand this: if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible. Accordingly, as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place. Therefore, all who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration—whether they do this deliberately or out of ignorance—are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church. For what will happen if each is allowed to do what he pleases? Yet that would happen, if to the preaching of doctrine there were not added private admonitions, corrections, and other aids of the sort that sustain doctrine and do not let it remain idle. Therefore, discipline is like a bridle to restrain and tame those who rage against the doctrine of Christ; or like a spur to arouse those of little inclination; and also sometimes like a father's rod[4] to chastise mildly and with the gentleness of Christ's Spirit those who have more seriously lapsed. When, therefore, we discern frightful devastation beginning to threaten the church because there is no concern and no means of restraining the people, necessity itself cries out that a remedy is needed. Now, this is the sole remedy that

Christ has enjoined and the one that has always been used among the godly.

2. Stages of church discipline

The first foundation of discipline is to provide a place for private admonition; that is, if anyone does not perform his duty willingly, or behaves insolently, or does not live honorably, or has committed any act deserving blame—he should allow himself to be admonished; and when the situation demands it, every man should endeavor to admonish his brother. But let pastors and presbyters be especially watchful to do this, for their duty is not only to preach to the people, but to warn and exhort in every house, wherever they are not effective enough in general instruction. Paul teaches this when he relates that he taught privately and from house to house [Acts 20:20], and declares himself "innocent of the blood of all" [v. 26], because he "ceased not to admonish everyone night and day with tears" [Acts 20:31]. For doctrine obtains force and authority where the minister not only explains to all together what they owe to Christ, but also has the right and means to require that it be kept by those whom he has observed are either disrespectful or languid toward his teaching.

If anyone either stubbornly rejects such admonitions or shows that he scorns them by persisting in his own vices, after having been admonished a second time in the presence of witnesses, Christ commands that he be called to the tribunal of the church, that is, the assembly of the elders,[5] and there be more gravely admonished as by public authority, in order that, if he reverences the church, he may submit and obey. If he is not even subdued by this but perseveres in his wickedness, then Christ commands that, as a despiser of the church, he be removed from the believers' fellowship [Matt. 18:15, 17].

5. The purpose of church discipline

In such corrections and excommunication, the church has three ends in view. The first is that they who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonor of God, as if his holy church [cf. Eph. 5:25-26] were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men. For since the church itself is the body of Christ [Col. 1:24], it cannot be corrupted by such foul and decaying members without some disgrace falling upon its Head. Therefore, that there may be no such thing in the church to brand its most sacred name with disgrace, they from whose wickedness infamy redounds to the Christian name must be banished from its family. And here also we must preserve the order of the Lord's Supper, that it may not be profaned by being administered indiscriminately.[8] For it is very true that he to whom its distribution has been committed. if he knowingly and willingly admits an unworthy person whom he could rightfully turn away, is as guilty of sacrilege as if he had cast the Lord's body to dogs. On this account, Chrysostom gravely inveighs against priests who, fearing the power of great men, dare exclude no one. "Blood," he says, "will be required at your hands. [Ezek. 3: 18; 33:8.] If you fear a man, he will laugh at you; but if you fear God, you will be revered also among men. Let us not dread the fasces, the purple, the crowns; here we have a greater power. I truly would rather give my body to death, and let my blood be poured out than participate in that pollution."[9] Therefore, lest this most hallowed mystery be disgraced, discretion is very much needed in its distribution. Yet this can be had only through the jurisdiction of the church.

The second purpose is that the good be not corrupted by the constant company of the wicked, as commonly happens. For (such is our tendency to wander from the way) there is nothing easier than for us to be led away by bad examples from right living. The apostle noted this tendency when he bade the Corinthians expel the incestuous man from their company. "A little leaven," he says, "ferments the whole lump." [I Cor. 5:6.] And he foresaw such great danger here that he prohibited all association with him. "If any brother," he says, "bears among you the name of fornicator, miser, worshiper of idols, drunkard, or reviler, I do not allow you even to take food with such a man." [I Cor. 5:11 p.]

The third purpose is that those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent. They who under gentler treatment would have become more stubborn so profit by the chastisement of their own evil as to be awakened when they feel the rod. The apostle means this when he speaks as follows: "If anyone does not obey our teaching, note that man; and do not mingle with him, that he may be ashamed" [11 Thess. 3:14p.]. Likewise, in another passage, when he writes that he has delivered the Corinthian man to Satan: "that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord" [I Cor. 5:5]; that is (as 1 interpret it), Paul gave him over to temporary condemnation that he might have eternal salvation. But he speaks of "delivering over to Satan" because the devil is outside the church, as Christ is in the church.[10] Some authorities refer this phrase to a certain vexing of the flesh,[11] but this seems very doubtful to me.

9. The limits of our judgment according to church discipline

This gentleness is required in the whole body of the church, that it should deal mildly with the lapsed and should not punish with extreme rigor, but rather, according to Paul's injunction, confirm its love toward them [II Cor. 2:8]. Similarly, each layman ought to temper himself to this mildness and gentleness. It is, therefore, not our task to erase from the number of the elect those who have been expelled from the church, or to despair as if they were already lost. It is lawful to regard them as estranged from the church, and thus, from Christ—but only for such time as they remain separated. However, if they also display more stubbornness than gentleness, we should still commend them to the Lord's judgment, hoping for better things of them in the future than we see in the present. Nor should we on this account cease to call upon God in their behalf. And (to put it in one word) let us not condemn to death the very person who is in the hand and judgment of God alone; rather, let us only judge of the character of each man's works by the law of the Lord. While we follow this rule, we rather take our stand upon the divine judgment than put forward our own. Let us not claim for ourselves

more license in judgment, unless we wish to limit God's power and confine his mercy by law. For God, whenever it pleases him, changes the worst men into the best, engrafts the alien, and adopts the stranger into the church. And the Lord does this to frustrate men's opinion and restrain their rashness—which, unless it is checked, ventures to assume for itself a greater right of judgment than it deserves.

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1. Cf. IV, xi, 1, note 2; IV, xi, 5-6. The power of the keys has reference to discipline and excommunication, a department of jurisdiction.
2. "*Clericos.*" Cf/ IV. iv/9: "I would have preferred them to be given a more proper name."
3. Cf. sec, 22, below.
4. Note the metaphors here: "sinews" (cf.IV.xx.14), "bridle," "father's rod." By discipline the church is bound together, the individual is restrained, and where necessary, "chastised in mercy," Cf. K. Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*,tr. Thomson, p.78.
5. The sequence of the acts of discipline is Scriptural, and the church acts through the session of elders *(censessus Seniorum)*, Cf. IV, xi, 6; p. 1217, note 10.
8. Calvin's anxiety to prevent the profanation of the Lord's Supper by the participation of unfit persons is basic to his emphasis on discipline. Cf. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, pp. 197ff. This is explicitly stated in the articles presented to the Geneva Council, January 13, 1537, where the sentence follows an earnest warning against such profanation: "For this reason, our Savior set up in his church the correction and discipline of excommunication" (CR X. i. 7-9, LCC XXII. 50). Cf. Calvin's *Letter to Somerset*, October 22, 1548: "The duty of bishops and curates is to keep watch over that [discipline] to the end that the Supper of our Lord may not be polluted by people of scandalous lives" (CRXIII.76; tr. Calvin, *Letters* II. 197).
9. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 1xxxii. 6 (MPG 58. 742; tr NPNF X. 496).
10. Augustine, *Sermons* ccxciv. 3. 3 (MPL, 38, 1337); clxi. 3.3 (MPL 38. 879; tr. LF *Sermons* II, 801 f.). Cf. Smits II.49.
11. Chrysostom, *Commentary on I Cor. 5:5*, hom xv.2 (MPG 61.123).

Study of the Confessions

Study 3: Confessions and Doctrines

by Rev. Theresa Ip Froehlich

Several years ago, a radio talk show host conducted a survey of the religious beliefs of Americans by randomly interviewing passers-by on the streets. He first asked them this question, "Do you believe in God?" To his surprise, over 90% of the respondents affirmed that they believed in God. But the bigger surprise came when he asked them the second question, "What is God like?" Then he realized that while these people all "confessed a faith in God," they did not all "believe the same things about God." They all believe it is right to think there is a God, they do not all have the right thinking about God. For the simple reason of their diverse understandings of what God is like, we would not expect them to be worshipping under one roof or to belong to the same church or even the same religion.

Confessions and Doctrines: How Are They Related?

"Confession of faith in God" is an ambiguous and elusive concept until and unless we unpack its meaning and filter this confession of faith through doctrine.

Doctrine is simply stating what the Bible teaches about God, what he is like, his words and works, and his plans and purposes for the human race. Doctrine originates from the Latin word *doctrina*, which means the content of what is taught.[1] The confessions of the church of Jesus Christ are attempts to articulate accurately the doctrines as taught in the Scriptures.

For this reason, confessing personal faith *in* Jesus Christ inevitably entails personal allegiance to a body of teachings (doctrines) *about* Jesus Christ.

The Confessing Church As A Teaching Church

The confessing act of the church frequently, though not always, results in the writing of a confessional document. This confessing act is effectively the articulation of doctrines which the church espouses. The resulting confessional statement then becomes the teaching document and standard of the church.

*** The church of Jesus Christ is a teaching church.**
The Christian church fulfils four key functions: proclaiming the gospel (*kerygma*), teaching (*didache*), fellowship (*koinonia*), and service(*diakonia*). While teaching is not the only function the church performs, it is one of the four legs on which the stool stands. Jesus Christ himself was a teacher and teaching was one of the key characteristics of his ministry (Matthew 4:23; 9:35). From its birth, the church has been preeminently a teaching community. The church is not only the place where teaching is done but also the place where teachings (doctrines) are born (Acts 2:42).

***The knowledge of Jesus Christ is mediated through the teaching ministry of the church.**
When the apostles went about teaching and proclaiming the resurrection in Acts 4:1-22, they were not merely imparting a system of ideas and thoughts, they were calling for personal commitment to the proclaimed truth and personal obedience to the proclaimed Christ. Accordingly, the apostolic teaching ministry not only aims at stimulating *thinking about* Jesus Christ, but also aims at moving the hearers to the point of *believing thinking*. Doctrine, therefore, is not just a thinking exercise about the Faith, but it is obedient and believing thinking about Jesus Christ. Without believing thinking, there can be no authentic personal relationship with Jesus Christ and there can be no genuine confession of faith in Christ.

***The church is charged to impart and preserve sound doctrine.**
The New Testament definition of "sound doctrine" is doctrine that is in keeping with that of the apostles (1 Timothy 1:10; 6:3; 2 Timothy 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9-10; 2:1). In fulfilling its charge to preserve sound doctrine, the church must do two things. First, it must hold firmly to sound doctrine (Titus 1:9) by insistently confessing and promulgating sound doctrine. Second, it must refute false doctrine (Titus 1:9) not only by declaration but also by discipline (Titus 1:10-11).

Why is Doctrine Necessary?

Given the charge to preserve sound doctrine, the church by necessity must seek out and state its doctrines (this constitutes the confessing act) through careful study of the whole canon of Scripture. Doctrine serves several purposes:

*** Didactic purpose**: to properly instruct the members and would-be members of Christ's community.

*** Polemic purpose**: to combat and refute heresies.[2]

*** Systematic purpose**: to systematize teachings of the whole canon of Scripture.

*** Identification purpose**: to provide a banner under which professing Christians can march, much like the standard under which the Roman army marched.

*** Disciplinary purpose**: true doctrine has a claim to obedience. Unless our doctrinal truth is unified, we cannot lay any claims on people because "the preaching and teaching activity of the church cannot make a strong claim for the obedience of faith if contradictory doctrines are put forth in the name of the Church. Not only the outward unity, but also the inner unity of the church. . .that is, the task of finding a way into the hearts and minds of men for the divine revelation, are seriously injured if the Church is not in a position to distinguish between that which is the standard and correct doctrine and that which is not."[3]

Faith And Doctrine

"Faith springs from doctrine in so far as doctrine springs from faith."[4] A believer who confesses personal trust in Jesus Christ must be able to move comfortably between "speaking to God as a worshipper" and "speaking about God (making doctrine as a thinker)." Confession of faith is a response of personal obedience; confession of doctrine is a response of accurate understanding (thinking and talking about God the way he intends us to).

Confessions: Timeless or Timebound?

Most literature on the creeds and confessions is very quick to highlight their limited use and limited authority because these confessional documents were written in and for a specific historical context to address specific issues, challenges and opportunities of a particular time and place.[5] Indeed, the Nicene Creed, for instance, was written because the church was wrestling with the doctrine of Christ (Christology), specifically the doctrine of his two natures; the Barmen Declaration was written to refute the idolatry of the state.

No one can deny that the confessions have a time-bound quality to them in that while truth will always remain truth, the way we live out the truth may vary because of different historical and cultural contexts. For instance, the Westminster Confession of Faith, originally written in the mid-seventeenth century, was revised in the twentieth century to reflect the cultural shift in the way the church relates to divorce.

However, it is equally important to highlight the fact that behind each time-bound application of truth, there still lies the eternal, timeless truth that lays claim on our personal obedience. Therefore, while the Westminster Confession of Faith was revised to recognize the reality of divorce, it never ceases to acknowledge divorce as a departure from God's will and it explicitly calls for "sufficient penitence for sin and failure."[6]

Conclusion

As the church of Jesus Christ confesses its faith *in Christ,* it must also simultaneously state what it confesses *about Christ* (i.e. doctrine). The confessing church is characteristically the teaching church, charged to promulgate and to preserve sound doctrine. The human doctrine of God can only claim to be sound doctrine in so far as the divine revelation in Scripture validates it as accurate. To the extent that the confessions are in doctrinal agreement with Scripture, the confessions are articulations of biblical teachings, and as such, they carry a doctrinal authority that is timeless.

Questions

1. What are the key doctrines that will help us unpack the meaning of "confession of faith in God?" What is the relationship between doctrine and Scripture? To what extent does sound doctrine prove the authenticity of a person's faith in Jesus Christ?
2. The New Testament church took seriously its charge to preserve sound doctrine, as evidenced in Paul's pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus. What are some of the ways the modern church can fulfill its charge to preserve sound doctrine? What role does church discipline have in this task of preserving sound doctrine?
3. Since the unity of the church is first and foremost theological unity (Second Helvetic Confession 5.141), the unity of the church is directly proportional to its purity of doctrine. What are some of the ways in which we can restore unity by promoting and preserving sound doctrine?
4. What are the dangers of highlighting the time-bound quality of the confessions without simultaneously highlighting their timeless quality?
5. What does it mean for the church to restore its respect for and obedience to the doctrinal authority of the confessions?

1. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1985), p. 27.
2. The Greek word for teaching false doctrine is *heterodidaskaleo* which literally means teaching a different (heretical) doctrine (1 Timothy 1:3; 6:3). Doctrine that departs from apostolic teaching is therefore heresy.
3. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), p. 50.
4. Ibid. p. 41.
5. Shirley C. Guthrie Jr., *Christian Doctrine*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1968), p. 35; Frank Hainer and Starr Luteri, *The Confessional Nature of the Church*, (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1995), p. 9.
6. Westminster Confession of Faith 6.132.

News from Around the World

PRESBYTERIAN RENEWAL LEADERS from over 15 groups, at their February meeting, called on all Presbyterians attending this year's General Assembly to show their unity by not wearing badges or other identifying labels to advocate for particular causes. After the difficult struggles the church has faced for the last several years, the leaders challenged all those attending GA to do so in a spirit of unity.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA) passed a resolution condemning the 1993 Re-Imagining Conference and the use of Presbyterian Church funds to support it, however, Re-Imagining speakers continue to be given Presbyterian forums to present their ideology. Delores Williams, who rejected the atonement in her presentation to the Re-Imagining group saying, "we don't need crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff," delivered the annual Smyth Lectures in October at Columbia Seminary, a Presbyterian Church (USA) Seminary.

The current issue of Presbyterian Women's Horizons magazine, has an excerpt from Miriam Theresa Winter's "bible study" at the 1997 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women. Winter was the 1994 Re-Imagining speaker. Her "Psalm in Search of the Goddess" from her book, *WomanWisdom* makes supplication to pagan goddesses: Ishtar, Inanna, Isis, Hathor, Cybele, Nut, Hera, Athene, Sophia, Aphrodite, Artemis, Demeter, Persephone, Anath-Astarte, and Gaia.

Union Seminary in Richmond welcomed feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, to their campus January 26-28, 1998, to deliver the Sprunt Lectures. Ruether's books include: *Sexism and God-Talk*, *Women-Church*, and *Gaia and God*. Ruether states in her book *Womanguides*, "Feminist theology cannot be done from the existing base of the Christian Bible."

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes eight clergy and two lay people, six women and four men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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