

CURRENT THEOLOGY

NOTES ON MORAL THEOLOGY 1994

JESUS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

New scholarly approaches account for much of the recent rise of interest in Jesus. Instead of starting from Christological and trinitarian doctrines, scholars have turned to history, literary criticism, and the social sciences to discover the identity and meaning of Jesus. Two conflicting responses based on historical methods appear in the works of John P. Meier and John Dominic Crossan.¹ The well-publicized Jesus Seminar scrupulously sorts biblical texts and the Gospel of Thomas into five layers of authenticity printed in different colors.² The "quest for the historical Jesus" has moved into a new phase. First, the 19th-century "lives of Jesus" presented him as a teacher of universal moral truths; then Rudolf Bultmann and the "second quest" portrayed Jesus as the eschatological prophet; now the "third quest" considers him a teacher of unconventional wisdom.³ Jewish scholars have reclaimed the Jewishness of Jesus.⁴ Major recent works on New Testament ethics anchor these teachings in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.⁵ The 1994 convention of the CTSA addressed the theme of Jesus for the first time in its fifty-year history.⁶

Revisionist moral theology has generally brought in Jesus via Christological doctrines rather than "from below," i.e. from gospel accounts of Jesus' words and deeds. That too appears to be changing. Jon Sobrino has written the first volume of what promises to be liberation

¹ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday: 1991); vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracle* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992). See comparative reviews in John F. O'Grady, "The Present State of Christology," *Chicago Studies* 32/1 (1993) 77–91.

² Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hooren, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

³ See James H. Charlesworth, "Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity," in *Images of Jesus Today*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity International, 1994) 1–41. Over 200 works are cited in the notes.

⁴ See Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), and *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); see also James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus' Jewishness* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

⁵ Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Eduard Lohse, *Theological Ethics of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Willi Marxsen, *New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

⁶ See *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 49 (1994) for the major addresses and responses.

theology's most thorough Christology.⁷ Sobrino focuses on Jesus from a conviction that "whenever, in the course of history, Christians have sought to reinvest Christ with his totality, they have returned to Jesus of Nazareth."⁸ In his encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, Pope John Paul II made a similar move to ground Catholic moral teaching in the response of discipleship as portrayed in the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man in Matt 19:16–22.⁹

Our review of the contemporary appeal to Jesus in Christian ethics and biblical studies will focus in turn on three central issues: the shift from history to ethics as the way to grasp the meaning of biblical texts; the question of whether Jesus is the eschatological prophet of the reign of God or an empirically astute sage; and use of the analogical imagination to move from Scripture to contemporary Christian normative reflection.

From History to Ethics

Interest in Jesus as the center of Christian ethics has increased as the historical-critical method has lost its monopoly in biblical interpretation. In the latter part of the 20th century it seems that ethics may be supplanting history as the primary mode of scriptural interpretation. Questions now focus on the meaning of Jesus rather than on factual knowledge about him. This shift has occurred in part because we have moved from a culture which prized historical fact and objectivity to one which evaluates systems of ideas primarily by their capacity for transforming individuals and society.¹⁰

In addition, historical method promised an objectivity it has been unable to deliver. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes that "the new quest is carried out in an academic environment far removed from the religious polemics that characterized earlier attempts, and is able at last to deal with Jesus in truly 'historical' terms.

⁷ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical Theological View* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 130; see *Jesus the Liberator* 36–40.

⁹ John Paul II, "The Splendor of Truth," *Origins* 23/18 (14 October 1993) 298–334. The rest of the encyclical, however, works on the premise that the magisterium has been invested with the task of continuing the moral teaching of Jesus; see nos. 30, and 25–27, 110. See also Joseph A. Selling, "Veritatis Splendor and the Sources of Morality," *Louvain Studies* 19 (1994) 3–17; William C. Spohn, "Morality on the Way of Discipleship: The Use of Scripture in *Veritatis Splendor*," in Michael Allsopp, ed., *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, forthcoming in 1995).

¹⁰ See J. I. H. McDonald, *Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University, 1993). This work provides a good historical review of the earlier lives-of-Jesus movement and the supervening emphases on eschatological ethics before studying postmodern developments. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988) 14–15; and Robin Scroggs, *The Text and the Times: New Testament Essays for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

It has been an embarrassment, therefore, that the many books generated by the new quest [specifically the work of Meier and Crossan] are no less divergent in their portrayal of Jesus."¹¹ Many contemporary scholars have abandoned the ideal of establishing who Jesus was with scientific objectivity on the grounds that the historical project cannot be separated from the author's own convictions.¹² Old Testament exegete Bruce C. Birch makes a disclaimer which has become familiar: "I no longer believe that it is possible or desirable to achieve objectivity in the exercise of this method. All interpreters bring their own perspectives and commitments with them to the text. The stance of so-called objectivity has often resulted in leaving these prior perspectives and commitments unexamined."¹³

The new critics do not advocate abandoning historical investigation of the life and times of Jesus because Christianity is a historical religion. They object to an exclusive reliance on historical method which severely limits the ethical and theological uses of Scripture. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's recent document, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," offers a good example of a more balanced approach. It reviews appreciatively the new methods of interpretation and hermeneutical theories. Although historical criticism should not be granted a monopoly, it should continue to be used because the Bible "does not present itself as a direct revelation of timeless truths but as the written testimony to a series of interventions in which God reveals himself in human history. . . . It follows that the biblical writings cannot be correctly understood without an examination of the historical circumstances that shaped them."¹⁴

Pursuing the meaning of Jesus and his message requires taking two perspectives into account: the world of the NT communities and the personal convictions of the reader. In the first place, "contextual criticism" uses social-science methods to grasp the political, economic, and cultural patterns of Israel and Palestine that shaped the biblical writings. Instead of seeking the earliest strata of the NT text on the assumption that the most primitive layer reflects the actual teaching or

¹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Marginal Mediterranean Jewish Peasant: Meier and Crossan on the Historical Jesus" *Commonweal* 99/8 (24 April 1992) 26.

¹² See Marxsen, *New Testament Foundations* 89.

¹³ Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 21. See John R. Donahue, S.J., "The Challenge of the Biblical Renewal to Moral Theology," in William J. O'Brien, *Riding Time like a River: The Catholic Moral Tradition since Vatican II* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1993) 59–80; Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

¹⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Origins* 23/29 (January 6, 1994) 524. "In its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, Vatican II bestowed the mantle of conciliar authority on the use of historical criticism, which had maintained a tenuous toehold in the church since the encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, in 1943" (Donahue, "Challenge of Biblical Renewal" 60–61).

deeds of Jesus, contextual criticism considers the text as it stands in relation to its environment. This approach leads to a more social model of hermeneutics which looks to the life of the apostolic communities as the locus of inspiration. Since the texts emerged from and were addressed to communities, they are best interpreted in a believing community rather than by an isolated scholar bracketing any faith convictions. As Christian communities today wrestle with the contemporary world, they should look to the precedents of biblical communities engaging their own context, namely, the world of politics, economics, etc., represented in the text.¹⁵ From this perspective, it becomes obvious that Jesus called for the transformation of many of the dominant institutions of his day.

At the same time, contextual criticism points out the strangeness of Jesus, which should prevent us from painting a Jesus in our own image.¹⁶ John S. Kloppenborg writes, "Much of the discussion of Jesus' ethics has gone on without any discussion of the cultural values represented in the key ethical vocabulary of Jesus." He cites three cultural aspects characteristic of ancient Palestinian society that are easily missed from our perspective: "first, the lack of an idea of 'religion' as a discrete and separate aspect of culture; second, honour and shame as 'pivotal' social values; and finally, the perception of limited good" [i.e. the perception that most goods exist in limited quantities so that one person's gain is another's loss].¹⁷

In the second place, the shift from objective fact to meaning requires that the commitments of the interpreter or interpreting community must be taken into account. While contextual criticism emphasizes social transformation, spirituality stresses the need for religious appropriation of the message of Jesus. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza charges that a strictly historical approach separates the meaning of the text from lived practice by concentrating on a literal reading that ignores the transformation of the readers which is necessary to engage the biblical text.¹⁸ Sandra Schneiders's hermeneutics begins from the conviction that Jews and Christians read the Bible not primarily for

¹⁵ Lisa Sowle Cahill reviews current literature on the subject in "The New Testament and Ethics: Communities of Social Change," *Interpretation* 44 (1990) 383–95. See also Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). A good example of contextual criticism is Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

¹⁶ See Bruce J. Malina, *Windows on the World of Jesus: Time Travel to Ancient Judea* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

¹⁷ John S. Kloppenborg, "Alms, Debt and Divorce: Jesus' Ethics in their Mediterranean Context," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 6 (1990) 184, 185. Treatments of moral sayings of Jesus that ignore the context of their formation now seem remarkably disembodied; see, e.g., Stephen Palmquist, "Four Perspectives on Moral Judgement: The Rational Principles of Jesus and Kant," *Heythrop Journal* 32 (1991) 216–32.

¹⁸ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Crisis of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception," *Interpretation* 44 (1990) 353–68.

information but for transformation. "Here the objective is to go beyond simply discovering what the text says to asking if what it says is true, and if so in what sense, and what the personal consequences for the reader and others might be."¹⁹ She locates this existential quest in spirituality rather than history. Liberation and feminist theologians appeal to Scripture in a pragmatic way as they search for "a useable history" to inform their struggles.²⁰

Biblical hermeneutics, therefore, requires a self-examination which may be quite challenging. It goes beyond acknowledging one's "social location" of class, race, gender, and educational status to considering the religious maturity of the interpreter. Walter Wink writes, "No scholar can construct a picture of Jesus beyond the level of spiritual awareness that she or he has attained."²¹ The immature self will fail to grasp what has not been experienced, and people at different levels of maturity will read the same NT saying or deed in different, even opposing, ways. "We cannot escape this limitation, because historical reconstruction proceeds by analogy from our experience."²² If accurate knowledge depends upon wisdom and religious maturity, the task of biblical interpretation becomes all the more demanding.

Subversive Sage or Eschatological Prophet?

There are two leading contenders today for the most adequate answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" One group states that he is the eschatological prophet who proclaimed and inaugurated God's definitive entry into history, the reign of God which meant the imminent end of the world order. The "eschata" or last things (death, judgment, resurrection, and eternal life) are vividly portrayed in apocalyptic rhetoric, which relishes the vindication of God's persecuted people in a fiery meltdown of the powers that be. A growing number of "new questers" reject that traditional view and claim instead that Jesus is the subversive sage whose shocking wisdom confronted the conventional ways of his culture and challenged his disciples to see the world in a new light. Although NT evidence can support either image,

¹⁹ Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) 14. See Schneiders on the limitation of historical criticism, "Living Word or Deadly Letter," *CTSA Proceedings* 47 (1992) 45–60, and Donald Senior, "Response to Sandra Schneiders," *ibid.* 61–68. Also John Navone, S.J., "Scripture for Christian Conversion," *New Blackfriars* 74 (1995) 21–33; Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B., "Catholic Moral Theology and Christian Spirituality," *New Theology Review* 7 (1994) 60–73.

²⁰ Usually but not always they honor William James's two criteria for pragmatic truth: the new insight must fit in with the settled body of truth and experience, and it must prove to have value for concrete life (*Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1978] 40–44).

²¹ Walter Wink, "Jesus and the Domination System" in Eugene H. Lovering, ed., *Society of Biblical Literature 1991 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 266.

²² *Ibid.* 267.

Christian morality will be differently shaped depending on whether Jesus is primarily sage or prophet. As Marcus J. Borg writes, "Images of Jesus give content to what loyalty to him means."²³

Subversive Sage?

Borg is the most accessible writer making the case for the image of Jesus as the subversive sage and the abandonment of an eschatological Jesus. He charges that the consensus which dominated Jesus scholarship for most of this century has had three deleterious effects: the historical Jesus became theologically irrelevant since not much could be known objectively about him; his message was understood in a highly individualized and internalized way because the temporal urgency of the kingdom was taken to be a mythical portrayal of the existential urgency of each moment's decisions; and the eschatological perspective led to an apolitical interpretation of his message and actions: "if the end of the world is near, do historical and political questions and institutions matter?"²⁴

A more adequate image of Jesus as teacher of subversive wisdom emerges when scholars discount the "end of the world" sayings of Jesus as post-Easter accretions and turn to his parables and aphorisms, wisdom forms that are "the earliest layer of the Jesus tradition."²⁵ They evoke a different form of moral response: "The appeal is not to the will—not 'Do this'—but rather, 'Consider seeing it this way.' As invitational forms of speech, the parables do not invoke external authority. . . . Rather, their authority rests in themselves—that is, in their ability to involve and affect the imagination."²⁶

The urgency of Jesus' message is sociopolitical rather than apocalyptic: the dominant arrangements stand under the crisis of God's present judgment, and the disciples are called to embody an alternative vision of human community and life in the Spirit. Jesus was executed because he exposed the religious establishment and its exclusionary practices based on purity, the domination of the patriarchal family, and social conventions based on exclusion and exploitation. "Kingdom of God" language is symbolic, "a way of speaking of the power of the Spirit and the new life which it created. . . . Entering the Kingdom is entering the life of the Spirit, being drawn into the 'way' which Jesus taught and was."²⁷ Living in the Spirit means breaking

²³ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) 200.

²⁴ Marcus J. Borg, "Jesus and Eschatology: A Reassessment," in Charlesworth and Weaver, Eds., *Images of Jesus Today* 42–67, at 45.

²⁵ Ibid. 48.

²⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994) 74.

²⁷ Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision* 198. Also see Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*

with the performance system of our world and living in an alternative community that practices the politics of compassion. Borg considers this noneschatological Jesus central to the work of Burton Mack (Jesus as Hellenistic Cynic sage),²⁸ Richard Horsley (as social revolutionary),²⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (as prophet of wisdom and founder of an egalitarian community),³⁰ and Crossan (as "magician"—charismatic healer—and proclaimer of a sapiential kingdom).

This consensus has not gone uncontested. James H. Charlesworth, a fellow new quester, fears that Borg has failed to situate Jesus in the cosmology and eschatology of his Jewish contemporaries. In addition, he finds that "Borg's Jesus seems so inoffensive and familiar," not the bearer of a message that would have gotten him crucified.³¹ Luke Timothy Johnson has a similar problem with Crossan's recent work: "Does not Crossan's picture of a peasant cynic preaching inclusiveness and equality fit perfectly with the individualized ethos of the late twentieth-century academic?"³² Arland J. Hultgren writes that an eschatological Jesus is an embarrassment for some today because he is too otherworldly. Nevertheless, "Jesus appears as a prophet in his speech about an impending judgment of the world—a theme that appears in all strands of the synoptic tradition. . . . In his words and deeds together Jesus acts as God's final envoy, messenger, or prophet who expects to be vindicated in events to come and in the final judgment of God."³³

The Jesus-as-sage approach is appealing in part because it is unencumbered by traditional doctrinal positions. The words of Jesus, however, may commend themselves on the basis of their intrinsic wisdom, but they are not exactly free-standing. Their authority for Christians derives in good measure not only from what was said but from who said them. The life and death of Jesus give a credibility to the parables which is missing, say, from the fables of Aesop. Even more, belief in the resurrection and Incarnation (factors almost never mentioned in

(Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity International, 1994) 88–90; also "A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus," *ibid.* 47–68.

²⁸ Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

²⁹ Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

³⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) esp. 72–159.

³¹ James H. Charlesworth, in *Images of Jesus Today* 21–23.

³² Johnson, "A Marginal Mediterranean Jewish Peasant" 26. Walter Wink believes that the projection of the reader's values onto the portrait of Jesus can reveal the reader's best aspirations, though it needs to be checked by attending to other perspectives ("Jesus and the Domination System" 286).

³³ Arland J. Hultgren, "Jesus of Nazareth: Prophet, Visionary, Sage, or What?" *Dialog* 33 (1994) 263–73, at 273; see also his *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

the portrait of Jesus as sage) gives a unique valence to his teachings. Oxford theologian Alister E. McGrath states, "Underlying the authority of Jesus is the Christian understanding of who he is. Christians regard Christ as authoritative because, in the end, they recognize him to be none other than God himself, coming among us as one of us."³⁴

Eschatological Prophet?

Does interpreting Jesus as the eschatological prophet vitiate the moral impact of his message today? This concern has been addressed in two ways. First, exegetically: What form did the proclamation of the reign of God take in Jesus' ministry? Second, constructively: Does a proper eschatology in fact add power and urgency to his moral message? On the first question, A. E. Harvey acknowledges that Jesus often taught in the style of a sage, but should not be classified primarily as a wisdom teacher because "many of the classic wisdom topics are absent from his teaching, particularly concern for balance and moderation which is typical of proverbial sayings."³⁵ Jesus announces a state of emergency which has already begun in his words and ministry. The transcendent and future character of God's reigning breaks into the present with great moral urgency. God's "kingship becomes an all-pervasive reality only when people freely acknowledge it and direct their lives towards the worship and service of their heavenly king."³⁶ The appropriate response is to act as if this reality were already present and relinquish the security of power, status, wealth, and violence. Even though the future is God's promise, its hastening depends "upon men and women allowing its values to influence their decisions, their attitudes and their relationships."³⁷

In an excellent study, Bruce Chilton and J. I. H. McDonald confirm the link between eschatology and ethics in the parables of Jesus, calling attention to "the development of ethical themes by means of eschatological motifs."³⁸ The persistent emphasis on the transcendent divine action that is breaking into history makes the ethical life a response. The future and present aspects of the kingdom must both be retained because the future of God already elicits a response from those living in the present. The eschatological action of God should not induce passivity in the hearers of the parables since they require "per-

³⁴ Alister E. McGrath, "In What Way Can Jesus Be a Moral Example for Christians?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991) 289–98, at 289.

³⁵ A. E. Harvey, *Strenuous Commands: The Ethic of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1990) 192, also 206.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 163.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 209.

³⁸ Bruce Chilton and J. I. H. McDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 118.

formance." From the prudent farmer to the enterprising merchant with the pearl, the parables convey the truth that "the Kingdom cannot be apprehended apart from action."³⁹

Richard J. Dillon also judges that Jesus' wisdom sayings have an irreducibly eschatological content. Exegeting the exhortation to consider the lilies of the field and birds of the air in order to dismiss anxiety (Matt 6:25–33; Luke 12:22–31), Dillon finds a "combination of sapiential insight and apocalyptic vision."⁴⁰ "Instead of 'wisdom,' however, as cultivated by an empirically observant sage, 'kingdom of God' is to be the object of a disciple's 'seeking.' The turn of phrase seems to be Jesus' own innovation, and it shows unmistakably his accommodation of wisdom language to an eschatological message."⁴¹ "Seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness" (Matt 6:33) sets the proper priority: first gift, then obligation. "It keeps the kingdom first as enabling source of right conduct."⁴² Although trusting the promise of God means relinquishing anxiety here and now, it does not encourage passivity. The future will come "with our responsible instrumentality but without our anxious management."⁴³

Recent constructive works give evidence that the eschatological tension inherent in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom is central to his moral message.⁴⁴ In Jon Sobrino's *Jesus the Liberator*, the motif of liberation links the three realities, Jesus, the reign of God, and the poor. The eschatological promise is God's gracious initiative in history, but it calls for Christians to respond as wholeheartedly as Jesus did.⁴⁵

Although the reign of God brings together transcendence and history, does it have any actual moral content? For this we must look at the gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus which flesh out the promise. "What happens is that the global (the Kingdom of God) is expressed in the everyday, the details of Jesus' life, but these in turn are the expression of the global vision, of the Kingdom of God."⁴⁶ The

³⁹ Ibid. 31. See the excellent popular presentation of James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus' Call to Discipleship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992).

⁴⁰ Richard J. Dillon, "Ravens, Lilies, and the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:25–33/Luke 12:22–31)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991) 605–27, at 607.

⁴¹ Ibid. 623.

⁴² Ibid. 625.

⁴³ Ibid. 622.

⁴⁴ See Dunn, *Jesus' Call to Discipleship*; Jurgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Daniel C. Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), which relies more on OT prophetic literature than on gospel accounts of Jesus; Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1989); James E. Will, *A Christology of Peace* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1989); Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), which shows how interpretations of the kingdom as present or future affect the application of Jesus' mandates concerning nonviolence.

⁴⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 51–58, 87–104.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 210.

healing miracles especially reveal that *mercy*, "the gripping of God's entrails at the sight of the suffering of the weak,"⁴⁷ is the primary and ultimate moral disposition of God's way of ruling. Compassion, the central moral demand of Christian discipleship, takes its cues from the needs of those who are suffering. In the same way, the reign of God becomes concrete by responding to those to whom it is proclaimed.⁴⁸

Sobrinho's sociopolitical reading of the life and death of Jesus reflects a growing consensus of theologians; so does his shift of emphasis from viewing Jesus' mission as primarily obedience to God to seeing it as primarily the compassionate response of the God of life to those who are threatened by death in all its forms. By contrast, the moral theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, which influences many conservative Catholic theologians, derives almost its whole portrait of Jesus from reflection on the life of the Trinity. The Second Person of the Trinity assumes humanity in obedience to the Father's will, thus setting the pattern for the predominant Christian moral virtue, obedience to divine authority, particularly as mediated by the hierarchical Church.⁴⁹ Liberal theologians tend toward the history of Jesus and the symbol of the kingdom but are wary of ontological or doctrinal suppositions; their traditionalist counterparts usually tend in the opposite direction. A more theologically based ethics is better able to consider NT material which lies beyond the domain or competence of historical method: namely, the resurrection, the sending of the Spirit, the gradual "conformation" of the individual and community into the *imago Christi*. These themes are central for Paul, John, Acts, and other writings beyond the Synoptic Gospels.⁵⁰

The Concrete Universal of Christian Moral Life

How is Jesus normative for Christian moral living? I want to propose that the entire story of Jesus is normative for Christian ethics as its concrete universal.⁵¹ The story is concrete because it has a particular shape in a definite time and place. It is universal because that shape

⁴⁷ Sobrinho, "Central Position of the Reign of God" 363.

⁴⁸ See *ibid.* 370.

⁴⁹ See the insightful study by Marc Ouellet, "The Foundations of Christian Ethics according to Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio* 17 (1990) 379–401, and the rather triumphalistic summary by John Seward, "The Christocentricity of Pope John Paul II," *Communio* 18 (1991) 332–55.

⁵⁰ E.g., see Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); and Timothy E. Sedgewick, *Sacramental Ethics: Pastoral Identity and the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

⁵¹ William Wimsatt describes "the concrete universal" as a work of art or literature which presents "an object which in a mysterious and special way is both highly general and highly particular" (*The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* [Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1954] 71). For a more extensive treatment of the issues discussed in this section, see William C. Spohn, "Jesus and Ethics," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 49 (1994) 40–57.

and the moral dispositions engendered by the story are morally relevant in every situation in the Christian's life. It is not the only norm, because human nature, practical effectiveness, accurate descriptions of data, and the accumulated wisdom of the tradition are also indispensable sources of moral reflection. Nevertheless, whatever actions and dispositions these other sources suggest at least must be compatible with the basic patterns inherent in the story of Jesus. In addition, Jesus as concrete universal may urge certain actions and dispositions, like forgiveness of enemies, which the other sources might not emphasize.

The greatest challenge to having Jesus function as a moral norm is epistemological. How can a particular life have universal significance? We tend to associate universality with abstract terms and general propositions. No abstract formula, however, can epitomize Jesus of Nazareth, because his meaning is inseparable from his story; it resides in the full range of encounters, personalities, and deeds which the Gospels relate.⁵² Abstraction, however, is not the only path to normative universality; imagination provides a parallel route and one more suited to religious truth. Religious symbols and stories contain patterns that can be extended to new material by analogical, imaginative reflection. The distinctive arrangement of elements in the religious original serves as paradigm, exemplar, prototype, and precedent to guide the actions and dispositions of Christians in new situations.

We extend a pattern by *analogy* since we move from the recognizable shape in the first instance to novel situations within certain limitations. Analogical imagination requires a creative transfer because, like Exodus and Exile, the gospel events and parables are *historical prototypes* rather than *mythical archetypes*, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has written.⁵³ The prototype is recognizable in the new dispositions and actions, but in order to be responsive to the actual needs of the day, they cannot copy the original as if it were a completely determined archetype.⁵⁴

The concrete universal of Jesus guides three phases of Christian moral experience: perception, motivation, and identity. This is so, because it indicates which particular features of our situation are reli-

⁵² On the universality of Christian ethics, see Norbert J. Rigali, "Christian Morality and Universal Morality: The One and the Many," *Louvain Studies* 19 (1994) 18-33; Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S., "Reconciliation as a Missionary Task," *Missiology* 20 (1992) 3-10; Jacques Dupuis, S.J., "La fede cristiana in Gesù Cristo in dialogo con le grandi religioni asiatiche," *Gregorianum* 75 (1994) 217-240.

⁵³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984) 14. The challenge to analogical thinking about Jesus is to preserve his strangeness while appreciating how he bears some similarities to our situation.

⁵⁴ A paradigm is "a normative exemplar of constitutive structure," but it always has an indeterminate, open-ended dimension" (Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* [San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1989] 67). See Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993) 78.

giously and morally significant; how we are to act, even when what we should do is unclear; and who we are to become as a people and as individuals.

Perception

First, consider how concrete universals guide us to perceive *which* features of experience are significant. Imaginative patterns guide our reading of the biblical text. Like other interpretive patterns, or *gestalts*, the image of Jesus selected by a theologian or biblical scholar organizes the data. Wink writes that the individual pieces affect the overall *gestalt*, "while the *gestalt* in turn exercises a powerful influence over the way we read the solitary pieces. The overall picture is far more stable, however, than the pieces. It performs the homeostatic function of providing coherence and consistency to the whole. It makes the pieces intelligible."⁵⁵ In addition, biblical paradigms can indicate what to notice in experience. What Garrett Green says about Scripture applies also to Jesus: "The Scriptures are not something we look *at* but rather look *through*, lenses that focus what we see into an intelligible pattern."⁵⁶ This religious process of recognition is a special case of perception in general. We only *perceive* what we *perceive as* something. Garret Green calls the little word "as" "the copula of the imagination" because it defines the selective and interpretive role of imagination. "We always see something by recognizing that it is *like* something else; that is, we always see according to some paradigm."⁵⁷ The paradigmatic imagination is precisely the ability to see one thing *as another*, to recognize the similarities between the world of biblical imagery and that of ordinary experience.

Religious experience is selective insofar as it relies on communal paradigms to notice which features are significant. These patterns, however, are paradigms, not icons. A paradigm is an image, a selective but partial aspect; it is not an exhaustive picture to be replicated. Perhaps this explains why the reign of God and the Spirit remain undefined in the Gospels: they are the dynamic, open dimensions of the action of God which shatter the established order. Nevertheless, they are defined by the Jesus of the Gospels: his life both announces and exemplifies the reign of God; the elusive Spirit instills in the disciples "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). Since Jesus participates in the reign of God and Spirit, we should be wary of making him an icon to be reproduced. To put it starkly, Christians are called to follow Jesus, not to imitate him. Following connotes a strangeness that cannot be domesticated. The danger of some "imitation of Christ" spiritualities is that they terminate in the person of Jesus, like worshipping an icon,

⁵⁵ Wink, "Jesus and the Domination System" 266.

⁵⁶ Green, *Imagining God* 107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 72.

whereas the Jesus of the Gospels was radically concerned about God and particularly attentive to the poor, the outcast, the sinner.

Motivation

Second, as the concrete universal, Jesus indicates *how* to act even when his story does not directly indicate *what* to do. Christians often dismiss Scripture as a moral resource because it does not address many of today's pressing problems. The lack of directly relevant prescriptive material is not such an obstacle, however, if Scripture is seen to have its main moral effect on the imagination and dispositions. A pattern of dispositions configured by the gospel portrait of Jesus guides moral discernment into action which is consonant with the experienced exemplar.⁵⁸ Paradigms become *scenarios for action* by evoking affective energies in distinctive ways. Paradigms become practical in two stages. First, they contain a discernible pattern which can be noticed elsewhere. Second, there are procedures for extending the paradigm to new situations. Analogical reflection extends biblical paradigms primarily through dispositions which are configured into a pattern by those original events. Exodus, for instance, shapes the thirst for justice; the cross and resurrection structure hope and love of neighbor.⁵⁹ Because the imagination is as susceptible to prejudice and sin as every other human faculty, other controls on analogical reflection are required, such as ordinary standards of morality, consequences, and community practice.

Harriet Crabtree has studied how biblically based images in popular religious literature shape the moral life. Writers use "the guiding images or ideas of servanthood, stewardship, fruitbearing, warfare, athletic contest, and pilgrimage, to convey their picture of the theological cosmos, to highlight the different moments of the Christian life, and to encourage certain dispositions and virtues."⁶⁰ The images do not directly dictate what to do, but they frame perception and encourage certain scenarios. "Religious metaphors are particularly powerful shapers because of their blend of cognitive, affective, and motivational elements."⁶¹ They always operate in combination with other pictorial elements and ideas. E.g., "discipleship" takes on different meanings

⁵⁸ Although I hold that Scripture does mandate certain practices for members of the community of faith which are not necessarily mandatory for all persons, Scripture exerts its normative function primarily by setting a pattern of dispositions rather than by directly dictating the content of action. See James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975) 82–116.

⁵⁹ Hans Hüber, "Kreuz und Auferstehung im Neuen Testament," *Theologische Rundschau* 57 (1992) 58–82; Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*.

⁶⁰ Harriett Crabtree, *The Christian Life: Traditional Metaphors and Contemporary Theologies*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 29 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) xxi.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 3. See J. David Pleins, *The Psalms: Songs of Tragedy, Hope, and Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

depending upon how Jesus is construed, and how the interaction of divine grace and human response is conceived.

William Werpehowski writes that adhering to the moral norm of *agapē* is not like obeying an abstract principle but "involves a disposition to view all of our fellow human beings" under certain biblical images which elicit corresponding dispositions.⁶² The neighbor (already a term shaped by the Good Samaritan parable and the love command) is further defined and appreciated by three images. He or she is a *creature of God*, which means someone who is a gift of God to be treated with "respectful reverence" and "a posture of 'attention' or loving clear-sightedness regarding the other in his or her call to us."⁶³ The neighbor is also a "*sister or brother for whom Christ died*," which means that we share a "solidarity in sin and solidarity in the promise of redemption." This calls for our encounters to be humble and governed by fidelity "which may call for mercy and long-suffering, but also for the willingness to criticize and correct hostility, injustice, and passivity."⁶⁴ Finally, the neighbor is a *possible companion in beatitude*, which should evoke "hopeful, persistent wonder and a noninstrumental persistence."⁶⁵

These virtues do not spring up in the character instantly. They become operative to the degree that the person grows in Christian holiness; they become internal principles by reflection, worship, articulation, and action. Dispositions shaped by biblical paradigms can tutor the imagination, enabling it to discern an appropriate response with ease and joy. When we know *how* to act, *what* to do may become clearer; minimally, we should be able to notice which dispositions and intentions clash with the Christian spirit.

Identity

Third, the story of Jesus is normative for *who* we are to become as Christians, individually and communally. Here too we employ a normative pattern by analogical reflection. Just as paradigms highlight certain features for moral recognition and scenarios establish a distinctive set of dispositions, so narrative forms the normative basis of personal identity. Contemporary cognitive psychology agrees with narrative theology that humans need a moving dramatic unity, a story with a beginning, middle, and end, to bring integrity into their personal histories. No other imaginative device can synthesize our diverse moments of experience into a coherent whole.⁶⁶ Culture and traditions

⁶² William Werpehowski, "Agape and Special Relations," in Edmund N. Santurri and William Werpehowski, eds., *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1992) 139.

⁶³ Ibid. 148.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 150.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 151.

⁶⁶ See Johnson, *Moral Imagination* 150–184; also Mark Johnson, *The Body in the*

supply us with a considerable range of models, metaphors, scenarios, and roles. They do not, however, hang together without narrative structures, which supply "the most comprehensive synthetic unity that we can achieve."⁶⁷ The self emerges through commitment and interpretation made possible by socially derived narratives, and in turn it lives out a unique version of those narratives.

Similarly, the various scenarios of the NT are held together by the overall story of Jesus. Stanley Hauerwas and other narrative theologians have been making this point for some time. Now, even Christian ethicists with a more philosophical bent are acknowledging the importance of biblical narrative for interpreting Christian love.⁶⁸ This development seems to respond to Hauerwas's charge that philosophically minded Christian ethicists have abandoned the distinctiveness of Christian ethics.⁶⁹

The prototypes of the biblical narrative are themselves open to revision, as Paul's ministry to the Gentiles proves. Subsequent application influences a prototype to bring out aspects latent in the original or even at variance with its presuppositions.⁷⁰ Radically new situations can lead to significant revision of biblical exemplars, including central Christian ones. Reading the biblical stories through distorted lenses highlights the wrong aspects of the pattern and invites deceptive constructions of what is going on in the present. Feminist and womanist theologians have eloquently shown how sexism, racism, and classism have used the story of Jesus in oppressive ways.

Ironically, both post-Christian feminists and Vatican declarations on the ordination of women fall into the same trap: they make a peripheral aspect of Jesus, his maleness, central to the paradigm. They accept an iconic Jesus rather than one who can be understood analogically. More mainstream Christian feminists argue that concentrating on the maleness of Jesus blinds one to his saving and liberating potential.⁷¹ Jesus Christ is the prototype of liberation not because he is

Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987) 170–72; Sidney Callahan, *In Good Conscience: Reason and Emotion in Moral Decision Making* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 206–08.

⁶⁷ Johnson, *Moral Imagination* 170.

⁶⁸ See Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). See the essays by Gene Outka, Edmund Santurri, and Timothy P. Jackson, in Santurri and Werpehowski, eds., *The Love Commandments*.

⁶⁹ See Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1992) 23–60.

⁷⁰ "Progressive clarifications of exceptions through history may allow rebuttal of the initial moral presumptions . . . [in addition there arises] the occasional situation in which the very factual underpinnings of the presuppositions are challenged by technical or social changes" (Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* [Berkeley: University of California, 1988] 318).

⁷¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether asks whether a male savior can help women (*To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* [New York: Crossroad, 1981] 45–56). See

male but despite it. Allowing the multiple images from the story of Jesus to be mutually corrective restores Jesus as a paradigmatic rather than an iconic norm.⁷²

Some theologians seem to suggest that contemporary Christians should shift from the concreteness of Jesus of Nazareth to more generic terms: the Christ, Spirit, Logos, or Sophia. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points to an original community of disciples as the prototype of Christian equality and liberation.⁷³ While these more generic terms can bring out dimensions obscured by traditional Christologies, they can be problematic. Substituting abstractions for Jesus can leave Christian moral reflection imaginatively impoverished and affectively confused. Wisdom is a quality, not a story that can shape an identity. Equality and inclusiveness are important values but they do not make disciples; they cannot convey the full range of affective guidance offered in the Gospels or connect one with the transforming grace of God. Jon Sobrino seems to have it right, when he states that "even after faith in Christ, the New Testament goes back to Jesus, and has to go back to Jesus, precisely to safeguard true faith in Christ."⁷⁴

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ETHICS AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Readers of this journal received their first look at liberation theology in 1970 when Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez published his "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," a ground-breaking essay that the editor called "theological dynamite."¹ Nearly two decades later in this same journal, Richard McCormick hailed this Latin American theology as one of the significant developments within moral theology over the past half century.² He identified three ways in which liberation theology has influenced moral theology. It first demolished the separatist mentality that dichotomizes reality into the profane and the sacred and replaced it with a perspective that sees Christ's action

Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," in Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper/Collins, 1993) 115–37. Martina Blasberg-Kuhnke, "Jesus as Women See Him," *Theology Digest* 39 (1992) 205–208.

⁷² Anne E. Carr speaks of "a pluralism of images of Christ that are mutually corrective when viewed in connection with women's experience" (*Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988] 168); see Elisabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 150–169.

⁷³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*; and her *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

⁷⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* 38–39.

¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," *TS* 31 (1970) 243–61; see Walter Burghardt's introductory remarks p. 241.

² Richard A. McCormick, "Moral Theology 1940–1989: An Overview," *TS* 50 (1989) 3–24.