



Following Paul: Some Notes on Ethics Then and Now

SALLY B. PURVIS

Atlanta, Georgia

SOMETIMES HE WAS GENTLE, “LIKE A NURSE TENDERLY CARING FOR HER children” (1 Thess 2:7). Sometimes he was shrill and harsh, as when he demanded that a person guilty of sexual misconduct be driven from the community (1 Cor 5:13). He used rational argument, stories, word pictures, communal memories, to call people to structure their lives together in faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Whatever his tone, whatever the issue he addressed or the way he addressed it, the Apostle Paul was passionate for God in Jesus Christ. That passion is in every page of his extant writings. That passion is the heart of the teachings of Paul, including what we call Paul’s ethics.

Many scholars have attempted to identify the ideational center of Paul’s ethics, and some if not all of their arguments have been illuminating. Here are two examples from this century: Albert Schweitzer corrected the tendency of the scholarship of his day to characterize Paul (and Jesus) as much like nineteenth-century Europeans by calling attention to the exotic strangeness of apocalyptic thought

SALLY B. PURVIS is an independent scholar and author of The Power of the Cross: Foundations for a Christian Feminist Ethic of Community (Abingdon, 1993) and The Stained Glass Ceiling: Churches and Their Women Pastors (Westminster John Knox, 1995).

How shall we structure our lives together so as to experience as fully as possible the presence of the risen Christ in our communities? This was the question that shaped Paul’s teleological and relational ethics, which can serve as a model and guide for contemporary Christian ethical thought.

and its importance in understanding Paul (and Jesus).¹ Later, Rudolf Bultmann's existentialist interpretations reminded those who would keep scripture at a distance that scriptural texts were written with a kind of urgency, and urgently demanded a response, and that those scriptural characteristics are independent of the vicissitudes of cultural transition.² Schweitzer and Bultmann both had an important corrective for other interpreters of Paul, and their influence, in turn, was diminished by insights of those that followed them.

The ongoing scholarly conversation is immensely helpful, and it shows no signs of ending in a definitive interpretation to which all, or almost all, could assent. The Pauline texts are too complex, and too old, to be amenable to resolution of the conflicts surrounding their meanings. Furthermore, I want to argue that with regard to Paul's ethical thought, there is no ideational center. No interpretive approach can yield a conclusive picture of Paul's ethical teaching, for then or for now, because Paul rarely developed the details of his moral pronouncements, and the ones that exist do not constitute a complete body of ethical thought. What we do have is evidence of Paul's activities and patterns of his thinking that offer insights into his ethical approach.

What Paul *did* was to found and help to develop communities dedicated to Jesus Christ. All of Paul's writings, including his ethical ones, were in service of that activity: the creation and ongoing support of communities of persons seeking to live according to their faith in Jesus Christ. As is widely noted, Paul's ethics are occasional, responsive to questions and situations that developed in those nascent communities. On the other hand, they are coherent responses, consistent with what we know of Paul's teaching and preaching about the risen Christ and what life lived in Christ's name could be. Here I will lay forth the outlines of Paul's ethical approach.³

I. PAUL'S ETHICS: FORMAL, SUBSTANTIVE, CONTEXTUAL, AND SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Formally, Paul's ethics is almost entirely teleological.⁴ Teleological ethical thought is goal oriented, directed to some good, or goods, that impart positive or negative ethical value to human attitudes and behaviors. Put more simply, we value or judge the ethical merits (or demerits) of an attitude or action based upon whether, and the degree to which, it attains or leads to the goal. Conflicts in teleological ethics arise either with regard to what constitutes a good, or with regard to the measure to which an action or attitude does or does not tend toward

¹Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

²His commentary on John is an especially vivid example. See Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971). See also his *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951).

³Constraints on the length of this essay preclude my arguing in detail each point that I will make. This will be more a sketch than a portrait of Paul's ethical thought.

⁴For an extensive and technical description of the various modes of ethical thought, see Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University, 1983), chapter 2.

that good, or both. These two areas can contain enormously complex questions. On the other hand, the teleological questions are relatively straightforward: Does this attitude and/or action bring me/us closer to our good or goal? If so, to what degree? For example, if the goal of human life is said to be power as control (a value seldom claimed but often displayed), then our ethical evaluations will be based upon the degree to which a life, or lives, or community increases power.⁵ If we object to the claim that power as control is the goal of human life, we have to do so on non-teleological grounds. Teleology does not establish the good, it simply measures the degree to which it is achieved and judges actions and attitudes accordingly.

Formally, then, Paul's ethics is teleological. Substantively, it is communal and relational. The goal toward which all human inclinations and behaviors are to tend is human community structured so as to provide as large and as clear a space as possible for the presence of the risen Christ. Paul considered this the good of human life for persons of all ethnic backgrounds, genders, and social locations. There is virtually no argument in Paul's ethics about the nature of the good or the goal of human life. He operates with the assumption, apparently shared by his readers, that the greatest human good is union with God in Jesus Christ, or, stated slightly differently, the ultimate good of humanity is as close a relationship to the risen Christ as this life can afford. There are disputes about the contours of that relationship, and there are heated polemics on Paul's side, at least, about what constitutes behaviors that achieve that goal, but the goal is not in question. At the heart of Paul's ethics is the value of a relationship with the risen Christ, and life led in a community of persons structured so as to enhance that relationship. Paul's ethical thought is in service of forming and maintaining Christ-shaped community.

Paul was not unconcerned with the behavior and well-being of individuals. For example, he commended various persons for their work on behalf of the community, as at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, or recommended expulsion of an individual from the community as noted at the beginning of this discussion. Even these references to individual behaviors, however, and those elsewhere in the correspondence, are offered in the context of and on behalf of the well-being of the community. The correspondence itself is to the communities; Christ-shaped community is the context in which Paul envisioned and tried to mold persons' lives.

As contemporary Pauline scholarship has investigated and identified parallels between Paul's thought – theological, ethical, philosophical – and that of other first-century Jewish and Hellenistic thinkers, one of the things we have learned is how complex and multivocal was that cultural entity known as Hellenistic Judaism.⁶ The culture in which Paul lived and wrote was no more homogeneous than

⁵Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross: Foundations for a Christian Feminist Ethic of Community* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

⁶See, e.g., Robert T. Fortna and Beverly Gaventa, eds., *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John – in Honor of Louis Martyn* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). See also, Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983).

our own, and attempts to isolate Paul in one ethnic niche or another are doomed to failure. The cultural menus from which he could select concepts, principles, and insights were many and varied, and he was apparently familiar with an array of them. He himself documented the eclectic nature of the resources he had at hand when he said that "I have become all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22b) in the course of his explanation for his failure to exercise his financial prerogatives as an apostle. His work, and his writings, cannot be identified without remainder with any cultural pattern that existed in his day, yet they can be compared to many. Yet Paul's writings are not incoherent, not without a center. The principle of selection that he employed with regard to the cultural standards and practices of his time was that of the communal goal of a living relationship with the risen Christ. The palpable, powerful presence of God in the communities founded on the gospel of Jesus Christ provided the goal and the measure of human choices.

Using language from contemporary sociology, we can characterize Paul's work and thought as an attempt to resocialize persons in accordance with structures and norms and values centered on the cross of Jesus Christ. In the normal course of growing up, persons are socialized into ways of being in the world that are considered acceptable and "normal." Those patterns of perceiving and behaving will vary from culture to culture, of course, and they are largely invisible to those who live them out unless they are highlighted in some fashion by contact with another culture or by internal challenges to cultural practices and norms that usually "go without saying."

Sometimes, however, persons move from one culture to another, one set of social and communal norms to another, and when that happens, they undergo a process of resocialization that usually includes not only learning new behaviors but also new ways of seeing and feeling and being in the world — what sociologists of religion call "symbolic worlds."⁷ The creation of a new symbolic world centered on the cross of Jesus Christ and the foundation of new communities to live out that world is at the heart of Paul's life and thought.⁸ "Building up" such communities is Paul's own summary of the ethical engine that drives his ethical decision-making process.

II. PAUL'S ETHICS AT WORK

For example, let us examine Paul's familiar advice in Corinthians 8-10 regarding dietary restrictions and Christian freedom.⁹ The Corinthian community was made up of people from different ethnic backgrounds. At least some of the Jews among them had identified with and participated in a cult that defined itself in part with dietary laws of varying degrees of strictness. At least some of the Gentiles among them had participated in pagan cults in which meat was sacrificed

⁷I developed the point much more fully in my dissertation, *Problems and Possibilities in Paul's Ethics of Community*, Yale University, 1987.

⁸I am aware of how dense those claims are and how little supported by this discussion. For supporting arguments, please see my longer writings cited above.

⁹Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 79-80.

to idols and then eaten as participation in the reality of that god or goddess. For at least some Jews and at least some Gentiles, then, in the new Corinthian Christian community, the issue of eating meat that was sold in the local marketplace, which would very likely have been part of a pagan ritual sacrifice, was problematic. However, the gospel of Jesus Christ promised freedom from the old norms and restrictions. And Paul certainly preached a gospel of freedom. To return to language used above, persons entering Christian community were radically resocialized to a new “reality” with the cross in the center. Whatever values and practices they had embodied in their lives would be subject to the new symbol system, the new perspective on life that the gospel offered. Thus theoretically, at least, those in the Corinthian community who insisted that it did not matter what they ate were taking the theologically correct stance. Dietary laws were apparently not part of the Christian cult. The reality and power of the idols were denied and replaced by the power of the cross.

Paul did not, however, respond to the issue of whether or not to eat meat offered to idols based upon the criterion of theological correctness. At the end of his long discussion Paul says, “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage but that of the other” (1 Cor 10:23-24). In this famous “Yes, but...” response to the Corinthians’ claim to be free from the pernicious influence of idols, Paul gives content to this norm of mutual service, or building up. Seeking the good of the other is the measure of the “lawfulness” of actions within the Christian community. If the action of eating meat at a communal meal will harm no one, then it is “legal.” If, on the other hand, another community member is present at the meal, someone for whom the reality of idols has not yet been expunged from consciousness, then that same action becomes “illegal.”¹⁰

Within the belief structure of the Christian community, the person who denies the reality of idols is correct and the person who retains at least a residual belief in their reality is incorrect; Paul affirms the “theological” position of the former. As he says, “we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’” (1 Cor 8:4). However, the ethical priority is clear: acting on correct belief at the expense of another person is wrong.

This is just one example out of many possible examples in which Paul recommends courses of behavior based upon the concrete needs of others in the community and the concrete needs of the community at large. One could agree, then, with Paul’s general ethical approach as teleological, relational, and communal, and one could accept Paul’s understanding of the ultimate human good as the ongoing presence of the living God, and still disagree with him about a specific ethical rule that he formulated. In other words, if behaviors that Paul recommended to his communities in their time and place would in another time and place cause harm to persons and to the community as a whole, then Paul’s ethical

¹⁰As this passage makes clear, the well-being of the neighbor, or doing the deeds of love, is at the heart of what Paul ironically calls “the law of Christ.”

approach would require a different behavior. Within Paul's own ethical thought pattern, the specific norms that he derived were never meant to be timeless behavioral rules but were always to be evaluated, and reevaluated, based upon the degree to which they construct and maintain Christ-shaped community.

For Paul, then, and for us to the degree to which we follow Paul, ethical thinking is a process of discerning what God would have us to be and do in every concrete situation, taking as our guide the goal of structuring our lives together so as to live as fully as possible in the presence of God. It is in that context that we must examine the specific norms presented in the Pauline epistles. Using Paul's own principle of selection in our eclectic, heterogeneous culture, our task of ethical discernment is no more straightforward than Paul's, and just as fallible. Nonetheless, that discernment is our duty and our privilege.

For most people in our contemporary North American culture, the issue of the enslavement of one group of people by another has largely been condemned and set aside. We have a very long way to go before we identify and renounce the oppression of some groups by others, or before we have come to terms with the legacy of enslavement that remains a raw sore on the surface of our communal life and a cancer within. We have, however, largely come to terms with the evil inherent in identifying some persons as not persons or as partial persons, giving them the status of things and allowing other persons ownership of them. Even that obvious step was very hard for us to take as a society, but we have taken it. We do not, then, read Paul's statements regarding the proper servitude of slaves to their masters to be normative for us. We have a number of options as to how to deal with them—for example, to dismiss them as culturally conditioned, to relativize them by means of apocalyptic categories, to ignore them—but we cannot treat them as normative based upon what we know about God's will that all persons be treated as persons and therefore not be owned by other persons.

I want to suggest that we take a similar approach to Paul's remarks about the subservient role of women in the communities. Using Paul's own criteria of communal well-being in accordance with the best Christian insights regarding making space for the presence of God among us, we must reject as normatively binding the passages in the Pauline corpus, for example those in 1 Cor 11:2-16 and 14:33b-36, regarding the status and behavior of women in Christian communities.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work has highlighted for us the extensive and powerful roles women had in the communities with which Paul worked.¹¹ Thus we have some historical reasons for questioning the appropriateness of Paul's remarks regarding women in 1 Corinthians even in the context of his own time. Specifically, 1 Cor 11:2-16 is generally accepted as part of Paul's attempt to bring order into the apparently chaotic meetings of the community in Corinth, and in this passage he invokes, rather inappropriately given his theology, a rigid patriarchal hierarchy of creation in support of his plea for order. His appeal to "what nature teaches" in 11:14 is odd at best in light of his own statements elsewhere

¹¹See, e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), esp. Part II, chapters 5 and 6.

regarding the “new creation” in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, as is widely noted in the commentaries,¹² there are good reasons for questioning the authenticity of 1 Cor 14:33b-36.

Nonetheless, we do not have to invoke these considerations to question the normative value and status of Paul’s words regarding the proper roles and conduct of women in the Corinthian community for our communities. Based upon our developing wisdom with regard to the full humanity of women and using the best tools of social analysis that our culture can provide, we are coming to know that subordination of any group by any other group is oppressive and destructive, of individuals and of community. Using our best insights from Christian theology, we know that oppression of one group by another is in stark contradiction to God’s equal regard for all persons. Specifically with regard to the passages regarding women in 1 Corinthians: as we come to identify and to analyze the pernicious impact of patriarchy in all its forms, both overt and subtle, and its corrosive effect on human community in general and Christian community in particular, we can read these passages with the same eyes that we read the passages about slavery. They have no normative power for us based upon the teleological, relational, communal ethical discernment process that guided Paul’s own thought. Acceptance of his values and his ethical thought patterns requires rejection of some of his specific norms.

III. FOLLOWING PAUL

What are the concrete needs of our neighbors in the concrete situations of their lives? What is required of our communities in order to experience as fully as possible the presence of the risen Christ? How shall we structure our lives together according to the cross of Jesus Christ? What does a value system look like that takes that cross as central? How do we ask those questions faithfully and in such a way that they continue to arise to keep the discernment process alive in us?

As with all persons who are passionate for God, Paul’s questions are a great deal more valuable for us than his answers. If there is a timeless truth to be found in his letters, specific and occasional as they were, the truth is in the passion itself and the considerations about human community that it generated. It was not a principle but a person that guided Paul’s thought. He was interested only in seeing that person, the risen Christ, instantiated and embodied as fully as possible in the world, through communities of persons who had heard the gospel and shared Paul’s longing for the goal. If and when we move beyond that person to principles and rules that we honor above all and refuse to review and revise, we leave Paul behind. Following Paul, at least ethically, means letting the questions lead us, as they led Paul, and working to structure our lives together in service of loving relationships with one another and centered on a faithful relationship with the risen Christ, whatever that requires. ⊕

¹²For example, Hans Conzelmann, *I Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).