Pauline Ethics

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Writing of the aim of the Epistle to the Galatians, James Denney¹ says that Paul's purpose is to show that, "The cross is the generative principle of everything Christian in the life of man." This view of the cross is relevant to a study of Pauline ethics or indeed of New Testament ethics as a whole. For the New Testament does not teach a system of ethics independent of religion,² nor does it recognize as adequate any form of religion in which the cross of Christ is not central. In common with the ethics of the rest of the New Testament, the ethics of Paul's epistles are essentially ethics of grace and are influenced by their eschatological setting. They derive their distinctive character from an "eschaton" past, and an eschatology now more fully realized than when Jesus taught in Palestine, but they also have reference to an "eschaton" in the future. And the working out of their principles
in daily life depends on the present activity of the Holy Spirit who contributes immediate benefit to the individual believer and the Christian community but at the same time works with a view to the future kingdom.

Like his theology Paul's ethical teaching was strongly influenced by his personal experience of salvation.

For him as a devout Jew, morality had its foundation in the character of God, whose people are called to be holy as he is holy; and the guide to holiness was especially the law crystallized in the Ten Commandments, each of which was acknowledged as holy, just and good. The Scriptures of the Old Testament appeal to the goodness of God in the past, his promises for the future and the serious consequences of sin as motives for obedience. But, because of the power of personal sin, the Law, which required perfect obedience as a condition of life, led to despair. Only when the meaning of the death of Christ became clear to him did the zealous Pharisee come to see that the standard of the divine requirement, though exacting, is not unattainable. But the way in which the ideal of holiness might ultimately be realized was entirely new to him. The love of God in Christ had provided a basis of justification and reconciliation and made available the dynamic of the enlightening and sanctifying Spirit on condition of faith in Christ. Consequently, accepting forgiveness and new life through Christ, he became obliged to lead a life of obedience, no longer in his own strength, but by the grace of God communicated by the Holy Spirit. So he regarded the law in a new light. It was no longer a case of do this and live but as the writer of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* states it, "Live and do this!"

As time went on St. Paul was led to recognize three primary gifts of the Spirit behind the character and form of the new life of obedience and service. These he frequently mentions in his epistles, for instance, in I Thessalonians where he writes of the church's "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ," for which he gave thanks to God. Faith is a response to the revelation of the love and mercy of God in Christ, involving mind, heart and will. One aspect of it is, of course, receiving from God, but another is acting obediently in dependence upon God. Paul implies that the Galatians received the Holy Spirit by the hearing of faith, but he also writes to them that faith works by love, and love fulfills the law. It is clear, however, that he regards love as the principal gift of the Spirit. The word *agape* denotes something very different from the notion of love in secular Greek literature or in modern thought. Dodd describes it as an active determination of the will and offers a provisional definition of it as an energetic and beneficient goodwill, stopping at nothing to secure the good of its objects. This love actuated the earthly life of Jesus, who might well have sat for the portrait in the celebrated hymn of I Corinthians 13, where Paul describes the considerateness, courtesy, modesty, unselfishness and generosity in which love finds expression. Elsewhere he says that love builds up and again, in a context where he points out how racial, religious and social barriers are removed in Christ, and commends virtues that make for unity, he compares love to a girdle binding all these virtues together in perfect harmony.

Closely associated with love is hope. It is promoted by the power of the Spirit. It leads to brave endurance because it looks beyond trial and conflict to deliverance and victory. It focuses attention on the righteousness of perfect character and the salvation of the whole person at the coming of Christ.
Further it embraces the prospect of a renewed creation and a purified community. Thus, along with love, it stimulates persevering endeavor for the ultimate salvation of the unresponsive and disappointing. Newton Flew says that when God is left out of the reckoning, hope has nothing left to it but what is represented in Watts well-known picture. There it is seen as a beautiful, blinded figure, holding a shattered lyre, listening for the music of the one, solitary, remaining string. But in a footnote, he mentions by way of contrast, the remark of D.S. Cairns, “The Winged Victory of Samothrace is to my mind a splendid symbol of Christian hope as she stands there on the prow of the rushing galley.”

MOTIVES:

But Paul did not rest satisfied with the knowledge that this triad of graces had been imparted and was being maintained in the experience of his Christian readers. Nor did he think it sufficient to describe in a general way how faith, love and hope should act. He knew that the Spirit uses the light of God’s Word to guide conduct and the revelation of God’s will to mould character, and he believed that such guidance was needed in order that faith, love and hope might find fitting expression in the varied relationships and circumstances of daily life in an environment that was unfavorable to their development. Accordingly he mentions certain motives for adopting a nobler way of life and points to different standards by which to assess attitudes and actions. It is in these motives and standards rather than in detailed rules for conduct that the vital difference appears between Paul’s ethics and the ethics of pagan and Jewish writers.

1. One of the motives he indicates is that of pleasing God. This was the aim which he set before himself in preaching the Gospel and it was the continual purpose of his life. It was the objective which he placed before the minds of his Thessalonian converts and he exhorted the Ephesians “To try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.” It is an aim that can only be realized by grace, “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” No doubt the thought of indebtedness to God in Christ was associated with Paul’s desire that he and his fellow-believers should please God. But it is usually in connection with the idea of accountability to God that he speaks of this motive. After referring to his personal purpose in this regard in II Corinthians, he immediately adds, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” In I Thessalonians he introduces it, following on a prayer that his readers may be unblameable in holiness before God at the coming of Christ, while in Ephesians it occurs after a warning has been given respecting persons who will be excluded from the kingdom of God.

2. This leads to a second Pauline motive, the approach of the end. In the Thessalonian Epistles which are concerned chiefly with the Second Advent, mention of the uncertain time of this event is made to support an exhortation to sober, orderly living and prayerfulness. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul commends detachment from worldly concerns and relationships because of the shortness of the time. Anderson Scott remarks, “It is curious... that there is so little trace of this motive as affecting the specific ethical teaching of St. Paul. It appears indeed only in connection with his teaching about marriage. And even there we find no suggestion that marriage is anything unbecoming in those who anticipate the early return of
the Lord." To this question of Paul's treatment of marriage we shall return presently.

3. Meanwhile we notice that a third motive is connected with the apostle's use of the figure of the body of Christ. The general idea of a community as an organism in which members are limbs and organs did not originate with Paul. It appears in the story told by Livy of the method by which Menenius Agrippa handled the strike at Rome, and it was commonly employed by the Stoics. The great difference in Paul's conception of the idea is that he speaks of the body of Christ, a body incomplete apart from the exalted Lord and existing to serve his ends. The figure is worked out in detail in I Corinthians 12:12-27, but the thought of service owed to one another on the part of those brought into union through Christ by the Spirit underlies a number of other passages. The Ephesians are reminded that they are obliged to speak the truth to their neighbor, because they "are members one of another." The phrase "in Christ" certainly implies more than membership of the believing community, but the idea of membership of the community is probably present in the use of the phrase "in the Lord" where Paul employs it in connection with the duty of wives to husbands, children to parents and Philemon to his converted slave.

4. Occasionally another motive is urged. Appeal is made to the reasonableness of maintaining a higher level of conduct in the light of the profession of faith that Christians have made. If they have been raised with Christ they should desire the type of life that is characteristic of heaven. If they live in the Spirit their present conduct ought to reveal it. They are now light in the Lord and no longer darkness therefore let them follow "what is good and right and true." 

STANDARDS:

1. The standards of Christian behavior which are found in the Epistles include the moral law and sometimes the words of Jesus. A second type of standard is example.

2. More than once it is to his own exemplification of the Christian life that Paul calls attention. Twice he invites to general imitation, qualifying his words in one of these instances by a reference to his imitation of Christ. At another time it is especially in respect of his industry that he appeals to the indolent in Thessalonica to follow him. The Ephesians are exhorted to follow God by exercising a merciful and forgiving spirit, but most frequently the example mentioned is that of Christ. In some cases Christians are asked to reflect their own experience of Christ's love and kindness in their dealings with their fellows. At other times the apostle's counsel is to adopt, as the situation requires, in their relations to others, the attitude of the pre-incarnate and incarnate Christ in choosing deep poverty for the enrichment of men and in submitting to incalculable humiliation for their salvation.

3. A third standard is the conception of what is worthy or fitting. This may perhaps be regarded as an appeal to the educated conscience rather than to reason. The saints should behave in a way worthy of God who has called them to his kingdom and glory, worthy of their calling, worthy of their Lord, worthy of the Gospel. In one passage the Roman Christian are asked to welcome Phoebe in the Lord as befits saints. Along with these allusions may be noted Paul's description of certain things in speech as unfitting for Christians, and of a type of action he desired Philemon to adopt as
what is fitting" to anekon (v. 8). In each case the appeal is to an enlightened conscience.

VICES:

Over and above supplying motives and standards Paul gives detailed instruction of both a negative and positive kind. He provided lists of vices to be avoided and rules of conduct to be followed. Of the former there are seven catalogues, one containing twenty-one forms of vice. A comparison of the lists reveals that the sins he names may be grouped mainly as sins of disposition, impurity, infidelity, speech, acquisitiveness, anger and idolatry. Three vices appear in five of these lists, namely fornication, covetousness and idolatry whereas anger appears in four lists. It is reasonable to infer that these were the most common sins in the localities to which Paul's letters were directed. Idolatry in its more obvious forms was to be expected in heathen communities and to remain involved in it in some way, or to relapse into it, would be a considerable temptation for some of the early converts. But Paul recognized a more subtle form of idolatry when he equated covetousness, or acquisitiveness with it. All four sins are specially destructive of religious life and injurious to human personality. Lindsay Dewar points out that allowing for one other sin being mentioned elsewhere in Paul's writings, and the possibility of another being included by him under a different name, every vice mentioned by Jesus as defiling man, excepting false witness, occurs in the Pauline Epistles. Both Paul and Jesus give prominence to the sin of fornication. Paul's strong attack upon this form of sin as distinct from adultery was something new in the heathen world and he would evidently have no sympathy with the present-day tendency to condone it.

He shows in Romans that the vices condemned resulted from refusal to acknowledge and worship God, or in other words from abandoning true religion. He describes them in Galatians as the works of the flesh, that is, of sinful human nature not controlled and transformed by grace. He points out in the Corinthian letters that they debar from the kingdom of God if not repented of. They grieve the Holy Spirit, and professing Christians indulging in them bring disgrace on the Christian community as well as involving themselves in shame and peril.

VIRTUES:

Among the virtues found in the hortatory sections of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and I Thessalonians, along with love, kindness, meekness and long-suffering occur more than once. Closely allied to meekness is another virtue commended, namely, humility. These latter two receive a new emphasis in the New Testament which goes back to the teaching and example of Jesus. In the first-century heathen world they tended to be despised rather than admired. It is plain that Paul's positive teaching on virtue owes much to the teaching of Jesus, but Hunter, Carrington and Selwyn have shown that it may also owe much to a body of catechetical teaching, commonly given to candidates for baptism, which was familiar to other New Testament writers. This appears, for example, in the subordination codes calling for subjection of wives to husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters and citizens to rulers. These scholars think that these and other codes may have derived material from Jewish and Hellenistic
sources. It had probably not acquired a fixed form when the New Testament writers drew upon it. It is significant that in Philippians 4:9 Paul commends a number of virtues that are not distinctively Christian, so acknowledging what was good in the thought of the Hellenistic environment in which his readers found themselves. But whatever sources Paul drew upon, the setting which he gave his material made it different in respect of the fact that it was related to the enabling of the indwelling Spirit and the glory of the exalted Christ.

STOICISM:

The debt of Paul to Stoicism is now recognized to be considerably less than was thought by scholars like Bultmann and Norden. It is obvious that there is a vast difference between Paul's teaching as a whole and Stoicism in general. The former is monotheistic and Christ-centered whereas the latter is pantheistic and man-centered. But it is not improbable that the apostle may have been indebted directly or indirectly to the Stoics for some terms which he uses, in addition to the idea of illustrating the interdependence of the members of a community by the relation of the limbs and organs of the human body. But he gave new value to what he may have taken over by linking it to a fresh system of thought and passing it through the alembic of his own mind. It is possible that in his references to the wise man and the wisdom of this world in I Corinthians, he is attacking the form of Stoicism that was familiar to his readers. In that case, so far from commending the Stoic ideal, he exposes the failure of human wisdom to recognize and worship the true God.

One term, indeed, which was thought to have been given an established place in philosophy for the first time by the Stoics is very frequently used by Paul. The word *suneidesis* occurs twenty-two times in his letters including six occurrences in the Pastoral Epistles. This is more than double the number of times it is found elsewhere in the New Testament. However, C.A. Pierce shows that the evidence for a Stoic origin is insufficient and holds that in common with other New Testament writers Paul has here adopted a current Hellenistic usage.

I CORINTHIANS:

The first Epistle to the Corinthians affords a good example of the application of Pauline ethical principles to social problems in the everyday life of a primitive Christian community. Although the specific form of some of these problems belongs largely to the place and time, Paul deals with them by laying down broad principles which are capable of wider application. The Corinthian Christians lived in an environment of traditional factiousness, frequent litigation, lax morality, slave service, pagan worship and developing syncretism. It was from this background that there emerged most of the questions discussed in this letter. It must not be forgotten that here as elsewhere Paul's treatment of ethical questions is related to the requirements of a particular situation and he never attempts to deal systematically or exhaustively with every aspect of a subject.

Thus when he forbids Christians to sue one another in the public courts he is not encouraging them to ignore or disregard the authority and proper jurisdiction of the state. This is clear from what he writes in Romans 13 and from the fact that when he himself was on trial he availed himself of the benefits
provided by the state legal system. In I Corinthians 6 he condemns the wrongdoing that gave occasion to legal action and the readiness to take this form of action. He points out that the spirit revealed in such conduct is alien to the idea of Christian brotherhood. Like Christ, he recognizes the function of the church in handling disputes between its own members, but in doing so, he says nothing to undermine the lawful administration of justice by the state.

Paul's teaching on marriage in this letter must be taken in conjunction with what he says in Ephesians and other letters on the relations of husband and wife. The special difficulties confronting the Corinthians determined the content of the reply he made to their questions. He insists that the marriage bond must be honored. Sexual union outside it is forbidden. Weighty arguments are adduced by the apostle in support of this prohibition. Christ has redeemed the believer soul and body, the Holy Spirit indwells him, and at the resurrection he will be raised in glory. Therefore to degrade his person by illicit sexual union is to dishonor God and do grave injury to himself. The Christian is free to marry or not marry. But his primary question in deciding upon his course of action should be in which state he will be better able to discharge his duty to Christ.

Where scruples about attending meals in the precincts of pagan temples or about eating food suspected of association with idolatry, were encountered, it was wrong to act in a way that might lead a person whom Christ redeemed to dethrone conscience. The Apostle shows in chapter nine how often he surrendered rights he might have exercised and how he subjected himself to stern discipline in order to serve Christ and others better. So he counsels his readers to consider the glory of God in all they do and to avoid giving offence.

The position of the Christian slave was another problem. If it was true that Christ set such high value on him as to redeem him from sin by his death, was he obliged to continue in a servile position where his lot was perhaps physically oppressive and religiously difficult? Paul's guidance is that so long as an opportunity of obtaining freedom in the recognized way does not present itself, it is the slave's duty to Christ to serve him in the station where he finds himself. But it is right that he should avail himself of the greater privilege and opportunity of service for Christ that freedom duly granted would bring him. In several other letters Paul gives counsel to Christian slaves as to how they should serve Christ in serving their masters faithfully but in Philemon he describes the relations of Christian master and slave in a way that was ultimately to lead to the abolition of slavery when the leaven of Christian teaching had sufficiently permeated society.

PRAYER:

Newton Flew draws attention to the fact that prayer is an essential part of Christian ethics. Without it ethics that are distinctively Christian cannot be translated into conduct. It is evident from the place that Paul gave to prayer in personal practice and from the counsel regarding it that he was in the habit of giving in his letters that he fully recognized its importance in this as in other connections.

FOOTNOTES:

2 Although as will be seen Paul commends what is good in pagan ethics.
3 I Thess. 1:3.
4 Gal. 3:2.
5 Gal. 5:6, 14.
6 I Cor 12:31.
8 I Cor. 8:2.
9 Col. 3:14.

10 Rom. 15:13.
11 Gal. 5:5.
12 Rom. 8:23.
13 Rom. 8:18, 22.
14 I Cor. 13:7.
16 I Thess. 2:4.
17 II Cor. 5:9.
18 I Thess. 4:1.
19 Eph. 5:10.

20 Rom. 8:8.
21 II Cor. 5:10.
22 I Thess. 3:13.
23 Eph. 5:5-6.
24 Cf. I Thess. 5:1ff.
25 I Cor. 7:29.

27 Eph. 4:25.
28 Col. 3:18.
29 Eph. 6:1.

30 Phil. 16.
31 Col. 3:1.
32 Gal. 5:21.
33 Eph. 5:9-10.
34 Rom. 13:8; Col. 3:20; Eph. 6:1-3.
35 I Cor. 7:10.
36 I Cor. 11:1.
37 I Thess. 3:7-9.
38 Eph. 4:31-5:1.
39 Rom. 15:7; Eph. 5:2, 25, 29.

40 II Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5ff.
41 I Thess. 2:13.
42 Eph. 4:1.
43 Col. 1:10.
44 Phil. 1:27.
45 Rom. 16:2.
46 Cf. Prayer for abundant love, Phil. 1:9.

47 Rom. 1:29-31; I Cor. 5:11; I Cor. 6:9; II Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:19-20; Eph. 4:31; 5:3; Col. 3:5-8.
49 Col. 3:5.

51 Rom. 1:21, 28.
52 Gal. 5:19.
53 I Cor. 6:9.
54 Eph. 4:30.
58 See p. 00.
59 I Cor. 1: 20-21.

60 C. A. Pierce, Conscience in the New Testament (London, 1955), p. 15. He also says, “Even had the Greek stoics made frequent use of it, it would have been of no importance, for the man-in-the-street used it far more frequently,” op. cit., p. 61.
61 I Cor. 6:1.
63 Matt. 18:15ff.
64 Eph. 5:22ff; Col. 3:18f.
65
66 I Cor. 8:9ff.
67 I Cor. 7:21ff.
68
69 Eph. 6:5ff.