

μη ὄν ἄνομος θεοῦ ἀλλ'...

ἐννομος Χριστοῦ

'Lawful to Christ'

Paul's Ethical Instruction in 1 Corinthians

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Pauline Letters: 1 Corinthians

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Introduction

The First Epistle to the Corinthians uniquely provides ample opportunity to observe Paul's ethical instruction and to consider key questions of method, such as: 'How does Paul understand 'ethics'? 'Why is it that Paul makes various ethical statements in the way that he does?' 'Is there a unifying principle, conviction or understanding that holds it all together?'

By observing Paul's treatment of key themes from 1 Corinthians, this analysis will first describe and outline the reshaped worldview from which Paul gives his ethical instruction, then propose some modern praxiological implications and applications of this.

Particular Community – Particular Letter

Though Pauline ethical instruction in 1 Corinthians will, of course, be somewhat continuous with that given throughout the entire Pauline corpus, the unique character and problems of this community slightly distinguish Paul's instruction here from the other letters.

First, the Corinthian community does not appear to have been subject to a Judaizing influence to anywhere near the degree with which the communities in Galatia, Philippi or Ephesus seem to have been.¹ Second, because of this, the community at Corinth was divided not so much along Jew/Gentile lines (though a certain degree of this was likely unavoidable), but largely along 'speech' and 'knowledge' lines. Third, Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians covers (comparatively) a numerous amount of problems dealt with.

A Reshaped Worldview

New Monotheism – New Orthodoxy

Paul's ethical instruction is anything but “a bit of *ad hoc* legislation”, but rather the outworking of his entire worldview which has been reshaped.² In and through his encounter with

1 On cross-influence of Judaism/Pagan world, see Yonder Moynihan Gillihan, “Jewish Laws on Illicit Marriage, the Defilement of Offspring, and the Holiness of the Temple: A New Halakic Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:14,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 711-744.

2 N. T. Wright, *The climax of the covenant : Christ and the law in Pauline theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 133; though reshaping still "on Jewish terms", Peter J. Tomson, “Paul's Jewish Background in View of His Law Teaching in 1 Cor 7,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James Dunn (Grand Rapids Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans,

the person and Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul has uncovered *an entirely new orthodoxy* – Christological Monotheism (Wright, 136).³

This new Monotheism is *continuous* with Paul's former Judaism in that (for Paul) it carries forward the story of “all our fathers” (10:1-7), and retains its Jewish creational monotheism, thus opposing paganism.⁴ However, it is also *discontinuous* in that its monotheism is reshaped by the person of Jesus, which is seen in Paul's re-working of the Hebrew Shema (8:6).⁵

A Reshaped Covenant Charter

New Law – New Orthopraxis

The Person of Jesus not only reshaped Paul's *orthodoxy*, but also his *orthopraxis*. Christological Monotheism had immediate implications concerning the Jewish Covenant and its charter, the Mosaic Law. Like Paul's new monotheism, Paul's new (and much-discussed) understanding of the Law of Moses was both *continuous* and *discontinuous* with his former Judaism.⁶ Thielman helpfully observes:

“...continuity exists between Paul and Judaism with regard to the law, for he is still subject to something called 'the law of God.' Discontinuity also emerges, however, for Paul is no longer subject to the law that distinguishes Jews from Gentiles.”⁷

The Mosaic Law had become a kind of boundary between Jew and Gentile, and Paul redefines this boundary “in terms of ‘the gospel of Christ’ and reflected in the relational phrase, *ενομος Χριστου*. [lawful to christ]”⁸

2001), 255

3 Wright, *The climax of the covenant*, 136

4 *Ibid.*, 126-128

5 *Ibid.*, 121, 128; cf also proto-trinitarian parallelism in 12:4-6.

6 Frank Thielman, *Paul & the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 86-87, more detailed comments in 103; see also the (mistaken to me) view that Jews keep the 'whole' Law, and the Gentiles keep 'their own share', Tomson, “Paul's Jewish Background in View of His Law Teaching in 1 Cor 7,” 267-270

7 Thielman, *Paul & the Law*, 104-105

8 Steph Barton, “All Things to All People': Paul and the Law in the Light of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James Dunn (Grand Rapids Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 283; see also discussion about *nomos* sometimes referring to other legal codes, Harm W. Hollander, “The Meaning of the Term 'Law' (*νόμος*) in 1 Corinthians,” *Novum Testamentum* 40, no. 2 (April 1998): 117-135

A Reshaped People

New Temple – New Purity

The reshaping of Paul's understanding of the People of God is seen in his usage of temple and body metaphor. God's people, redefined now by faith in Christ, reconstitute the New Temple for God's Spirit, which must not be defiled by uncleanness.⁹ As the "Israel of God"¹⁰, the Corinthians will "resemble the portrait of God's people painted in the Mosaic law."¹¹

New Body – New Community

The body metaphor places emphasis on the entire Corinthian community, as opposed to only a few 'spiritual' individuals. They were to prefer the honour of the community over the honour of the individual.¹² The concern is for brotherly community (1:9-10; 8:12); far deeper than merely what is or is not permissible for individuals (6:12).¹³

Paul can also expect both *humility* and *holiness* from a body of people with Christ as the head. *Humility*, in that Christ the humble servant is the head, not the arrogant Corinthian elite; and *holiness*, in that no members (individual believers) of Christ's body should be united with a prostitute (6:15).

A Reshaped Past

New Remembrance – New Pattern

The person of Jesus Christ also reshapes Paul's appreciation of the Jewish Passover.¹⁴ The central formative event for the new People of God is now the sacrificial death of Christ, the Paschal Lamb. This should give expression to wider communal life in general, but is particularly to be

9 On connection between Temple and Holiness, see Brian S. Rosner, "Temple and Holiness in 1 Corinthians 5," *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (1991): 137-145

10 Richard B. Hays, "Ecclesiology And Ethics In 1 Corinthians," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 9, <http://www.northpark.edu/sem/exauditu/papers/hays.html>

11 Thielman, *Paul & the Law*, 86-87, 99, 106

12 For a thorough treatment of Graeco-Roman ideals and their influence on the Corinthian community, see Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace & Community* (Downers Grove Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), of immediate relevance, 154

13 Strom, *Reframing Paul*, 190-191; Frank J. Matera, "Ethics in the NT," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 333; Richard B. Hays, *The moral vision of the New Testament : community, cross, new creation : a contemporary introduction to New Testament ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 33-35

14 And the Feast of Unleavened Bread, cf. 5:7

manifested when they gather for the remembrance meal – the Lord's supper.

The selfless act of Christ's death supports Paul's ethical instruction and provides a pattern to be followed by His followers.¹⁵

A Reshaped Present

New Identity – New Freedom

The Corinthians are to humbly appreciate what they have already and what they still wait for. Their *identity* rests not on superior wisdom or 'spiritual' activities, but on grace.¹⁶ Paul embodies this humility – which they are to imitate (11:1) – by continually *identifying* with the weakness of Christ's death and the foolishness of the gospel.

Though Paul gives specific commands at times, he refuses legalism. Rather than taking sides or giving simple 'yes' or 'no' answers to various problems, he often (e.g. 7:6, 7:25) gives freedom for working out the imitation of Christ.¹⁷ Not a lawless freedom, but a selfless freedom that considers one's brother even if their understanding is 'weak'.¹⁸ With and according to the Spirit of Christ, they must work out Christ's pattern of self-giving love.¹⁹

A Reshaped Future

New Creation – New Hope

The resurrection of Jesus was absolutely central for Paul's reshaped eschatology. Christ's resurrection was the firstfruits of their hope, and they awaited the full harvest. The assurance of New Creation not only undergirded their faith (15:12-19), but also provided assurance of the worth of their ethical labour (15:58, cf. 1:7-8). The moral imperative here is not a 'threat', but a call to

15 H.H. Drake Williams, "Living as Christ crucified: the cross as a foundation for Christian ethics in 1 Corinthians," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2003): 117-131

16 Strom, *Reframing Paul*, 154

17 Hays, *The moral vision of the New Testament*, 43; also David Horrell, "Theological Principle or Christological Praxis? Pauline Ethics in 1 Corinthians 8.1-11.1," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 20, no. 67 (January 1, 1998): 83-114

18 Sally B. Purvis, "Following Paul: Some Notes on Ethics Then and Now," *Word & World* 16, no. 4 (1996): 417;

Günther. Bornkamm & David Muir Gibson. Stalker, *Paul*, Ecclesia books (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), 73

19 Strom, *Reframing Paul*, 191-193

take hold of what is theirs already as they wait for total consummation.²⁰

Summary

Paul's ethical instruction, then, was born out of reoriented worldview – both continuous and discontinuous with Judaism. This profoundly reshaped his understanding of the Jewish Covenant charter, the Mosaic Law; and the people of God including their past history, present experience and future hope.²¹

From this new perspective, Paul responded to the multiple problems and questions of the Corinthian community. Equally, if not more importantly, he modelled the lifestyle – identifying with the One he desired them to imitate, and demonstrating the self-less and humble love he wished to see become manifest among them (e.g. 9:12).

Significantly, this meant the refusal to prescribe exact behaviour in every circumstance. Unflinching desire for holiness was at times to yield to a freedom that allowed relationships to flourish, and yet the liberty under the law of Christ was not to be used as a license to sin or to excuse offending a brother.

Modern Implications

Paul's mode of instruction has urgent applications to modern Christian praxis. The urgency is not so much due to a need for *more* ethical instruction, but rather instruction of the right *kind* and for the right *purposes*.

In many contexts, the ethical instruction given can all too often be either non-existent or legalistic – and it's not clear which one is worse! Where the ethical instruction is absent, Christian behaviour can frequently be indistinguishable from the culture around it. Where the ethical instruction is legalistic, a culture of performance can result; causing people to hide their faults and hide from each other.

²⁰ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul : an outline of his theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975), 275; Hays, *The moral vision of the New Testament*, 41; Matera, "Ethics in the NT," 334

²¹ Strom, *Reframing Paul*, 154-155

Some places in the 'contemporary' world may have a more direct application of some of Paul's teaching, while others require more contextualisation. This reminds us of the need to understand the principles behind Paul's instruction. Paul's Christological Monotheism provides a value-base from which sound Christian ethical instruction can be given to literally any human context.

Being 'lawful to Christ' doesn't mean being legalistic. The dangers of legalism lurk just around every corner. Christians must allow people the freedom to 'work it out' in the Spirit. This will not mean that strong denouncements are never needed (quite the contrary), but when they are it should be to protect the holiness and unity of the community, not to 'maintain the rules'.

For a closing example, the Christian worldview is creational, valuing createdness as good. Community characterised by bodily presence and physicality is to be preferred. This provides a challenge to 'virtual community' so popular and widespread. However, it is vital for the 'strong' (those who realise the value of bodily community) to follow Paul's advice and example and bear with the 'weak' (those who value 'virtual' community over 'bodily' community), and at times 'become as an online junkie in order to win the online junkies'.

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