
Editorial

Biblical Social Ethics

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In his recent introduction to his translation of the New Testament, David Bentley Hart notes how, even though he should not have been surprised, he was struck by the sheer strangeness of the world evoked by the New Testament texts. To listen to the writers and to attend to their message is to find oneself shocked:

When one truly ventures into the world of the first Christians, one enters a company of ‘radicals’ (for want of a better word), an association of men and women guided by faith in a world-altering revelation, and hence in values almost absolutely inverse to the recognised social, political, economic, and religious truths not only of their own age, but of almost every age of human culture. (Bentley Hart, xxiv)

Bentley Hart wonders how we would find Christians cast in the New Testament mold, if we were to meet some, and concludes that we might experience them as ‘fairly obnoxious: civically reprobate, ideologically unsound, economically destructive, politically irresponsible, socially discreditable, and really just a bit indecent.’ (Bentley Hart, xxv) We, whose eschatological expectations have become less urgent over the years, are more complacent when it comes to our home in this world with all of its loyalties, conventions, social structures and mores. He concludes that to live as the New Testament language really requires, ‘Christians would have to become strangers and sojourners on the earth, to have here no enduring city, to belong to a Kingdom truly not of this world. And we surely cannot do that, can we?’ (Bentley Hart, xxxii)

It might be, then, a particularly difficult and even dangerous undertaking to see what the Bible teaches us about social ethics. It

might even be impossible for us to live in this world in the way that the Bible commends. But perhaps this is to do nothing other than affirm the impotence of sinful humanity. As it truly is, all things are possible with God. So it is by grace that we can fashion our corporate living in such a way that we are able to be Christ to the world. And surely this is what a Biblical Social Ethics would entail for us as Christians, to live the corporate life that we have been given in a way that lives with and alongside others as Jesus did. After all, did he not teach us that all Scripture begins and ends with him and, in so doing, did he not turn around the lives of his two travelling companions on that road to Emmaus (Luke 24.27)?

A Biblical Social Ethics would not then be simply the fruit of us interpreting our sacred texts to find the social and political speculations which we can then apply. Rather, it is to see that the Bible reveals to us a world in which the triune God is active, and to realise that this is the world in which we are called to live. To describe a Biblical Social Ethics, or at least to attempt to discover what it might be, is a labour of trying to come to some understanding about who we are, who we have been, and who we are called to become. We are the community of women and men who are of the same world, of the same company, as those first Christians. We have persisted as this community, horrifically and gloriously, inadequately and triumphantly, over two millennia.

Nonetheless, this hardly circumvents the work that is still required. When we pass from 'meta' questions about what a Biblical Social Ethics might be, with all the attendant difficulties, to more particular questions about the Bible's ethical instruction, things are hardly easier. Of course there are cases when the Bible might have some fairly clear things to say about how we live together or how we should live in the world. It is not ambiguous about usury, for example. On the other hand, there are plenty of ways in which the Bible offers us less certainty. For example, even the dominical teachings on divorce seem to be contradictory, and it is not always clear to what extent marriage and family life are good things for Christian living.

We find ourselves mired quite quickly in questions of interpretation and debates about how to read the Bible well. Even if we agree (however unlikely this may be) that the Bible is inspired and inerrant, and then agree what *that* means, it is hardly likely to lead to agreement over what the Bible actually teaches. It might even be debatable which forms of literature are the best sources of our ethical life. Sometimes

the content might more obviously point to social-ethical forms of living, like the Law, or Paul's lists of virtues and vices. However, it might be argued that our ethical life is best stimulated and formed by a careful and prayerful reading of the Scripture, such as happens through the daily offices or *lectio divina*. In the more narrative parts of the Bible, some tales might be cautionary rather than exemplary, which leads us to conclude that those who are seen as types of Christ are not necessarily to be emulated. Kingly David might prefigure Jesus but he is a character only to be used selectively when it comes to Sunday School morality tales. Some form of hierarchical division amongst the texts is thus predicated. Indeed, how do we deal with a canon that seems to debate with itself, that offers us developments and disagreements and diverse literary forms, and that seems to ask us to read intertextually?

How do we understand our sheer historical and cultural distance from the Biblical worlds? Is it true that the community in Acts with its infamous communism is to be emulated (Acts 2.42-45) or are we safe to compartmentalise them as forerunners and of a different age? Or are we to expect that in the time in which we can proclaim the risen Christ, all things simply are different, of a new creation, and that this is a description of what should be our common life?

Again, things are not given an enlightening clarity by attending to the way our brothers and sisters have read Scripture as forming their common life and directing their ethical concerns over the centuries. The Patristic exegetes found in Scripture both an example and a mandate for reading the Scriptures allegorically (Gal 4.22ff, 1 Cor 10). For those of us less attuned to such modes of reading, it can seem as if they are taking liberties with the text and allowing it to speak in ways that overflow its plain or literal sense. But then again, is it not the case that to expect the Scriptural text to speak into our situation, our culture, our time, our lives, is to expect it to overflow the bounds of the page and to become something living, vital, organic. And would that not be what we should expect, if the Scripture reveals not itself but the living God and the person of Jesus Christ?

With questions such as these in the background, the four contributors to this edition of *Crucible* engage diversely with the topic of Biblical Social Ethics.

Angus Paddison uses the work of Stanley Hauerwas to tease out the relationship between the Scriptures and their performance in the life of the church. He attends to Hauerwas's criticism of 'social ethics'

as a tautology and to the way that he articulates the church *as* a social ethic. Paddison uses the topic of money as the prism through which to interrogate what it means to see Hauerwas's ethical reflections as those of a *Biblical* theologian. He leaves us with some questions that Hauerwas's virtue ethics poses for us and asks some in return.

In his essay John Barton asks whether the Wisdom literature could be seen to be a form of virtue ethics and in the light of new studies takes himself to task. Even if we do not make Wisdom a subset of a prior category, then he wonders if it is analogous to Greek virtue ethics and in what ways it might differ. How does it form us, into whom, by what means, and to what end? The Wisdom literature touches on all that is germane to our ethical lives – our motivations, our desires and our imagination – and prompts us to wonder who we might be and what our lives might be like if we are the wise. Barton also points to the way that the actual content of texts and the effect that they have might differ. That is, what is conveyed might be said in such a way as to provoke a reaction. Biblical Social Ethics is thus just as much about the formational potential of certain texts as it is about what they more immediately counsel.

Paying attention to just one psalm, Walter Moberly describes what it can tell us about God and who he reveals himself to be. If we do not read Scripture as if we were just historians and social scientists and as if it were only a historical artefact - though these things may have their place - then we may be more alive to the theology of God that it reveals. And, if we come to know God more deeply, the question becomes how then are we to live. Moberly shows how the text might be read in the context of pluralism and idolatry - a context which is by no means foreign to us. Faith in the God of the Bible is faith in a God of justice and this stands in stark contrast to faith in the impotent idols of the age. When we seek the God of the Bible in prayer we should expect that it will provoke a desire to serve God and participate in his realization of a just world.

Arguing that the Scriptures do not present us with a set of proof texts or a set of ethical dictats but God's revelation of himself in Jesus, Simon Cuff also attends to Biblical theology. Cuff places human anger in the perspective of God's anger as it is revealed in the texts, with a careful attention to the interplay between Scripture and its doctrinal articulations. Cuff warns us against univocal readings which would presume that *our* anger is the interpretative key to *God's* anger, for this might be to make God vicious. But he also rejects equivocal

readings which would presume that they are wholly different and have no relation to one another, for this might be to leave *us* vicious. It is participation in God's loving anger, with continual penitence for our failure to be righteously angry, that should define how we should be angry, and teach us to be Christlike in a crucifying world.

The Forum piece in this edition also touches on the Biblical term which names the church: 'assembly'. It juxtaposes two recent critical works on the idea of political assembly with the Pauline vision of the church as the assembly of those 'called-out' (*ekklesia*). By bringing them together in this way, it reminds us to lay hold of the radicality of the vision held out to us in the early Christian church and witnessed in Scripture. It is a reminder of who we are and what we are called out to be and to do, as the *ekklesia* today.

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Reference

Bentley Hart, David, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).