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See back cover for Table of Contents

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# The Doxological Dimension of Ethics

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*If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4:11)*

## I. Worship and Ethics

Christian ethics is so inseparably bound to the Christian faith that it cannot exist as a separate, free-floating entity. Dogmatics (Christian doctrine) and ethics (Christian praxis) are inextricably linked. Heiko Krimmer writes:

There is no such thing as Biblical, Christian ethics. That there is such a specialist field within the concept of theology at all is a consequence of the invasion of the Enlightenment into theology. What we nowadays describe and discuss under the umbrella term of 'Christian ethics', i.e., Christian praxis, was originally contained in all the individual areas of theology and did not claim to have its specific area. A biblical and, more specifically, Christian ethic was first declared to be its own domain when Kant, for example, presented his Enlightenment ethics with its own ethical edifice. And yet, it is not possible to speak about Christian praxis

which is removed from Christian faith. Ethics and dogmatics, life and doctrine, do not allow themselves under any circumstances to be separated from each other within the Bible's perimeter.<sup>1</sup>

When Georg Calixt put forth the first independent work on ethics in 1634, his intention was not to separate himself from dogmatics but 'rather to include philosophical ethics within dogmatics'.<sup>2</sup> However, in the long run that led to the same result, namely that ethics was uncoupled from dogmatics and from exegesis. In contrast, Emil Brunner wrote similarly to Krimmer, 'One can only correctly present all of ethics as a part of dogmatics because ethics is also a question of God's actions upon and through people.'<sup>3</sup>

Christian ethics is also not a continuation of and certainly not an appendage to Christian worship. Rather, it is a direct component and a direct consequence of worship. C. H. Dodd

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<sup>1</sup> Heiko Krimmer, 'Grundlagen christlicher Ethik', printed excerpt from *Das Fundament: Zeitschrift des DCTB* (Korntal, n.d.), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Honecker, *Einführung in die Theologische Ethik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Emil Brunner, *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1939): 71-72.

wrote, "The Christian religion is, as is Judaism ... , an ethical religion in the special sense that it does not acknowledge a final separation between worship and social behavior."<sup>4</sup>

That worship and ethics in Christianity are so closely linked with each other has to do with the fact that God is a just God, and that all ethics is determined on the basis of the justness of his essence. Thus, Gottfried Quell writes the following about the Old Testament: "One could say that justice comprises the foundation of the vision of God in the Old Testament. ... That God sets what justice is and as a just God is bound to justice is an indispensable proposition for the Old Testament knowledge of God in all its variations."<sup>5</sup>

For that reason, there are also areas not normally addressed in drafts of Christian ethics, such as prayer,<sup>6</sup> worship and the Christian church, which in general belong among the innermost issues of Christian ethics.<sup>7</sup>

4 C. H. Dodd. *Das Gesetz der Freiheit: Glaube und Gehorsam nach dem Zeugnis des Neuen Testaments* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1960), 7.

5 Gottfried Quell. "Der Rechtsgedanke im AT", in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1990), 176–78. Quell certainly assumes that the legal thinking of Israel was so strong that it shaped the thinking about God. According to the New Testament understanding, this was, however, just the opposite. Cf. what is said about the image of God in Lesson 54.2., also comp. chapters 44.10. and 33.A.2.

6 See for example Werner Elert, *Das christliche Ethos: Grundlinien der lutherischen Ethik* (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1961), 397–408, and note Calvin's long discussion of prayer in his *Institutes*.

7 See the introduction and arrangement of

The expression used for true, pure teaching, orthodoxy (Greek *orthos* = correct, straight; *doxein* = to praise, to extol), on the basis of the meaning of the word, means neither true teaching nor true praxis. Rather, it brings both of these together to express true veneration of God.

Whereas Paul speaks in Romans 1:18–32 of irrational worship that refuses to give God thanks, the first thing he mentions in the practical portion of Romans is that we are exhorted in view of God's mercy to place our life at God's disposal, for "this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom 12:1). A form of worship that does not have practical consequences in all areas of life is an irrational form of worship. Even if all confessions surely share this thought, it has historically been emphasized primarily by Orthodox and Reformed believers, and at the present time above all by the Orthodox and Evangelicals (who have a Reformed or Baptist heritage). Of course, the degree to which that ethic has actually been put into practice is another story and is a topic for sociological and historical analysis.

In "Singing the Ethos of God", Brian R. Brock<sup>8</sup> considers the Psalms to be a pattern for Christian ethics, because they do not only speak about and of God. Rather, they are conversations with God that receive and express ethical instruction, ask for strength to achieve fulfillment of God's direction, and thank God for his ordinances, directions and aid.

my *Ethik*. 8 vols. (Nuremberg: VTR, 2009).

8 Brian R. Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

## II. Reformed Theology

In the Protestant realm, doxology, as the origin and aim of ethics, became a trademark of the Reformed movement. It is not coincidental that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches named its 1977 centennial celebration 'The Glory of God and the Future of Man'.

For John Calvin,<sup>9</sup> the glory of God was the individual's goal in life, as well as the goal of the entire history of salvation:

The regiment belongs to the Lord, and for people just as for the entire world there is, outside of his glory, nothing worth striving for. What can diminish God's glory is foolish, irrational, and malicious.<sup>10</sup>

It is not very sound theology to confine a man's thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God. For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves. As all things flowed from him, and subsist in him, so, says Paul (Rom

11:36), they ought to be referred to him. I acknowledge, indeed, that the Lord, the better to recommend the glory of his name to men, has tempered zeal for the promotion and extension of it, by uniting it indissolubly with our salvation. But since he has taught that this zeal ought to exceed all thought and care for our own good and advantage, and since natural equity also teaches that God does not receive what is his own, unless he is preferred to all things, it certainly is the part of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul.<sup>11</sup>

For Calvin, the glory of God is primarily found in creation, in Christ and in the goal of salvation history.

It was typical for Calvin to place a comprehensive and personal appeal for prayer, for the church as well as with particular regard for the private realm, before the exegesis of the Lord's Prayer. At the same time, the experience of answered prayer plays a significant role for him,<sup>12</sup> as Calvin is overall marked by a deep, practical piety. In spite of his deep exegetical and systematic digging, he allows the experience of Christian life to flow into his work.<sup>13</sup> 'According to the

<sup>9</sup> On Calvin's teaching about praise and worship, see Pamela Ann Moeller, *Calvin's Doxology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997). On Calvin's view of the glory of God, see Wilhelm Niesel, *Lobt Gott, den Herrn der Herrlichkeit: Theologie um Gottes Ehre* (Konstanz: Christliche Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 13–16; Eberhard Busch, 'Calvins Verkündigung der Herrlichkeit Gottes', [www.reformiert-info.de/288-0-105-16.html](http://www.reformiert-info.de/288-0-105-16.html); James J. Tyne, 'Putting Contexts in Their Place: God's Transcendence in Calvin's Institutes', in *The Standard Bearer*, ed. Steven M. Schlissel (Nacogdoches, TX: CMP, 2002), 369–95.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift: Römerbrief und Korintherbriefe* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960), 240.

<sup>11</sup> Translation from [www.glaubensstimme.de/doku.php?id=autoren:calvin:calvin-antwort\\_an\\_kardinal\\_sadolet](http://www.glaubensstimme.de/doku.php?id=autoren:calvin:calvin-antwort_an_kardinal_sadolet).

<sup>12</sup> Hans Scholl, *Der Dienst des Gebetes nach Johannes Calvin* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1968); Paul C. Böttger, *Calvins Institutio als Erbauungsbuch* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 71–74; Eva Harasta, *Lob und Bitte: Eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung über das Gebet* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005), 112–42.

<sup>13</sup> Harmannus Obendiek, 'Die Erfahrung

line we have noted up to this point, everything is—and it should not be a surprise—geared towards instruction for prayer. This is demonstrated in the disposition.<sup>14</sup> The true mark of the church is, according to Calvin, not preaching the Word of God but rather its being followed,<sup>15</sup> and that is especially expressed in personal prayer.

The Reformed view has found its classical expression in the famous first two questions of the 1647 Westminster Shorter Catechism:

1. What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.
2. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him? The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.<sup>16</sup>

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses it somewhat differently but likewise powerfully, in that the chapter on ethics, built upon the Ten Commandments, goes by the title 'Of Thankfulness'.<sup>17</sup> However, as is gener-

ally known, this all goes back to Martin Luther's similar approach of introducing the explanation of each of the Ten Commandments with the words: 'We should fear and love God, so that we ...'

The glory of God as the goal of 'Calvinists' also flowed into Max Weber's famous thesis that Calvinists had brought about capitalism. A classical description of Calvinists from this discussion should suffice as a representative indication:

Everything comes down to the moment when God is honoured: the entire world is appointed for his glory; the same thing is the task of the Christian. God seeks activity on the part of Christians in the world and society; for these should be so established that they serve the glory of God; social work, i.e., work in the world and society, in which Calvinism is enjoined as a duty *in majorem gloriam Dei*, and it is precisely this character which is also found in vocational work.<sup>18</sup>

In a monumental section of his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth, as is generally known, discarded the differentiation between dogmatics and ethics and in good Reformed fashion set the glory of God in the centre of the 'perfections of God' (as he ingen-

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in ihrem Verhältnis zum Worte Gottes bei Calvin', in *Aus Theologie und Geschichte der reformierten Kirche. Festgabe für E. F. Karl Müller* (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1933), 180–214.

14 Böttger, *Calvins Institutio*, 71.

15 See Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), 16.

16 *Der kürzere Westminster Katechismus von 1647*, trans. Kurt Vetterli (Bonn: Martin Bucer Seminar, 2006). [www.bucer.eu](http://www.bucer.eu).

17 *The Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Thomas Schirrmacher (Bonn: Martin Bucer Seminar, 2005); see also, for commentary on these two questions, Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter*

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*Catechism of the Westminster Assembly Explained from Scripture* (1674; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 1–24; Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity: Contained in Sermons upon the Westminster Assembly's Catechism* (1692; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 6–38.

18 Felix Rachfahl, 'Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus', in *Max Weber, Die protestantische Ethik II: Kritiken und Antikritiken*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1978), 65–66.

iously called the attributes of God) as a landmark.<sup>19</sup> Glory, Barth stated,

is the appearing paragon of all divine perfections. It is the fullness of the divinity of God, it is the eruptive, expressive, manifesting reality of all that which God is. It is the essence of God inasmuch as God is a self-revealing being.<sup>20</sup>

### III. Orthodox Theology

Outside the Protestant realm, doxology has always been emphasized as the origin and aim of Christian ethics, above all in Orthodox theology. A few examples should suffice.

Geoffrey Wainwright calls his combined dogmatics and ethics *Doxology*, and he states in his preface that every systematic theology is a 'theology of worship'.<sup>21</sup> Vigen Guroian champions the same view in his ethics, in particular in his chapter 'Seeing Worship as Ethics'.<sup>22</sup> He emphasizes that ethics and doctrine are not to be separated from religious practice, at the apex of which worship stands.<sup>23</sup>

Stanley Samuel Harakas likewise emphasizes the character of ethics as worship in his two-volume work

on ethics, indicating that 'Theoria and Praxis' are not to be separated.<sup>24</sup> The expression of the viewpoint that worship and ethics have to be lived out sounds very similar to evangelical and pietistic formulations. In the USA, where Orthodox and Evangelicals most frequently deal with each at eye level, an unusual show of unity is demonstrated by repeatedly speaking about this openly.

Interestingly, Wainwright, an Orthodox systematic theologian, expressly and approvingly quotes the first article of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, a Reformed document!<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Wilhelm Niesel calls 'To God alone be the glory' the 'slogan of Reformed believers throughout time'. At the same time, he suggests that this truth must be witnessed to by all churches, and he refers to Easter Jubilation in the Greek Orthodox Church as an example.<sup>26</sup>

### IV. Other Denominations

All denominations, not just the Reformed and Orthodox, confess in principle that doxology is the justification and goal of ethics. In each case it is only a question of how prominently this actually works itself out in the dogmatic and ethical system—and, of course, how it looks in practice.

Thus, 'all for the greater glory of God' (*omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam*) was Ignatius of Loyola's (1491–1556) motto. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit

**19** Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1987), vol. 7, 722–64; see also vol. 8, 362–65, and vol. 31, 246 (keyword 'Herrlichkeit' [glory]), as well as John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 592–95.

**20** Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 7:725.

**21** Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: A Systematic Theology* (London: Epworth Press, 1980), preface.

**22** Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 51–78.

**23** Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 51.

**24** Stanley Samuel Harakas, *Toward Transfigured Life: The 'Theoria' of Eastern Orthodox Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 1984), 3–5, 188–96.

**25** Wainwright, *Doxology*, 17.

**26** Niesel, *Lobt Gott*, 11.

order, wrote the following in his *Spiritual Exercises*: 'Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord.'<sup>27</sup>

In the confession of faith of the decrees of the First Vatican Council (1870–1871), one reads in point 5 of the Canons the following: 'If anyone ... denies that the world was created for the glory of God: let him be anathema.'<sup>28</sup>

From a Lutheran point of view, Amy C. Schiffrin laments that the basic problem in modern Christian social ethics is 'the cosmetic separation of ethics from doxology', and she calls for 'doxological ethics'.<sup>29</sup> Similar examples can be cited from all Christian denominations and orientations.

## V. Liturgy and Ethics

'Honour be unto the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever will be and from eternity to eternity. Amen.' Since the fourth century, this liturgical refrain has accentuated Christian worship services and has summarized its elementary theological structure.<sup>30</sup>

Much discussion has been given to the relationship between liturgy and ethics. Liturgy is only a part of the entire spectrum of worship. However, it is the most visible and most significant expression of worship. God seeks public and collective reverence and pronouncement of his glory, and the body of Christ, the church, is most visible when more than anything else it corporately celebrates the Lord's supper and, in so doing, sacramentally places thanks to God and Christ at the centre of the faith.

The ancient maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which means that whatever one prays and confesses in worship determines faith and action, is affirmed by Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed churches<sup>31</sup> but admittedly has fallen into oblivion in a number of wings of the evangelical spectrum. Calvin, for instance, assumed that the church had to work intensively on what occurs in

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theologische Grundlegung', in *Handbuch der Liturgik*, ed. Hans-Christoph Schmidt-Lauber and Karl-Heinrich Bieritz (Leipzig: Ev. Verlagsanstalt, 1995), 72.

31 Martin Sturflesser and Stefan Winter (eds.), *Ahne nach, was du vollziehst: Positionsbestimmungen zum Verhältnis von Liturgie und Ethik* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2009); Wainwright, *Doxology*, 218–86 on the Orthodox and Catholics; Gerhard Sauter, *Zugänge zur Dogmatik: Elemente theologischer Urteilsbildung* (Göttingen: V&R, 1998), 22 on Lutherans and Anglicans; Dennis Ngien, *Gifted Response: The Triune God as the Causative Agency of Our Responsive Worship* (Milton Kenyes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), 1–2 (Basil of Caesarea), 56–58 (Anselm), 75–76 (Augustine), 159 (Calvin). An evangelical justification is found in Paul F. M. Zahl, 'Formal-Liturgical Worship', in Zahl et al., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 25–27.

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27 Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, chapter 23, quoted in [www.jesuiten.org/geschichte/index.htm](http://www.jesuiten.org/geschichte/index.htm) vom 24.2.2009. As a more recent Catholic example, see Karl Hörmann, *Lexikon der christlichen Moral* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1976), columns 109–39 (chapter title 'Bestimmung des Menschen' or Man's Calling).

28 DS 3025 (1976 edition).

29 Amy C. Schiffrin, 'Delight, Design and Destiny: Toward a Doxological Ethics of Sexuality', 28 April 2009, [www.lutheranforum.org/sexuality/delight-design-and-destiny-toward-a-doxological-ethics-of-sexuality/](http://www.lutheranforum.org/sexuality/delight-design-and-destiny-toward-a-doxological-ethics-of-sexuality/).

30 Geoffrey Wainwright. 'Systematisch-

worship services, for it is through the word, song and sacrament that the everyday life of believers is shaped. As a matter of fact, the consequences of the absence of certain elements from modern worship—for example, the lack of preaching from the Old Testament or the lack of intercessory prayer for the persecuted church—is often underestimated. Evangelicals frequently fail to recognize how deeply the elements of worship other than the sermon can shape belief through their continual presence or repetition; for instance, the collective prayer for forgiveness fosters humility, and its omission can reflect a certain feeling that Christians are generally better people than others, contrary to Luke 18:11–14.

The thought of the common bond of glorification in worship services and of dogmatics and ethics is arguably most pronounced in Orthodox theology. The classic statement on this point may be the following: 'The lack of agreement between liturgy and ethics leads to an undesired separation between that which is worldly and that which is holy.'<sup>32</sup>

## VI. The Glory of God

When the glory of God is commended to people in Scripture, this message has two components. On one hand, the Bible emphasizes that God already possesses glory eternally, regardless of what we think of him. He is the God of glory (Acts 7:2), 'the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious

Father' (Eph 1:17). Just as on Mount Sinai, God's glory comes from above and becomes visible for people to see (Ex 24:16–17).

Created things can be called glorious only insofar as their glory is derived from God's glory, with humankind leading the way as the image of God (see especially Psalm 8:6: 'You ... crowned him with glory and honour').<sup>33</sup> However, this also includes celestial bodies (1 Cor 15:40–41) or the splendored lilies of the field (Mt 6:28), even if since the fall all this 'glory' is ephemeral just as the grass is. This means that in the end every form of glory only reflects the glory of God.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, there is also the glory that we ascribe to God, or the glorification of God, which in the end only acknowledges his existing glory, as Psalm 150:2 makes clear: 'Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.'

The Church Father and martyr Irenaeus of Lyons formulated it briefly and concisely: 'For the glory of God is a living man (*gloria Dei vivens homo*); and the life of man consists in beholding God' (*Against Heresies* IV 20:7).

Scholastic theology differentiated between the inner honour of God, which is in essence inherent to his nature, and the external honour of God, which he assigns to humankind and which is expressed in reverence shown by individuals. People see the glory of God (Num 14:22) and are responsible to see to it that 'the glory of

32 Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 399. The liturgy of Orthodox worship is best described in German by Nikolaj V. Gogol, *Betrachtungen über die Göttliche Liturgie* (Würzburg: Der Christliche Osten, 1989).

33 On Psalm 8, see Esther Brünenberg, *Der Mensch in Gottes Herrlichkeit: Psalm 8 und seine Rezeption im Neuen Testament* (Würzburg: Echter, 2009), 135–239.

34 Especially according to Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 8:364.



the Lord fills the whole earth' (14:21). We render God honour which is due him anyway and which he has anyway, as stated in 1 Chronicles 16:28–29: 'Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength; ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name. Bring an offering and come before him; worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness.'

Another important aspect of the glory of God is the fact that he shares his honour with no one (Is 48:11; Ex 20:1), which means for us that no one else is to be given honour—no other gods and powers and also no other people, be it the state, the church or an individual.

Although God's glory is permanent, the failure of believers to glorify him, especially if we live unholy lives, brings disgrace to God, at least in the eyes of non-believers: 'You who brag about the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you"' (Rom 2:23–24).

God inexplicably ties his honour to his people. Thus, in Isaiah 48:10–13, he calls, tests and refines 'Israel' because he is the almighty Creator (verse 13) and states that 'for my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another' (v. 11). Correspondingly, Ephesians 1:9–2:22 explains that God saves the church by grace and has it mature in good works so that all powers will recognize his greatness and 'in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory' (Eph 1:12). Ultimately, the following applies to believers: 'When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory' (Col 3:3–4;

see also 2 Thess 1:10).

## **VII. Goodness to the Honour of God: Gratitude as the Highest Commandment**

Conversely, it is repeatedly emphasized that everything good we do should accrue to the honour of God. Thus, the following is said of the gifts of grace: 'If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen' (1 Pet 4:11). According to 1 Corinthians 6:20, we are 'bought with a price. Therefore honour God with your body.' Thus, what we do physically is included here, as 1 Corinthians 10:31 demonstrates with respect to eating: 'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.'

The highest commandment within Christian ethics is to thank God, honour him and love him with all of one's heart. In Romans 1:16–32, Paul proceeds on the assumption that humankind's original sin is not a certain concrete act. Rather, it lies in man's failure to thank and revere his Creator and his tendency instead to worship other things and other people. The concrete sins, such as slander or sexual aberrations, are first of all the consequence of God giving humankind over to their desires of their hearts (Rom 1:26, 28). It is also typical of Paul that in the midst of his dogmatic-ethical remarks he erupts into spontaneous praise: 'the creator ... who is forever praised. Amen' (v. 25).

The fall of man in Genesis 3 is im-

mediately followed, as a consequence of this tragic event, by the first fratricide in Genesis 4. One might tend to think of the horrible guilt of fratricide as leading to a broken relationship with God. But the Bible stresses the reverse: destroyed relationships among people are a consequence of the destroyed relationship between people and God.

### VIII. Awe before God and His Being as the Point of Departure for Christian Ethics

The biblical term 'fear of God' (better expressed as 'awe') very clearly illustrates the basic normative principle of Christian ethics, which sees everything that happens as intended for the glory of God. Ernst Luthardt has written that 'as early as the Old Testament, the fear of God, trust in God, and the love of God are the roots of moral behaviour.'<sup>35</sup>

The essence of Old Testament wisdom literature is the statement,<sup>36</sup> 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Prov 9:10; similarly Prov 1:7), or with even greater brevity: 'The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom' (Job 28:28). Here, 'wisdom' refers to practical life wisdom and not a purely intellectual item, as other texts demonstrate: 'The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honour' (Proverbs 15:33); 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his

precepts'<sup>37</sup> have good understanding' (Psalm 111:10). Ethical wisdom without the fear of God is thus unthinkable. For that reason, the Bible says, 'To fear the Lord is to hate evil' (Prov 8:13).

In both the Old and the New Testaments, God is by far the person mentioned most frequently. At the same time, the Scriptures are fully oriented towards communicating to people in their practical lives. This practical orientation, however, does not come at the expense of occupation with God. Rather, it arises from the fact that the essence of God, whom the Bible reveals, is repeatedly the reason for ethical instructions and decisions. David correctly sings, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing' (Ps 16:2). W. S. Bruce has written the following about the Old Testament:

In Israel it is God himself who is the all wise one, the holy one, and the good one, the prototype of all moral life and action. ... Religious faith and ethical life are so intimately bound together through this foundational conception of the character of God that they cannot be separated from each other. 'At this point, Jewish ethics hooks into theology, but theology is itself essentially of an ethical nature.'<sup>38</sup>

Emil Brunner coined a similar formula: 'There is no 'goodness in

<sup>35</sup> Christoph Ernst Luthardt, *Kompendium der theologischen Ethik* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1921), 9.

<sup>36</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985), 90–94.

<sup>37</sup> In Hebrew grammar, the word *his* refers to the 'precepts' in Psalm 111:7, but in older translations it referred to the 'fear of the Lord'. However, no true contradiction lies therein.

<sup>38</sup> W. S. Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), 38–39, including a quotation from W. L. Davidson.

itself',<sup>39</sup> since there is no goodness without one who is good and who creates, mandates and enables good.

What is good is what God does and wishes; what is evil is what occurs against the will of God. Goodness has its foundation and existence solely in God's will. An idea such as Zarathustra's religion, that God is the Lord because he chose the good, the idea of a law which stands above God, is unthinkable in the Old Testament. God is not merely a guardian of the moral law and of moral rules. Rather, he is their Creator.<sup>40</sup>

## IX. The Will of God

The will of God 'is the sole valid norm. For that reason, what is "religious" is at the same time that which is "moral", and the moral is religious. The relation to God is grounded in God's covenant with humankind; for that reason, it is a relationship of trust. It is nothing like a blind force of nature which asserts claim to God's rights of Lordship.'<sup>41</sup>

Since God himself is justice and he himself institutes just order, he cannot be unjust: 'Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do

wrong' (Job 34:10; see also Job 8:3; Deut 32:4; 2 Chron 19:7).

God is the point of departure and the authority of Christian ethics. Wherever another set of ethics applies, there is also another authority besides the authority of God, for 'the [final] authority of a system is the God of that system.'<sup>42</sup>

This applies not only to foundational statements, such as 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy' (Lev 19:2; similarly 11:44). It also applies to individual questions. This is how Paul justifies his very specific directions as to how many prophets are allowed to speak in succession in a worship service (1 Cor 14:26–32). Paul concludes, 'For God is not a God of disorder but of peace' (1 Cor 14:33). To mention an additional case of God setting forth ethics by example, in the Ten Commandments the seventh day of the week is a day of rest because God himself rested in the creation of the world on the seventh day and blessed that day (Ex 20:11).

There are additional examples of substantiating commandments based on the essence of God. The prohibition against revering other gods is grounded in God's jealousy (Ex 20:5). The prohibition against the misuse of God's name refers to God as an afflicting God (Ex 20:7), and the overall rationale behind the Ten Commandments is the goodness of God: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out ... of the land of slavery' (Ex 20:2).

39 Emil Brunner, *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1939), 99.

40 Brunner, *Das Gebot*, 39. Brunner points out on pages 83 and 578–79 that the Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics of the Christian Middle Ages contradicted this principle and posited a principle of the good as an objective entity in place of the will of God. It also posited action appropriate to human nature ('natural law') as a subjective reaction in place of obedience.

41 Brunner, *Das Gebot*, 40.

42 Gary DeMar, *God and Government*, vol. 1 (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1982), 58.

## X. The Twofold Commandment: Love and Honour God and Love Others

The combination of honouring God and keeping his commandments, or loving God and, for that reason, loving his commands and living them out, pervades the entirety of the Scriptures. It is the foundational structure of the Ten Commandments. The book of Ecclesiastes ends with 'the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man' (Eccl 12:13). In Micah 6:8 one reads: 'He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' Similarly, Deuteronomy 13:4 states, 'It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him.'

In the middle of the praise in Psalm 86:8–13 regarding the hope that all people will worship God and acknowledge his goodness because he rescues people from death, one reads in verse 11, 'Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.'

The great commandments of the Old Testaments are well-known: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' (Deut 6:4–5), and 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18; Mk 12:19–31). At this point, worship and ethics are placed on the same level.

The inalienability of the teaching of the Trinity and of the reverence given to the triune God lies, in my

opinion, in the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. He did not first have to create a counterpart in order to be able to actually love. Rather, love is the agenda of creation, and it is founded on the fact that the world was created by a God who is love eternally in a very practical way, not only theoretically.

## XI. Shame and Guilt

At this point, we must go into detail regarding a question that has been carried into systematic theology from missiology, namely how the difference between guilt-oriented and shame-oriented cultures influences our question and whether biblical revelation is closer to the one or the other culture. Since issues in shame-oriented cultures are primarily addressed as matters of honour, Christians who live in these cultures particularly emphasize God's honour. Since on a global basis, evangelicals have functioned predominantly in shame-oriented cultures, evangelical missionaries, missiologists, and anthropologists have submitted related ground-breaking studies.<sup>43</sup>

In my book *Culture of Shame/Culture of Guilt* (German *Scham- oder Schuldgefühl?*), I have spoken out at length in favour of the complemen-

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<sup>43</sup> For example, Hannes Wiher, *Shame and Guilt: A Key to Cross-Cultural Ministry* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2003); Martin Lomen, *Sünde und Scham im biblischen und islamischen Kontext* (Nuremberg: VTR, 2003); Thomas Schirrmacher and Klaus W. Müller (eds.), *Scham- und Schuldorientierung in der Diskussion: Kulturanthropologische, missiologische und theologische Einsichten* (Bonn: VKW; Nuremberg: VTR, 2006).

tarity of the biblical message with respect to this question. It is for this reason that shame-oriented cultures have accumulated needs in the area of biblical understanding of law and guilt—extending all the way to political applications. Conversely, guilt-oriented cultures, such as my German culture, have accumulated needs in how the Bible sees the loss of one's own honour and the disavowal of God's glory as consequences of the Fall. They need a deeper understanding of how the cross of Jesus restores God's honour and, with that, has restored and will restore our honour.

As a violation of the law of God, sin against God leads to guilt before God. And as an encroachment on the honour or glory of God, sin leads to shame before God. Only through God's righteousness and God's honour or glory is it possible for man's righteousness to be restored.<sup>44</sup>

This ultimate position of the honour of God makes it impossible to exclude aspects of an orientation towards honour and dishonour from Christian dogmatics and ethics!

The Bible is full of commands to give God the honour due him (1 Chron 16:28; Ps 3:4; 19:2; Lk 12:14). In the process, to give honour is in the final sense adoration, i.e. worship, and in the final analysis that is something to which only God is entitled: 'Oh, praise the greatness of our God!' (Deut 32:3).

For the Bible, the key question is not whether we are shame- or guilt-

oriented. Rather, the Bible orients itself towards our honour and justness. Whoever orients his or her sense of honour towards people as the final norm errs just as much as those who orient their sense of justness towards people as the final norm.

To some extent, one can find complementarity between shame and guilt orientations in the main confessions of the Reformation. Whereas the great Lutheran discovery was above all that justification cannot be oriented towards people and cannot in the final event be produced by people, but is rather a gift of God, the Reformed called for everything to be oriented towards the glory and honour of God and for making this the highest goal of life (without giving up the Lutheran discovery). An individual can as little produce this honour out of himself as he can do so with justness. Through God's justness, an individual can become just and come to God, and through God's honour and glory, an individual can gain the derived glory of the children of God. Together, both lead to a situation where we can have fellowship and peace with God (Rom 5:1).

God's honour means, on one hand, being oriented towards giving up one's own honour and not orienting oneself towards obtaining honour from people. One should primarily have shame before God and not before people. For that reason, people are criticized who do wrong things out of fear of other people. A Christian should orient himself towards God and not towards shame before other people: 'However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name' (1 Peter 4:16). 'What will others think of me?' is not a proper life principle.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher, *Scham- oder Schuldgefühl? Die christliche Botschaft angesichts von schuld- und schamorientierten Gewissen und Kulturen* (Bonn: VKW, 2005), 39.

The absence of the possibility of self-redemption means that we cannot produce justness or honour on our own. The idea of self-redemption can come to express the idea that humans can work up the necessary justification before God on their own, or that they can work up honour and glory before God on their own.

God has created us to be imbued with honour and justification and has also given us individually a conscience with a shame and guilt orientation. Both orientations contribute significantly to our success in life as

well-adjusted individuals and as community members.

Sin against God, as a violation of the law of God, leads to guilt before God. And as an encroachment on the honour and glory of God, sin leads to shame before God. For that reason, according to Genesis 3, Adam and Eve considered themselves guilty before God as well as being ashamed (Gen 3:9–12). Only through God's righteousness, glory and honour is it possible for man's righteousness to be restored.