

Considering the Needs of the Church: A Response to Craig Blomberg

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It is necessary for the academy to listen carefully to the church, to appreciate more fully its new orientation and its changing needs. Three topics are especially pressing: (1) We must acquaint our students with the cultural experiences of early Christianity, in order to learn again how to make biblical theology relevant to our society. (2) The distinctives of biblical and Christian ethics need to be carefully probed. (3) The relevance of biblical theology for spirituality needs to be investigated afresh.

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Craig Blomberg has provided an admirably competent overview of some of the most pivotal areas for NT research as we enter the first decade of the new millennium. I would like to express my appreciation both for his labors in the production of this prospectus as well as his own contributions to many of the questions he has so thoughtfully placed before us. Nonetheless, in what follows, I would like to take a somewhat different approach. With an evangelical eye upon the church, Blomberg himself remarks that our scholarly efforts must "self-consciously serve the most crucial needs of the church of Jesus Christ at home and abroad." But if this is indeed the case, would it not be profitable to pause for a moment to ask what questions the church might have for us? Rather than focusing exclusively upon issues arising out of dialogues within biblical scholarship, let us spend a few moments reflecting on those trends within the Christian community that might evoke a helpful response from the side of academic societies such as the IBR.

There is a change afoot in American Christianity. The current occupants of the Saturday evening or Sunday morning pew are primarily interested in a completely different set of questions than were the John and Mary churchgoers of a generation ago. For the most

part, the endless doctrinal debates that previously impressed inquisitive crowds and established denominational boundaries now beg an audience. The decision whether to attend this church or that is no longer made by a rational choice of belief systems; it is, rather an expression of attitude or feeling, of preference for worship style or program convenience. For some, this thoroughgoing shift represents a lamentable decline in religious vigor. In an orgy of hand-wringing, these critics lay the blame on the self-centeredness and practical anarchism of a particular generation. But such a conclusion, elevated to an axiom by repetition without contradiction, is arguably impetuous. We are witnessing not so much a dilution of religion as a search for new meaning. The shared ecumenical experience of American Christianity—from the National Council of Churches to Focus on the Family—has exposed the failure of denominational purity to uphold its exclusive claim to genuine spirituality and moral rectitude. The issues that divide us have been deposed from their throne of singular importance to compete with more proletarian fears. Changes in American family structure, the moral failures of public figures, frustration with the political process on both sides of the aisle, innovations in Christian worship and ecclesial conceptions—all have conspired to produce a level of anxiety that threatens to drown out the doctrinal issues of the past. As a guild, we must react to these currents of change by listening to the disquietude of our constituents or surrender our valued credentials as the servants of the church.

In the light of these matters, I would like to make some suggestions that are intended neither to replace the research interests highlighted by Blomberg nor to be comprehensive in scope. My desire is, rather, to provide a few illustrations of the ways in which biblical studies can contribute to meeting the contemporary needs of the Christian church. First, in view of the predominately cultural and ethical nature of twenty-first century issues, I would strongly recommend that we redouble our efforts to supplement the formal categories inherited from the history of dogma by acquainting our students and readers with the religious and cultural experiences of early Christianity—where possible, in narrative form. The next generation of believers will confront a world that from our vantage point at the dawn of a new millennium, we can scarcely imagine. In their attempts to contextualize the Christian message in the world of the future and to answer the questions forced on them by an evolving culture, they will desperately need to have a vital relationship with the struggles of the past. They will need to recognize and empathize with the hard choices of the early church in both accommodation and nonconformance to the world around them. Numerous recent advances in the sociological background of the NT that explore the lives of ancient Christians within Greco-Roman social structures could

bear considerable fruit, not only for exegesis, but also for the tough assignment of distinguishing the truly Christian from the contingent cultural mores of the day. It would be very helpful, therefore, to have something in print that would update the material found in such older studies as Wayne Meeks's once-influential volume *The First Urban Christians* and, at the same time, boldly outline the genuinely theological nature of early Christian communal choices, something Meeks was reticent to do.¹

Second, in the area of NT ethics, Wolfgang Schrage, Rudolf Schnackenburg, and Richard Hays need some help.² For all their benefits and insightful contributions, these works were not the last word. The challenge of describing the moral center of the Christian message has not yet been met with anything like a broad consensus. The ordinary person in the pew is certainly prepared to respond with tolerance and understanding when confronted with the reality that the contemporary church speaks with an unclear voice on the pragmatic task of living out the ethical vision of the NT. But his or her patience with the academic process becomes sorely tested when the would-be custodians of Christian revelation suggest that the diversity of canonical expression cannot be bridged, that, although the Christian ethic is *extra nos*, it is also incoherent. The inevitable result is either a disturbing indifference to the biblical voice, or a factionalization of the church emerging from the arbitrary preferences of individual communities. In the context of this confusion a growing chorus of voices calling for a return to an ethics of virtue can be heard.³ But what are the similarities and the differences between the Greek life of virtue and the Christian life worthy of God? As has been frequently observed by the great NT scholars of the past, there is scarcely an aspect of NT morality that is not somehow paralleled in

1. W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

2. W. Schrage, *Ethik des Neuen Testaments* (GNT 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989); R. Schnackenburg, *Die sittliche Botschaft des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols.; HTKNT Supplementband 1-2; Freiburg: Herder, 1986-88); R. B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation — A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

3. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2d ed.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984); M. Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); M. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Martin Classical Lectures 2; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); D. Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997); R. Crisp and M. Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford Readings in Philosophy; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); S. Hauerwas and C. Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); N. Murphy, B. Kallenberg, and M. Nation (eds.), *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997).

the philosophy of the imperial period, including not only the typically Greek virtues of righteousness, self-control, wisdom, and piety but also the more familiarly Christian qualities of gentleness, kindness, and forgiveness.⁴ But does this then mean that Plutarch's winsome essays or Epictetus's colorful diatribes should become indispensable reading for Christian college students and seminarians, filling in the gaps left by the occasional nature of the NT documents? Why or why not? What is essentially distinctive about Christian moral teaching? A carefully reasoned answer to these questions in the light of the latest research will give considerable aid to reflective Christians living in an age that responds with reserve to any suggestion of a coherent ethical norm.

Third, and I must be brief, we live in a period in which the subject of spirituality demands considerable attention. The word itself encompasses such a bewildering variety of issues that it is difficult to parse with exactitude. Two, however, stand out as having attracted insufficient attention from serious biblical scholarship: spiritual formation and Christian worship. Let's begin with the former. The Greco-Roman world occupied itself extensively with ethical therapies for the dysfunctional lives of the untutored, carefully laying out procedures for the achievement of εὐδαιμονία (happiness) that included observations concerning the symptoms of the problem, the consideration of famous examples, and an outline of a practical "cure."⁵ But early Christian literature, for all its readiness to offer human models for emulation, does not regard every human problem as mere ignorance that can be treated with a prescription for ἀσκησις (training). A quick comparison of Eph 4:26 and Seneca's *De ira* or Plutarch's *De cohibenda ira* should sufficiently illustrate that some difference is in play. But if the life worthy of God cannot be taught purely by meditation on the human existence or by the lecture notes of a revered teacher, how then do we manage to shape the character of our students and fellow-believers? At this point, we are admittedly adjacent to vintage doctrinal debates of earlier generations, but the answers are not therefore less important. Our churches and seminaries

4. A. Bonhöffer, *Epiktet und das Neue Testament* (Gießen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1911) 374: "Man wird in der Tat schwerlich auch nur einen Zug christlicher Vollkommenheit, wie sie im Neuen Testament in Wort und Beispiel vor Augen geführt wird, entdecken, den nicht auch Epiktet als einen wesentlichen Faktor des wahrhaft sittlichen Menschen erkannt und gefördert hat."

5. P. Rabbow, *Seelenführung: Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike* (Munich: Kosel, 1954); I. Hadot, *Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung* (Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie 13; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969); H. G. Ingenhamp, *Plutarchs Schriften über die Heilung der Seele* (Hypomnemata 34; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971); P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophic antique* (rev. 3d ed.; Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 1993).

are holding seminars and conferences on spiritual formation, but for the most part, with only a few exceptions, leading biblical scholars are absent from the discussions. The same can unfortunately be said about matters of worship and even prayer. Every seminary worthy of its name boasts of at least one course on each of these subjects. But for all the interest, the available publications from the pen of biblical scholarship on early Christian prayer and worship, or relating more broadly to a biblical theology of worship, are extremely limited. As a result, we are confronted with an exuberant resurgence of interest in a significant area of the church's existence that is taking place almost completely without any meaningful dialogue with the biblical text or the world of early Christianity.

Finally, I would like merely to mention in passing a host of other matters that warrant careful investigation. Christian leadership, the mission of the church, equality within the congregation, these are all topics that—with the exception of the gender issue—have been largely neglected by our generation of biblical scholars at a time when the church is radically rethinking its fundamental assumptions. I am not suggesting that we precipitously abandon the research projects that have been helpfully highlighted by Craig Blomberg. Indeed, there is a natural and appropriate priority that academically trained biblical scholars will always accord to the inquiries of their guild. But what I am, in fact, advocating is that we intentionally discipline ourselves to integrate our thinking with the legitimate concerns of our constituents, contemplating questions not just from the academy but also from the pew and thereby bringing the light of rigorous scholarship to bear on "the most crucial needs of the church of Jesus Christ."