

## **Ethics and Community**

by Thomas L. Michaels\*

Christian ethics in the modern world seems to have generally taken one of two tracks. Either it has become ossified as a rigid set of rules and regulations of behavior or it has followed the world's example and reached a point of flexibility wherein nearly any activity is permissible and acceptable in a context where individual rights supersede any other consideration. These extreme points are often used to help describe the stance of conservative and liberal Christian factions. Unfortunately neither side has maintained a Christian perspective on ethics as found in the Pauline writings of the New Testament.

John Howard Yoder has sought to describe "the connection which might relate New Testament studies with contemporary social ethics" or "how Jerusalem can relate to Athens" and that "Bethlehem has something to say about Rome."<sup>1</sup> This writer concurs with Yoder's position that Jesus is relevant and necessary for normative Christian ethics.

The objective of this paper is to understand the Pauline context of Christian ethics by reviewing the historical basis for ethical behavior and then using this to discover the intentions of Paul as he instructs the churches of his time. We will close by examining our present culture from that Pauline context.

Ethical behavior in ancient times took on forms which dealt with the relationships between people. One of the earliest models is the Suzerain-vassal model on which many scholars believe the Mosaic covenant is based. According to *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* this covenant form "was merely a device for communicating values envisioning human relationships proceeding along some moral plan higher than coercive force."<sup>2</sup>

This Hittle formulation has several characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

**1. Identification of the covenant giver:** Here the great and powerful king identifies himself and bestows a gracious relationship upon an inferior. The exclusivity of this relationship is understood. Turning away from this relationship by the inferior is treason and subjects the inferior to a penalty of death.

**2. The historical prologue:** The idea of reciprocity is inherent in this section. The great king narrates his past actions for the benefit of the vassal. The appropriate response of the vassal then becomes gratitude and obedience to the requests of the great king.

**3. The stipulations:** This section describes the interests of the great

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king which the vassal is bound to protect under the covenant relationship.

4. **The provision for deposit and periodic public reading:** The treaty and its contents are incorporated into the operating value system of the vassal kingdom. It was read regularly to the people to keep it before them.

5. **The list of witnesses to the treaty:** The witnesses to the treaty were always deities or deified elements of the natural world.

6. **The blessings and curses:** Because the witnesses were considered supernatural, those same deities were to carry out the blessings and curses which would come for obedience or disobedience to the activities required under the treaty.

7. **The ratification ceremony:** The ratification ceremony was centered on the sacrifice of an animal. The animal represented the vassal and his kingdom who would be likewise slaughtered if the covenant was violated.

8. **The imposition of curses:** The implied right of the great king was to declare the covenant invalid upon the disobedience of the vassal nation. At such time the protection and benefits of the great king were withdrawn. If such occurred, then the logical and likely instrument of destruction of the vassal nation was the great king himself.

The similarity of this model to the Mosaic covenant is obvious. However, the most significant characteristic of this model for our discussion is the basis of relationship which is established therein. The Mosaic covenant including the laws and ordinances should not, therefore, be seen as a set of rules or regulations to be strictly accomplished by rote. Such a perception destroys the intent of the covenant to establish a basis for continuing relationship between the great king and the vassal.

A careful reading of the prophets will convey this as the claim which God brought against the people of Israel. The condemnation found in Micah and Amos (among others) relates an empty performance of rites which God rejects. The people's relationship with God has become ossified and meaningless in the activities of the daily lives. In other words, the ethical impact of their relationship with God is missing. The accusations of injustice, greed, and vice which God brings against Israel witness to this fact. Unless the vassal nation of Israel returns to its covenant relationship with God, God himself will destroy them. Ethics here is not separated from daily living or from a proper relationship with God. Ethical failure, in the form of breaking the covenant, however, is the basis for God's action against Israel and Judah.

The second model we wish to review is the city-state model of ancient Greece. The city-state was the unity of government in ancient Greece. The virtues of acknowledged by an community would be defined by that community. While the virtues of each city-state might be defined differently,

one's observance of these virtues would define one's citizenship. Freedom in this setting was defined as doing what one knew to be required. It was not doing whatever makes one feel good, as in our society today.

The final model for understanding ethical behavior comes from the Greco-Roman world in which Paul lived. The benefactor-client model dominated relationships in these times. The benefactor-client relationship was foundational for the Greco-Roman world. It defined relationships at all levels of society. John Chow provides the following list of common features of the patron-client relationship.<sup>4</sup>

1. It is an **exchange relationship**. The patron provides what the client needs and the client gives the patron the object or service he desires.

2. It is an **asymmetrical relationship**. The patron and client are not equal in terms of power or resources.

3. It is **particularistic and informal**. It strengthens the bonds between them.

4. It is usually a **supra-legal relationship**. It is based on mutual understanding and not on a worldly legal system. Hence it is often subtle.

5. It is a **binding and long-range relationship**. There is a strong sense of interpersonal obligation.

6. It is a **voluntary relationship**. However, the client may have no other place to turn to for help.

7. It is a **vertical relationship**. It discourages the multiple patron relationships, although clients may find commonality in their diversity through their patron.

Frederick Danker has done extensive work on the subject of patronage. He describes both Jesus and Paul as endangered benefactors.

In his earthly life Jesus manifested himself as a benefactor through mighty words and deeds. His crucifixion is the climactic expression of his willingness to accept the consequences of identifying with God's intention to relate to the needs of humanity at any and every social level.<sup>5</sup>

Paul's imitation of Christ places him in a similar endangered benefactor position which Paul occasionally describes in his epistles. However, such a model provides a sense that we are to become benefactors, even endangered, to those around us who do not know of Christ's benefactor on behalf of us all.

In the Greco-Roman world the interrelationship between households and *polis* is key to our understanding of Paul's writings.

Greco-Roman political writers understood the household to be the basic building block of the state. Cities, they

observed, are composed of households... Some political philosophers...gave the discussion of the household a specific form: Aristotelians and Neo-Pythagoreans were concerned about the relationship of authority and subordination between three pairs: husbands and wives, fathers and children..., and masters and slaves.<sup>6</sup>

That Paul highlights these same relationships in his letters should not be overlooked. The form of the first century church was the household. Therefore, these same relationships become important expressions of that first century Christianity.

Even more, the benefactor-client relationship often expanded the household influence far beyond a traditional twentieth century understanding. Such influence frequently reached into the homes of servants and slaves, business associations, community involvement, and religious expression. As an example, the range of influence of the imperial household reached far beyond the immediate royal family. Its expanse was as wide as the Roman empire.

Paul understood and used the concepts of *polis* and its unit, the household, to express the new relationships which Jesus Christ offers. He further used the reality of benefaction to express Christ's position in these relationships, and the Mosaic covenant, most often expressed as the Law, to define the part which God the Father plays in this new age. This idea can easily be identified in Paul's customary greeting, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" and his benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." The relationship of the household is expressed as God our Father and the benefaction relationship with Jesus in the expression of grace and the title of lord. Further uses of benefaction language can be found in Galatians 5:1-3 and Romans 5:6-8.

In Philippians Paul specifically conveys the image of the *polis* to the new community when we are "in Christ." In Philippians 1:27 and 3:20 Paul uses forms of this word to indicate our citizenship in a new community, the community of God, which has replaced our loyalty to worldly kingdoms. Jesus, through his death, has offered to become our benefactor. Only our response as faithful clients remain to claim this new relationship which is offered to us.

In benefactor-client relationships, there was often a broker who mediated the relationship. Jesus came from God to Israel in such a function. That is why he came not to the Gentiles but to Israel. God had functioned as the great king of Israel, as their benefactor. When the Jews crucified Christ, they also rejected the benefaction of God. But through this same act Jesus became the benefactor of all who believe in him.

With Christ as our benefactor we now must live our lives in accordance to the "law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2): To love our neighbor as ourselves (Gal. 5:14). Our love for God is omitted here, not because it is invalid, but because as we accept our position as clients of Christ our adoption by God is understood. Our relationship with God is secure and only our relationship with each other remains by which and through which the truthfulness and fullness of our relationship to God through Christ is testified to. Therein, the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit witness not only to our relationship with each other but to our relationship with God. They are the measure of our Christian ethics. In this relationship we are free in the classical sense: we are able to be and do what we have been created for. Like a fish out of water, our lives are threatened when sin removes us from relationship with God. Freedom and life is found only in the water for a fish, and only "in Christ" for humanity.

Christian ethics in this Pauline context then become the measure of our faithfulness to our covenant with God. It is not dependent on the strict obedience to parnetic material which Paul includes in several of his letters. Rather, in these portions of virtue/vice lists and household codes, Paul seeks to highlight the relationships and the actions which should be influenced and determined by our relationship "in Christ."

The benefactor relationship with Christ is also to be the model for other relationships we have. Paul repeats several times the relationships between master and slave, husband and wife, father and child. But Paul also announces the destruction of barriers which have prevented persons from relationships: Jew and Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Gal. 3:28).

The context for Christian ethics then runs parallel to that of the ancient Greeks: being "in Christ" becomes the community, the *polis*, wherein our virtues and actions are defined. The "head" of this nation is Jesus Christ. He is our Lord, our benefactor, by virtue of his death and resurrection on our behalf. By extending his grace to us and through our acceptance of it we establish a relationship through which we continue to experience his grace, and wherein we must continue to worship, praise, and serve him.

As Yoder has indicated, Christian ethics without a relationship to Christ is impossible. From this relationship, a relationship based on faith and the experience of Christ's grace, our moral actions and position must be drawn. We must define our ethical behavior in this relationship. This precludes the use of violence, violence which cannot be defined just in terms of the destruction of human lives, but rather more broadly in the destruction of our human relationships (1 John 4:20-21).

In Galatians, a structural analysis of the letter demonstrates that Paul and his opponents agree that the law cannot bring salvation. The Galatian Christians have misunderstood the message of the Judaizers and now seek the

law as a means to salvation. Paul's argument against his opponents essentially was that to associate oneself with the Jews is to identify with those who have rejected the relationship which God desires to have with his people. This identification as the people of God (Israel) was exactly what the Judaizers were seeking to have the Gentile Christians embrace, but to Paul it was to "cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4). Essentially Paul was viewing the nation of Israel through the eyes of the suzerain-vassal formula. God has rejected Israel because of its disobedience, because of its rejection of Jesus and its attempt to destroy him. To associate oneself to Israel is to associate with the way which God has rejected. Paul offers a better way.

The writings of Paul, especially from an ethical perspective, become quite understandable when viewed with an understanding of the benefactor-client model. Paul even views the Torah from such a perspective. The similarities between the suzerain-vassal formula and the benefaction model provides Paul with a good perception of the Torah at this point. The understanding of the Gentiles was also facilitated by use of the benefactor model, and through Paul's parallel use of the "in Christ" for the "polis" as a basis for understanding the virtues which Paul describes as fruits of the Spirit and through his drawing in parnetic material such as virtue-vice lists and household codes.

How then does this relate to our world today? The benefactor-client relationship is often dismissed as archaic or inappropriate in our society. In its place we find the declaration of individual rights. But such a condition destroys the traditional basis for relationships. As such we should expect the deterioration of relationships which we have experienced in our society. With no relationships of value to be maintained, there is no community. Without community the definition of virtues is absent and license is granted for any action which the individual deems to be appropriate. Freedom is redefined to include license rather than obligation. Even the sanctity of human life is sacrificed in such a state. Ethical behavior is impossible without community; and community fails without relationships; and relationships without a foundation by which they may be maintained cannot be valued or conserved.

What then is the answer to this dilemma? It remains as clear in our day as it was in Paul's. We who have the ears to hear must be obedient to God's call to demonstrate to this world the unique opportunities for relationships which brings value and purpose to life. We who find our community and relationship in Christ must witness to the validity of that relationship in this society. It will take more than words, more than demonstrations of love, more than reaching out to others. It requires drawing others into our community and discipling them, teaching them of the relationships to which Christ calls us all.

It means being an ambassador from the kingdom to which we now belong to those in whose communities of this world where we now live. Paul understood this need in his day (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

This is the ethical responsibility to which our faith calls us: not an ethic of rigid rules and regulations, not an ethic of license and individual rights; nor even an ethic of giving without an expectations. But rather an ethic which finds its expression arising out of a relationship with God through the grace of Jesus Christ. An ethic which possesses the reasonable expectations of response, not to our feeble efforts, but to God's work through us as an expression of our relationship to Him. An ethic which seeks to build a community in which the virtues of Christ are manifested and experienced by all who come. Being in Christ is our new *polis*, our new community. Being a child of God is the new household to which we belong within that community. Being grateful clients to our benefactor, our Lord Jesus Christ, we must act in ways which bring praise and honor to him. We will know we are fulfilling these responsibilities when we who are the branches, grafted into the vine which is Christ, bloom, and the fruits of the Spirit take form and ripen in us.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1972), 13.
- <sup>2</sup> George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, "Covenant." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1201.
- <sup>3</sup> "Covenant," 1180-1182.
- <sup>4</sup> John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 30-33.
- <sup>5</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Greco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1982), 423.
- <sup>6</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in it's Social Environment* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 123.

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