



Rethinking "New Testament Ethics"

Author(s): Leander E. Keck

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (Spring, 1996), pp. 3-16

Published by: [The Society of Biblical Literature](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3266815>

Accessed: 06/04/2012 10:39

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Society of Biblical Literature is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Biblical Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

RETHINKING “NEW TESTAMENT ETHICS”*

LEANDER E. KECK

Yale University, New Haven, CT 06510

The subfield called “New Testament Ethics” needs rethinking. Yet there is little agreement about why this is the case or what the purpose of doing so ought to be. Some preliminary remarks therefore should set this presentation on course.

To begin, New Testament ethics—understood loosely for the moment as its moral teaching—has become as much a lightning rod for today’s controversies in our discipline as was the theme of history and faith a generation ago. This time, however, the controversies are deeper, and sometimes more bitter, because more is at stake. Then, the debates were over the mythological character of the New Testament’s theology; today, they concern the role of social factors such as patriarchy and androcentric thinking in its moral teaching. The issues raised by this shift can make ours the most yeasty time for biblical study since the historical-critical method was developed over a century ago—if we rise to the occasion, not by defending the indefensible or debating the *adiaphora* but by rethinking New Testament ethics overall.

Moreover, despite the growing corpus of monographs and articles dealing with New Testament teaching about behavior, it is not evident that the New Testament has any ethics to be studied. Indeed, what William Wrede said about New Testament theology can be said about New Testament ethics as well. Setting out to write the obituary of New Testament theology nearly a century ago, Wrede claimed that what then was called New Testament theology “makes doctrine out of what itself is not doctrine” but mostly “practical advice, direction for life, instruction for the moment.”¹ Likewise, much that passes for New Tes-

* The presidential address delivered 18 November 1995 at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

¹ William Wrede, “The Task and Methods of ‘New Testament Theology,’” quoted from Robert Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (SBT 2/25; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1973) 75.

tament ethics makes into ethics what is not really ethics at all but a heterogeneous mass of imperatives, counsels, parables, narratives, and theological statements that pertain to the moral life without actually being “ethics.” It is possible, of course, that the New Testament has its own characteristic mode of ethics. If so, that needs to be made explicit, because only then can the New Testament’s ethics have its own say in the wider field of ethics, and of Christian ethics in particular, instead of being a quarry from which various stones are cut to be used as needed. Indeed, one aim of this presentation is to call into question the common way of speaking, namely, the *use* of the New Testament in Christian ethics.

One reason that conversation between the subfield of New Testament ethics and Christian ethics is not flourishing is that we have made it more difficult by losing the focus. Not only has it become ever more difficult to define the field, but, despite a plethora of studies of specific topics like divorce or of particular authors like Paul, few books present and analyze the subject matter as such. Moreover, given the variety of material and its rootedness in specific situations, it is understandable that we study in detail each tree and the soil in which it grew but neglect the ecosystem of the forest itself. And some of us, I suspect, might not have noticed had not feminist hermeneutics called the ecosystem into question.

Such considerations imply the agenda for this address: first, to define the field by clarifying both what we are looking *at* (the New Testament) and what we are looking *for* (its ethics); then to analyze the rhetoric of the New Testament’s ethics; and finally to reflect briefly on the implications of what has been only begun.

I

The Source for New Testament Ethics

“New Testament ethics” is the ethics of the New Testament texts, period. It is neither the ethics of early Christianity, nor of groups within it, nor of alleged sources such as the Signs source that many think was used in the Fourth Gospel. The general public might regard this definition as self-evident, but among us it needs to be justified.

In this context, the justification will be historical, beginning with the insistence that in no way does this definition imply that either the New Testament or its ethics is to be isolated from its natural habitat in emerging Christianity, or that early Christianity is to be sundered from its Greco-Roman environment or separated from its complex relations with the various Judaisme of the day. Our reconstructions of the past, tenuous and hypothetical though they must be, are essential for a historical understanding of the New Testament; nonetheless, recovering early Christian history is not the goal itself. There is something odd,

I confess, about insisting on this at an Annual Meeting of the Society of *Biblical Literature*. What makes it odd is that in our legitimate and relentless quest for historical origins, antecedents, parallels, and influences to explain each writing and its alleged sources, we may have forfeited, unwittingly, a fully historical understanding of the New Testament as a whole, namely, as canon.

The New Testament does not account for itself historically, partly because it is not a representative anthology but one weighted, both theologically and geographically, toward Paul and his successors. It is this elemental fact that makes the reconstruction of early Christian history necessary if we are to understand this remarkable literary phenomenon; at the same time, this same elemental fact makes a historical interpretation of the New Testament unavoidable. What is commonly overlooked, however, is the implication of this dual observation—namely, that for *us* the reconstructed history of early Christianity provides answers to questions generated by the existence of these twenty-seven writings and their formation into the canon. But it is equally the case that for *those who lived* that history, beginning already with Paul, the situation was the reverse: for *them* the existence of these texts and their formation into the canon provided answers to the problem of early Christian history as they faced it. Although many factors were at work in the creation of these twenty-seven pamphlets, as also in their continued use and eventual canonization, it is unlikely that we would have these texts at all had the authors, users, and canonizers regarded the Christianity they knew and faced as flawless. In other words, the New Testament as canon, like its constituent pieces before they were canonized, not only expresses the faith and ethos of early Christianity but also addresses them in order to correct them. To overlook this is to fail to understand the New Testament historically. On the whole, the same is true of much of the Old Testament as well.

This, of course, is exactly what some forms of feminist interpretation have been telling us, being convinced that the New Testament texts and their emerging canonical status provided too many wrong answers because they inhibited, thwarted, and finally stifled alternatives. Consequently, a truly historical reading of the New Testament must be subversive: it must undermine what was made central by hierarchic and androcentric ecclesiastics, and then rehabilitate what the texts and the canonizers made marginal.² Assessing this hermeneutic lies beyond the scope of this presentation. What cannot be overlooked, however, is that this construal of the relation between the New Testament texts and the reconstructed early Christian history serves the discipline very well, for it forces into the open the need to distinguish one from the other and so compels us also to decide what the interpreter of the New Testament owes the text and what one owes the alleged history that has been reconstructed.

² See, e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

Given the current fascination with social location, it will surprise no one to hear that what one owes the text and the alleged history in which it was created and preserved depends partly on the content and nature of the text, partly on the identity of the interpreter, and partly on the relation between text and interpreter, including the relationship created by historical-critical inquiry. Nowhere does our self-celebrated diversity go deeper than here, where everyone decides what one owes the text and what one owes the history we create by inferring the past according to our canons of rationality. Much as this watershed calls for serious reflection, that too cannot be done in this context. It must suffice to observe that because we are as contingent and biased by our preoccupations as the writers, editors, and canonizers, what we owe the text is willingness to listen and learn by trying to see what *they* saw before telling the text what it would have said had its writers been as wise and as moral as we. As a minimum, we should take the text as seriously as we take ourselves.

There is indeed a place for *Sachkritik*, an assessment of the degree to which the text does justice to the subject matter, but that should follow patient work in the service of the text lest prejudice be recycled as wisdom. This willingness to stand, at least momentarily, with the New Testament authors is difficult, especially with regard to ethics, because most of us find objectionable some of what those authors wrote, such as Paul's counsel about submission to governing authorities (Rom 13:1–7) or the Pastor's insistence that women be silent (1 Tim 2:11–15),³ just as we find objectionable some of their silences, notably about slavery. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that our *Sachkritik* too is subject to someone else's *Sachkritik*.

What we owe the past, insofar as we can recover it accurately, is a serious effort to understand it on its own terms, just as we want our successors to understand us by acknowledging our insight and achievement while neither overlooking nor repeating our mistakes. In other words, if our work is to be truly historical, we will also ask why the authors deemed objectionable some of the alternatives *they* faced. The reconstructed past becomes Manichean if we simply assume that the losers must have been heroic victims because we disagree with the winners. The lived past, like the lived present, is too deeply ambiguous for such simplicities.

The Meaning of New Testament Ethics

Whereas the first part of the definitional task dealt with *where* we look for New Testament ethics, the second concerns the *what*—namely, the meaning of the word “ethics,” particularly when used of the New Testament. Some precision is needed because the word has many referents, ranging from general

³ Whether Paul too insisted that women be silent in church depends on whether 1 Cor 14:33b–36 is part of his letter to Corinth or an interpolation (as I think).

moral teaching to codes of conduct. And while "ethics" is often used interchangeably with "morals," they are not the same.

Some years ago, a historian of philosophy, Vernon J. Bourke, introduced his book *History of Ethics* by noting that "from the time of the first Greek philosophers, ethics has had but one meaning: it is the reflective study of what is good or bad in that part of human conduct for which man has some personal responsibility."⁴ More recently, Wayne A. Meeks identified ethics as a form of second-order discourse, which he called "morality rendered self-conscious"; that is, "it asks about the logic of moral discourse and action, about the grounds for judgment, about the anatomy of duty or the roots and structure of virtue," whereas morality "names a dimension of life, a pervasive and, often, only partly conscious set of value-laden dispositions, inclinations, attitudes and habits."⁵ In other words, if morality describes and prescribes proper behavior as well as proscribes what is unacceptable, ethics is critical reflection on the prescribed and proscribed, the allowed and the forbidden, the urged and the discouraged. The subtitle of Paul Sampley's recent book on Paul's ethics points to the same understanding: "Paul's Moral Reasoning."⁶ In this light, the apostle's staccato imperatives in Romans 12 express morality, but they are not ethics. To paraphrase Wrede, unless this distinction is observed, we will make into ethics what is not really ethics. It is as important to observe this distinction as to observe that between New Testament ethics and early Christian ethics.

This elemental and common distinction has, however, been more widely ignored than observed in discussions of the New Testament, partly because the paramount concern has been to present what the New Testament says about matters of interest to current readers—marriage and divorce, war and peace, loyalty to the state and dissent, or the role of women in the home and in public institutions—and partly because the texts usually combine ethics and morals, because their admonitions and arguments are embedded in particular social settings which they are trying to support or modify. Indeed, sometimes what is important for ethics is expressed in a simple phrase such as "for the Lord's sake" (e.g., 1 Pet 2:13) or even in a single term such as "sanctification." When faced with such terse, formulaic, or allusive language, the student of New Testament ethics must bring to the surface, make explicit, the rationale or "moral reasoning" built into the exhortation, for this is the real "stuff" of ethics even if grammatically it is neither the subject nor the main verb of the sentence.

Since the New Testament is a collection of religious texts, the contents of

⁴ Vernon J. Bourke, *History of Ethics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968) 8.

⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1993) 4.

⁶ J. Paul Sampley, *Walking Between the Times: Paul's Moral Reasoning* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

its moral reasoning are largely theological. But not exclusively so. For instance, in 1 Thessalonians 4, after Paul grounds an exhortation in God's will for human sanctification (1 Thess 4:3), he goes on to urge his readers to live quietly, mind their own business, and work with their hands, so that they will earn the respect of outsiders and be dependent on no one (1 Thess 4:11–12). Thus he begins with a biblical-theological warrant that might have sounded odd in Gentile Thessalonian ears and moves to considerations that had become familiar through popular moral discourse, as A. J. Malherbe has demonstrated.⁷ Given the diverse grounds of moral exhortation in the New Testament, a major task is twofold: first, to analyze the material formally in order to identify the reasons given for or against behavior—the warrants and sanctions—and then to develop a taxonomy of adduced reasons. That would yield a useful overview of the “moral reasoning” of the New Testament.

Since the subject matter of ethics is the rationale that undergirds enjoined morality, studying New Testament ethics requires us to take the stated rationale, mostly theological, seriously instead of transforming it into a religious rationalization for alleged real reasons, usually construed as political strategies for gaining and maintaining power. That there were struggles over authority and power in the early Christian movement, virtually from the start, is clear enough, even if the embittered schism reflected in the Johannine epistles was not the pattern everywhere. But it is one thing to be alert to the influence of social, economic, and gender factors on the way people think, another to become so preoccupied with such matters that the study of New Testament ethics abandons its religious and theological content. The fact that secularized moderns (and self-proclaimed postmoderns) do not take religious and theological issues seriously enough to fight over them does not mean that the ancients did not do so. Indeed, Luke Johnson's article, published in this journal, has documented amply just the opposite.⁸

Morals can be taught, and usually are, without making explicit the sapiential judgments and the ideas that inform them; but there is no ethics without ideas, and no New Testament ethics without theological ideas. Surely the New Testament authors, and many of their initial readers, thought so too. Taking the theological warrants and sanctions seriously as ideas does not, of course, pre-judge their adequacy, either in their own time or in our own. Whether they were profound or superficial, broadly humane or parochial, liberating or constricting, seminal or already gone to seed, can be judged only if the ideas themselves are pondered and compared with actual alternatives available to the author.

The vocabulary of ethics used in the major philosophical traditions is gen-

⁷ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

⁸ Luke T. Johnson, “The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Rhetoric,” *JBL* 108 (1989) 419–41.

erally absent from the New Testament. For example, the term central in Aristotle's ethics (μεσότης, the mean) never appears, not even to be criticized; nor does the common term εὐδαιμονία (well being, or happiness).⁹ Moreover, even when some terms common in contemporary ethics discourse do appear, they are used in quite different ways. For instance, ἀρετή (virtue) appears five times, but is never emphasized as a human character trait that should be developed.¹⁰ Although Paul uses the common mandate to live according to nature (κατὰ φύσιν) to condemn what he regards as sexual perversion (Rom 1:26–27), he never makes it the warrant for his exhortations. When he uses terms basic to Greco-Roman ethics, such as δικαιοσύνη (justice or righteousness) or ἐλευθερία (freedom), he does not bother to tell his readers that he uses them somewhat differently; like the rest of the New Testament writers, he stands in a different stream of tradition and is at home in a different kind of community.

Early Christian moral teaching did not enter a vacuum. Indeed, many early Christians probably had more in common with some of their non-Christian neighbors' sensibilities and morals than they did with the conceptual rationales that undergirded them. Concern for honor and reputation, deference to patrons, and order in the family were rooted in Greco-Roman morality long before Christian preaching and theology began to provide new reasons for customary behavior or to call for new patterns of living.

Nonetheless, the ethics of the New Testament manifests a distinct and characteristic mode of moral reasoning, comparable to the way an archipelago is evidence of a distinct mountain range in the ocean. Explorers and sailors will plot the relation of one island to another, noting a mere reef here, a barren rocky islet there, as well as larger land masses with unique vegetation on the lee side of their central hills. Likewise, we carefully plot the differences between what Paul, John, Hebrews, Mark, and 1 Peter have to say, and account partly for their differences by appealing to circumstances, literary forms used, and the author's place in church and society. But to understand this archipelago as a whole, one must go below the surface to see whether what formed it has a discernible pattern, a shared origin in deep impulses and upheavals. In other words, for New Testament ethics, as for its theology, "unity" is the wrong word, for the quest of unity sends us looking for conceptual, systemic coherence in which ideas fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, some of whose pieces are missing.

⁹ Because the qualifications for the office of bishop (1 Tim 3:2–7; Titus 1:7–9) do not include the noble virtues, the late Georg Strecker suggested that aspirants for the office came from the lower classes ("Ziele und Ergebnisse einer neutestamentlichen Ethik," *NTS* 25 [1978] 11). More important, however, is the possibility that the absence of this vocabulary, and that of ancient ethics generally, reflects the socioeconomic and hence educational level of the New Testament writers.

¹⁰ Of the five uses of ἀρετή, two refer to God's ἀρετή (1 Pet 2:9 [plural, suggesting mighty acts for human benefit]; 2 Pet 1:3); the author of 2 Peter urges readers to add virtue to faith, and knowledge to virtue without specifying further what he means (1:5). Paul includes it in a list of things one should *think* about, saying not a word about the discipline needed to achieve it (Phil 4:8).

However, acknowledging that such a search is misplaced does not preclude looking for a constancy in outlook and a persistence in ways of thinking that give these texts a character sufficiently clear to allow us to differentiate them from other archipelagos and land masses.

The defining feature of New Testament ethics is its orientation to an event, namely, the event of Jesus (including his resurrection and exaltation to God's right hand), and to the community that resulted. On the other hand, the Greco-Roman philosophical traditions commonly proceed by analysis based on the observation of the nature of things, including human experience and its vicissitudes, and on the nature of the good. Their center of gravity is not in a pivotal event, as in the New Testament. Even the *Haustafeln* in Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Peter have been pulled into the orbit of the christological appeal. This persistent reference to the Christ-event reflects the fact that Christianity offered Christ-wrought salvation, whose acceptance entailed changing certain aspects of the inherited behavior while reinforcing those deemed not inconsistent with the emerging Christian ethos. In other words, what distinguishes the ethics of the New Testament from the philosophical tradition is its appeal to the shape of Jesus' life, to what had happened through it, as well as to what happened to those who believed that this was the salvific work of God. And this is what links it to the Old Testament, where this event-oriented mode of ethics was learned. Moreover, since the believers and their new communities were part of the still-uncompleted event, one task of New Testament ethics was to distinguish what is appropriate mandatory behavior now from what must await the future consummation. It is at just this point that some of the New Testament's ethics engages critically the ethics and morals of the early Christians.

II

Having defined the subject matter rather narrowly as the rationale that either undergirds or is built into the moral teaching of the canonical texts, the next step is to grasp its rhetoric. Here, "rhetoric" refers to the construal and configuration of ideas and convictions adduced in support of the morality advocated; it pertains to the function and role of ideas in persuading readers that a deed or stance is indeed proper, correct, or mandatory (or the opposite). A comprehensive, systemic analysis of the rhetoric of New Testament ethics is still lacking. Indeed, the field of Christian ethics itself lacks an agreed-upon rhetoric, for as Edward L. Long has noted, "the last fifty years have seen Christian ethics shaped and reshaped in so many ways that the process is probably better thought of as kneading than as remolding—and the end is not yet."¹¹

¹¹ Edward LeRoy Long, "Modern Protestant Ethics," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (ed. J. F. Childress and J. Macquarrie; rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 384.

Since this presentation is but a beginning, it concentrates on the rhetoric about the deed and the doer. The distinction between deed and doer is not absolute, of course, but a useful way of focusing the analysis on one thing at a time.

The Deed

Of concern here is not the deed itself but its grounding, that is, its *warrant* and its *telos*, both of which are intrinsic to the deed itself. While morals too have warrants, ranging from "Because I said so!" to "You know that's no way to live," in view here are the nature and function of warrants in ethics, that is, when morality is made self-conscious. "Warrant" anchors the action in reality and so intends to persuade the mind by exposing the inherent, necessary, substantive connection between a specified reality and the deed. Warrants are adduced in order to persuade the doer who, presumably, has an aversion to inconsistency and contradiction. Warrants assume that one is more likely to do what is right if one knows why it is right and how that rightness is grounded in the kind of reality that matters.

Characteristically, the New Testament writers appeal to the new reality created by the Christ-event. So Paul, in seeking funds for the Jerusalem church, reminds the readers of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Best known, of course, is Paul's use of the christological hymn in Philippians 2, which accents Christ's humbling himself as the warrant for the appeal to "do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves." A warranting event can also be the doer's experience of redemption, as when Paul asks, "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom 6:2)—a fine instance of the role of logical consistency in a warrant. Probably the most axiomatic biblical warrant is the will of God, sometimes expressed as, "You shall be holy because I am holy," making it clear that the will of God reflects the nature of ultimate reality itself.

Whereas the warrant stands behind the behavior advocated, so to speak, the *telos* lies ahead of it, because the *telos* of a deed is its complete, uncompromised actualization. In this context, *telos* is not the result that the doer intends but that toward which the deed inherently points, since the vicissitudes to which it is subject frustrate its complete actualization. No deed is fully good, just, or fair. Still, whatever degree of goodness, justness, or fairness it has points to the good, the just, and the fair. Consequently, one can either conclude that this disparity is permanent or envision a situation, inevitably future, in which it is overcome, and so strive to minimize it in one's doing. In biblical perspective, the futurity of the warrant is expressed as eschatology. In the New Testament, both the warrant and its *telos* are derived largely from the Christ-event, which, as the continual reference point of its moral reasoning, is itself reinterpreted as it is correlated with questions of behavior.

In antiquity, no one emphasized the *telos* more than Aristotle, who began his *Nichomachean Ethics* by noting, “it has been well said that the Good is that at which all things aim” (ἄγαθὸν οὐδὲ πᾶντ’ ἐφίεται, 1.1.1). While most ends are pursued for the sake of other ends, the supreme good is to be pursued for its own sake; knowledge of this highest good is essential for the conduct of life. The highest achievable good is happiness (εὐδαιμονία), living well (εὖ ζῆν), and doing good (εὖ πράττειν, 1.4.2).¹² Nevertheless, for Aristotle the drive toward the good remains completely within the realm of the human.¹³ The same must be said of Stoics like Epictetus, who quotes Zeno, “To follow the gods is man’s *telos*” (*Disc.* 1.20.15). Later, Marcus Aurelius asserts, “Now the *telos* for rational beings is to submit themselves to the reason and law of that archetypal city and polity—the Universe” because “even the most trifling things should be done with reference to the *telos*” (*Meditations* 2.16).

Little of this philosophical teleology appears in the New Testament.¹⁴ True, the word *telos* appears forty times, but its most common meaning is “end” in the sense of terminus or result, as in Rom 6:22, which says that the *telos* of sanctification is eternal life (see also 1 Tim 1:5; 1 Pet 1:9). What interests New Testament writers is not the *telos* of human action but the *telos* of God’s or Christ’s activity in redemption, whether this be perfecting believers so that they may enter God’s presence (as in Heb 10:14; 12:23), or emancipating the whole creation from death (as in Rom 8:21), or uniting all things in Christ (as in Eph 1:10)—to cite but a few examples. Since the future of the warrant is its *telos*, both are intrinsic to the right deed, which is itself part of the action of God. Therefore Paul can tell the Philippians that “God is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure”—the latter being the true *telos* (Phil 2:13). So too, 1 John says that if we love God, “God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:11–12). These quotations point us to the other focus of these reflections—the doer.

The Doer

While a full discussion of the doer includes the nature and history of the self in its communities (i.e., anthropology), the focus here is on a major, but not

¹² H. Rackham notes that the whole texture of Aristotle’s ethics is colored by his teleology, for *telos* “means not only nor primarily aim or purpose, but completion or perfection: the aim of a living organism, the final cause of its being, is to realize the potentiality of its nature, to grow into a perfect specimen of its species. Hence comes the assumption that not only can conduct . . . be centred on a single aim, from which the entire ethical system can be deduced, but also that this aim consists in the full development and exercise in action of man’s natural faculties” (*Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics* [trans. H. Rackham; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926] xxii).

¹³ So Gerhard Delling, “Telos-Aussagen in der griechischen Philosophie,” *ZNW* 55 (1964) 31.

¹⁴ So also Gerhard Delling, “τέλος,” *TWNT* 6.55.

sole, factor in moving the doer to act in a particular way—namely, *sanctions*. Sanctions reinforce the warrant and its *telos* by specifying considerations that should make doing more likely. Whereas the warrant and its *telos* appeal to the mind, sanctions address the will and feelings. The New Testament's heavy reliance on sanctions reflects a significant feature of the writers' anthropology—the double but unstated conviction that knowing the good or the right does not suffice to move one to do it and, conversely, that one is more likely to act rightly when one knows how the consequences of doing or not doing will affect the self. In other words, sanctions specify the doer's stake in the warrant and its *telos*; they keep deeds from being mere preferences or matters of taste. Sanctions have a degree of coercion because they must override the inhibiting power of factors already in place (such as habit or disposition), as well as the coercive capacities of other sanctions, like the threat of prosecution or persecution.¹⁵

Whereas the warrant and its *telos* are intrinsically related to the deed, the sanction is extraneous to it. The difference is clear in Col 3:5–11, where the two are juxtaposed. The author relies on an extrinsic sanction when he urges readers to put to death what is earthly in them—immorality, impurity, passion, and the like—because God's wrath is coming. Were this reference to God's wrath a warrant, it would say how the rejected behavior is contrary to God's holy nature and so evokes his wrath; as a sanction, it motivates a change in behavior by threatening punishment. The rationale is not unlike, "Stop doing that, or you'll be in trouble when your father gets home." But when the author goes on to urge also that readers put away anger, wrath, malice, and so on because "you have put on the new *anthrōpos*"¹⁶ which is being renewed in knowledge after

¹⁵ The advantage of distinguishing warrant from sanction is clear when one reads Amos Wilder's *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teachings of Jesus* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1950), which built on Hans Windisch's study of the Sermon on the Mount. Both Windisch and Wilder saw in the Jesus tradition two types of material: the eschatological, which announced the kingdom's coming, and the sapiential, which urged people to do what is right in view of the discernible nature of God. Wilder then distinguished what Jesus required (repentance) from the reasons for doing so, which he called "sanctions." Because he did not distinguish warrant from sanctions, however, he had to distinguish formal from material sanctions. As a result, he called the eschatological material the formal, external, secondary sanction, while the primary sanction was the sapiential material. This produced the strange assertion that although "the nearness of the Kingdom of Heaven . . . is the dominant sanction for righteousness," it is "a formal sanction only, secondary to the essential sanction," God's nature (p. 133). Much of what Wilder wrote about the primary sanction should have been classified as warrant.

For an appreciative appropriation of Wilder, see Ted Peters, "Eschatological Sanctions and Christian Ethics," in *Hope for the Kingdom and Responsibility for the World: The 1993 Frederick Neumann Symposium on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Princeton Seminary Bulletin Supp. 3; ed. D. L. Migliore; Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1994) 129–52. Like Wilder, Peters writes only of sanctions, and so distinguishes extrinsic from intrinsic sanction, and in passing calls the latter "an ethical warrant" (p. 129).

¹⁶ NRSV: "self"; REB: "the new human nature."

the image of its creator," he provides the warrant that makes clear the inherent connection between deed and its grounding reality.

When a sanction is already in place, it needs only to be brought to bear. This is particularly evident in sanctions that appeal to honor and shame, or to a sense of group identity. Thus Jesus warrants the demand to love the enemy by referring to what is required to be a child of the heavenly Father who sends rain on just and unjust alike, but then he reinforces it with a sanction based on the group's sense of special identity, "If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matt 5:47). Paul assumes that honor and shame have motivating force when he adduces them as a sanction in his appeal for money: "We intend that no one should blame us about this liberal gift . . . for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of men" (2 Cor 8:21 RSV). So too, the author of 1 Timothy appeals to honor and shame in addressing Christian slaves, "Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be defamed" (1 Tim 6:1 RSV).

The use of the antithetical twins honor and shame reminds us that the same content of the sanction—especially the coming judgment—can be used either positively as reward to reinforce a desired action or negatively as punishment to discourage it. Thus, the admonition to slaves in Colossians begins by referring to the coming judgment as reward: "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord, not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward," and then refers to the judgment as punishment, "for the wrongdoer will be paid back for the work he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven" (Col 3:23–4:1 RSV).

The New Testament writers do not shun reward and punishment as sanctions. The notion that the good is to be done for its own sake, not with an eye on future reward, simply never appears, for New Testament ethics is not oriented toward the good but to God's will, character, and activity as actualized in the Christ-event. And God is not indifferent to human behavior. In his own way, William James saw this when he wrote that God is to be conceived as "a power not ourselves . . . which not only makes for righteousness, but means it, and which recognizes us."¹⁷ In James's language, in other words, because God "means it, and . . . recognizes us" the coming judgment is the ultimate sanction. Thus Paul says that in life or death the aim is to please Christ, "for all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor 5:10 NRSV).

¹⁷ William James, *The Will to Believe*, quoted from Paul Lehman, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 197.

III

Clearly, with these remarks the rethinking of New Testament ethics is barely off the blocks; many additional matters require consideration if one were to continue along these lines, among them the relation of warrants and sanctions to loyalties to persons and kin, or to groups, as well as loyalties to racial and ethnic identities. Also needing thought is the role in moral reasoning of what is neither warrant nor sanction but something in between—a reference to what is to be borne in mind, to what is fitting or appropriate. Needing attention too are what is done “for the sake of” someone and the role of gratitude in motivating the doer. Still, perhaps enough has been sketched to permit some concluding observations about how this approach might help the ethics of the New Testament have it own say in the general field of ethics and of Christian ethics in particular.

To begin with, when the New Testament’s ethics has its own say, it speaks not alone but in concert with the ethics of the Old Testament, in which some of its warrants and sanctions are rooted. To outline this would entail more than noting the multiple and subtle forms of intertextuality; it would also show that in much of the Old Testament as well the reality to which the warrants refer are events understood as acts that disclose the character of God. There too the ultimate sanction is God’s verdict on the Day of Yahweh. Moreover, the prudential ethics of the wisdom traditions has its New Testament counterpart in the *Haustafeln* and the Epistle of James. In no way does the New Testament’s focus on the Christ-event replace the focus on the God-events in the Old Testament, because for the New Testament it is axiomatic that both the warranting events that have occurred and the ultimate sanction yet to come express the nature and will of the same God. Consequently, the moral reasoning of the New Testament is finally unintelligible apart from the Old Testament, and so in order to be itself, requires a biblical ethics in which each Testament retains its own witness to the selfsame God.¹⁸

Next, the formal analysis outlined here can be used to get at the moral reasoning of any text. Consequently, it can facilitate a serious conversation between students of New Testament ethics and colleagues in the wider field, especially those in Christian ethics.

Third, the formal distinction between warrant and sanction is significant for Christian ethics because it exposes what is materially important—the warrant’s focus on the Christ-event and its impact on the believer in the community that exists in Christ’s name. Insofar as Christian ethics is not to be confused

¹⁸This formulation appropriates for ethics Brevard S. Childs’s insistence that in a truly biblical theology, each Testament must retain its own integrity (*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993]).

with the ethics of persons who happen to be Christians but rather is ethics that is deliberately Christian, it is obligated to be centered on and informed by what is pivotal in the New Testament because it is the canon of the community. The aim, of course, is not simply to repeat the New Testament but to learn from it how to correlate the moral life of the believer in the community of faith with its christology. One has a right to expect that Christian ethics will reflect the New Testament's characteristic and persistent conviction that the Christian life is a response to something decisive and redemptive that has happened. One function of New Testament ethics is to make it difficult for Christians and for Christian ethics to forget this.

Finally, since the distinction between warrant and sanction reveals also that in the New Testament the ultimate moral sanction is God's coming judgment, being instructed by the New Testament entails also restoring to its rightful place the theme of our accountability to the God to whom both Testaments point. Then the primary question would be not, What must/ought/should/may I *do*? or What is the right moral calculus for deciding it? but rather, To whom am I accountable, and for what?¹⁹ Giving this question its due would help us not only rethink New Testament ethics, but renew its relation to theology as well.

¹⁹ See my "Accountable Self," in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Modern Interpreters* (forthcoming).