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Evangelism, Ethics, and Eschatological Existence

Michael R. Weed

The present essay will examine the integral—essential and necessary—relationship between ethics and evangelism; it will contend that the evangelistic message of the early Christian movement was inescapably eschatological and ethical. Second, this essay will argue that distortion, attenuation, or loss of this relationship accounts for a general malaise among the churches and spiritual and moral slackness in the lives of individual Christians. Third, the essay will identify basic components in the complex process whereby deterioration of this critical interrelationship between ethics and evangelism has come about—particularly among Churches of Christ. Finally, initial steps will be suggested toward a recovery of evangelism, ethics, and eschatological existence.

The Gospel and Ethics

Although moral considerations varied among the Hellenistic religions of the first century, it is fair to say that morality did not play a major role in the common religiosity of the period.[1] Christianity (and Judaism) differed markedly in this regard. Christianity made exclusivist claims and called its members to follow a rigorous and distinct way of behaving. Conversion was not simply a matter of participating in a rite of initiation and accepting certain traditions. Rather, conversion involved a fundamental alteration in one's basic perception of reality, in one's values, and in the structure of the self.[2]

Not surprisingly, Christians could speak of their initiation as a death to the old self and to the old way of life and as a "new birth" and the beginning of a new way of life. They were initiated into what was in principle an all-encompassing reorientation of the self. Thus Paul

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could state not only that the Christian is a new person, but also that the Christian sees the world in a radically new way. It is, for the Christian, a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17).

While the fundamental connection between evangelism and ethics is reflected throughout the New Testament, we obtain instructive glimpses of it in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians and Colossians. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul's earliest extant letter, we see the apostle exhorting young converts regarding how they ought to live. Specifically, he reminds them of instructions they had earlier received regarding "how you ought to live and to please God" (4:1). While Paul here is particularly concerned with marriage (vs. 4), he also voices a general concern for the Thessalonians' "sanctification" (vs. 3) and "holiness" (vs. 10).

In Colossians 3, in the broader context of a discussion regarding baptism, Paul gives two lists of vices to be avoided (vss. 5, 8) and one of virtues (vs. 12) to characterize the new life in Christ. Significantly, Paul uses the language of disrobing or undressing as one takes off the "old nature" (vs. 9) and of dressing or re-robing as one puts on the "new nature" (vs. 10). Here he extends the symbolic meaning of baptism beyond immersion in the baptismal water and invests both the preparation and the aftermath of the baptismal practice with ethical import.

For Paul, the very act of admission into the community through the rite of baptism was an initiation into a radically new way of life (Rom. 6:1-23) empowered by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13; 2 Cor. 1:22; John 3:5).

Such texts make it apparent not only that early Christian preaching consisted in teaching the basic beliefs and rites of the Christian movement, but also that the very process of conversion involved ethical instruction.[3] Moral instruction did not just closely follow after preaching and conversion; catechetical and paranetic material were integral to missionary preaching from the very beginning of the Christian movement.[4]

The eschatological announcement of God's salvific actions in Christ ("God was in Christ . . .") leads directly to and provides a ground for the moral imperative ("put on," "live," "walk . . ."). Accordingly, the early Christian ethic was thoroughly an eschatological one; it was an ethic which radically interpreted and reordered all of life on the basis of God's in-breaking in Christ's death and resurrection. As eschatological existence, Christian existence stood in considerable tension and even disjunction with the surrounding world and its values and practices (Rom. 12:1f).

Christians knew that "the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31). They lived "in the flesh but not according to the flesh," "in the world but not of the world." They lived by faith and not by sight. They possessed knowledge and insight, wisdom and discernment—but not according to the conventional knowledge, wisdom, and prudence of the world.

Evangelism and Ethics in Churches of Christ

Church history testifies to the fact that the integral relationship between evangelism and ethics is crucial for the integrity of the Christian movement.[5] The following comments will examine the relationship between evangelism and ethics in the Restoration Movement and the Churches of Christ in particular. It will be argued that Churches of Christ have undergone a significant shift which has seriously distorted this relationship and damaged Christian faith and life.

This shift has occurred through an admittedly uneven and complex process, and therefore an attempt will be made to relate it first to general sociological "laws" which appear to apply. Second, it will be argued that specific tendencies long present within Churches of Christ have also fundamentally, if inadvertently, contributed to the process.

From its diverse beginnings, the Restoration Movement in the United States was committed to evangelism. Churches were deeply committed to restoring biblical faith and practice, and they strongly

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emphasized the importance of evangelism. In the early years sermons from the pulpit, "gospel meetings," debates with other religious groups, and countless publications all sought to proclaim the gospel. In time, radio evangelism was used and, still later, other techniques were developed such as "cottage meetings" and "campaigns for Christ." All of these efforts, supported by "personal work" seminars and "soul winners' workshops," were explicitly directed toward evangelism—preaching and teaching the gospel.

Those familiar with the Churches of Christ will recognize that this description has radically changed in the last three decades. Debates, gospel meetings, cottage meetings, and campaigns have largely disappeared. Even the term "evangelism" has largely been subsumed under the vague and more inclusive euphemism "outreach" (except in foreign mission work, where "evangelism" may still occur). Preachers are no longer called (nor view themselves as) "evangelists," but tend to become "ministers" or various kinds of ministry specialists (Associate, Pulpit, Youth, Involvement, etc.).

To be sure, churches engage in a number of activities with a quasi-evangelistic or "outreach" intent. They offer a variety of services and engage in a number of ministries with the intent of reaching new groups. Numerous "practical" seminars attract outsiders and insiders alike with advice and insight regarding such matters as marriage enrichment, family relationships, sex education, drug abuse, stress reduction, and the family budget. Aerobics classes, golf tournaments, ski trips, and spring musicals are subsumed under the heading of "body life" if not under "outreach."

In short, Churches of Christ appear increasingly at home in the world. The wisdom of many churches is not drawn from insight into the eschatological situation and loyalty to the cross. More often than not, it reflects the wisdom of the present age—it is the age-old wisdom of the shrewd of every age—those who figure the angles and percentages, minimize risks, and keep their options open.

What is rapidly disappearing from too many churches is any regular and clear presentation of the gospel and the claim which the

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confession of Christ's lordship makes on the lives of believers. In fact, some such churches appear to be uninterested in evangelism and incapable of ethics. Too often the whole apparatus of church life and its supporting institutions function as if intended to prevent any serious encounter with the Christian message and its eschatological ethic.

Sociological Perspectives: Piety to Prosperity

While it is not particularly flattering, it is instructive to view the broad changes among Churches of Christ in the wider context of well-documented and widely discussed shifts which have radically affected a number of denominations.

American church historian Winthrop Hudson makes two relevant observations regarding the demise of evangelistic churches of the 1880s. First, Hudson observes:

> In a very real sense the churches had become victims of their own success. . . . [P]roud of their achievements and pleased that their mission had been so largely accomplished, the churches relaxed and made peace with the world.

He continues:

> The progression which followed was clear—discipline disappeared, evangelistic fervor faded, faith lost its force, and the churches, living at peace with the world, lost their sense of a distinct and specific vocation in society and devoted their energies to social activities, humanitarian enterprises, and the building of costly edifices. . . . [T]he churches, succumbing to complacency, had embraced the world.[6]

Second, Hudson notes that the theology driving the evangelistic churches trapped in the above process was seriously flawed. In short, it was truncated by the revivalist churches' understanding and practice of the evangelistic task itself. For

> . . . the tendency of the revivalist was to oversimplify theological issues and the ultimate result was to render faith devoid of content.[7]

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Clearly these two factors are closely interrelated. When expedience and "preachableness" control and progressively simplify the content of the Christian faith, the church lacks necessary resources and thus is left doubly vulnerable to the pressures and seductions of the surrounding society.

Although Hudson is discussing the manner in which evangelical churches succumbed to the world over a hundred years ago, many will recognize the situation he describes. Disappearing discipline, loss of evangelistic fervor, preoccupation with social activities, costly edifices, and a general loss of direction—all are depressingly familiar to too many contemporary Christians.

Hudson's analysis sheds light on the manner in which Churches of Christ have undergone a radical shift in focus and identity. The social and economic status of Churches of Christ has undergone drastic change over the last four or five decades. From a largely southern, rural, uneducated, lower and lower-middle class movement, Churches of Christ have "stormed across the tracks" and moved up in social and economic status. Church of Christ members nationwide—not just in the South—are becoming urban, educated, and middle class. In sociological terminology, Churches of Christ have shifted from being a sect to being a denomination.[8]

Viewed in light of this process, the shift within Churches of Christ appears to be one more among many instances of what is almost a sociological "law." That law is that the virtues of hard work and honesty promoted by sectarian religion tend to enable one to prosper and climb the class ladder. In short, piety may promote prosperity. Unfortunately, a second law tends to be a corollary to the first: increasing preoccupation with this-wordly concerns and accomplishments is inevitably accompanied by loss of focus and spiritual slackness. Piety is exchanged for pleasure and profit as many who once hungered and thirsted for righteousness now satisfy themselves with the lesser gods of financial security and physical comfort.

A Flawed Gospel

Further light may be shed on this process by noting other factors contributing to the vulnerability of Churches of Christ to the

above-mentioned sociological laws. A plausible case may be made that much "gospel preaching" actually proclaimed a seriously abridged or attenuated version of the gospel and, indirectly at least, led to critical distortions of the Christian ethic. At least four separable but complexly interrelated factors appear to have contributed to this development.

First, the general social and religious environment seriously influenced Restoration practices regarding preaching and ethics in at least two ways. Having the luxury of existing in a society marked by both interest in and knowledge of the Bible—a society with some residue of knowledge and commitment to general biblical beliefs and morality—Churches of Christ developed a tendency to neglect or ignore those important truths shared in common with others. Attention tended to focus on certain fine points of doctrinal differences with other religious groups.

Because one could assume a fair level of moral agreement in this quasi-Christian environment, fundamental ethical instruction was largely ignored and moral issues were dealt with on a highly select basis. Preaching, for example, might inveigh against the evils of dancing; but it remained embarrassingly silent regarding matters such as racism. Unlike the Mennonites and Amish, Churches of Christ by and large adopted the morals of their Bible Belt neighbors and did not develop a seriously sectarian—much less eschatological—lifestyle.

Second, an evangelistic approach evolved in which baptism was authorized but de-eschatologized. The Bible was rationally defended as God's infallible and inspired word. Baptism was then vigorously argued for in the broader context of the Bible's authority as a practice or ordinance required for salvation. Emphasis fell upon the necessity and correct mode of baptism. Ironically, in this approach, the early Christian view of baptism as the linchpin connecting gospel and ethics (e.g., Rom. 6; Col. 3:1-14) was radically altered. Frequently, baptism was presented as an almost arbitrary requirement "making no more sense than Naaman's seven dips in the Jordan River." In this manner the meaning and significance of baptism as the connection between the eschatological message and the eschatological life simply disappeared.

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Occasionally, baptism was virtually divorced from ethics altogether. T. W. Brents, for example, in The Gospel Plan of Salvation, widely read among members of the Church of Christ for over one hundred years, is representative of standard preaching and teaching regarding baptism.[9] For example, when the case of Cornelius's conversion (Acts 10) was cited in "gospel preaching," it was emphasized that in spite of his good morals (vss. 2, 22), Cornelius still needed to be baptized. Regarding Cornelius, Brents could say, "... as his conduct was as good before birth as after it, it follows that the birth did not consist in a reformation of life in this case."[10] Elsewhere Brents asserts, "The new birth does not consist in a reformation of life."[11]

Third, Church of Christ members in effect were "twice born spiritually" but "once born morally." Brents's assertion that Cornelius was as good before baptism as after vividly illustrates an understanding that the morality of Christians was not particularly "Christian"—and was certainly not eschatological. Rather, just as Cornelius had access to natural moral knowledge prior to his conversion, the morality of Christians was constructed by reason, common sense, and conscience—drawing on natural law, conventional morality, and scripture. Sanctification, in so far as it was considered, was the accomplishment of the rational agent living in accord with God's will.

Significantly, the role of scripture in this approach was largely that of providing prohibitions to serve as guidelines as to permissibility of actions. The unfortunate legacy of this approach has been an intellectualist and juridical (or legal) model of the Christian moral life—a model which brings many attendant problems.[12] Sin, for example, is removed from the context of the covenant relationship with God and is viewed primarily as guilt incurred for a violation or infraction of a rule. Consequently, moral actions become equated with rule- or law-keeping rather than living in a right relationship with God (or, more precisely, a right relationship with God is simply equated with law-keeping).

Not surprisingly, a desire to be right tends to be equated with a desire to be faithful and overshadows any desire to be compassion-

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ate. This leads to a tendency to neglect matters such as motivation (clearly one can do right for many reasons) and character formation. Moral deliberation takes the form of complicated casuistry refining the requirements of the rules and locating the limits and loopholes in an intricately constructed legal system.[13]

This approach almost invariably creates a vast seemingly "neutral" area where, in the absence of specific prohibitions, one has no particular moral obligation. That is, where there is no specific command against a particular behavior it is assumed to be morally licit. (Fortunately, these neutral areas were often filled by conventional morality rather than human caprice.)

While many good and faithful Christians lived better than this approach called for them to live, many did not; they became victims of works-righteousness and the divisiveness it spawned.

Fourth, against this background it was almost inevitable that the "discovery" or "recovery" of grace in the Churches of Christ (beginning some time in the 1950s) would not only lead many to reject the juridical or legal distortion of the Christian life; it also caused many to shun the disciplined life and moral obligation per se. In a radical distortion of the apostle Paul's teaching, grace was reduced to a lessening of standards and expectations.[14] Reacting to the very real abuses of the juridical model of the Christian life and tired of trying to be religious over-achievers, many simply "accepted themselves" and equated mediocrity with spiritual maturity. Grace was trivialized as clearing the way for sporadic church attendance, social drinking, and various forms of self-indulgence correcting perceived deprivations of the religious past.[15]

Grace did not mean a recovery of the radical message of the gospel, the significance of baptism, and the eschatological thrust of the Christian ethic.

These four factors have worked together to bring about the present situation, wherein the church has lost its grip on the connection between evangelism and ethics and finds itself doubly vulnerable to the moral and spiritual influences of the surrounding world.

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The Present Situation

American culture no longer provides an environment supportive to general moral values. Although it is variously described ("postmodern," "secular," and "pluralistic"), two fundamental components illustrate the character of modern American culture: liberal social theory and the therapeutic movement.

The residue of liberal social theory marks our society with a radical commitment to individual rights without accompanying attention to responsibilities. This emphasis, coupled with the therapeutic movement (whatever the relative merits of particular counselors and therapies), promotes individualistic and narcissistic preoccupations—introspection, self-centeredness, uncertainty, dependence, and irresponsibility.

By accident and by choice this is the cultural wind now blowing through the churches. Churches of Christ, long accustomed to depending on their environment to sustain basic values and morals now find themselves reflecting the values and morals—radical individualism and self-preoccupation—of a less benign environment. In part, this is also the unintended result of attempting to become relevant to the modern mind. In this process Christians have become preoccupied more with becoming modern than with being Christian.

Ironically, many churches have become "relevant" at the cost of having anything to say to a world struggling with real moral and spiritual problems. The fact that few Christians even turn to the church for fundamental direction or moral guidance is indicative of the degree to which the church has lost its distinctive character. Thus unable to offer light or act as leaven, countless churches dissipate their energies in diversions and pathetic attempts to make themselves attractive to a buyers' market.

Toward Recovery

The following suggestions are offered in an attempt to provide some concrete and specific steps toward correcting the present plight of the church.

First, however unpleasant and unflattering they may be, in-depth analyses of the situation must be encouraged. Inaccurate

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analysis should be corrected rather than suppressed.

Second, better knowledge of Restoration history appears requisite in understanding the present situation. (Ignorance accompanying the irony of being an "anti-tradition tradition" does not serve well at this point.)

Third, the quest must be abandoned for some technique or "quick fix" for what is fundamentally a question of spiritual integrity. Contrary to the dominant mood of the age, we must recognize that "spiritual problems cannot be solved by administrative techniques."[16]

Fourth, a Restoration theology about the Bible must give way to a theology of the Bible—biblical theology. A recovery of the eschatological horizon of the Christian faith is crucial. The church must regain a vision of itself as a prophetic community—a community living under and seriously wrestling with the implications of the eschatological word.[17] This will entail leaders and congregations who encourage and expect prophetic preaching that draws out the implications of the word for both public and private morality.

Further, there is an urgent need to recover the meaning of baptism as an eschatological act linking the gospel—the eschatological message—with ethics—eschatological life in the community of the end time. Such an understanding must be incorporated into our common practice of baptism (not to mention worship and Lord's Supper) for it to become significant for the life of the church.

Finally, ministries and methods should be subordinated to the church's eschatological message. Ministries should be deployed that clearly follow from and are congruent with the message and task of the church. Only those methods that are appropriate to the church's unique identity as the community of the end time should be adopted. In this fashion the church may find a way beyond the equally disastrous alternatives of maintaining a sterile orthodoxy or embracing every new trend or fad.

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NOTES

[1] Arthur Darby Nock, Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background (New York: Harper, 1964), 17f.

[2] Wayne A. Meeks, The Moral World of the First Christians (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 13.

[3] Meeks, 115.

[4] Wolfgang Schrage, Ethics of the New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 132.

[5] Problems emerged in the first few centuries of the church which brought about serious consequences. The development of two separate levels of morality, the separation of spirituality from morality, the rise of sacramentalism, the formalizing of the doctrine of original sin, and other developments variously distorted the relationship between evangelism and ethics and variously contributed to spiritual and moral confusion. Later, the Protestant Reformation's "grace alone" would unintentionally give rise to the familiar distortions of "cheap grace."

[6] Winthrop Hudson, The Great Tradition of the American Churches (New York: Harper, 1953), 201-02.

[7] Hudson, 147.

[8] Literature in this area is vast. Two helpful review articles are: Erich Goode, "Some Critical Observations on the Church-Sect Dimension," and Allan W. Eister, "Toward a Radical Critique of Church-Sect Typologizing," both in Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1:1 (Oct. 1961).

[9] T. W. Brents, The Gospel Plan of Salvation (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, fourteenth edition 1957, first published 1874). Brents was still in use as a text in Christian colleges and schools of preaching at least into the mid 1970s.

[10] Brents, 196. Ironically, while Brents is concerned to distinguish the new birth from merely moral change, the result of his argument is that new birth is not directly related to any moral change.

[11] Brents, 194. It is interesting and instructive to compare Brents with another less influential Restoration classic, R. Milligan's Scheme of Redemption (St. Louis, 1869), 405-06: "Without the regenerating influence of

the Holy Spirit producing in our hearts faith, hope, love, and repentance, Baptism is but an abortion, and can of course, be of no benefit to any one. There must of necessity be a renewing influence of the Holy Spirit before there can be a normal birth of water. But the man who has been begotten by the Spirit of God is, according to the Divine arrangement, introduced by his Baptism into the Kingdom of Christ (John 3:5), made partaker of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), and constituted an heir of the eternal inheritance" (Rom. 8:12-17).

[12] See Michael R. Weed, "The Moralistic Experience: An Inquiry," Restoration Quarterly, 15:2 (1972), 65-83. Also see David Chadwell, Beware of the Leaven of the Pharisees (Abilene: Quality, 1985).

[13] Numerous church publications carry on complicated arguments that rival those of Medieval scholastics, if not the Pharisees themselves. Such arguments are frequently irrelevant to matters of Christian living and conducted in an unedifying manner.

[14] See James W. Thompson, "Paul, The Law, And Legalism," Faculty Bulletin of the Institute for Christian Studies, No. 5 (1984), 51-60.

[15] One of the most destructive aspects of this caricature of grace for the life of the church has been caused by at least a generation of "anti-legalist" teaching to youth who, not surprisingly, have little knowledge of basic Christian teachings and have come to think of the church as existing to provide entertainment and social outlets.

[16] Abraham J. Heschel, Man's Quest for God (New York: Scribner's 1954). The complete quotation is as follows: "A variety of suggestions have been made, e.g., to bring the liturgy up to date by composing shorter and better prayers; to invite distinguished speakers, radio-commentators and columnists; to arrange congregational forums, panels and symposia; to celebrate annual projects such as 'Jewish Culture Sabbath,' 'Jewish War 'Veterans Sabbath,' `Boy Scout Sabbath,' 'Interfaith Sabbath' (why not have a 'Sabbath Sabbath'?); to install stained glass windows; to place gold, silver or blue pledge-cards on the seats on which people would pledge regular attendance; to remind people of their birthday dates. Well-intentioned as these suggestions may be, they do not deal with the core of the issue. Spiritual problems cannot be solved by administrative techniques" (52).

[17]Recovery of an understanding of the church as an eschatological community might help overcome the current impasse regarding the role of women in the church. Both liberals and conservatives draw upon nonbiblical sources to underwrite their positions. Liberals draw on 19th century political theory, while conservatives draw on other traditions. Neither take eschatology seriously (though liberals inaccurately use Galatians 3:28 to portray the church as an egalitarian or rights community and disingenuously call it "eschatological").

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CONTRIBUTORS

The following contributors to this issue are faculty or staff members of the Institute for Christian Studies.

Holloway, Gary, B.A., Freed-Hardeman College; M.A.R., Harding University; Ph.D., Emory University. Librarian. Church History.

McNicol, Allan J., Pat E. Harrell Professor, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Yale University; M.A., Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Biblical Theology.

Reynolds, J. Robert, B.A., Abilene Christian University; M.A., Texas Tech University. Ph.D. candidate in Spanish at the University of Texas. Director of Admissions.

Thompson, James W., A. B. Cox Professor, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Union Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. President of ICS. New Testament, Hellenistic Literature, Homilitics.

Weed, Michael R., Billie Gunn Hocott Professor, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Emory University. Ethics, Theology, Church History.

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