

35. LIFE OUTSIDE CHURCHES

Having discovered a 'unified field' by which to discern moral reality in Parts 3–4, Part 5 considers some approaches to the details of our lives. This chapter considers our relationships to others who don't identify with Christ. We consider four strategies for relating to them.

Augustine's favourite way of describing human society was that despite all our diversity, there are 'only two orders, as we may call them, of human society: and, following our Scriptures, we may rightly speak of these two as cities'. That is, it's as if two groups are tangled together. There are those with an eye on the new future (ch. 24), the members of 'the heavenly city'. There are those with an eye on their 'flesh' (ch. 9), the members of 'the earthly city'. 'Each desires its own kind of peace, and, when they have found what they sought, each lives its own kind of peace.'¹

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1. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, tr. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), p. 581. Augustine has a number of Scriptures in mind, many of which picture the citizens of these two 'cities' living alongside each other in a sort of a tangle: Ps. 119:19–20, 54; Matt. 5:13–16 (perhaps); Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:14–18 (but noting the 'entanglement' seen in 1 Cor. 5:10); 2 Cor. 10:2–3; Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20; 1 Pet. 1:1, 17; 2:9–11; and Heb. 11:13.

Citizens of the heavenly city traverse among those of the earthly city who don't identify with Christ. But how? Various groups become schools of moral formation that imperceptibly alter what we and others think and do (ch. 8). We cannot antisocially deny our sociality; we have to move in these groups, and they do affect us.

But we find our truest inclusion 'in' Jesus Christ (ch. 14), and we learn new patterns of relationship in his school of moral formation (ch. 34). Once this process has begun, the Christian community – the 'heavenly city' – 'live[s] an alternative way of life in the present social setting, transforming it, as it [can], from within'.² These words are a neat summary of what happens as people gradually find their true human identity in Christ, and live a truth not yet known by the people around us.

The biblical authors present a spectrum of responses to the wider social environment. This set can act as a useful toolkit for imagining and discerning what might be the best and most useful response to various neighbours in various situations. We'll each tend to have a favourite on this spectrum, but the expansion of our moral imaginations will consist in becoming more skilled at the other responses.

Cooperation is the default posture. 'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone' (Rom. 12:18, NIV). Christians are uncontroversially able to cooperate with many people and their various plans and purposes. The prophet Jeremiah's exhortation to Jewish exiles to seek Babylon's welfare (Jer. 29:7) is an Old Testament analogue.

We see this cooperation when slaves wholeheartedly assist masters, knowing Christ as their new, true Master (Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–23; 1 Tim. 6:1–2). In this new knowledge, the master is actually an equal of sorts (ch. 31). Similarly, Peter exhorts cooperation with various humanly constituted expressions of authority (literally, 'every human creation', 1 Pet. 2:13).

This relaxation about cooperation relies, it seems, on humanity's participation together in a created order (ch. 22). We often agree to cooperate with another's sharing of created goods, or with their view of proper sociality, or with the conditions they set for it. This posture also frees Christians from expectations to overturn systems, as in the case of the socially powerless first-century slave (ch. 31). The effect upon social settings of these apparently powerless people will be intangible and long term – an unpredictable 'ripple effect' (p. 124).

2. Miroslav Volf, 'Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter', *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994), p. 20.

However, this default response easily becomes the only response conservative Christians practise. Well-resourced modern Christians do need to experiment more with the other responses I'll outline.

Subversion isn't always a negative social force. The classic Old Testament subversive is Daniel, who willingly cooperates with the Babylonian regime, yet conducts his practices of diet, prayer and integrity so cleverly as to shock the despot Nebuchadnezzar to his core.

Jesus' metaphor of light shining in darkness (Matt. 5:14–16) describes lives so attractive that others cannot help themselves: 'they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (v. 16). As an example, he promotes and attends lavish dinner parties for outcasts rather than merely for friends, family and rich contacts (Luke 14:12–14; cf. 5:29–32; 7:34).

Jesus spoke in a context where the Father to be praised was generally known. The apostles Peter and Paul extend his concept to settings where God was unknown. Peter pictures Christians responding to contempt with hopeful gentleness (1 Pet. 3:14–16), and Paul pictures Christians responding to wariness in others with the salty speech of grace (Col. 4:5–6). Speech that's 'always full of grace' (Col. 4:6, NIV) reminds us of the allied practice of forgiveness and reconciliation (ch. 29). Christians gracefully subvert vengeful and meritorious cultures through practices of forgiveness, and by their thirst for reconciliation.

The philosopher Wittgenstein, known for his quirky insights, makes a comment that helps me visualize what's going on in these practices:

We must begin with the mistake and transform it into what is true. That is, we must uncover the source of the error; otherwise hearing what is true won't help us. It cannot penetrate . . . To convince someone of what is true, it is not enough to state it; we must find the *road* from error to truth. I must plunge again and again in the water of doubt.³

So neighbour A listens to talkback radio's narratives of strength, and promotes an ideology of vengefulness. Neighbour B listens to narratives of random human origins, and has an ideology of futility and despair. Neighbour C listens to economic narratives of growth amid scarcity, and lives out an ideology of endless acquisition. Neighbour D feeds on magazine narratives of individual beauty and merit, and arduously pursues an ideology of self-improvement.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, tr. A. C. Miles, ed. Rush Rhees (Retford: Brynmill, 1979), p. 11e.

But gentleness, hope, generosity and grace uncover an error at the root of his and her conception of true humanity, plunging each neighbour into doubt about his and her ideology. We may also *speake* this gentleness, hope, generosity and grace into situations at work, in schools, hospitals, political parties and businesses. Christians are joyfully subversive in these off-balancing, atypical responses. Neighbours will probably censor us in these moments, since we *will* be undermining some dominant school of moral formation. But someone will quietly listen and may, like Nicodemus, creep up at night to find out more (John 3:1–2).

There's no guarantee that these neighbours will always respond with interest or praise to God, and we don't subvert only to achieve that result. Others may just as likely respond in sharp defence of their ideology, as when my friend proposed 'grace' and 'forgiveness' as candidates for his children's school's list of values. 'They fell on me like wolves,' he recounted. But even so, when Christians are gentle, others can start to doubt their muscular systems of vengeance. When Christians are joyfully hopeful, others may doubt their despair. When Christians are lavishly generous, endless practices of acquisition are destabilized. When Christians are graceful, it becomes possible to loosen the bonds of self-improvement.

Exposure is the 'whistle-blowing' posture of open challenge and rebuke to others. Although some modern Christians specialize in it, this posture appears infrequently in the New Testament letters. Its deeper roots are in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament (such as the 'watchman' metaphor of Ezek. 3:16–19 and 33:1–9), and in the polemical aspects of Jesus' own ministry (e.g. Matt. 23:12–35; Luke 6:42–52).

But those attacks have a particular place in the Bible's story arc (ch. 19), so exposure was not Paul's primary posture for relating to others (1 Cor. 5:9–10, 12). Even so, Jesus' light metaphor is extended in the exposure of 'fruitless works of darkness' (Eph. 5:11), and such moments of exposure seem to have been the flashpoint for the outright disagreements and return expressions of contempt seen in the starkly polarized communities of 1 Peter 4:3–4 (a text that also hints at the next posture, separation).

But what would trigger such exposure of others? It relies upon a capacity to discern (p. 312) a practice as 'fruitless' and 'dark'. The moral meaning of the metaphor 'fruitless' is technically hard to pin down. What distinguishes a 'fruitless' from a 'fruitful' practice, and what makes a practice 'dark'? In Titus 3:14, continued involvement with those who have serious needs is not 'unfruitful'; and 'dark' practices seem, roughly, to be those that no one wants seen. However, we need more than a semantic analysis to find the substantive moral content of these metaphors. We need a 'unifying field' (ch. 26) in order

to gauge what constitutes the kinds of evil that deserve exposure, and to focus our mind on evaluating the actions, culture or policy of some group in which we're situated:

- We might confront refusals to acknowledge the good *order of creation*, whether in practices of (e.g.) rapacious strip mining, unsustainable logging, excessive biomedicine, or the complete refusal of sexual propriety. (In Australia, Melinda Tankard Reist has launched a sustained assault on bizarre social trends to 'pornify' women and young girls.⁴)
- We might confront narratives of society that don't understand how people are to be with and for each other, as learnt in *Christian community* and by attention to the *new future*. We might oppose practices of deliberate exclusion, or contrived competition, or the glorifications of isolation or tribalism or xenophobia. (At every federal election in Australia it becomes necessary to oppose the political exploitation of latent racism against asylum seekers.)
- We might confront refusals of the just and merciful *character of God*, whether in practices of extremely vengeful justice, or in practices of lax injustice. (In my home state of New South Wales, prisons have become holding pens for difficult people who struggle with mild intellectual disability and multiple substance abuses. Many within the system do their best to help these people. But the people of my state prefer simplistic 'law and order' policies to properly devised care for these difficult and troubled people.)

Of course, the Christian logic of exposure will always prompt the mantra that 'we have no right to impose our values on others'. I'll return to this objection later (ch. 47).

Separation appears as almost a 'monastic' option in 2 Corinthians 6:17 – 7:1. It alludes to Old Testament covenant-restoration after idolatry, but Paul doesn't specify what moral referent is analogous to fleeing idolatry. He does warn against too-close associations with those of an opposing world view (vv. 14–16), and then refers more generally to 'washing ourselves clean from every impurity of the flesh and spirit' (7:1). The Corinthians' temptation to follow teachers that were more glamorous may also lie in the background.

Therefore, we cannot encode the moral referent in this section into a set

4. Melinda Tankard Reist (ed.), *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls* (North Melbourne, Vic: Spinifex, 2009). Online: <<http://www.melindatankardreist.com>>.

of rules. That is, we cannot simply dream up some list of bogeys from which to separate (e.g. dancing, smoking or drinking). Rather, the possibility of separation helps us to avoid passively endorsing or participating in social evil solely because our moral imagination has not extended to *exiting* the group that sponsors it. The time comes simply to refuse playing by the rules of some other group's school of moral formation. When the apostles declare 'we must obey God rather than any human authority' (Acts 5:29, NRSV; cf. 4:19–20), they serve notice that they're taking a different path. Others must then determine whether to oppose them, join them or leave them alone.

Sometimes, a literal geographical separation may be the best response. A Dark Ages monastery, a modern Christian school, a hospice or a home for pregnant women who wish to keep their children may become the best expression of Christian polity. Such communities can operate as islands of life shaped by the gospel. (However, we must note the danger of idiosyncrasy and abuse when separation cuts others *and their leaders* off from accountability to a wider church, so that these communities degenerate into mere sects: terrible prisons of body and spirit.)

Less dramatically, separation may take the form of leaving a job, moving house or refusing further contact with some acquaintance. But in the light of Paul's passing remark that Christians don't voluntarily 'leave the world' (1 Cor. 5:10b), this posture cannot possibly be the default. At most, separation is an emergency condition.

In summary, then, New Testament authors can imagine a variety of postures towards others. Settling on which posture to deploy is a context-dependent act of discernment (p. 312). We each tend to have a favourite, with various edifices of justification based on this favourite. Therefore, we may each need to experiment with our less-favoured options, in order to have a better 'tool set' for use when the time requires it.