

# Moral Formation according to Paul

The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics

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**Baker Academic**  
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# Introduction

## *Paul's Moral Teaching in Context: Living Worthily of the Gospel*

For generations of interpreters, the central Pauline message is the human plight in sin and God's unconditional acceptance. Both evangelists and theologians have maintained that justification by faith is the center of Paul's theology and the culmination of the journey from plight to solution. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, organized Pauline theology according to this narrative, placing the Pauline message under two headings: "Man prior to the Revelation of Faith" and "Man under Faith."<sup>1</sup> Prior to the revelation of faith, the individual is subject to flesh and the power of sin. The solution to the plight is the new existence effected by the individual's experience of the righteousness of God by faith in Jesus Christ. Bultmann, like many others, interprets justification by faith as the individual's initial acceptance by God, the culmination of the narrative.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's letters indicate, however, that the readers stand not at the end of the story, but in the middle. The readers stand within a corporate narrative between their original conversion and the end. Paul consistently reminds his readers of both their new beginning in Christ (cf. Rom. 6:1–4; 1 Cor. 1:26–2:5; 2 Cor. 1:18–20; Gal. 3:1–5; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 1:5) and the final day (cf. Rom. 2:5, 16; 13:2; 1 Cor. 3:13; 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4). Thus his concern is not only to evoke faith and to baptize, but to complete the narrative of the community's existence.

1. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:190, 270.

2. See Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification*, 60.

Paul envisions a day when believers are “changed” (1 Cor. 15:52), “conformed to the image of [God’s] son” (Rom. 8:29; cf. Phil. 3:21), sanctified (1 Thess. 5:23), and “blameless” (3:13). The success or failure of his ministry depends on whether they will reach this goal. His communities will be his “boast” (2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 2:16–18; 1 Thess. 2:19–20) at the day of Christ. He is the anxious father of the bride who hopes to present the church as a “pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2) and the priestly servant (*leitourgos*) who presents the gentile converts to God “sanctified in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:16). If he fails, he will have “run in vain” (Gal. 2:2; 4:11; Phil. 2:16).

If the transformation of believers is the ultimate goal of Paul’s work, it is also the focal point of his theology,<sup>3</sup> as his letters indicate. He frequently employs the language of formation to describe the moral progress of the converts. Recognizing that his converts will be “conformed to the image of the Son” (Rom. 8:29; cf. Phil. 3:20–21) at the final day only if they are “being transformed into the same image” (2 Cor. 3:18), he describes himself as the mother about to give birth, addressing the Galatians as “my little children, with whom I am in the pangs of childbirth, until Christ is formed (*morphōthē*) in you” (Gal. 4:19). Introducing the section on moral conduct in Romans, he says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (*metamorphousthe*) by the renewing of your mind” (12:2). Thus Paul provides the vocabulary for what would later be called spiritual formation. He envisions moral transformation—a metamorphosis—in the present as a prelude to the ultimate transformation at the end. Thus he writes letters to ensure that his goal is fulfilled.

Morna Hooker has described this transformation as “interchange” in which Christ “became what we are in order that we might become what he is.”<sup>4</sup> Although the language comes from Irenaeus (*Haer.* 5, praefatio), it accurately describes the consistent theme of Paul’s letters. He summarizes this theme in the creedal statement in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Similarly, he writes to the Romans, “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom. 8:3–4 NRSV).

Paul’s understanding of transformation is evident in his letters. As the introduction to the moral advice in Romans 12:2 indicates, to be “transformed by the renewal of [the] mind” is to live according to the moral advice that

3. See Schnelle, “Transformation und Partizipation,” 58–75.

4. Hooker, “Interchange in Christ and Ethics,” 5. Hooker explains that the metaphor comes from the “interchange” of roads at a busy intersection. When the car breaks down and is towed in a new direction, interchange occurs. This provides the metaphor for the Christ event, in which Christ leads humans in a new direction. See also Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul*, 24.

follows (12:3–15:13). In describing himself as the mother giving birth, Paul introduces his instructions for appropriate conduct in Galatians by describing his labor pains until Christ is “formed” among the readers (Gal. 4:19). Paul never uses the word “ethics” but speaks instead of being transformed (Rom. 12:2), living “worthily of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27; cf. 1 Thess. 2:12, “worthily of God”), walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), and doing the will of God (Rom. 12:2; 1 Thess. 4:3).

The central place of moral transformation for Paul is reflected in the shape of his letters, all of which contain instructions for appropriate conduct. Contrary to popular interpretation, this instruction is neither the appendix nor the application of Paul’s theological discourse, but his primary concern. His ethical advice is not limited to a separate section at the end of the letters. As Paul Schubert demonstrated long ago and rhetorical critics have reaffirmed, Paul sets the agenda for his writing in the opening thanksgiving of the letters.<sup>5</sup> In 1 Corinthians he expresses the hope that the community will be “blameless at the day of Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8). He gives thanks for the Thessalonians’ “work of faith,” “labor of love,” and “steadfastness of hope” (1 Thess. 1:3). He prays to God that the Philippians will be “blameless” at the end and that the Thessalonians will be “blameless in holiness” (1 Thess. 3:13) at the final day. Thus the moral instructions are the means toward the transformation of the community.<sup>6</sup>

This metamorphosis in conduct will set the community apart from its surroundings, creating a moral counterculture. Paul resocializes his converts into a group ethos consisting of shared behavioral norms and conduct that maintain the cohesion of the house church. Transformation occurs when believers are “not conformed to this age” (Rom. 12:2). Paul even writes to gentile communities, encouraging them not to behave “like the gentiles who do not know God” (1 Thess. 4:5). When he discovers incest in the Corinthian church, he shames his readers, declaring that they are engaged in a vice that is not even practiced among the gentiles (1 Cor. 5:1). Those who do God’s will are “blameless and pure, children of light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation,” among whom they “shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15). With his low view of gentile morality (1 Thess. 4:5; cf. Rom. 1:18–32), Paul describes a sharp break in the conduct of believers, who have been rescued

5. Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings*, 27.

6. Paul frequently uses forms of the Greek word *morphē* (“form”). Jesus takes the path from the form (*morphē*) of God (Phil. 2:6) to the form (*morphē*) of a slave (Phil. 2:7). Paul describes himself as “being conformed (*symmorphizomenos*) to his death” (Phil. 3:10) and assures his readers that “we . . . are being transformed” (*metamorphoumetha*, 2 Cor. 3:18). He encourages them, “Be transformed” (*metamorphousthe*, Rom. 12:2), anticipating the time when all will be “conformed” (*symmorphous*, Rom. 8:29; cf. Phil. 3:21) to the image of the Son. Current usage of terms like “Christian formation” and “spiritual formation” ultimately traces back to Paul’s language of formation and transformation.

from the power of sin (cf. Rom. 6:1–23). Thus Paul indicates that those who are being transformed practice a distinctive morality.

### The Coherence of Paul's Moral Instruction

Although the moral transformation of the churches is the most consistent feature of Paul's catechetical instruction and letters, discovering the coherence of his theology and ethics remains a challenge.

First, Paul's moral instruction has been a problem for those who place the doctrine of justification by faith at the center of his thought;<sup>7</sup> that is, if God offers salvation without human deeds, why does God make ethical demands? If God is at work in believers "to will and to do" the good (Phil. 2:13), why does Paul encourage them to "work out [their] own salvation" (Phil. 2:12)? Why does Paul declare that God offers salvation apart from works (cf. Gal. 2:16; Rom. 4:2), but give thanks for the Thessalonians' "work of faith" (1 Thess. 1:3)? If salvation is by grace, why does Paul indicate that we shall stand before the judgment seat of God to give an account for our deeds (2 Cor. 5:10)? Paul declares that God has delivered believers from the power of sin (Rom. 6:1–11), but encourages them not to let sin reign in their bodies (Rom. 6:12). Rudolf Bultmann shaped the discussion of Pauline ethics in the twentieth century with his suggestion that the indicative—God's righteousness revealed in Christ—and the imperative stand in a paradoxical relationship in Paul's writings.<sup>8</sup> The demand is at the same time the gift of God's grace empowered by the Spirit. The paradox is present in Paul's exhortation, "If we live by the Spirit, let us walk in the Spirit" (cf. Gal. 5:25).<sup>9</sup> Bultmann insists that this righteousness is not the transformation of the believer's moral quality. There is no new content to the moral life that distinguishes believers from others. The demands placed on the justified person "consist only of what is good and pleasing and perfect, what may be included among praiseworthy things" (Rom. 12:2; Phil. 4:8).<sup>10</sup>

Although Bultmann's dialectic of indicative and imperative has dominated the study of Paul's ethics, becoming for many the organizing principle, subsequent scholarship has either modified or rejected it.<sup>11</sup> Recent studies have shown that this dialectic is reductionistic and inconsistent with the wide range of Paul's instruction.<sup>12</sup> The imperatives in Paul are not always clearly connected with the indicative of God's saving grace, for Paul appeals to a range

7. Zimmermann, "Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ," 260.

8. Bultmann, "Das Problem der Ethik bei Paulus," 132–40; idem, "The Problem of Ethics in Paul," 195–216.

9. Ibid., 140 ("Ethics in Paul," 216).

10. Ibid., 138–39 ("Ethics in Paul," 213–14).

11. On the numerous modifications to the indicative-imperative schema, see Zimmermann, "Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ," 262.

12. See *ibid.*, 264.

of motivations in his exhortations. Nor does Bultmann acknowledge the corporate nature of Paul's instructions and the role of specific moral duties. Thus this dialectic is inadequate for demonstrating the coherence of Paul's moral instruction.

Second, Paul insists that believers conduct themselves "worthily of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27), but he gives no comprehensive ethical theory to guide their conduct. Although ethical lists appear in 1 and 2 Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:10; 6:9–10; 2 Cor. 12:20), Galatians (5:19–23), Philippians (2:1–4; 4:6–8), and the disputed Pauline letters (cf. Eph. 5:3–6:9; Col. 3:5–4:1), they are scarcely a comprehensive description of the life that is worthy of the gospel. Paul gives extensive oral catechetical instruction that is not available to us (cf. Gal. 5:21), but not a comprehensive code of conduct for his communities.<sup>13</sup> Alongside advice on traditional ethical concerns such as marriage and sexuality, he includes instructions for regular prayer and worship. Thus Paul's major goal for his communities is to ensure their moral formation, but he provides few details on the shape of this life. Ethics, as defined by the philosophers, is not a clearly delineated category in Paul. Hence Wayne Meeks prefers to speak of morality rather than ethics,<sup>14</sup> and W. Schrage and S. Schulz, both of whom have written books on Pauline ethics, have suggested that one use quotation marks in speaking of Paul's "ethics."<sup>15</sup>

Paul's moral instructions in the letters share common themes, but they are limited almost exclusively to matters of sexuality and other relationships within the community. Because he writes to minority communities about their concerns, he says little about civic life, family life, or other issues that were the topics of ethical discourse. Thus he offers no guidance on matters of public concern. When he addresses concerns about poverty and economic justice, he addresses only those issues that involve the church (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1–15; Philemon). In contrast to the Torah and the Pharisaic tradition, he does not offer regulations that attempt to cover every situation in life. Nor does he mention the common themes of the ancient moralists, including matters of civic life and duties to one's country, household, or friends.<sup>16</sup> Thus one who looks to Paul for moral guidance today is likely to be perplexed that Paul makes no explicit comment on specific issues such as abortion, the environment, or other issues that confront us. Paul offers amazingly few specific instructions that could be a code of conduct.

13. Meeks, *Origins of Christian Morality*, 69: "The earliest Christian lists are neither systematic nor comprehensive. Clearly their function is not to name *all* the wicked things one should eschew or all the good traits one ought to cultivate. Neither do they suggest a rationale of interconnectedness among the virtues or the vices."

14. *Ibid.*, 3.

15. Schrage, *Ethik des Neuen Testaments*, 13; *idem*, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 5; Schulz, *Neutestamentliche Ethik*, 350.

16. For the topoi of ancient ethical discourse, see Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation*, 86–105.

Third, although Paul insists that the moral conduct of his communities not “be conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2) and distinguishes the conduct required of them from that observed in others (1 Thess. 4:5), one may ask what is distinctive about Paul’s ethic. The focus of the literature on Pauline ethics in the twentieth century has been on the parallels to Paul’s moral instructions, and scholars have mined both Greco-Roman and Jewish texts, identifying the parallels to Paul’s instructions, leaving scarcely any ethical concept that may be described as distinctively Christian.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as Teresa Morgan points out, many values are common to all societies. “People cannot live together until they have agreed not to murder each other (and agreed what counts as murder); they cannot farm until they have agreed not to steal from one another; they cannot decide who belongs to an ongoing group without deciding who breeds with whom.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, while Paul insists on a countercultural morality, one is not likely to find instructions that are without parallels in antiquity.

Fourth, Paul insists that believers are not “under law” (Rom. 6:14) and will not be vindicated by “works of the law” (Gal. 2:16), yet instructs believers to “keep the commandments” (1 Cor. 7:19). He writes that both he and his readers “died to the law” (Gal. 2:19; Rom. 7:4), yet reminds them that he is under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21) and that they may “fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2; cf. Rom. 8:4). His moral instructions for gentile communities do not mention the Jewish boundary markers of circumcision, food laws, or the Sabbath. He writes to the Romans that “nothing is common or unclean” (Rom. 14:14). However, while he does not require those commandments of the Torah that are badges of Jewish identity, his instructions for gentile converts correspond to the commandments of the Torah, which was written “for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4).

Fifth, he shows extraordinary pessimism concerning the human potential to do the good apart from Christ, but equally extraordinary optimism concerning the possibilities for his communities to fulfill the will of God. His categorical claim that “no one is righteous” (3:10) is without parallel in both the philosophical tradition and Jewish literature. However, he assures his communities that if they walk by the Spirit they will not be overcome by the desire of the flesh (Gal. 5:16), and he assumes that his readers will keep the commandments.

With these tensions in mind, my task in this book is to explore Paul’s moral instruction to determine what, if anything, gives coherence to his teaching. Inasmuch as the coherence of Paul’s thought remains an open question, this study will contribute to the resolution of that problem by placing Paul’s instruction within the larger context of his role as pastor and theologian. What was the relationship between the theoretical foundation of Paul’s ethics and

17. Wolter, “Identität und Ethos bei Paulus,” 126: “For every ethical instruction and every ethical value that we find in Paul, there are parallels outside the New Testament. What is not in pagan environment can be found in Judaism.”

18. Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire*, 3.



the specific instructions? By what criteria did he determine the character of the life that was worthy of the gospel? Did Paul offer moral instructions ad hoc in response to problems in his churches, or was he consistent in his requirement for the churches? Can we determine the center of his moral demands? Did he offer moral requirements that were distinctively Christian? Or did he shape his communities according to existing models in philosophy, popular folk morality, or the Jewish tradition? Recognizing that Paul did not answer many of the questions that we ask, I will follow the logic of his moral instructions as they relate to the issues involved in the formation of his communities.

## The Context of Paul's Moral Instructions

Paul's moral instruction is especially noteworthy within the context of the ethical teaching of the ancient moralists—which would have influenced the communities he established—and that of the Jewish heritage based on Scripture.<sup>19</sup> Both traditions offered coherent approaches to moral instruction, but they differed significantly.

### *The Greek Heritage*

Long before Paul, the Greeks had placed ethics alongside logic and physics as a division within philosophy.<sup>20</sup> As the first to reflect on ethics systematically,<sup>21</sup> Socrates offers an important point of comparison to Paul. Socrates devoted himself to the question how one should live, maintaining that the *eudaimonia* of the individual was the foundation of the good life.<sup>22</sup> The Socratic question led to wider self-determination, according to which one should care for one's soul rather than seek fame, wealth, or honor (Plato, *Apol.* 29c–d, 36c). The path to *eudaimonia* is virtue (*aretē*), which he associates with knowledge of the good.<sup>23</sup> With his focus on knowledge, Socrates gave to ethics a strong rational approach that was appropriated consistently among Greek thinkers.<sup>24</sup> Thus, according to Socrates, no one willingly does falsely, but only because of intellectual error, for bad behavior is the result of misinformation.<sup>25</sup>

Plato develops the schema of four cardinal virtues: wisdom (*sophia* or *phronēsis*), courage (*andreia*), self-control (*sōphrosynē*), and justice (*dikaiosynē*),

19. For the view that Pauline ethics is a synthesis of the Greek ethic of autonomy and self-control and the biblical ethic of command, see Theissen, "Urchristliches Ethos," 209–22.

20. Xenocrates, *Testimonia*, frag. 82; Inwood, "Ethics," 83.

21. Inwood, "Ethics," 82.

22. *Eudaimonia* can be rendered as "prosperity," "good fortune," or "happiness." LSJ 708.

23. Lohse, *Theological Ethics of the New Testament*, 16.

24. According to Dihle, the rational knowledge of human nature and the human environment became the basis for ethics throughout the Hellenistic world ("Ethik," 648).

25. Inwood, "Ethik," 162.

a theme to which he returns frequently (*Resp.* 427d–e; 442b–d; *Phaed.* 69c; *Leg.* 631c; 963a). Although later writers occasionally substituted for one of the four cardinal virtues, this schema shaped subsequent ethical reflection. Aristotle continued the development of a coherent theory of ethics in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*, maintaining that virtue consists of living according to our own nature.<sup>26</sup> Offering a comprehensive ethics, he expanded the list of four cardinal virtues and elaborated on each, maintaining that each virtue was the mean between two extremes. In addition to the four cardinal virtues, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he also addressed such topics as friendship, liberality, proper speech, and gentleness.

Like Aristotle, the Stoics recognized the presence of irrational impulses in humankind but insisted that reason can overcome the destructive passions (Cicero, *Tusc.* 4.26=SVF 3.427; Seneca, *Ep.* 75.11=SVF 3.428). They also maintained the four cardinal virtues and offered a coherent ethical system, according to which the good life consists of living according to nature (cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Vit.* 7.87). Like Socrates, the Stoics argued that the good life consists not of material things but of virtue.

Although the Greek philosophers approached ethics variously, they also had points in common, which will be important in a comparison with Pauline ethics. They were individualistic, attending to human flourishing (*eudaimonia*).<sup>27</sup> They all assumed that the context for individual *eudaimonia* was the Greek polis, or city-state, in which the harmony of the larger community was essential.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Plato put justice at the head of the virtues, Aristotle associated justice with the concern for others (*Eth. nic.* 5.1.1129b), and the Stoics insisted on the good of others within the context of the ancient city-state.<sup>29</sup> These philosophers assumed that correct behavior is derived from proper insight. Consequently, they assumed that through knowledge humankind could overcome destructive impulses and do the good.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Heritage of Scripture*

In contrast to the Greek ethical tradition, that of the Jews was based on submission to the command of God as stated in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—the three parts of Scripture. Before the Torah was gathered in written form, the prophets summoned Israel to obey God’s commands. Micah summons Judah to do what the Lord requires: “to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). The narrative literature indicates

26. *Ibid.*, 163.

27. Dihle, “Ethik,” 652.

28. Meeks, *Origin of Christian Morality*, 7. According to Aristotle, the human is a political animal designed by nature to live in an ordered community (*Eth. nic.* 9.9.3).

29. See Engberg-Pedersen, “Paul, Virtues, and Vices,” 610.

30. Dihle, “Ethik,” 649.

that certain things are “not done in Israel” (2 Sam. 13:12; cf. Gen. 34:7; Judg. 20:6, 10).<sup>31</sup> According to the psalmist,

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.  
He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.  
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. (Ps. 25:8–10 NRSV)

The psalmist asks, “Who may dwell on your [God’s] holy hill?” He answers,

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,  
and speak the truth from their heart;  
who do not slander with their tongue,  
and do no evil to their friends,  
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;  
in whose eyes the wicked are despised,  
but who honor those who fear the Lord;  
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;  
who do not lend money at interest,  
and do not take a bribe against the innocent. (15:2–5 NRSV)

The Torah was God’s gift to the covenant people and the expression of God’s will. The legislation in the Pentateuch is comprehensive, covering the full range of obligations toward God and others who compose the community of Israel as well as foreigners who dwell among them. As epitomized in the Ten Commandments, the vertical relationship to God required that the Israelites obey God’s law (Exod. 20:3), while the horizontal relationship promoted peace among the Israelites by eliminating causes of friction among them.<sup>32</sup> The legislators placed before Israel the choice between good and evil without questioning the potential of the Israelites to keep the law.<sup>33</sup> The developing rabbinic tradition attempted to interpret the Torah as a living document, appealing to it to cover all situations. While Jews in the Diaspora were united in their loyalty to the Torah, they did not produce a body of literature that offered a comprehensive ethics.

### The Content of Paul’s Ethics in Previous Study

If the believer is not under law, what provides the source and coherence of Paul’s instruction? The literature of the past century has provided a variety of answers. Many scholars maintain that Paul’s moral instructions lack a coherent

31. Lohse, *Theological Ethics of the New Testament*, 11–12.

32. Mafico, “Ethics (OT).”

33. Lohse, *Theological Ethics of the New Testament*, 13.

organizing principle. Some argue that Paul's soteriology is the coherent center, while others find the focus in the love command.

### *Alternatives to the Law as a Source of Guidance*

Martin Dibelius insisted that Paul's eschatological consciousness was so intense that he gave no thought to a coherent set of ethical principles. As hopes for the eschaton diminished, Paul co-opted the ethical guidelines of Greek and Jewish moralists without laying a theoretical foundation.<sup>34</sup> Dibelius described the moral instruction as "paraenesis," which he regarded as unconnected ethical advice. Although some interpreters have challenged Dibelius's view, a major alternative in the understanding of Paul's ethics is to regard the specific instructions as independent both from the theology of the letter and from each other.

Numerous others have indicated that Paul followed the conventional morality of his day without including any specifically Christian dimension to his instruction. Scholars in the past century have focused on the affinities between his ethical instruction and the teaching of the moral philosophers, a familiar topic among the church fathers, who acknowledged similarities between the Christian and the Greek (especially Stoic) moral tradition.<sup>35</sup> Rudolf Bultmann maintained that Paul's ethic introduced nothing new, for he demanded nothing other than what was recognized as good in the judgment of the gentiles.<sup>36</sup> Scholars have explored the relationship between the ethical teachings of Dio Chrysostom,<sup>37</sup> Plutarch,<sup>38</sup> Musonius,<sup>39</sup> and Epictetus<sup>40</sup> on the one hand and those of the New Testament on the other. Others have examined the relationship between lists of vices and virtues, the household codes, lists of sufferings (*peristasis* catalogs), and other topics and the New Testament, maintaining that Paul's ethical instruction is indebted to these traditions. According to Abraham Malherbe, "Christians borrowed extensively from whatever school happened to meet their immediate needs."<sup>41</sup> According to this view, the needs of the community determined the ethic. "The contents of this instruction are for the most part determined by traditions that were already in circulation, taken over from the environment and reformulated so that they now correspond to the Christian way of life and become a vehicle for its communication."<sup>42</sup> Troels

34. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 239.

35. See Malherbe, "Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament," 267–68.

36. Bultmann, "Das Problem der Ethik bei Paulus," 138 ("Ethics in Paul," 213).

37. Moxnes, "The Quest for Honor and the Unity of the Community."

38. Paterman, "Marriage and Sexual Fidelity."

39. Van der Horst, "Musonius Rufus and the New Testament," 306–15. Klassen, "Musonius Rufus, Jesus and Paul"; Ward, "Musonius and Paul on Marriage," 281–89.

40. See Thorsteinsson, "Paul and Roman Stoicism," 157.

41. Malherbe, "Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament," 269.

42. Lohse, *Theological Ethics of the New Testament*, 83.

Engberg-Pedersen has compared the ethics of the Stoics with Paul's ethics in several works,<sup>43</sup> concluding that they share a deep structure, according to which the individual progresses from self-centeredness to a concern for others.

Numerous studies have shown parallels between Paul's instruction on specific topics and the instructions of ancient moralists. Will Deming argued for the Stoic background to Paul's instructions on marriage.<sup>44</sup> Hans Dieter Betz commented on the vice list of Galatians 5:19–25 that Paul merely summarizes the conventional morality of the time, but concedes that such lists might have been adapted from Hellenistic Jewish texts.<sup>45</sup> In commenting on the catalog of vices and virtues in 5:19–23, Betz remarks that, “with the exception of *agapē*, all of the concepts are common in Hellenistic philosophy.”<sup>46</sup> He adds, “The individual concepts are not in any way specifically ‘Christian,’ but represent the conventional morality of the time.”<sup>47</sup> Much the same can be said of the maxims (*sententiae*) in 5:25–6:10:

With regard to the content of the *sententiae*, there is little that is specifically Christian. . . . The Christian is addressed as an educated person. He is expected to do no more than what would be expected of any other educated person in the Hellenistic culture of the time. In a rather conspicuous way, Paul conforms to the ethical thought of his contemporaries.<sup>48</sup>

But despite the formal connections that scholars have observed, major differences between Pauline ethics and the ethics of the Hellenistic moralists suggest the limitations of Hellenistic morality as a consistent source of Pauline ethics or as the basis for the coherence of Paul's ethical instructions. In contrast to the focus on individual flourishing (*eudaimonia*) within the city-state in Greek ethics, Paul speaks to communities, insisting on practices that are consistent within the subculture of the house churches. His focus on sexual vices has little analogue in Hellenistic ethics. Similarly, Paul never refers to the four cardinal virtues; the term *aretē* appears only once (Phil. 4:8). The dominant place of faith, hope, and love in Paul's ethical instruction has few parallels in the Hellenistic moral tradition. Moreover, Paul's emphasis on humility (*tapeinophrosynē*) transforms a Hellenistic vice into a positive quality.

According to many interpreters, Paul is a contextual ethicist for whom the only absolute is the command to love. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, argues that the absolute nature of the love command makes impossible “every ethic

43. Engberg-Pederson, *Paul and the Stoics*; Thorsteinsson, “Paul and Roman Stoicism”; Engberg-Pedersen, “Paul's Stoicizing Politics in Romans 12–13.”

44. Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy*.

45. Betz, *Galatians*, 282.

46. *Ibid.*, 281.

47. *Ibid.*, 282.

48. *Ibid.*, 292.

which tries to give an answer to the question, what shall I do? It therefore absolves the individual of the need for an answer.”<sup>49</sup> Christians must know what love demands. In the encounter with the neighbor, those who love recognize how to respond, for the concrete demands become matters for the individual conscience.<sup>50</sup> According to H. Preisker, the demand for love makes all lists of virtues superfluous.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Georg Strecker maintains that concrete norms would violate Paul’s message of freedom. One discovers the demand of God in the situation and recognizes the good and the evil from the realm of ethical concepts in the larger culture.<sup>52</sup> According to William Doty,

One of the most important reclamation projects in the history of biblical research was the reclaiming of Paul as a situational or contextualist theologian and ethicist rather than as a dogmatic moralist. Instead of visualizing Paul as an abstract thinker spinning webs of ethical and moral duties, modern interpreters see him as involved with his addressees in the process of dialogic piecing-together of concrete ethical responses in each situation.<sup>53</sup>

Robin Scroggs indicates that “Paul’s ethical stance is close to a view in ethical discussion today called situation ethics.” He argues that for Paul “there are no rules and regulations which predetermine a person’s action.” Paul listens to the concrete situation and then gives advice in each case.<sup>54</sup> He adds that “the believer is free to follow his or her own best judgment about actions, as long as these actions do not impinge upon the well-being of the other person.” Wolfgang Schrage finds coherence in the Pauline ethic in the place he gives to four primary values: freedom, peace, love, and upbuilding of the other.<sup>55</sup>

In discussing the place of love in the Pauline ethic, however, scholars have failed to recognize both the literary and historical context of Paul’s numerous appeals to love. He does not advocate love generically, but always assumes the communal context of the house church. When he employs the verb *agapan*, he employs the direct object “one another” (cf. Gal. 5:14; 1 Thess. 4:9–11), expanding on the nature of love in great detail. That Paul gives specific instructions in his letters suggests that love was not the only criterion for behavior. The extended descriptions of loving action (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1–13; Rom. 14:1–15:13) indicate the need to practice love.<sup>56</sup> While Paul argues that the law is “fulfilled”

49. Bultmann, *Glaube und Verstehen*, 1.234–35. See Schrage, “The Formal Ethical Interpretation of Pauline Paraenesis,” 302. See also idem, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote*, 9.

50. Bultmann, *Glaube und Verstehen*, 2.70. Cited in Schrage, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote*, 10.

51. Preisker, *Das Ethos des Urchristentums*, 76.

52. Strecker, “Autonome Sittlichkeit,” 871.

53. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, 37.

54. Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day*, 70.

55. Schrage, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote*, 71–95.

56. Holtz, “The Question of the Content of Paul’s Instructions,” 70. Original publication, “Zur Frage der inhaltlichen Weisungen bei Paulus,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 106 (1981): 385–400.

(Gal. 5:14; 6:2) in the love command, he never indicates that it renders other commands superfluous.<sup>57</sup>

Others have maintained that the guidance of the Spirit provides the norm for Christian action. Udo Schnelle insists that Paul's virtue and vice catalogs were consistent with the common moral values of the time and that Paul proceeds on the basis of what was generally considered ethical; moral instructions are valid not because they appear in Torah but because they are a fruit of the Spirit.<sup>58</sup> James D. G. Dunn maintains that the Spirit gave direction for ethical decisions:

He must therefore have been envisaging a life-style and choice of conduct options which constantly referred to that inner consciousness of the Spirit's presence and which sought to bring the life of the Spirit to expression in daily life. The repeated contrast with the law implies an inward rather than an outward point of reference in matters of ethical decision. This is presumably what Paul had in mind when he spoke elsewhere of discerning God's will by means of a renewed mind, of being given discernment to approve what was best in any particular situation (Rom. 12:1–2; Phil 1:9–10). Paul was claiming in effect that the inner, spontaneous knowledge of God's will for which Jeremiah had looked as a feature of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) was now a reality in the experience of those who had received the Spirit.<sup>59</sup>

Although the Spirit plays a decisive role in Paul's ethics, Paul never indicates that the Spirit guides believers in the ethical decisions of daily living, or even that the Spirit provides special insight into the issues facing Paul's communities.<sup>60</sup> The Spirit is the divine power that equips believers to keep the commands rather than a guide to consult in making decisions.

Because the imitation of Christ undoubtedly played a role in Paul's ethics, interpreters have maintained that Paul's instruction is based primarily on following the path of Jesus.<sup>61</sup> Paul expresses gratitude that the Thessalonians became imitators of himself and the Lord (1 Thess. 1:6) as well as imitators of the churches in Judea (1 Thess. 2:14). He models his own existence after the crucified Christ, describing his own self-denial (1 Cor. 4:9–12; 9:1–23) and identification with the sufferings of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 4:10–11; Phil. 3:10). He challenges his readers to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1). He frequently bases his ethical advice on the example of Christ. He challenges the Romans not to please themselves, because "Christ did not please himself" (Rom. 15:3). He encourages the Corinthians to participate in the collection because "Christ being rich became poor" (2 Cor. 8:9). The Christ who humbled

57. Schrage, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote*, 12.

58. Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 552.

59. Dunn, *Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, 107.

60. Deidun, *New Covenant Morality in Paul*, 219.

61. Schürmann, "Das Gesetz des Christus," (Gal 6,2)," 58–59.

himself is the example in Paul's exhortation that believers ought to act with humility, counting others better than themselves (Phil. 2:3).

Richard Hays recognizes the significance of the cross as one of three "focal images" that give coherence to Paul's ethic, the other two being community and new creation. These three images are inseparable in Paul's understanding, for the cross is the eschatological event that ushered in the new community and new creation. Consequently, the path of the cross leads to selfless conduct and the building up of the eschatological community.<sup>62</sup> Paul was an ad hoc theologian, applying these focal images to the situations that emerged in the church. According to Hays, Paul derived his norms for ethical behavior not from a rule book but from Christ as the ultimate paradigm; following him, believers can discern appropriate conduct.<sup>63</sup>

While the focal images are undoubtedly principles guiding moral instruction for Paul, they do not exhaust it. He commonly adds specific deeds and prohibitions in his description of the life that is worthy of the gospel. Indeed, he appeals only to the example of the selflessness of Jesus in giving up the privileges of the preexistent state (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:6) and to Jesus's path to the cross, but never to Jesus's deeds on earth, asking, "What would Jesus do?"<sup>64</sup> Paul challenges his readers to imitate Christ not in concrete deeds but as a pattern of selflessness in all of their conduct. He also instructs his community in detail concerning the shape of the life that is worthy of the gospel.

### *The Law as a Source of Moral Guidance*

Attempts to focus on freedom, love, conventional Greek morality, and the Spirit as the guiding principles of Paul's ethic are consistent with the view that Paul's negative assessment of the law as a means of salvation for gentiles extended to its role as moral guide, leading to other sources of moral guidance. According to Victor Furnish,<sup>65</sup> "Paul never quotes the Old Testament *in extenso* for the purpose of developing a pattern of conduct" and makes little use of the Decalogue. He looks to sources other than the law to provide moral guidance. Andreas Lindemann, having surveyed the moral instructions of 1 Corinthians, concludes that the Torah played no role in Paul's instructions on marriage and community life.<sup>66</sup> Udo Schnelle is struck by the absence of appeals to the Old Testament in the moral instruction of both 1 Thessalonians and the Corinthian correspondence.<sup>67</sup>

62. Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 193–205.

63. *Ibid.*, 43.

64. Deidun, *New Covenant Morality*, 219.

65. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul*, 33.

66. Lindemann, "Die biblischen Toragebote und die paulinische Ethik," 243–61.

67. Schnelle, "Die Ethik des 1. Thessalonicherbriefes," 301. According to Schnelle, Paul never appeals explicitly to the OT in 1 Thessalonians. When one notices where he could have appealed to the OT (1 Thess. 4:5/Ps. 79:6; 1 Thess. 4:6/Ps. 94:2; 1 Thess. 4:8/Ezek. 36:27; 1 Thess. 4:9/Jer.



While Lindemann and Schnelle may correctly observe both Paul's insistence on freedom from the law and the paucity of direct citations from the Old Testament in ethical discourse as evidence that the law is not a source of moral guidance, their argument fails to recognize that Paul's appeal to the Old Testament is not limited to specific citations. Indeed, Hellenistic Jewish literature frequently appealed to the contents of the law without specific citation, as I will demonstrate in chapter 1. Nor do Lindemann and Schnelle take account of Paul's specific statements about the place of the Scripture for ethical guidance. In the context of moral guidance, Paul claims that the Scripture was written "for our instruction" (Rom. 15:4; cf. 1 Cor. 9:9–10) after citing a passage of Scripture. Moreover, as Peter Tomson has shown, Paul addresses the varied issues at Corinth within the framework of the Torah and the Jewish halakic tradition.<sup>68</sup> Michael Wolter cites an imaginary letter from the man whom Paul condemns for living with his father's wife in which the gentile convert asks, "How can you judge me according to Jewish standards? What gives you the right to evaluate my relationship with Charikleia according to the law of the Jews?"<sup>69</sup> Markus Bockmuehl argues that New Testament writers, including Paul, found a framework for ethical instruction to gentile churches in the Noahide Commandments.<sup>70</sup> Although Paul insisted that gentiles are not subject to the established boundary markers (circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws), his ethical instructions are consistent with the moral instruction of the Torah.

The revolution in Pauline studies in the past generation has resulted in a recognition of the complexity of Paul's view of the law. Recent studies have also shown that the sharp distinctions between the Hellenistic and Jewish backgrounds are no longer tenable in our study of Paul. In his moral instructions, Paul undoubtedly depended on both Hellenistic and Jewish sources while at the same time omitting those aspects of both traditions that were not consistent with his gospel. Indeed, the two traditions overlapped in numerous ways in their concepts of life in harmony with others. However, just as one may ask about the coherence of Paul's theology, my task is to examine the coherence of Paul's instructions within the context of his theology, calling, and predecessors.

Among Paul's predecessors was a Greek-speaking Jewish tradition that had attempted to be loyal to the Jewish law while communicating it with the terminology of the Greek ethical tradition. Attempting to maintain Jewish identity while adapting to a majority culture, they interpreted the law in summaries that focused not on the sacrificial system or the Jewish boundary markers but on an ethic that was reasonable to the larger audience. For these

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31:34–35; 1 Thess. 5:22/Job 11:8) as the basis of his paraenesis, the absence of OT references is striking. Cf. also Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 638–39.

68. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law*.

69. Wolter, "Der Brief des sogenannten Unzuchtsünder," 188.

70. Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches*, 169–73.

Jews of the Diapora, “There is no such thing as Torah as such, but always and only the interpreted, the historically applied Torah.”<sup>71</sup> As he established and shaped minority communities within the larger society in such a way that they demarcated themselves from that society while coexisting with it, Paul faced a task similar to that of his predecessors in Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>72</sup> This study will explore the relationship between the paraenetic tradition of Diaspora Judaism and Paul’s instructions to new converts in a similar situation.

Recent study of the background of Paul’s ethics has not adequately examined Hellenistic Jewish texts and Paul’s appropriation of them. According to Abraham Malherbe, “It is astonishing that we have paid relatively little attention to Hellenistic Jewish texts in exploring the philosophic moral context of early Christianity.”<sup>73</sup> While Tomson and others have pointed to contacts between Paul and halakic traditions, their work is limited to a few texts. I propose that a study of Hellenistic Jewish ethics may provide the necessary background for the study of Paul’s ethics.

Since Jewish writers of the Diaspora faced a situation analogous to that of Paul, chapter 1 will explore the moral instructions of Greek-speaking Judaism that demarcated the Jews from their surroundings. Summaries of the law played an important role in both catechetical and apologetic contexts, indicating the parts of the Torah that were especially relevant in the Diaspora situation. Chapter 1 examines the role of moral instructions for maintaining the Jewish identity and ethos.

Ethical instruction in the Diaspora was inseparable from the establishment of Jewish identity. This identity protected Jewish communities from assimilation by demarcating them from the surrounding society. This identity requires a distinctive symbolic world, myth, and rituals. Communities express their distinctive identity with a code of conduct that distinguishes them from others.<sup>74</sup> Through all of Paul’s letters he weaves a thread of terminology that establishes a shared identity among converts who come from a variety of backgrounds. He appeals to this identity as the basis for his instructions. Since ethics is the expression of our identity, in chapter 2 I will examine Paul’s establishment of a new identity for his gentile converts as the basis for his moral instructions.

The relationship between identity and ethics is especially evident in 1 Thessalonians, Paul’s first letter. As a pastoral and paraenetic letter that repeats much of Paul’s original catechesis (cf. 1 Thess. 4:1–2), 1 Thessalonians offers a window into Paul’s moral instruction, which consisted largely of directions on how to walk “worthily” of God (1 Thess. 2:12). Since Paul is apparently responding to no crisis in 1 Thessalonians, his moral instructions probably provide a summary of his teaching in all of the churches. Chapter 3 will

71. Holtz, “The Question of the Content of Paul’s Instructions,” 70.

72. Wolter, “Die ethische Identität christlicher,” 64.

73. Malherbe, “Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament,” 332.

74. See Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference*, 121–69.

examine the ethical teaching in Paul's earliest letter as the basis for observing the continuity between his basic catechesis and the ethical instruction in those letters that he wrote to a contingent situation.

Paul's catechesis includes other items that are not mentioned in 1 Thessalonians but were probably the common property of Paul's converts in numerous communities. New converts received lists of vices and virtues, which were easily committed to memory (cf. Gal. 5:21). While some items in the lists may be in response to a local situation, the presence of common themes among the lists indicates that they belong to Paul's basic catechesis. They contain the most important themes of Paul's ethical teaching for establishing a common ethos. In chapter 4 I will place the lists of vices and virtues within their larger context in Judaism and the Greco-Roman world.

What role did the law play in the ethical instructions for new converts? These lists were common throughout antiquity, but rare in the Old Testament. Although Paul does not cite the law frequently, the lists of vices and virtues cohere with the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition. Furthermore, Paul's moral guidance contains echoes of the Torah, and he declares that Scripture is useful for moral instruction (Rom. 15:3–4). Chapter 5 will examine the role of the law in formulating instructions for new converts.

Nothing is more consistent in Paul's moral instructions than the list of sexual vices and the demand that the people overcome the "passion of lust" (cf. 1 Thess. 4:5). In common with ancient moralists and Jewish writers in the Diaspora, Paul insisted that the moral life involved the overcoming of the destructive passions of the flesh (cf. Rom. 1:18–32). Unlike his contemporaries, he argued that no one can keep the law or overcome the passions without the intervention of divine power. In chapter 6 I shall examine Paul's view of the human capacity to do the will of God.

Just as Paul's vice lists regularly mention sexual offenses, his lists of positive qualities consistently place love at the center. However, he does not merely place love above all virtues, but elaborates at length on the meaning of love in actual practice. Paul never mentions the Greek word *philanthrōpia*, but insists on *agapē* for others within the community of faith. In the extended sections on love in 1 Corinthians and Romans, he describes the meaning of love in actual practice. Chapter 7 will explore the role of love in Paul's response to the concrete circumstances of his churches.

Interpreters frequently distinguish the ethic of undisputed letters from that of those that are either disputed or pseudepigraphical (Colossians, Ephesians, the Pastoral Epistles), insisting on a loss of Paul's major themes in the second generation and a turn to the conventional morality of the environment. In chapter 8 I shall compare these letters with the undisputed letters to determine the continuity of the former with the latter.

In the conclusion, I shall summarize the results of the preceding chapters to determine both the coherence and the logic of Paul's ethical instructions.

The task involves recognizing that, like his peers in Hellenistic Judaism, Paul was indebted to both the Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions, but appropriated these traditions to correspond with his own theology. This chapter will explore the basic convictions that guided Paul in his adaptation of the values of his own time. I shall conclude with reflections on the relevance of Paul's approach for the contemporary church.