

Imperatives of New Testament ethics

The New Testament contains many assertions about Christ's historical achievement of salvation. What ethical imperatives grow out of this accomplished fact? □ by Norman H. Young



In a previous article,¹ I discussed the "Imperatives of Salvation" and emphasized those New Testament exhortations that either urged the unbeliever to accept the gospel (imperatives of evangelism) or appealed to the believer to hold fast his faith in the gospel (imperatives of the ecclesia). In this article I wish to

examine the great New Testament assertions about the accomplished fact of the gospel and the ethical imperatives that grow out of, and are integrally related to, those assertions.

The indicative is that form of the verb that makes assertions, statements, or questions. In the context of this article the term is not limited only to those texts that contain such a verb, but refers without grammatical precision to texts that speak of Christ's historical achievement of salvation prior to human faith or acceptance. As a matter of fact, the great majority of the verses cited below as "indicatives of salvation" do indeed have their main verb in the indicative, and the tense is invariably the aorist, the tense that simply stresses action completed in the sense that it is no longer going on. The aorist verb here implies that the sacrifice itself was now completed, but has no reference to Christ's further necessary function as mediator in the further stages of the plan of salvation.

Norman H. Young, Ph.D., is professor of theology at Avondale College, Coorabong, New South Wales, Australia.

Centrality of the cross

An examination of the great redemptive words of the New Testament quickly reveals how constantly these occur in connection with the death of Christ. The whole range of salvation words, whether forensic (*justify, acquit*), social (*redeem, reconcile, purchase, forgive*), or cultic (*sanctify, purge, expiate*), are invariably attached to a word about the cross.

The resurrected Christ was recognized by His wounds (John 20:27-28); the exalted Christ is the crucified one (Rom. 8:34; John 12:32); the enthroned Christ is represented as a slaughtered lamb (Rev. 5:6, 12); and the high-priestly Christ who intercedes in the heavenly sanctuary is the one who offered Himself once-for-all (Heb. 9:24-28). The ascending Christ commissioned His disciples to proclaim forgiveness in His name, for the blood of the new covenant had been poured out (John 20:20-23; Matt. 26:28; 2 Cor. 3:6). The resurrection, the intercession, indeed the incarnation itself must be seen as electrons held in orbit by the nucleus of the cross, never as stairs that lead away from and above the cross.

But does not Paul say of Jesus that He was "delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25)? Does he not say, "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life" (chap. 5:10)? Such texts should not be read as if the resurrection surpassed the crucifixion in saving power. The resurrection demonstrated the achievement of the cross, but it did not replace the centrality of the cross in the New Testament. Romans 4:25 is a rhetorical couplet and should be read as a whole, not as two stages in which the second line advances to a higher stage of salvation. The assertion in Romans 4:25 declares that Christ was "delivered" [to be crucified] as well as "raised." This combined death and resurrection was for our justification, necessitated by our trespasses.²

The centrality of the cross is likewise maintained in Romans 5:10. Paul is encouraging his readers at Rome by reminding them that if Christ's death reconciled them while they were enemies, certainly they can have confidence for the future now that they have become

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His friends. Chrysostom puts it nicely: "How shall the one who has given the greater thing [i.e. reconciliation] to enemies not give the least things [i.e. final salvation] to His friends?"³

It is therefore Christ's death that the great indicative texts in the New Testament present as the central act in the drama of redemption.

Indicatives of salvation

Some of the greatest verses of the New Testament occur in contexts announcing the death of Christ as the climax of salvation history. Most of the verbs in the following texts are indicatives and all are aorists, the tense that emphasizes the finishing of an act.

"The redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood" (Rom. 3:24, 25).*

"Christ died for the ungodly. . . . While we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (chap. 5:6-8).

"We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (verse 10).

God "'gave him up for us all'" (chap. 8:32).

God "'gave his only Son'" (John 3:16).

"For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7).

God "made him to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Christ, having become a curse for us, redeemed us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13).⁴

"Having canceled the bond⁵ . . . he set [it] aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14).

"Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many" (Heb. 9:28).

"Christ also suffered for you" (1 Peter 2:21).

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (verse 24).

Words from every sphere of human life have been pressed into service as the New Testament writers attempted to proclaim the redemptive act of God in the death of Jesus. From the law court are such statements as these:⁶

"Since we have now been justified by

Christ's sacrificial death" (Rom. 5:9, N.E.B.).†

"One man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (verse 18).

"You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 6:11).

"Who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died?" Yes (Rom. 8:34).

"It is God who justifies" (verse 33).

"Reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you . . . irreproachable"⁷ (Col. 1:22).

The New Testament employs numerous examples of words, generally in the aorist indicative, that have a social background:

"You were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23).

"God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself" (2 Cor. 5:18).

"Has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev. 1:5).

"You were washed" (1 Cor. 6:11).

"By thy blood didst ransom men for God" (Rev. 5:9).

"You were ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

"Having forgiven us all our trespasses" (Col. 2:13).

"As the Lord has forgiven you" (chap. 3:13; see also Eph. 4:32).

"The church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son" (Acts 20:28).

"He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness" (Col. 1:13).

Terms that have their setting in the Levitical ritual of the Old Testament are also sometimes used by the New Testament writers to describe the deep significance of Jesus' death:

"When he had made purification for sins" (Heb. 1:3).

"We have been sanctified⁸ through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (chap. 10:10).

"He offered up himself" (chap. 7:27).

"To sanctify the people through his own blood" (chap. 13:12).

God "sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

"I saw a lamb standing, as though it had been slain" (Rev. 5:6).

This, then, is a sampling of the New Testament statements that declare what God has established in the death of Jesus: the removal of sin and the restoration of man to God. No wonder Paul considered it a fact of Christian truth of the first importance that Christ died, was buried, and was raised (see 1 Cor. 15:3,4). But the same Paul is just as adamant that this gospel couplet—Christ's death/burial and resurrection—is a reality for the believer. Thus, to insist that the believer's involvement in the events of the gospel has no part in that gospel is a very synthetic view, which does not take into account the richness of the New Testament's understanding.

Imperatives of ethics

Paul applies each of the great saving elements (death/burial and resurrection) to the believer. He is convinced that Christ's death for all meant that "all have died" (2 Cor. 5:14). This leads him to make an ethical pronouncement: Christ's death for all has as its purpose "that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (verse 15).

We were buried with Christ (Rom. 6:4), crucified with him (verse 6; Gal. 2:20) and raised with him (Rom. 6:5; Col. 3:1). These great gospel facts bring forth, in turn, the ethical imperatives to consider ourselves dead to sin (Rom. 6:11), to put to death earthly immorality (verses 12, 13; Col. 3:3-5), and to know that the Christian has "crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24).

Christ's dying for sin and His resurrection are true descriptions of the believer's own experience. Christ's sin-bearing had as its express purpose "that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24), "that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:6). The Christian is thus "dead to sin and alive to God" (verse 11); buried in baptism and raised to newness of life (verse 4).

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high places, temples, altars, water systems, Solomon's royal cities, the King's Highway, and the tomb of Christ. Series of articles have explored the relationship between Israel and Assyria, the historicity of Esther, and the seven churches of Revelation.

The third of Horn's original goals for this section was to share notices of recent archeological literature, including the best books and magazine articles. An annual book review article appeared between 1971 and 1975, although this feature has not been continued. Certain key books have been reviewed since then, of course, such as the two major books on Ebla by Matthiae and Pettinato. Reader's attention was called to the *Biblical Archeology Review* through a review article and the announcement of a special subscription price. Quotations of interest to ministers have been shared in *MINISTRY* and obituaries of the following archeological giants who died during the decade have been published: Albright, De Vaux, Glueck, Lapp, Wright, and Kenyon.

Another of Horn's plans was to make known the availability of archeological visual aids of interest to ministers. Three different slide sets have been recommended along with special prices on three booklets by Siegfried Horn: *What Is New in Biblical Archeology* (a lecture given in Australia, printed as a *MINISTRY* insert in 1980), *Archaeology After Thirty Years* (a lecture prepared for the naming of the Horn Archeological Museum at Andrews University in Michigan in 1978), and *Relics of the Past: The World's Most Important Biblical Artifacts** (a guide to the archeological holdings in major world museums of interest to Bible students). Horn also promised to announce opportunities to participate in archeological expeditions and tours of the Bible lands. Not only have several such announcements appeared but also notices of ministers' seminars on archeology, invitations to join the Horn Archeological Museum as a member, and an invitation to contribute to the Cairo Genizah Documents' Preservation Fund.

As we look back over the past ten years it is with some pride of accomplishment. All the original goals have been met either wholly or in part. One obviously wishes even more could have been done. Requests by certain other periodicals and books to reprint particular *MINISTRY* articles on archeology are a

heartening development that indicates we must be meeting someone's needs. More important, have we met *your* expectations? The letter columns of *MINISTRY* have contained an average of only slightly more than two letters a year commenting on the archeology articles specifically. Almost all of these have been from ministers appreciative of the archeological emphasis in a *general* way. At least two ministers wrote that they subscribed to *MINISTRY* because of the articles on Biblical archeology. One minister said he uses the archeology articles in class. Only one letter was negative: "You print too much that is questionable concerning diet, Bible prophecy, *archeology*, theology, science, pastoral care, and Sabbath observance." We wish the writer had been more

specific with regard to what was questionable archeologically!

Our goals remain the same as when Siegfried Horn outlined them in 1973. But we want to know from *you* whether they are being met and how we can improve. Take this opportunity right now to tell us what you think of what appeared so far and what you would like to see discussed in the future. We will make every effort to meet each request eventually. Your input is needed. *Please* fill out the opinion poll and send it to us. And thank you in advance for your help in setting the tone for our next decade!

* This is still available to *MINISTRY* readers postage paid for \$1.00. See our special tenth anniversary offer.

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The ethical imperatives, then, often use the language of the cross-event, for the Christian is to put into effect what the indicatives assure him he already is: crucified with Christ, freed from sin (verses 6, 7) and thus alive unto God.

Take up the cross (Mark 8:34), for you have been crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20).

Put to death the earthly immorality (Rom. 6:11; Col. 3:5), for you have died with Christ (2 Cor. 5:14; Rom. 6:8).

Cleanse out the leaven of malice, for our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7).

Put off the old nature of malice, anger, slander, etc. (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:8), for you have been buried with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12).

"Arise from the dead" (Eph. 5:14), "set your minds on things that are above" (Col. 3:2), for you have been raised with Christ (Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13).

Conclusion

By using the language of death/burial and resurrection to exhort and to describe Christian existence, the New Testament writers, especially Paul, integrated the believer and his conduct into the very acts of God which are the foundation of the gospel. The practical effect is to prevent any tendency to pervert Christianity into an amoral or immoral scheme by isolating the indicatives from the ethical imperatives. But it

also forbids our inclination to divorce the conduct called for by the imperatives from its grounding in the prior, and continually valid, act of God's forgiving grace in the death and resurrection of Christ.⁹ The gospel clearly includes both the indicative and the imperative. The imperative is always conditioned by the prior indicative, and the indicative always gives rise to the ethical imperative.

¹ "The Imperatives of Salvation," *MINISTRY*, November, 1982, pp. 14, 15.

² K. E. Kirk, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 192.

³ Quoted by C. E. B. Cranfield in *The International Critical Commentary: Romans*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975), p. 268, n. 2.

⁴ I have altered the *Revised Standard Version's* word order in this text to make it more obvious that the aorist participle (*genomenos*) is referring to a finished act of Christ.

⁵ In other words, the incriminating debt of sin.

⁶ Most of the examples are again indicatives, and the tense is generally aorist (i.e. finished action).

⁷ The Greek word *anegklētos* is a legal word meaning "irreproachable," "guiltless," "without grounds for legal charge."

⁸ "Sanctified" in Heb. 10:10 and throughout the Epistle has its background in the Levitical cult.

⁹ The worst example of this tendency is when the crucifixion is dismissed as merely a pardon for the believer's past and the resurrection is praised as the sole basis of the believer's present moral existence.

* All following texts not otherwise indicated are quoted from the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, copyrighted 1946, 1952 © 1971, 1973.

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