

A Guide to Ethics

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What is Christian Ethics?

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Christian morality consists of living one's life with guidance and inspiration from the Christian scriptures and traditions. Christian ethics as an academic discipline uses these scriptures and traditions in developing and critiquing ethical norms and theories and applying them to ethical issues. Most Christian ethicists agree that the sources for doing ethics include revelation (scripture) and tradition, as well as human reason and experience.

Being shaped by Biblical revelation is the primary way that Christian ethics can be distinguished from alternative ethical perspectives, both religious and secular; thus one important question for a Christian ethicist is how morality (the practice) or ethics (ideas about the practice) depends on religion (convictions and commitments) or theology (critical discussion about those convictions and commitments).

Few people, whether religious or not, would deny an historical dependency; the great ethical teachers tended to be prophets or founders of religion, and for most of human history the influential ethical authorities tended to be religious authorities. Of course, atheists could cheerfully admit this historical point and then claim that, in western culture at least, the 18th century Enlightenment changed that dependency, encouraging ethicists to avoid religious or theological assumptions and, as Immanuel Kant famously put it in his essay "What is Enlightenment?" to dare to think for themselves.

Christian ethicists can affirm the need to think for one's self but claim that such thinking

reveals that ethics depends on theology in ways other than merely historical. One venerable view is the meta-ethical theory that ethics requires a theological foundation in order to avoid nihilism (no real values) or subjectivism (values are relative to each person). This claim has been developed in at least two different ways, the first being what is called “The divine command theory of ethics.” One version of this theory is to claim that only God’s will makes things right or wrong; it is sometimes stated as “X is good (or obligatory)” just means “God approves of (or demands) X.” Divine command theorists admit that, of course, atheists and others can use moral ideas without realizing their foundation; people can use a building, for example, without giving a thought to its foundation. Only when they start questioning will they see a need for a foundation.

A philosophical problem with this version of divine command theory goes back to Plato’s *Euthyphro* dialogue: he thought that the question, “Does God approve of something because it is good or it is good because God approves of it?” is analogous to the question, “Does the gardener love a flower because it is beautiful or is it beautiful because the gardener loves it?” And he thought that the answer was obvious: if the gardener’s love is the foundation for beauty, if there is nothing in the flower that elicits the gardener’s approval, we end up with sheer arbitrariness. It would be as if God could choose murder to be good, thereby making it good. A religious problem with this version of the divine command theory is that when Christians praise God as good, they seem to be saying something deeper than merely that God approves of himself. Contemporary versions of the divine command theory seek to avoid the charge of arbitrariness; for example, Robert Adams links morality to God’s character (loving) and Linda Zagzebski to God’s motivations. So the debate continues.

The second way that many Christians assert a theological foundation for ethics is by claiming that the best—perhaps only—grounding for human dignity and universal human rights is that God creates all persons in God’s image or that God loves all persons (see, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*) When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([CLICK HERE for link to PDF](#)) was being debated during the late 1940s in the United Nations, the committee Chair—Eleanor Roosevelt—got tired of listening to philosophers and theologians argue about the grounding of human rights, and insisted that they simply come up with a consensus on a coherent list of human rights, and then agree to disagree about their foundation. That is why it is called “A Universal Declaration of Human Rights” rather than a “Declaration of Universal Human Rights” (there were abstentions but no vetoes during the final vote). But for those who do wonder about their grounding, and who perhaps think that how rights are grounded can affect how they are understood and applied, the claim that they are grounded in theological conviction is an important one and one that is shared by

most Christian ethicists.

Entirely apart from the view that theology is needed for the foundation of ethics is the view of many Christian ethicists that scripture reveals at least some of the content of ethics. Most of them agree that through reason and natural law humans can know some and maybe even most of morality, but claim that scripture provides distinctive features and emphases for moral and spiritual life. Love for all, including one's enemies, in the sense of self-sacrificing agape, is perhaps the most commonly cited distinctively Christian ethical teaching (see, for example, *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, eds. Edmund Santurri and William Werpehowski). Other teachings include an emphasis on calling to discipleship and stewardship (see, for example, Douglas Schuurman's *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life*), to mercy and forgiveness, and to economic justice. Intramural debates among Christian ethicists who affirm a distinctly Christian content for morality include the following: is the revelation one of specific rules, like the ten commandments (which might tend toward text-citing and legalism) or more general basic principles, such as the love commandments; or is it more a matter of basic virtues, such as the "fruits of the spirit" cited several times by St Paul (as in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control), virtues taught more by stories than rules.

Other Christian ethicists think that we can know about morality quite independently of our religious beliefs and that, although Christian ethics may have distinctive emphases, few if any of its rules, principles, or virtues are unique to Christianity or even to religious outlooks. So they question whether ethics is epistemologically dependent on theology (that is, dependent on it for knowing the content of morality). Rather, they see the distinctively Christian feature as one of motivation: we can have the proper convictions about what is morally appropriate or required but will we be motivated to commit ourselves to do it? The oldest form of the claim that morality is motivationally dependent on religious commitment is the appeal to rewards and punishments, the "fire and brimstone" preaching that "put the fear of the Lord" into people. "Fear" here is understood as being scared of God, which does not necessarily involve respect or love. This appeal, of course, is to self-interest—save your eternal skin—and is rejected by others who point to a different sort of motivation, such as a sense of calling or vocation nurtured by covenantal gratitude for creation and redemption. Here is a link to one effort at developing this latter type of Christian moral emphasis:

["Duties to Others and Covenantal Ethics," by Ed Langerak \(1994\)](#)

What we have not discussed so far is the history of Christian ethics and explanations of the

views of important Christian ethicists, including contemporary ones. Let us turn there now, focusing on the early Christian tradition.

ETHICS AND THE EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITION – BY EIN EDITORS (2014)

Christianity is inconceivable without taking seriously its Jewish roots and evolution in the early centuries of the Common Era. In this light, Christianity is monotheistic, professing belief in an all-good, powerful Creator who made a good cosmos in which sin has entered through disobedience. Some of the changes between and emerging Christianity and rabbinic Judaism are subtle. For example, Christians tended to give greater weight to an Adamic fall (Genesis 3) than in Judaism because of its being the mirror opposite of the obedience and reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12-21; all citations of passages from the Christian Bible are from the Revised Standard Version). But some differences will be far more radical as we shall see. Jesus, his disciples, and the apostle Paul were all Jewish. Only gradually did Christianity achieve an independent religious life, though always indebted to the Hebrew Bible (incorporated in the Christian Bible as the Old Testament), the tradition of prophecy and revelation, its liturgy animated most centrally by the Psalms, and the Jewish tradition's ethical monotheism with its sapiential tradition (from the Latin 'sapientia' for wisdom) as found in the Book of Proverbs with its guidance on avoiding evil and pursuing the good.

The most important point to note at the beginning of early Christian thought concerning evil is that, in keeping with its Jewish teaching, creation was not the result of violence and combat between good and evil or between amoral supernatural powers (as with Babylonian cosmology, for example, in the *Enuma Elish* in which gods battle each other and the earth is formed out of corpse of a god). But, while for Jews and Christians, creation did not emerge out of combat, the life of Jesus Christ in the four Gospels does involve combat with evil, especially the demonic. Jesus is tempted by a supernatural adversary, Satan (Matt 1; Mark 1; Luke 4). Furthermore, Jesus performs multiple exorcisms during his ministry (Mark 5:1-13; Luke 8:27-33). In the Gospel of John, in Jesus' farewell discourse, Jesus prepares for his passion and observes "the ruler of this world coming," which suggests the ruler is, again, an evil agent (John 14:50). Early Christian teaching shows Jesus Christ not only fighting the demonic, but fighting diseases (Mark 8) and ultimately fighting and overcoming death (Luke 8, and all accounts and witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus). The fight against evil, then, was a fight to restore a once good creation and to bring it into a new, redeemed relationship with God.

However much subsequent, even contemporary Christian theology has sought to "demythologize" scripture (eliminating or re-interpreting the supernatural), any form of Christianity in continuity with its origin must take seriously that there are life-denying forces, vice, cruelty, suffering, death itself, and all these are deemed (from a traditional Christian point of view) as evil or bad. References to Satan may be reinterpreted by Christians today as references to the spirit of pride, or illegitimate power, and what is described as demonic possession in the New Testament may be re-interpreted in terms of any number of pathologies and disease, which Christ expels or eradicates. But an historically informed, recognizable Christian view of evil cannot fail to take evil seriously.

From time to time, Christians have some of these phenomena (which I am referring to as "life-denying forces") as now blessed through Christ: Julian Norwich prayed for an illness that would allow her to be closer to Jesus and St. Francis of Assisi referred to Sister Death, implying that even death may serve a divine purpose (alongside Brother Sun and Sister Moon). These, however, are not representative of the main bulk of Christian tradition.

According to much Christian tradition, God has not abandoned us to illness, vice, victimization, and extermination, but just as God sent prophets to the children of Israel, so God has sent Jesus Christ to teach, heal,

comfort, challenge, and call people to a renewed life of reconciliation with God in a fashion that death itself cannot defeat (Romans 8:35-39). This core vision has evolved over time.

For our purposes, this topic is divided into three sections that examine the concept of evil through specific historical moments in early Christianity. The first considers evil in the New Testament, while the second examines evil in the immediate post-Apostolic era as different Christian views of Christ's person and work are developed, and the third section consider the "orthodox" or the creedal form that Christianity took shortly after Emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. After this narrative history, a series of questions about evil is presented that Christians will continue to wrestle with throughout the Medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation eras.

Good and Evil in the New Testament

This chapter will follow the conventional, current practice of beginning with Mark, moving to Matthew and Luke, and then finally the Gospel of John, as this is most commonly judged today to be the historical sequence of composition, Mark being first, Matthew and Luke coming later (supposedly relying on the same or similar source of material about Jesus referred to as Q, a source that has not yet been discovered), and John representing a later, independent tradition. A small caveat: the Gospel of Matthew was believed by some in the early Church to be the first composed and there is a case that can be made for the primacy of Matthew (*Redating Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (1992) by John A.T. Robinson). One reason (among many others) for dating some of the Gospel material late is that Jesus is described as foreseeing the destruction of the Temple during the Roman Siege of Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 CE. This is seen by some scholars as *Vaticinium ex eventu* (literally, prophecy after the event) – an attribution of foreknowledge after the event occurred – but this conclusion is not forced on us by the evidence. It may be that Jesus made a sound prediction (Matt24; Mark 13; Luke 21). This chapter will not, however, engage issues of dating nor cover the so-called quest for the historical Jesus (debates among scholars surrounding which passages of the New Testament are reliable or more reliable than others; see Evans 1992).

Some skeptical, secular philosophers (famously, in the early modern era, the 19th century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham) regard the historical reliability of the New Testament as very tenuous, whereas Christians have varied from treating the New Testament as inerrant (free of error) in its original inception (containing Jesus' very words, *ipsissima verba*) to believing the New Testament is inspired and contains Jesus' core teachings and acts (it contains perhaps not Jesus' exact words in every incident, but his voice or *ipsissima vox* to, in its most liberal form, self-identified Christians seeing scripture as providing a "Jesus of faith" that may or may not be historically veridical (see Wright 1999 for an excellent overview). Be that as it may, let us begin with evil in what is traditionally referred to as the Gospel according to Mark.

Mark begins with the theme of prophetic call and repentance, first espoused by John the Baptist and then taken up by Jesus: "God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). The good news is that Jesus gathers disciples to proclaim an era or time of repentance and forgiveness; he engages in exorcism (1:21-28), heals multiple maladies including leprosy and paralysis. He subordinates ritual observations to healing, repudiates any alliance between himself and demonic power, and recognizes a familial tie between those who follow his teaching. Despite such abundant proclamations, the feeding of thousands from what seems to be an impossibly small food source (loaves and fish) and healing, Jesus is not accepted by the religious leaders of

his day. Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. There is a transfiguration scene in which Jesus is glorified with Moses and Elijah. There is great healing, a cleansing of those who corrupt the temple, Jesus' betrayal, suffering, death, and the discovery of the empty tomb. In some ancient manuscripts, Mark ends with a resurrection appearance. Of the four gospels, Mark is not as obvious as the next three in revealing a Jesus that is clearly aware of himself as both human *and* divine, though Jesus is called Lord, Adonai, the traditional term for God (in lieu of tetragrammaton, or the name of God, often depicted in English as YHWH, which, for reasons of piety, is not to be pronounced), Jesus forgives the sins of others (often thought to be a prerogative of God alone), and he seems to understand that his death and resurrection has a role in bringing about the kingdom of God in apocalyptic terms (Mark 13:24-27). In summary, Jesus' whole mission in Mark seems to be the exposure, challenge, and overcoming of evil.

In the interest of space, many details in Mark are omitted, and the same is true in this combined, telescoped portrait of Matthew and Luke. From a literary point of view, there is a fierce urgency to Mark, whereas Matthew and Luke seem less hurried. As far as evil is concerned, both Gospels see Jesus as perpetuating and fulfilling the promise of God to deliver the people of God from evil. The births of John the Baptist and Jesus is told in Matthew and Luke, and both births herald a new period in the salvation of God's people. Matthew and Luke see Jesus as fulfilling older prophecies as Messiah and Savior, crucified and raised from the dead. Jesus combats the evil of others by calling them to repentance and sharing with them the values to live by (e.g. live a life of forgiveness and mercy, e.g. Luke 7:36-50; live in light of "the sermon on the mount," Matt 5:1-7:28). Jesus condemns the evil of not just behavior (adultery), but of sinful desire (lust) (Matt 5:27-28). The hoarding of wealth is not commended (Matt 6:24; 19:23-24), but instead generous living is blessed (Matt 5:42; Luke 18:25). Both Matthew and Luke see Jesus in deep opposition to a Pharisee-led Judaism. In Luke 13:1-5, it seems Jesus claims that specific, ill calamities (a tower collapses killing eighteen people) are not due to the victims' sins, but all people are in need of repentance ("I tell you... unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" verse 5). This appears to place Jesus theologically in line with the Covenant of Noah in which God promises not to bring all wrongdoers to punishment in this life as well as the Book of Job in which an innocent person suffers. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus triumphs over evil by suffering, death, and resurrection. It must be noted that in all four gospels, there is a theme of judgment (e.g. Mark 9:47; Matt 12:36; Luke 13:5), and while there are parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) which valorize mercy and reconciliation respectively, there are also warnings of punishment for those who refuse God's call to repentance and neglect the poor (e.g. Luke 16:19-31).

The Gospel of John is the most explicit in recognizing Jesus as God in flesh, from its prologue in which God and Jesus are seen as one, to Jesus' proclamation of oneness with the Father (John 14). John identifies Jesus as the Lord of both his life and the life to come: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies'" (John 11:25-26). In John, the conflict between good and evil is cast between life and death, lightness and darkness. In the Gospel of John and the three Johannian epistles, the term for "life" (and its cognates) occurs 67 times. (This compares well with the Pauline literature in which "life" and its cognates occur 96 times). In John, Jesus as the Lord and giver of life confronts the darkness of this world, providing a way of salvation through his life, teaching, death, and resurrection.

Hints of the Trinity are displayed in Matthew 28:19, which proclaims: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The Trinity is nowhere explicitly endorsed in the New Testament, but there appears to be a recognition that God the Father is personal, if

not a person, to be addressed in praise, prayer, and worship. Jesus is a person who is said to be at one with the Father and is worshipped. The Holy Spirit also seems personal, if not a person (e.g. Luke 11:13; 12:12; John 14:26; 20:22; Acts 2:4; Romans 9:1; 1 Thes. 4:5). So it appears (at least hints) that evil is opposed to a Triune God – a thesis that will be clarified in the credal era. But it should be noted that however much (if at all) the divinity of Jesus is recognized in the gospels, they nowhere claim Jesus is the entire divine. This is the difference that was later expressed by claiming that Christ is *totus deus* (or wholly God) but not *totum dei* (the whole of God). For an excellent overview of the debate on the philosophy of the Trinity, see Thomas McCall's *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?*

What the rest of the New Testament includes from the Book of Acts to the Revelation to John (Apocalypse) are accounts of the teaching, persecution, and history of the early church, instruction concerning baptism and what would come to be known as the Eucharist, the Lord's supper, communion, mass, and so on, teaching about faith and works, redemption, salvation, prayer, virtue and vice, heaven and hell, and the "end times." Not underestimating the diversity within the New Testament, such teaching appears to be articulated in the context of a good world, corrupted by sin, and yet a savior or Messiah has appeared in Jesus Christ to call persons from a life of sin to a life of fulfillment in relationship to God. As the New Testament unfolds there is the suggestion that while Jesus triumphed over death and evil, the full defeat of evil will not occur until Jesus returns (1 Thes 4:13-18; Revelations 22:20).

The "canon" (from the Greek meaning "measuring rod"), which refers to the recognized New Testament text by the church, was substantially recognized in the fourth century, though some texts still remain unsettled. The Apocrypha, for example, is recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as divinely inspired, while Protestant denominations tend only to recognize it as worthy of study concerning the divine, but not as authoritative as the rest of scripture. For many Christians scripture itself will function as a guide to what is evil and good. Even if Satan himself can cite scripture (Matt 4), scripture itself has been seen by Christians as holy and an instrument for doing good (Col 3:16; Heb 4:12, 2 Tim 3:16). Christians have, however, differed as to whether they see scripture itself as the revelation of God or containing the revelation of God. On the former model, scripture would be as disclosive and revelatory of God, as an honest letter would be written by someone perfectly trustworthy. On the latter, scripture is the means by which God and the ways of God may be revealed to persons. In this model, scripture can serve as a portal or perhaps even a doorway; under some conditions (perhaps under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) one may come to encounter the divine through it. So, on the first view, scripture *is* revelation, and on the second scripture is a means for persons and communities to come to divine revelation.

In the first two to three centuries of the church, great energy was directed on clarifying the role and the nature of Jesus Christ in overcoming evil. The New Testament contains abundant claims and implications calling for systematic reflection. Even so, in this first section we may see that early Christians fully recognized the reality of evil and the central role of Jesus in overcoming evil, offering a life of abundance, and love of God and neighbor.

The clarion call concerning evil can perhaps best be summarized as: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

Post-Apostolic Thought

The Apostolic Age refers to the era of Jesus' original disciples and it comes to an end with their deaths.

According to tradition, two of the greatest followers of Jesus, Peter and Paul, were martyred in Rome. The extent of the early persecution of the church is much debated, but there is little doubt of the prevalence of martyrdom in the early stages of Christianity. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, who was probably killed in 110 CE during the reign of Emperor Trajan, wrote, "Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, which are my way of reaching to God. I am God's wheat, and I am to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become the pure bread of Christ" (see Frend 1967). But the religion of Christianity was at last recognized as permissible to practice in 313 with the Edict of Milan and it became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 391.

Let us consider four vital matters leading up to Christianity becoming a religion of the empire: reflection on the role of Jesus in overcoming evil; the initial stages of distinguishing orthodoxy (literally, *right belief*) and rightful authority from heresy; the relationship between Jews and Gentiles; and the difficulties of evolving from a prosecuted minority faith to its official state sponsorship. Each of these have a bearing on early Christian thought on evil.

Who was Jesus and what did he do? Disputes ranged in the early years about whether and how (of even if) Jesus was human and divine. Because this is a book on the history of evil and not Christology (theories about Jesus Christ), suffice it to say most self-described Christians (NB: "the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" Acts 11:26) recognize that the person Jesus Christ was an agent of divine goodness (blessed by God the Father) who dies and rose again to overcome the sins of the world. This appears to be the key teaching of the earliest recorded sermons (Acts 2; Acts 7). While some early professing Christians stressed the humanity of Jesus over his divinity (some held a view termed *adoptionism*, according to which Jesus, as a man, was adopted by God the Father to bring about salvation), others stressed the divinity of Jesus over his humanity (docetism).

Eventually a balance is achieved (as we shall see in the next section), but without settling the matter here, note several of the early ways in which Jesus was thought of overcoming sin, Satan, and death: by paying a ransom; by satisfying a divine demand for justice; and by showing us an awesome, nearly irresistible love, and it is through this self-giving love that the followers of Jesus are reborn or regenerated as new persons in Christ.

In what has become known as the Ransom Theory or the Christus Victor tradition, when persons sinned they came under the dominion of sin, death, and Satan. In order for us to be freed, a ransom had to be paid. In a simple version of this account, Satan is the holder of the hostages and he agrees to release sinners if Jesus takes our place. Jesus agrees to this and is killed. But, Satan's scheme is undone, for Jesus rises from the dead, destroys Satan, and frees the captives to new life.

This position has always been a minority position in Christian thought, but it can be defended against some of the common historical objections. Consider three historically significant objections and replies in rapid succession.

Why would God pay Satan a ransom and not just break sinners out of prison? Reply: imagine that sinners are willing prisoners and would not leave captivity without a witness of God's costly self-giving love. Objection: surely this theory gives too much prominence to Satan. As we shall see, none of the church's creeds call for belief in Satan. Reply: true, but even if Satan does not exist, might the Ransom Theory still house something intuitively plausible? Practicing wickedness can very much seem like being under the power of some stronger power.

Objection: alright, let Satan be a metaphor. Why pay a metaphor a ransom? Reply: if you carry the metaphor through, sinners are the ones who are paid the ransom. By witnessing God's love, sinners willingly walk out of their self-exile.

How might Jesus overcome death through a satisfaction of some kind for divine justice? One of the main ideas here will take centuries to refine, but the root theme is that Jesus died in our place. By his dying, he frees us from death. In Saint Ignatius of Antioch's *Letter to the Trallians* we read, "Jesus Christ... died for us, that through faith in His death you might escape dying."

In a related strand in this view of redemption, Jesus frees us from sin through love and regeneration. St. Ignatius writes:

"Who is able to explain the bond of the love of God? Who is equal to the telling of the greatness of His beauty? The height to which love lifts us in unutterable. Love unites us to God. Love covers a multitude of sins. Love endures all things, is long-suffering in everything. There is nothing vulgar in love, nothing haughty. Love makes no schism; love does not quarrel; love does everything in unity. In love we are the elect of God perfected; without love nothing is pleasing to God. In love did the Master take hold of us. For the sake of the love which he had for us did Jesus Christ our Lord, by the will of God, give His blood for us, His flesh for our flesh, and His life for our lives." (St. Ignatius 11)

On this view, Jesus in some sense transforms the single life of his followers through forgiveness leading to a kind of regeneration and adoption:

"Since, then, He has renewed us by the forgiveness of sins, He has put a different stamp upon us, so that our souls might be like the souls of children, as they would be if He were creating us anew." (St. Ignatius 14)

Ignatius goes on to articulate Jesus' suffering as a substitute (he suffers in our place), Jesus' vicarious suffering frees us from the yoke of sin, and paves the way for a regeneration, in which repentant sinners come into a unified life with God.

Orthodoxy, Authority, and Heresy

It has been said that history is written by the victors, and if there is truth to that, we should be cautious in accepting an official history that makes the transition from the post-Apostolic age to the Creedal era as too smooth. Some early Christians described the Apostolic age as one of purity, with errors and disagreements only emerging later. Tertullian argued (in a clever analogy) that it made no sense for a forgery to exist prior to that which is authentic. But many scholars (Christian and non-Christian) opt for a different image than forgery and authenticity, and refer instead to a kind of trajectory, or a movement from a diverse beginning with many sources in dispute and moving not to some perfect unity, but to distinctive Christian alternatives (see Dunn 1977 for an excellent overview). Still, while controversial today, what emerged as a Christian consensus was its distinction from forms of Gnosticism, even those forms of Gnosticism which were in Christian terms affirming Jesus as savior delivering us from evil.

There are a great variety of Gnostic philosophies either just before or after the emergence of Christianity around the Mediterranean, but one version was of special interest to defenders of what would emerge as "orthodoxy." In this version, the creation was not the result of a good God's free act of creation, but the outcome of an errant

divine being, sometimes called Sophia. On this view, the material world is itself base, perhaps even evil, and we are trapped in our material bodies, requiring liberation. For Gnostics with a Christian orientation, Jesus was sent by the God beyond the god of this world, to give us the sacred knowledge (or *gnosis*) that will lead us to enlightenment and out of the entrapment of this world. In its common form, Jesus is not fully incarnate as human, but *seems* human and has been sent to out-wit the evil powers of this world and lead us heaven-ward.

Against this, Polemicists like the Christian theologian Irenaeus argued forcefully that New Testament requires Christians fully recognize the reality of the incarnation. In the Gospels of John, for example, which would seem to be very close to a Gnostic gospel given the ostensible “other worldly” origin of Jesus, it is evident that Jesus is fully subject to human bodily life: he eats (John 6), tires (John 4:6), bleeds (John 19:34), and dies (John 19:30).

The struggle with Gnosticism was to clear the path for creedal affirmation of Jesus’ human nature. While some of the New Testament has a Gnostic tone (3 John), the New Testament as a whole stresses that the incarnation is a real, tangible event (Luke 24:39-40; Matt 26:67). Note especially the humanity of Jesus in the crucifixion narrative of John 19. Moreover, Irenaeus and other Christian polemicists repudiated the idea that the material, created order was not good.

Jews and Gentiles

While Jesus and his disciples were all Jewish, there are hints in the New Testament that the Jews who reject Jesus are no longer blessed by God. In John 8:44, Jesus addresses Jews who reject him and are (he believes) seeking to kill him. “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning...” The New Testament also contains explicit claims of equality between Jews and Gentiles: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Still, some of the reasons that were offered in the New Testament and in the post-Apostolic age for the authenticity of Jesus Christ as the Messiah included fulfilled prophecy from the Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament. If many, but not all Jews knew of these prophecies, why did they not recognize the Lordship of Christ and become Christians (see Bickerman 1990 and Ferguson 2003)? Sadly, Jews and Jewish and Gentile Christians drifted apart and the grounds for the long legacy of persecutions of the Jews was begun in the post-Apostolic age. One of the classic representations of the Christian case against non-Christian Judaism is Justin Martyr’s second century book, *Dialogues with Trypho*. In the dialogue between a Christian and an observant Jew, the Christian argues that Christianity is the true completion or fruition of Judaism, whereas Jews that refuse Christ are now clinging to an old, and no longer divinely sanctioned covenant (see Dunn 1991).

From a Persecuted Minority to Public Sponsorship

In the earliest stages of Christianity, there was great ambivalence about the legitimacy of using lethal force, and thus of the permissibility of serving in the military. The New Testament itself teaches that one should love one’s enemies: “do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Matt 5:43-46; Luke 6:27-28). If the Emperor is a Christian, can he authorize the killing of those whom he is supposed

to love, namely his enemies and the enemies of the empire? Gradually, the church formulated conditions of when it was permissible to use lethal force individually (to protect the innocent) and as an empire or state. Some scriptural authority was appealed to stressing God's providence in appointing world leaders (King David who was anointed to be King in the Old Testament and the Pauline appeal to God's hand in establishing governing authorities in Romans 13). Topics of just war and a theology of governance will have to be covered in future chapters. Suffice it to note that some Christians today still debate the theological implications of Christianity (or more specifically, the Church as an institution) achieving state sponsorship. Especially Christian pacifists lament the rise of what is sometimes disparagingly referred to as "Constantinian Christianity."

The highly institutionally form of Christianity that evolved contrasts with the early monastic, ascetic practice of the faith by the desert fathers and mothers in small monastic communities in Northern Africa and the Near East. In these contexts, the battle against evil was seen in terms of spiritual warfare in which the monk or nun would resist temptation, and seek a life of contemplative, even unitive prayer and union with God. These early monastics also sought to aid in the overcoming of evil in the world through petitionary prayers (see Chadwick 1958).

Let us briefly consider many of the themes in the New Testament and post-Apostolic age that culminated in what is perhaps the most widely acknowledged statement of faith in early Christianity.

Creedal Christianity

As Christianity continued to evolve in its early life, different statements of the faith called *creeds* were developed. Probably the most important is the Nicene Creed, still in use in the West and (with a minor but significant change in reference to the Holy Spirit) in the East (the Eastern Orthodox Church as opposed to the Roman Catholic Church). The Nicene Creed (the result of the Council of Nicea, 325 CE) affirms the point of Jesus Christ becoming incarnate, his crucifixion, suffering, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and second coming was "for our salvation." This puts the deliverance from evil as the key, central claims of the Christian Church. The creed begins with the affirmation of God as the "creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible." This strong commitment to creation as stemming from God implies that the creation is indeed worthy of God, and the subsequent references to Jesus being "begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created of the same essence as the Father" implies that the one who is to save us from sin or to bring about "our salvation" is divine. The Holy Spirit is then affirmed as "the Lord and life-giver Who proceeds from the Father" and explicitly identified in terms of revealing God to us for it is the Holy Spirit "Who spoke through the prophets." The creed also affirms the ultimate overcoming of evil at the end of time, for Jesus "will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom shall have no end." The last line indicates that Christian believers should live in anticipation of this future event: "We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen."

Future Questions

Many questions about the nature and scope of evil would be of enduring importance in future Christian reflection

on evil, many of which are addressed in other chapters. Here is a short list of the questions that still remained open after the early Christian reflection on evil:

Does God predetermine who shall be saved?

Are acts evil because God condemns them or does God condemn them because they are evil?

What is the best account of the Atonement whereby Jesus redeems sinners and brings about an atonement (or at-one-ment) between God and creatures?

Is it essential that a person be saved by becoming a follower of Christ in this life, or might Christ's redemption extend to "unbelievers" or those too young or impaired or those who are not exposed (properly) to Christ's offer and worth of redemption?

Is evil inevitable?

In the end, is it good that there is evil, for that allows for the great good of the Incarnation and Atonement?

Is evil a positive reality or a privation or disfiguration of something good?

What are the implications of the first sin (original sin or the sin of Adam and Eve)?

Can human beings (in this life, by the grace of God) achieve moral and spiritual perfection?

Are any of the following evil, and if so, why: Homosexuality, abortion, suicide, euthanasia, divorce, not preventing starvation when surplus food is available, stealing or lying if it seems necessary to save a life?

If someone has wronged a person and has not confessed or repented, is it permissible for the victim to forgive the wrong-doer or is confession and repentance a precondition for forgiveness?

If some persons are in hell for all eternity, is this a perpetual, unredeemed evil?

Would an all-powerful, all-loving God save all people from evil, if not in this life, in an afterlife?

How should a Christian (who believes in a God of love and mercy) address cases in which it appears that the God of scriptures seems to command or countenance that which seems to be evil?

Ultimately, in practical terms, who or what is the best interpreter of God's revelation about evil and good after the Apostolic age?