

Christian Oughtness for Today: Biblical Perspectives for Christian Living

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ABSTRACT

The world has traveled on a path that has presented inherent complexities and untold challenges as well as difficulties to the living of the 'religious' life in general and the Christian life in particular. Often, modern-day values offer a contradiction to traditional, religious, and biblical values which most of the time eclipses the Christian understanding of how one ought to live in the awareness of one's Christian identity and vocation. This has culminated in the laxity of awareness in the *Christian oughtness*, in other words, of how the Christian ought to live in response to one's identity and calling. This paper has sought to re-present the Christian oughtness anew situating it in its biblical-ethical perspectives. The paper used a narrative paradigm to reflect on biblical Christian ethics in the light of imperatives from the Old and New testaments. The paper envisages deepening a treatise on the awareness of the Christian oughtness from the biblical ethical perspective as a new paradigm through which Christians and people of goodwill would live as they ought to live, in promoting justice, progress and development of all people and their nations.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, human societies have seen progress in terms of technological advancement and globalization. That process has been heavily influenced by secularism and secularization. The effect of such progress has resulted in dual consequences. On one hand, humans are able to live 'better' compared to their forebears; as there is a general improvement in healthcare delivery, telecommunications, and technology and has ushered excitement and quality to various dimensions of human life. On the other hand, there has been the challenge of traditional values, worldviews and morality on some delicate questions of human existence. The latter continues to throw increasingly, perplexing challenges to modern-day human beings on how they ought to live their everyday lives. Often, they are faced with contradictory values, that they have traditionally known and the other that the new wave of the direction of society presents them with. Same challenges are also faced by the modern-day Christian who in his everyday life is presented with an intricate web of dilemmas on how one must live his or her life in the light of faith. This calls for a lucid understanding of what and how the Christian ought to live daily.

To address this problem, the question of how the Christian ought to live an existential life daily is one which answer must culminate in a clear, precise and fluid understanding of what Christian morality or ethics is about. Of course, the Socratic connection of knowledge to virtue has important ramifications for how knowledge of *Christian oughtness*¹ would shape the morality of the Christian. Invariably, morality has interrelationships with many notions of life such as justice, progress, and development.² Consequently, this paper seeks to shed light on how one could be a Christian in today's world and live his or her Christian identity informed by biblico-ethical considerations.

¹ The notion of 'Christian oughtness' has been indirectly expressed in Catholic Moral theology's understanding of 'Call and Response' where God calls people into friendship (or union) with Him and the people respond with their will, heart and mind. In this vocation, man responds to God in the light of the revelation he has received where he follows the prescriptions given by God. See: Bernard Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, (New York: Crossroad, 1978).

² Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei Socialis- Papal Encyclical On Social Concern*, (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987).

Christian Ethics and Biblical Ethics

At the outset of this exposition, the relationship that is thought to exist between Christian ethics and biblical ethics must be clarified. This key strategy situates discussions of the 'Christian oughtness' in its right contexts and perspectives. There is a general consensus that is widely accepted that biblical ethics is the same as Christian ethics. This view has received lucid scholarly articulation in the works of such scholars as Carl F. H. Henry³ and John Murray.⁴ Their treatise highlights that Scripture corresponds to a "revealed morality". Henry perhaps, was very much aware and indeed, critical of the modern tendency to de-couple "biblical ethics" from "Christian ethics." He took to the view that anything the Bible taught was Christian ethics.⁵ That model also brought into sharp focus the composite nature of Scripture in addressing the moral life of the Christian. Henry construed a "unitary biblical ethic, of one with a coherent and consistent moral requirement, that lays claim on all men at all time."⁶ Murray also discovered in Scripture "objectively revealed precepts, institutions, commandments which are the norms and channels of human behavior."⁷

Thus, the morality revealed in Scripture is understood as giving specific information regarding how man should live with his fellow human. While holding that the moral revelation of Scripture is not always clear, Henry averred that "there is actually no ethical decision in life which the biblical revelation leaves wholly untouched and for which, if carefully interpreted and applied, it cannot afford some concrete guidance."⁸ The Bible consequently serves as a guideline providing principles that embrace the various particularities and obfuscations of life, by giving specific instruction for ethical decisions (and of course, actions) that arise out of them.⁹ In the light of guidance the Bible gives, Henry maintains that there is no conflict of duty [because] "in the ethical dilemmas of life there is never a real conflict of duty, even though the mind and heart may be torn between apparent conflicts that are as yet unresolved."¹⁰

Accordingly, there is no ambiguity of duty from any situation the Christian might face. This is because, in the light of the understanding gleaned from above, the unique morality revealed in Scripture addresses every situation. And, it is the following of this unique guide that leads the Christian to a life of moral obligation and virtue. Basically, Christian ethics is made up of learning what the Bible teaches and, as persons who have been converted, acting in accordance with this. Scripture, therefore, can be significant in shaping the character of the moral actor who in this situation is the Christian. Both ethicists and biblical scholars have sounded this emphasis clearly. Stanley Hauerwas has also stated that the specific commands in the Decalogue, especially, and other ethical postulations that the Bible presents are simply reminders of the kind of identity people must (have) be and what lives they ought to live.¹¹

According to Benezet Bujo, "Christianity is based on a "document" which is called the Bible" and includes both the Old and New Testaments.¹² The two testaments reveal ethical imperatives which teach Christians how they are to live their lives as children of God in the world. It is to be noted from this moment that the ability of the Christian to live in line with the ethical imperatives is in fact, a fulfilment of the "Christian oughtness." This part of the paper is devoted to showing the ethical imperatives that are contained in the Christian Scripture. In doing this endeavor, the text will highlight the notion of "Christian oughtness" and some ethical teachings of the Old Testament which will deal with certain portions of the Decalogue which deals with man's relationship to man. It will also touch on the ethical teachings of Jesus, Paul and James. This approach is significant because it articulately emphasizes how adherents of faith are to practice their faith in everyday living gleaned from their ethical postulations in fulfilling the 'Christian oughtness.'

The "Christian oughtness" notion

The term "ought," no doubt, clearly resonates well in ethics circles, often used in relation to obligation. But, the term is quite difficult to delineate its precise meaning. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines oughtness as "the quality or state of being obligatory."¹³ Fox's classical article *Defining Oughtness and Love* carefully substantiated the connection oughtness has with purposiveness and volition.¹⁴ In that work, Fox established that oughtness carried a relationship between free agents (creatures/humans) and the first free agent (creator/God) who defines the purpose of existence for creatures in terms of what they ought (are obliged/must/are *related*) to do with their free will for the relationship with the first agent. Accordingly, Fox maintains the understanding of 'Christian' oughtness as based on *Agape* where

³ Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1957).

⁴ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1957).

⁵ Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 236.

⁶ Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 327.

⁷ Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*, 24.

⁸ Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 339.

⁹ Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 339.

¹⁰ Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 340.

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture: The Politics and Ethics of Remembering," *Int* 34 (1980): 369. See also his book, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio, Texas, 1975).

¹² Benezet Bujo, *Do we still need the Ten Commandments?* (Nairobi-Kenya: St. Paul's Publication Africa, 1990).

¹³ "Oughtness," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oughtness>. Accessed 18 Oct 2020.

¹⁴ F. Earle Fox, "Defining "oughtness" and "Love", *The Journal Religion*, Jul., 1959, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Jul., 1959), University of Chicago, 170-182, <https://www.jstor.com/stable/1199585>. Accessed 16 Aug 2020.

creatures do something or live in response “to fulfil the existent relationship and accomplish the purposes of God in the relationship.”¹⁵ As a result, the Christian oughtness finds its foundation in the light of the existent relationship that is formed between humans and God, and that becomes the fulcrum of human action. Humans, therefore, live or act in a certain way because it is willed by God or because humans have been purposefully created to live in that accord. The Christian oughtness thus exemplified in the law of love becomes a meaningful ethic for Christians to live by. The Bible presents series of instructions to the Christian on how to respond to this ethic of love. This is the background informing the treatment of some ethical imperatives from the Old and Testaments of the Bible that suggest ways about which the Christian must live his life in the world.

Ethical Imperatives from the Old Testament

The Old Testament presents Christians with a series of imperatives about which to live their life. The Hebrew Scriptures postulate intrinsic norms to facilitate social cohesion, build social justice, establish rational laws, and maintain good order in society; those norms are also espoused in some theories of development. Accordingly, the stipulations of the Decalogue set themselves as the first basis for justice, progress and development. This section discusses the ethical oughtness in the Decalogue. This article focuses on the fourth through to the tenth commandments. This is strategic as the commandments in scope, also known as the “second tablet” are those that deal directly with man’s relationship with fellow man. The sub-headings have been chosen in light of the typology developed by Bujo in his seminal book *Do we still need the Ten Commandments?* This work goes on to state the ethical injunctions and following them up with an appropriate contextual discussion of the injunction. Such a mechanism would be instrumental in delineating the ‘Christian oughtness’ implied in the injunction.

Respect for one’s Parents

The injunction here is “Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD, your God has commanded you, so that you may have long life and prosperity in the land that the LORD, your God is giving you” (Deut. 5:16 NAB).¹⁶ This commandment has greater implications for social order and living. The Christian is called to respect his or her parents, both biological and non-biological. At the same time, the commandment also has an implied dimension of respect for leadership and authority. It has been stated that authority and leadership are intrinsic to any progress project. This calls for respect of social institutions and authorities. Respect for leadership and authority is significant for social order and thus for development. It is the rules and regulations that govern behavior that make life worth living. This calls for a decorous relationship with authority and leadership that shows mutual respect and trust. This commandment enjoins the Christian to be law-abiding to the rules of his country and act in conformity with them. Invariably, the adherence to law and order has ramifications for life enhancement.

Sanctity of Human Life

The fifth commandment stating categorically, “You shall not kill” (Deut. 5:17 NAB) is the opening into the sacred character of human life. The sanctity of life has universal applicability to protect and promote life and not to engage in any kind of way that threatens the dignity of life. This is to say that any kind of homicide ought to be avoided.¹⁷ The sacredness of life is even extended to include fetal protection which equally places a prohibition on abortion. This is to be reflected in working for peace and justice, opposing killings and wars. This is seen in respect for life, and the fellow who does not respect life offends God who made man after his own image and likeness. The Christian is, thus, called to guarantee the sanctity of human life by embarking on ways that stimulate the progress of man, materially, socially, economically and politically.

Dignity of Sexual Life

Among the ways the Christian must fulfill his or her ‘Christian oughtness’ is to appreciate the dignity of sexual life. The sixth commandment’s “You shall not commit adultery” (Deut. 5:18 NAB) is a clear attestation to this. The Christian is therefore called to avoid pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations. This is because the value of sexual intimacy is only esteemed in marriage. This directive also has implications for the married who are called to uphold sexual fidelity in their marriage life. It is here that the exclusivity of marriage as a union between one man and one woman is enshrined. This union is seen as a perpetual one that ends only in death. As a result, cases of divorce and separations are highly discouraged. The dignity of sexual life also relates to such behaviors contrary to traditional Bible values such as homosexuality, lesbianism, etc. This also has to do with prostitution and commercial sex work. Self-pleasurable behaviors like masturbation are also not welcome in the life of the Christian. The followers of Christ in how they live

¹⁵ Fox, *Defining “oughtness” and “Love,”* 176.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all the Bible quotations in this article are from the St. Joseph Edition of the New American Bible (NAB)

¹⁷ The Catholic Church recently revised Paragraph 2267 of its Catechism to make capital punishment “inadmissible” in all cases. That revision has been reemphasized in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli tutti* calling for the abolition of the death penalty.

out their faith is to be devoid of all these entanglements. It is important that for a healthy sexual life, the need for self-control in the body and the will is necessary. The tenacious following of this imperative would reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancies, prostitution and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and AIDS which have been noted to be inimical to the development discourse.

The sixth commandment espoused above has connections with the ninth commandment wherein is captured “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Deut. 5:21). Scholars indicate that the ninth commandment has quite a wider scope as it is not only aimed at desires leading to adultery but also to dangerous friendships, flirtations and playing at love.¹⁸ This decries lustful desires, possessive or selfish friendships. It requires respecting people, their right to personal integrity, and everything that even the most passionate desires must be mastered. Therefore, in order to live out his faith, the follower of Christ must mirror these qualities that the commandment identifies.

Attitude towards Earthly Goods

“You shall not steal” (Deut. 5:19 NAB) is the commandment that attempts to moderate the Christian’s desire for earthly materials. Riches, possessions and acquisitions are accordingly part of God’s creation and the first chapter of Genesis gives approbation as good the things in creation,¹⁹ but this commandment suggests that people should be cautious how they respond to the goodness of creation. This is a call to review constantly human attitudes towards material wealth. The human being is to show contentment for the goodness of creation he has received and not seek to take by force what does not belong to him. This commandment has the nuance of distributive justice wherein one is to respect the needs of others and duly give them what belongs to them. This directive sets itself against financial misappropriations, corruption, bribery, embezzlements, greed, exploitations, and so on which do not advance the cause of development. This is indicative of the fact that for someone who identifies as a Christian, these kinds of negative tendencies should not be found in them.

The Love for Truth

The eighth number of the Decalogue makes the call for the pursuit of truth, “You shall not bear dishonest witness against your neighbor” (Deut. 5:20 NAB). It calls for probity, transparency, accountability and integrity in relationship with one another. It applies to sincerity and fidelity in all things, in industry, in politics, in academia, in health, in commerce, etc. The Psalmist captures this love for truth thus:

Who can climb the mountain of the Lord, who shall stand in his holy place...The man whose way of life is blameless, who always does what is right, who speaks the truth from his heart, whose tongue is never used for slander, who does no wrong to his fellows and casts no discredit to his neighbor (Ps. 24:3-4).

From the psalm above, one is able to deduce that the follower of Christ in fulfilling his ‘Christian oughtness’ must strive to always do what is right, he or she must do no wrong against his or her fellow human being, and neither must one tell lies in his dealing with others. In other words, the love for truth must characterize and permeate the Christian’s life. Bujo has stated that “truth as a bearer of life must be part of the African way of life because the continent cannot develop without [it]...”²⁰ Christians in their daily existential conditions must therefore pursue truth economically, politically, socially, morally, etc. From the scenario painted above, it is an indictment on this love for truth to have Christian politicians willfully deceiving the public with promises, to have Christian accountant manipulating figures, Christian contractors charging exorbitant amounts and doing shoddy works, Christian police officers extorting monies from the public, Christian students engaged in examination malpractice, internet fraud, etc. all of which are detrimental to any discourse on development. What is needed in the words of Bujo is “irreversible fidelity and truthfulness”²¹ in order to advance the cause of justice, progress and development.

Mastering Excessive Desires to Possess Earthly Goods

Certain comforts are necessary for the fulfillment of the human being, and therefore the desire to possess some earthly good for comfort is a good thing as it befits man and radiates his inherent dignity. Nevertheless, excesses and consequent perversion are highly discouraged.²² This is what the tenth commandment as a possible addendum to the seventh commandment seeks to portray. “You shall not set your heart on his house, his field, his servant- man or woman- his ox, his donkey or anything that is his” (Deut. 5:21). The commandment sets itself against selfishness, jealousy, and all tendencies that push people to crave excessively for earthly materials. It condemns all excessive desires for earthly materials. In Africa where earthly possessions are the object of prestige, Bujo mentions that the hunger for power must

¹⁸ Bujo, *Do we still need the Ten Commandments?* 77.

¹⁹ The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)’s teaching on environmental stewardship finds its foundation here.

²⁰ Bujo, *Do we still need the Ten Commandments?* 72.

²¹ Bujo, *Do we still need the Ten Commandments?* 72.

²² The idea being portrayed above may be espoused best in the popular expression “Live simply, so that others may simply live.”

be curtailed as invariably, the African's desire for power is motivated first and foremost by an unquenchable thirst for material possessions.²³ He cites the cases where medical doctors abandon their vocation to become ministers of transport when they have little or no competence in the transport sector. The unbridled pursuit of earthly possessions, accordingly, has become the source of corruption, misappropriation of public funds and embezzlements. But human relations and development are based on respect for the world in which people live. This commandment shows the way to regulate and overcome the inclinations to the excessive pursuit of material goodness. By this, the follower of Christ is called in the way he lives his life to master his desire for earthly goods to allow for other people to obtain the basic necessities of life. This is because real progress and development have to aim at the evils of greed and envy, and there must be the drive to eradicate those ills. The article now discusses some ethical perspectives from the New Testament.

Ethical Teachings from the New Testament

This section reflects on ethical teachings from the New Testament as the basis of how Christians are to respond to their 'Christian oughtness'. These ethical teachings deepen the necessity of how the Christian ought to live everyday life. This section will, first and foremost, touch on the ethical teachings of Jesus as contained in the synoptic gospels and letters of Paul and James. These books are key as they seem to encapsulate what New Testament ethics is all about.

Gospel Teachings of Jesus

The basis of Christian ethics is traceable to the ministry of Jesus, and this is painted brightly in the synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke. The Synoptics highlight the crux of Jesus' teaching with the exposition on the Kingdom of God, as the way through which God's rule as King of the world is exercised.²⁴ Jesus starting his ministry called all those 'who labor and are heavy-laden to go to him in order that He may give them rest' (Matt. 11:28). That the mission of Jesus had the purpose of calling men to prepare themselves for the Kingdom is indicated by many passages of the gospels when he began his ministry by calling men to repentance (Matt. 1:14). He calls His disciples; His general calling to all men is: 'He who wills, let him follow me' (Matt.16:24), and appeals to the free will of all men who are left to accept or to reject it. Nti-Abankoro has cited Demetropoulos who intimates that repentance means "a full change in the whole attitude of man and the decision to undertake the difficult struggle to overcome his weaknesses and bad tendencies, and install in himself a stable moral life led in accordance with the will of God."²⁵ It is after repentance that one experiences new birth. Ethically, this new birth means the inner renaissance of man affected by faith and grace. An aspect of this new birth (baptism) also is the free will with, which man proceeds towards it and with which he accepts the obligations and duties that come out of it. In baptism, there is an actual change from the life of sin to the regenerated life in Christ. This is what in St. Paul's interpretation, in virtue of the baptism the old man, the man of sin, dies and the man of virtue, the new man in Christ, emerges out of it (Rom. 6: 3-11, 2 Cor. 5:14). Baptism initiates the process of discipleship.

Jesus defines self-denial as the first condition of discipleship. "If any man wishes to come after me", that is to be employed as a servant in my mission, "let him deny himself take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). Self-denial, therefore, involves the abandonment of contemporary and relevant values for the sake of the permanent and eternal ones. It enables man to distinguish between, and make the due classification of values.²⁶ Marshall has articulately captured this notion of self-denial saying that it:

is something new in Ethics, and self-sacrifice for the sake of others, as a means to social good, is the central idea of Christian morality. It is from this vantage point that we see the innermost meaning of Jesus' call to repentance-there is to be a complete change of mind, change of front, a redirection of interest and love and care. When a man repents he stops thinking and caring for himself alone and takes God and matters of conduct. The rule of self is abandoned for the voluntary acceptance of the rule of God.²⁷

Jesus regarded these as embodied in his very own life and ministry. Growing up and frequenting the synagogues, Jesus internalized the traditions of his people which became available to him and he re-interpreted those traditions in a new, radical and original way for the purposes of his own mission. He held a highly paradoxical understanding of God's kingly rule which was seen as unconventional by the standards of his times. As a result, he expressed God's rule through parables, axioms, and pithy sayings (as well as by choice of action). This was done by relating it to everyday experiences, meant to shift the attention of his hearers and viewers to a new paradigm. Thus, his approach was less of doctrinal affirmations but more of practical explications. Through these, Jesus taught how one could become a citizen

²³ Bujo, *Do we still need the Ten Commandments?* 81.

²⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament- An interpretation*. (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2010). See also Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2014).

²⁵ Panayiotis C. Demetropoulos, *The Ethical Requirements of the Kingdom of God*, pdf, quoted in Ignatius Nti-Abankoro, "Linking the Formal and Informal Expressions of Christianity for Socio-economic development: A case study of Selected Christians in the Kumasi Metropolis." MPhil Thesis unpublished, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, 2017, 61-62.

²⁶ Demetropoulos, *The Ethical Requirements of the Kingdom of God*, 61-62.

²⁷ Laurence. H. Marshall, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1947), 35.

of this Kingdom of God. For him, the invitation to the kingdom of God was through a call to holiness which is anchored in the ethics of love.

For the Christian, therefore, the summit of all such moral principles is encapsulated in the principle of *agape*²⁸ (love). Moral philosophy and moral theology can be condensed as the attempt to fuse all norms into a single, overarching principle. In the case of faith revealed through Scripture, the supreme norm is the principle of *agape*. This is summarily put in the notions of love for God and for human beings which Jesus recaptures from the OT.²⁹ St. Paul is straightforward in his reminder in Romans 13:9-10, that “The commandments . . . are summed up in this sentence, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (RSV).³⁰

In the life and teachings of Jesus, [*agape*] love is the ultimate measure by which all other lesser moral principles, rules, etc. are deemed valid and coherent. It can therefore be stated that all other principles, codes, and rules require the principle of *agape* in order to reach meaningfulness. This is to say that they “need” *agape*. However, it is rules, codes, principles, etc. that give love its defining feature. It must be borne in mind that the focus and unity that are achieved in the normative discourse is because of love. Therefore, the continual synthesis of this dialectic of *agape* is the most arduous task of Christian normative ethics. And this synthesis must be guided at every step by insights from Scripture.

Ethical teachings in the Pauline Corpus

It is instructive to note that in the Pauline corpus, St. Paul does not only teach fundamental truths about the Christ-event but also exhorts the believing community to be upright in their ethical conduct. Ethical considerations are peculiar in his epistles with respect to the behaviors of individuals as well as that of the whole community. Brian S. Rosner has commented summarily on Paul’s ethics saying “When we speak of Paul’s ethics we simply have in mind ‘his ways which are in Christ (1 Cor. 4:17), and his ‘instructions as to how one ought to walk and please God’ (1 Thess. 4:1).³¹ Pauline ethics is Christocentric as he envisions a universal community of believers through Jesus Christ. Anugraha Behera has cited Johannes Weiss’ four motifs of Pauline ethics.³² The first motif, which is eschatological in nature³³ cites Paul’s expectation of a *Parousia* and judgment of the world. The aim of ethics here is for believers to appear blameless on the day of the Lord. It is for this reason that he exhorts the believing community at Thessalonica “to walk worthy of God who has called you in his kingdom and to his glory” (1 Thess. 2: 12). The second motif is also closely knit to the first. The believing community is called to holiness. The Christian must therefore live a holy and clean life since one’s true home is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). After the holiness motif is the fellowship motif where Paul’s ethics are not only for individual benefit or individual soteriology but aim to establish a loving, caring brotherhood (1 Cor. 12: 4-14; Rom. 12:3ff). Here, Paul highlights the necessity of love in the community. Love plays a crucial role in Paul as his ethics is founded upon what is responsible, fitting and loving in the concrete situation.³⁴ Pauline ethics also has the personality motif where the Christian is called to cultivate a Christian personality which will not only glorify Christ but also attract people towards Christ. The Christian is a free person in Christ, but this freedom is not unrestrained. Paul argues that the ideal Christian personality is the expression of values such as love, joy, long-suffering, faithfulness, goodness, generosity, peace, gentleness and self-control. Christians therefore should be outward examples of exalted breeding with decent and dignified manners (1 Thess. 4:12; 1 Cor. 7:35, 14:40; Rom. 13).

From the discussion above, it can be gleaned that Paul regarded religion and ethics as indissolubly joined, that true religion was always accompanied by a high ethic and that high ethics can be inspired by religion. From that, it can be deduced that the first aspect of the ritual of worship and how people ought to live out their lives are two sides of the same coin. This is cogently articulated by Willi Marxen when he summarizes the whole Pauline ethics as follows: “genuine Christian ethics is the worship of God in everyday life.”³⁵ The ultimate ideal for Christian conduct, therefore, is anything that promotes fellowship with the Lord Jesus not excluding the brethren.

Ethical Teachings in the Book of James

Experts have maintained that the most practical book in the New Testament (NT) is the book of *James* because a glance

²⁸ Agape is a Graeco-Roman term referring to “love; the highest form of love, charity”, and “the love of God for man and of man for God” (H.G. Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Lexicon from Abridged from Liddell and Scotts Greek-English Lexicon*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 6. It has been used by C. S. Lewis to describe the highest level of love known to humanity: a selfless love that is passionately committed to the well-being of others (See C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*. (London: Fount, 1960).

²⁹ Matt 22:23-40; cf. Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18.

³⁰ Compare the mirroring of the same central truth in recent times by Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, Calif., 1911), p. 487: “It is love alone which in the sight of Heaven makes any act of value.”

³¹ Brian S. Rosner, “That Pattern of Teaching: Issues and Essays in Pauline Ethics”, 351-353; Paul Furnish, *The Moral teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, 2nd Edition. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, [1979], 1989).

³² Anugraha Behera, *From Law to Grace*, 2nd Edition. (Kolkata: Sourjya Printers, [2007], 2009).

³³ Behera, *From Law to Grace*, 253.

³⁴ Em Stephan, *Introducing Christian Ethics*. (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2003), 69. See also: Emmanuel E. James, *Ethics: A Biblical Perspective*. (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1992).

³⁵ Willi Marxen, *New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 224.

through the book reveals a consistent highlight of moral principles.³⁶ Nonetheless, the epistle of James is not presented as a treatise systematically. Compared with the other parts of the NT, there are different ethical prohibitions in the subjects that are treated. A distinguishing feature is the fact that the whole epistle is full of ethical postulations and not interspersed with doctrinal passages like the pattern typical of Pauline letters.³⁷ It appears that James the elder wrote to his former parishioners attempting to educate them like he would have done if they were under his care in Jerusalem.³⁸

Dibelius has through form-critical analysis analyzed and determined that the instructions and exhortations found in the book of James belong to a special genre called *paranesis*.³⁹ *Paranesis* brought together a series of ethical postulations which have no definite context.⁴⁰ Dibelius has consequently expounded the epistle as containing loosely arranged sayings and brief didactic portions. By linking the epistle of James with the *paranesis* of Jesus, especially the Beatitudes, Schlatter has entrenched this understanding.⁴¹ Regardless of these scholarly theories, it is unquestionable that the prominence of James' epistle is its experiential concerns.

The peculiar characteristic of the ethical teachings in James' epistle is the recollection of Jesus' teachings and the persuasion of the prophets in the Old Testament (OT). He gives empirical admonitions for a wide spectrum of topics. It can be said that the paradigm for his catechesis is the life of Jesus.⁴² However, several scholars have intimated that even though the book is practical, it does not pinpoint every issue.

James deals with the first theme of how believers are to practice the Word in their lives (1:18-25). The addressees are advised with an epigram: "Know this, my dear brothers: everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (1:19). According to Davids, this is crucial and fascinating, and a practically nauseating word for contemporary people in these times of "express-your-feelings."⁴³ The one who is ready to answer to the word is the person who has ears to listen to others and discerns and afterward speaks in prayer and care. The genesis of wisdom is therefore the attentive listening to the word rather than fast speech and spiky condemnation. When anger, squalid conduct and wrongful habits (1:20-21) are gotten rid of, Christians are to be prepared to receive the word grown in them which can save them (1:21). This must be humbly done in submission to God (1:21). The reception of the word connotes on one's part, the ability to commit oneself to Jesus and his teaching. It is such commitment that James seeks, i.e. to have one's lifestyle transformed.⁴⁴

Also, the writer of the letter deals with the theme of *Hearing and Doing*. It is essential that Christians hear the word and act upon it, so as not to be swindled (1:22). The four-time occurrence of "doers" in James is quite instructive as the word occurs again twice in the remaining portions of the NT (Acts 17:28). This instantiates James' continuous urgency on living out the word which has been received. The one who does not act in accordance with the word implanted (1:23) is comparable to the one who forgets how he looks like after looking into the mirror (1:24). The point holds true that one's knowledge of the Bible has value insofar as it is lived out, or else it becomes like a morning glance into the mirror.⁴⁵ Mayor has suggested that the torn awareness gained through reflection in the mirror differs from the quintessential understanding of reality.⁴⁶ It is also probable that a look in the mirror would not necessarily make evident the depth of one's character, but also "one's moral needs as reflected in the ugly traces of sin on his face."⁴⁷ James 1:25 makes the salient distinction between the "doer" and the ordinary "hearer." The fact that people hear, simply forget and refuse to put it into practice can be seen to be the result of neglect and negligence. However, those who put it into practice will be blessed by God because they live out the word they have received. James foregrounds the action of putting the word into practice as a full-time endeavor. It is worth noting here the eschatological orientation of the blessing.

Consequently, those who act upon the word follow the law of freedom. For it is within these Jewish contexts that this phrase could be understood. Davids has noted that this does not refer to the Stoic dictates of reason or the Jewish law, but the OT scriptures elucidated and made exemplary by the Messiah.⁴⁸ The Sermon on the Mount⁴⁹ (e.g.,

³⁶ David S. Dockery, "True Piety in James: Ethical Admonitions and Theological Implications". *Criswell Theological Review* 1.1 (1986), 51-70.

³⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1918) 2.358-65; and D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1970) 736-70.

³⁸ Donald Burdick, "James" *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. C. Gaebelein (12 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 163.

³⁹ Martin Dibelius, *James*, rev. H. Greeven (Hermeneia: Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 3; cf. S. Songer, "James" *Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. C. J. Allen (12 vols.; Nashville: Broadman, 1972), 12, 102.

⁴⁰ James Starr, *Paraneisis*. Oxford Bibliographies. Retrieved from www.oxfordbibliographies.com on October 15, 2016.

⁴¹ Adolf Schlatter, *Der Brief des Jakobus* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1932), 9-19.

⁴² cf. James 3:17.

⁴³ Peter H. Davids, *James* (GNC; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 14.

⁴⁴ Davids, *James* (GNC; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 15; cf. the discussion on "the implanted word" in J. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 98-100.

⁴⁵ Davids, *James* 16.

⁴⁶ Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 71.

⁴⁷ Thomas B. Maston, *Biblical Ethics* (Macon: Mercer, reprint 1982), 259.

⁴⁸ Peter H. Davids, *Commentary on James* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 99.

⁴⁹ William D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1964); Davies, *Torah in the Messianic Age and/or the Age to Come* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1952). Also see the very helpful comments in J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 69-81.

Matt 5:17) and other gospel verses depict Christ as the giver of the new commandment.⁵⁰ The freedom Jesus gives comes from the innermost disposition of the law (cf. Jer 31:31- 34).⁵¹ Thus, this freedom is not a license but the capacity to fulfill Christ's new law in human actions. This freedom is attained when one totally submits to Christ. In this way, Christians who live by the word of God are liberated from the oppression to sin and death and all excessive adherence to the law and will receive blessings from God. James' teaching could be enveloped in two aspects: (1) the service of "looking after the vulnerable" and (2) individual holiness which is the perpetual striving to keep oneself unblemished in the face of the pollutions in the world. The follower of Christ in living out his faith is called to expend his life at the service of the vulnerable in society and to strive perpetually to keep himself from being stained by the sordid nature of the world. Tasker aptly encapsulates how the follower of Christ must live his life as follows:

The believer must never be blind to his duty to express his faith in love, but at the same time, in the midst of all the distracting and demoralizing influences of the world around him, which lies wholly in the evil one, he must keep himself pure by continual remembrance of the demands of the all-holy God.⁵²

Practical Response to the 'Christian oughtness'

In the light of the biblico-ethical postulates and imperatives stated above, the Christian is supposed to respond in a certain committed way. The Christian's motifs are to be underpinned by love, and one must pursue the common good. By common good, "the sum total of social conditions which allow people either as groups or as individuals to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" is being referred to.⁵³ The ethical teachings from the OT and NT make it imperative that the best means of fulfilling one's commitment to justice and love is to furnish the common good according to one's giftedness, and the needs of others, to promote and help...to making the conditions of life better.⁵⁴

Bettering the conditions of life demands that Christian and non-Christian citizens alike participate more fully in public life. Invariably, today's democratic societies allow for all to contribute their quotas, to vote in electing lawmakers and government officials, and to act in ways that will benefit the common good, by developing political solutions and legislative choices to the effect.⁵⁵ Development [i.e. the attainment of the common good] is only possible with people who are productively active, responsible and generous, "albeit in a diversity and complementarity of forms, levels, tasks, and responsibilities".⁵⁶ Christians must therefore fulfil their civic duties. They must do this, "guided by a Christian conscience",⁵⁷ in congruence with its values. The Christian must infuse the temporal order with Christian values by exercising their proper tasks in diligence and love,⁵⁸ and collaborating with other citizens in line with their particular capability and responsibility.⁵⁹ The implications of this cardinal directive of the Second Vatican Council is that Christians "are never to relinquish their participation in 'public life', that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good".⁶⁰ This is seen in the furtherance and safeguarding of public goods such as order and peace, respect for human life and regard for the environment, justice and solidarity, and freedom and equality.

CONCLUSION

Being a Christian today is beset with its own inherent difficulties as a result of the contradictory values that the individual Christian continues to face in his or her decisions and actions, as well as in all spheres of one's life. Consequently, it is cogent that there is a re-intensification of knowledge of the Christian oughtness, gleaned from biblico-Christian ethics in terms of catechesis and ongoing Christian formation initiatives. With the above background in view, this essay sought to look at situating a lucid understanding Christian oughtness in the light of biblico-Christian ethics. The paper related the ethical imperatives from the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible to the Christian oughtness to which subscription would help Christians in particular and all people of goodwill, in general, to live out their vocation and identity. This was done by highlighting the ethical teachings in the Decalogue, the ethical teachings of Jesus, Paul and James in the NT. The paper also highlighted some practical responses from the Christian to the ethical postulations from the OT and NT as a way of responding to that oughtness. The case is therefore true, in effect, that the application of biblical ethics to everyday life is a step in the direction of contending in human progress and development. In this

⁵⁰ C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966),

⁵¹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981), 698-99.

⁵² Randolph V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Tyndale: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 55.

⁵³ Catechism of the Catholic Church. No. 1906. Retrieved from www.vatican.va/ccc_css/catechism/p2s2c2.htm on November 21, 2015.

⁵⁴ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (The Church in the Modern World), 30.

⁵⁵ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (The Church in the Modern World), 75.

⁵⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles laici*, 42: AAS 81 (1989), 472.

⁵⁷ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 76.

⁵⁸ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (The Church in the Modern World), 36.

⁵⁹ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 7; Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 36; Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (The Church in the Modern World), 31 and 43.

⁶⁰ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 42.

regard, the words of Marxen need a reecho that “genuine Christian ethics is the worship of God in everyday life.”⁶¹ It is against this backdrop that a reflection on biblico-ethical imperatives is important for life, progress and development of society.

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⁶¹ Marxen, *New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 224.

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