

Chapter Three

Paul's Isolation of Three Key Social Commandments

Historical critical exegesis will be used in the next few chapters. A major aim here is to examine the way in which Paul, the first Christian theologian “shaped the map” of Christian morality. Later this same method of interpretation will be used to explore how the synoptic writers, following on from Paul, continued on with the morality “map” that he had drafted. Paul was preaching and writing in the 50’s CE,³². This was about twenty years after the death of Jesus and about twenty years before the gospel of Mark was written around 70 CE. It was at this time that Jerusalem and its Temple was being destroyed by the army of the Roman Empire.³³ In this Chapter Three and then in Chapters Four and Five, areas of Paul’s writing on key morality issues will be singled out and considered. The overview of Paul’s writing will include his letters to the Thessalonians, Philippians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans. Also Paul’s challenge to the “spirit people” of Corinth and the implications of this will be given special emphasis.

As one could expect, a “map of morality” re-designed from the Judaic one by Paul the Pharisee, would put the Commandments of Moses in a central position. The Decalogue or Ten Commandments as they are known would therefore be an

³² B. Ehrman “Paul as pastor,” *Yale Bible Studies Series* (New Haven, USA: Yale university) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMVatCd_1xM [accessed march 2016].

³³ Moloney, *Mark, Storyteller, Interpreter, evangelist* ix.

obvious starting point for Paul. For clarity and as a re-cap, the Ten Commandments as set out in the traditional “Penny Catechism” of the Catholic Church are as follows:

I am the Lord thy God

1. Thou shalt not have strange gods before me
2. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain
3. Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath Day
4. Honour thy father and thy mother
5. Thou shalt not kill
6. Thou shalt not commit adultery
7. Thou shalt not steal
8. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour
9. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s goods ³⁴

The themes of “money, power and sex” are reflected by the three social commandments of “Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not kill and Thou shalt not commit adultery” (cf. Mk 10:19). Note that these commandments are numbers seven, five and six in the Catholic list above.

The themes of money, power and sex are continually touched upon in the letters of Paul but in a way that is rarely explicitly noticeable. For instance he would change around their order of sequence. Paul was avoiding legalism. Thus he could be talking about donations, self-determination and relationship or parallel topics even while these three commandments and his interpretation of them underlie his thinking. Thus on the one

³⁴ Plenary Council, *Catechism: Issued with Episcopal Authority for General Use in Australia* (Melbourne: Australian Catholic Truth Society, 1937) 28.

hand the three commandments are not being explicitly mentioned. But an indirect elaboration of them is being made.

The way in which these commandments are constantly, but indirectly referred to can be seen in the following six examples:

1. In the letter to the Philippians Paul warns against people who go against the commandments. He says “Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame.” (Phil 3:19)³⁵ Metaphorically, these parallel the three key commandments mentioned above, that is, “Thou shalt not kill” (in terms of destroying their own destiny), “Thou shalt not steal” (in terms of giving priority to their own material benefits), “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (in terms of their shameful conduct).

2. In the first section of the letter to the Corinthians, 1 Cor. 1:1-2:13, Paul has pointed out the example of his own life in facing opposition, rough treatment and insults (2:2-3). An indirect reference is thus made here to “Thou shalt not kill”. He also says he has avoided delusion, immorality or deception (2:3) (cf. Thou shalt not commit adultery). He has not sought flattery or money (2:5) (cf. Thou shalt not steal) .

3. In 1 Cor. 4:8 Paul said the Corinthians as “freedmen” and in such newly found freedom, social security and wealth in Corinth, were themselves ‘filled, rich and like Kings’. Thus there is an echo here of their satisfactions in the area of social relationships, wealth and power. Paul then contrasts the situation and attitude of these wealthy Corinthians with the poverty, homelessness and weakness that has been deliberately taken on by the apostles of Jesus (1 Cor. 4:9-13).

³⁵ *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: New Testament*. Intro. Comm. Schott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001).

Again the themes of poverty, aloneness and powerlessness are raised.

4. In 1 Cor. 5:11 Paul lists vices of people (even so-called brothers). He says they could be “guilty of immorality or greed, or be an idolater, reviler, drunkard or robber.” He also says because of their bad influence these people should be avoided. Apart from idolatry (worship of other gods), it appears the vices he lists here are again, failings in the areas of sex, money or power. The first two vices of “immorality or greed” have a fairly obvious connection to the sixth and seventh commandments. The last three “vices” on the list of such ‘polluted’ people, that is, “reviler, drunkard or robber” actually fall into the category of the fifth commandment of “Thou shalt not kill”. How so? These vices all perpetuate abuse. They include verbal abuse, self abuse through drinking or robbery with violence. As regards this latter vice, in standard translations of the text, it is not immediately obvious that it falls into the category of the fifth commandment.³⁶ For instance the word “robbers nowadays does not have the same connotation of violence as the word “rapacious” which is the RSV’s literal translation of the Greek word used by Paul, that is, ἄρπαξ. Nor are translation of this word ἄρπαξ into “robber” as strong as Matthew’s use of this same word when he talks of “ravenous wolves” (Mtt 7:15). But in the literal translation of the word, Paul the moralist map-maker implies violence here. Thus in his list of vices here, he is keeping to the three categories of social sins relating to sex, money and power. Also as in some of his other references to these commandments he changes around their order while extending the range of words used to describe them.

5. Later on in 1 Cor. 6:9-10 Paul again sketches out a shadow of the three key social sins (and implicitly their

³⁶ *The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments*, RSV Catholic Edition (London: Nelson, 1966).

reversal) cf. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, not catamites, sodomites, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor (violent) robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.” In such a list as with other lists, Paul also includes idolatry. He knew he needed to deal with this particular failure amongst Gentile converts at length and in particular the Corinthians. In dealing with idolatry a special focus and approach would be needed and Paul takes this in 1 Corinthians (to be discussed further). But in the above list of vices he still groups the three key social sins together

In 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Paul starts with sins against chastity (“neither the immoral,... adulterers, catamites, sodomites”). Then he lists sins related to theft and greed (“nor thieves nor the greedy”). Then he lists sins of violence, including self-abuse and abuse of others (“drunkards, revilers and the ‘rapacious’ cf. ἄρπαξ”).³⁷

6. In his letter to the Romans Paul challenges his readers/auditors.

You then who teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?

(Rom. 2:21-23)

In this context the first question ties in with education and helping people’s self-determination (cf. “Thou shalt not kill”). The link-ins with “thou shalt not steal or commit adultery” and their connection with the seventh and sixth commandments are more obvious.

³⁷ C. G. Kruse, “Virtues and Vices,” *Dictionary of Paul and his letters: a Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press).

7. In Romans 13:9 Paul mentions the three commandments, this time explicitly, that is, “You shalt not commit adultery. You shalt not kill. You shall not steal.”

8. The letter to Titus, apparently from Paul, also reflects this sort of focus. The letter begins with a salutation by Paul. However the scholar Holladay says this letter to Titus (between 70-90 CE) was probably written after Paul’s death.³⁸ Yet even so, one finds that an “isolation” of the three social commandments is being carried forward. Thus the letter shows that character traits required by these commandments are incorporated into the range of qualities expected of a church leader....

”he must be irreproachable, never an arrogant or hot-tempered man, nor a heavy drinker or violent, nor out to make money: but a man who is hospitable and a friend of all that is good....” (Titus: 1:7-8).

The wider context in which Paul presents this “thread” of the three key commandments will be discussed in pages to follow. According to David Horrell in his *An Introduction to the Study of Paul* even though there may not be a “story” as such in Paul’s letters, there is in fact a “narrative” which appears to underpin his varied statements and arguments on specific topics.³⁹ In this sense he develops his theology across his letters. This includes his moral theology and his continued focus upon the three key social commandments. .

One of the ways in which Paul develops his moral theology is to put focus on the need for moral behavior as such. He appears to put particular focus on one or other of these three

³⁸ Cf. Holladay *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*: 382-3.

³⁹ David G. Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul*, 2nd ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 58.

key social values in a particular letter. In his letter to the Thessalonians, arguably his first letter, he introduces the need to work at morality and the imitation of Christ.⁴⁰ In Philippians there is special emphasis on the generosity that these people showed towards himself and thus their “reversal” of the commandment “Thou shalt not steal”. In Galatians Paul stresses the importance of self-determination. In this case, such a theme echoes the meaning behind “Thou shalt not kill”. In 1 Corinthians the theme of the body and relationship permeates this letter (cf. “Thou shalt not commit adultery”) In the case of 1 Corinthians, when he is dealing with the theme of the body, Paul also confronts the “spirit people” and their tendency towards self-worship because of the Stoic idea that they have been adopting. This is the notion that people automatically possess a “divine spark” which they carry on beyond death.⁴¹ Paul’s confrontation with this Stoic idea brings up his support of the first commandment of the Jewish Decalogue, that is, “Thou shalt not have strange Gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3).



⁴⁰ Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament...* 382-3.

⁴¹ Marcus Aurelius, (Emperor of Rome 121-180) *The Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius*, translated by Meric Casaubon (London: J.M.Dent, 1906)