

COMMENTS ON THE USE OF SCRIPTURE
IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS¹

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Clarity about using the Bible in ethics is surely the need of the hour. As she lives in a world whose morality is in rebellious turmoil, the church of Jesus Christ is called to speak as loudly as possible the Word of her sovereign, covenantal God. But the question of the hour has become: Is it a *sure* Word? That question leads immediately to a deeper, more challenging query: *can* God's Word, inspired and authored so many centuries ago, be a sure Word *for today*? If not, where then do we go for morality's norms? To group consensus? Democratic ideals? Individual liberties? If God's Word can be a sure word for ethics for today, *in what way* is that certainty to be enjoyed? To put the question differently: *how must we move from Scripture to moral norm*? How must we discern Scripture's norms? How are we to distill them?

Many people appeal to the Bible to justify their actions. Among people calling themselves Christians, both advocates and opponents of homosexuality do so; defenders and detractors of capital punishment do so; those who compliment and those who criticize protesters at abortion mills appeal to the Bible. In the face of so many competing appeals to Scripture, who today dares to say that we have a sure Word from God?

In addition to competing appeals, the modern church faces the difficulties of Scripture-interpretation presented by the continuing, progressive history of God's redemption in Jesus Christ. This comes to expression in the relation between Old and New Testaments, in the delicate balance between covenantal continuity and discontinuity present in Scripture itself. What, if anything, of Old Testament revelation has "passed away"? How do we discern the immutable, the abiding and the permanent, which has survived the changing dispensations?

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Yet a third challenge is presented by modern developments in science and technology. "What does the Bible say about . . . ?" is one of the most frequent questions fielded by pastors and Christian leaders today. What does the Bible say about family planning? Nuclear weapons? Organ transplants? Living wills?

I raise these matters and identify these challenges not to induce either doubt or skepticism. That, incidentally, has been one widespread result of the modern hermeneutical debate. Each of these three areas of difficulty — conflicting appeals to Scripture, confusion about the permanent core that finds temporal expression in Scripture, and uncertainty with regard to modern moral questions not addressed directly in Scripture — can be used today to take God's Word out of the hands of God's people. When that occurs, people no longer know God's will; and this ignorance is followed quickly by inability: *don't* know becomes *can't* know. You hear the implicit denial of the ability to know in the question, "What makes you think you're right?" The answer implied by the question is that nobody may *say* he is right, because no one person can *be* right. Religious skepticism breeds moral relativism.

But that is surely not my purpose in raising these questions. Positively stated, my purpose is (1) to convince you that these challenges to Reformed ethicists present *real* difficulties, and (2) to show you how these real difficulties can be overcome by employing resources *already present* in our Reformed Confessions and tradition.

The central problem

I wish to narrow the focus of my observations to the question with which every minister must wrestle in writing and preaching every sermon. It involves *how* the minister moves from the Bible text to contemporary application, from "then" to "now," from the historical particular to the universally normative. Within Christian ethics, this *how* is called our "ethical warrant." It works exactly like a "hermeneutic" or method of interpretation: everybody has one, few recognize theirs, and variations here account for different theological and ecclesiastical loyalties.

An illustration might serve us well at this point. Imagine yourself to be a preacher who, on three successive Sundays, is bound to preach sermons on each of three commands. On the first Sunday, your text will be: "The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk" (Ex. 23:19). On the second Sunday, you have chosen to

preach on this text: "When you build a new house, then you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring guilt of bloodshed on your household if anyone falls from it" (Deut. 22:8). And on the third Sunday, your preaching text is: "You shall not murder" (Deut. 5:17).

We all realize that each of these commands is (a part of) Scripture, and that each prescribes or proscribes action, being thereby of interest to Christian ethics. We should also realize that if we were to preach a sermon on each of these, the "application" would sound different from the words of the precept. Each is a command, an imperative; yet each instance of applying the words spoken/written "then" to life "now" will somehow look different from the other.

Applying the prohibition about boiling a kid in its mother's milk to twentieth century North Americans will require some kind of "translation" in terms of the function in biblical times of goat-boiling. The requirement of parapet-building gets translated today into "When you build a swimming pool, then you shall install a fence around it, that you may not be liable for the accidental drowning of your neighbor's child." And you might apply the sixth commandment quite generally and comprehensively, in the light of Christ's own instruction about anger as the root of murder.

This illustration alerts us to the fact that in understanding and applying each of these commandments, a process is taking place whereby we move from the biblical text to the contemporary situation. Christian ethics is interested in that process. How does one move from text to action in each case? As I've indicated, that *how* is called the *ethical warrant* which justifies pressing that application as normative.²

A necessary starting point

At this juncture, we may be tempted to turn to philosophy or linguistic analysis to help determine how we derive our "ought" from the text of Scripture. I believe there is a better way. The answer lies embedded in the Reformed Confessions and tradition. To state the answer briefly, let me say this: *the relationship between Scripture and ethics involves a normative aspect which is discerned best by observing how Scripture employs Scripture.* As those who confess the divine inspiration

²For a collection of essays that discuss this matter from a wide range of perspectives, cf. *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, ed. by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, *Readings in Moral Theology*, No. 4 (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

and the unity of Scripture, we need to ask: How does *God* move from revelation, from the "text," to the situation?³

I have in mind, for example, how the New Testament employs the normative aspect of the Old Testament revelation. This normative aspect is identified by some Reformed confessional statements that deal with the law of God. Listen first to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 19:

III. Beside this law, commonly called *moral*, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All of which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.

IV. To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.⁴

For now, notice the phrase "the general equity" of the law, something we'll hear again later, from John Calvin. Before the *Westminster Confession* was formulated, Guido de Bres and the Reformed churches echoed Scripture this way in the *Belgic Confession*, Article 25:

We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians; *yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ*, in whom they have their completion. In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in

³For a discussion of this confessional presupposition, cf. J. Douma, *Voorbeeld of gebod? Enkele opmerkingen over het schriftberoep in de ethiek* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1983), 21-22, 68ff.

⁴The [*Westminster*] *Confession of Faith*, in *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions*, classroom edition (Orange City, IA: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991).

the doctrine of the gospel, *and to regulate our life in all honorableness to the glory of God, according to his will.*⁵

Notice here the distinction between, on the one hand, "ceremonies and symbols" and "shadows," and on the other hand, "the truth and substance" of these ceremonies, symbols and shadows. The former *pass away*, having been accomplished or fulfilled in Christ; but the latter — the truth and substance — *remain* to confirm us in the gospel and to regulate our life to God's glory.

Among the hermeneutical principles being formulated here is the distinction between the so-called moral, ceremonial and civil laws of God. But we must remember that no Old Testament Israelite would have invented or employed this artificial distinction; for the Old Testament believer, church and state, temple and courthouse, were regulated by the one, unified law of the LORD, the Torah. But this characterization of divine laws as moral, ceremonial and civil became necessary and useful *with the progress of redemption*. It was when the temple no longer served as the New Israel's cultic center, when circumcision was replaced with baptism, when Israel's theocracy was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, that this differentiation became relevant. Even so, perhaps it would be better to speak of moral, ceremonial and civil *aspects* of the *one* law of God, rather than three *kinds* of laws.

Consequently, the New Testament church — and of this the New Testament Scriptures bear witness — has had to reflect on the question of precisely what, from the Old Testament legislation, retains its validity, its normative force, and what does not. *How does the Old Testament legislation retain its normative character for the New Testament church?* Consider Christ's use of the Old Testament, in the Sermon on the Mount and in his conflicts with the Pharisees concerning the Sabbath. Think also of Peter's vision and subsequent visit to Cornelius (Acts 10); of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), occasioned by the great influx of Gentile believers into the church; of the apostle Paul's application, in 1 Corinthians 9:9ff., of Deuteronomy 25:4 (about muzzling an ox treading out the grain). Recall as well that all the sins mentioned in Revelation 21:27 and 22:15 as barring people from the New Jerusalem are related in some way to the commands encountered in the Decalogue.

⁵[Belgic] Confession of Faith, in *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions*; italics added.

A covenant-historical hermeneutic

One principle to be derived from the New Testament's use of the Old Testament is that *the manner in which the New Testament employs the Old Testament arises from, is determined by, and corresponds to the progress of revelation and of redemption-history.*

The progress of redemption-history compels us to distinguish among various aspects of God's law — for baptism has come in the place of circumcision, and Sabbath has become Sunday. There is the permanent and the passing, the norm and the form. Distinguishing among aspects of the law (moral, ceremonial and civil) compels another choice, namely, that of arranging them in terms of rank or centrality. The Reformed Confessions, and under their tutelage, Reformed ethics, is not embarrassed to recognize the centrality of the *moral* aspect of God's law, or as some might put it, God's moral law, also called the Decalogue. It is this aspect that Jesus Christ focuses upon in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and in the Sabbath conflicts. It is this aspect that the early church was led to acknowledge, both in apostolic practice and gospel application. The New Testament use of the Old Testament proceeds from viewing God's moral law as constitutional, central and governing, and the ceremonial and civil legislation as the outworking or concretization thereof.⁶

Understanding the relationship between moral constitution and ceremonial/civil concretization requires that we see the Decalogue in its *covenantal-historical context*. This brings us back to Exodus 19, which presents the introduction to God's covenant-making with Israel. The story of Sinai begins at Exodus 19:1, and unfolds with covenant conversation between the LORD and Israel, through God's appointed mediator, Moses. Covenantal consecration prepares Israel for God's thundering and Sinai's smoke. Then comes the Decalogue.

The place which the Decalogue occupies in the whole of God's legislation to Israel is not one of isolation, but of concentration. Words which convey this centralized significance of the Deca-

⁶Cf. W.H. Velema, *Wet en evangelie* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1987), 77-80; cf. also Knox Chamblin, "The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ," *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments. Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. by John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 192.

logue in the Old Testament are "key," "summary," "foundation," and "constitution."⁷

In the Decalogue we find a most unique moral concentrate (here not the *verb*, which means "to bring toward a common center," but the *noun*, meaning "that which is brought to a common center"). Everything else that the LORD commands flows out of the Decalogue, is an outworking thereof, or is determined by it. In the very concisely formulated Decalogue everything concerning our relationship toward God and our neighbor is addressed. Its prologue reminds us that the law's context is one of divine deliverance and mercy, one of grace and power. That it contains two tables testifies to the religious character of ethics and neighbor-love. That the precepts governing our relation to God precede those directing relations with fellow men, teaches that morality and laws governing human relationships are to be anchored in the LORD.

From the Decalogue there is an outward, centrifugal movement in revelation in terms of redemption. The two forms of the Decalogue (Ex. 20 and Deut. 5) bear the marks of that growth or movement. The Decalogue is re-published as Israel prepares to enter a new mode of existence in the land of Canaan as God's chosen people.

This covenantal-historical context involves both constitution *and* concretization, moral center *and* ceremonial/civil outworking. This is what some have referred to as norm and form.⁸ As the word indicates, the "norm" points to that normative or regulative aspect of the temporal form required during a particular time. The *norm* of the eternally valid Decalogue is addressed in a *form* that is historically *expressed*, not historically *determined* or *time-bound*. Moreover, this norm ("you shall not murder") is expressed in a form appropriate to Israel's particular situation ("when you build a house, you shall build a parapet on your roof"). Notice the three ingredients: norm, form and situation.

We prefer to speak of the Decalogue's *covenantal*-historical context, rather than simply of its historical context, in order to show that both the principles concentrated in the Decalogue and the manner whereby they are historically concretized in further Old Testament legislation are

⁷Velema, 78.

⁸Velema, 92-94; Gordon Spykman, *How is Scripture Normative in Christian Ethics?* (Chicago: RES Theological Conference, 1984), 47, 53.

normative. The manner of their concretization has canonical authority.⁹ I say this in order to identify what I consider the mistaken underestimation and virtual elimination of these historically concretized commandments by characterizing them as being "just cultural." In these commandments, Israel's Sovereign Redeemer is revealing himself to Israel *and to us* as Legislative Lord by working out the constitutional principles of the covenantal relationship into precepts and ordinances designed to aid, to sustain, to protect and to nurture that covenantal relationship in the land of Canaan, for the sake of the coming Christ.

This legislative dynamic is part of what I would call the dispensational dynamic of the covenant of grace. My use of the term "dispensational" seeks to maintain the delicate biblical balance between continuity and discontinuity. One might put it very simply this way: *there is one covenant, but two dispensations*. This is much more than merely a historical observation or a biblical-theological maxim. Embedded within this simple statement is a hermeneutic, a way of interpreting and applying the Bible. One covenant — that is: one eternal, abiding norm, constitution, foundation, whose moral concentrate is the Decalogue. Two dispensations — that is: two kinds of administrations, the one an administration under the law, the other in the power of the Spirit.

Bible passages must be positioned within the framework of world history, but also within the framework of God's history of revelation and the history of the covenant.¹⁰ For example, when the Old Testament prescribes capital punishment for adultery, we should investigate how adultery was punished among the nations surrounding Israel in order to assess how severe or mild God's prescribed punishment was for Israel. But it is more important to understand this punishment in the light of what God earlier had said about marriage, in Paradise: "A man shall cleave unto his wife." That divine word is directly relevant to the punishment prescribed in Israel for adultery. But we must also take into account the fact that along with the exodus from Egypt, God constituted his people a theocracy with their own form of government. This revelational-historical situation explains the form of Israel's penal sanction for adultery, namely, capital punishment. However, when later in the new covenant we observe that adulterers in the church are not stoned, that difference is not due to the time-boundness of biblical law,

⁹Velema, 110.

¹⁰For the following illustration, cf. *Het lezen van de bijbel: Een inleiding*, by J. van Bruggen (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1981), 32.

but due to the fact that God has moved in his revelation from a nationally gathered church to an *internationally* gathered church, gathered from every nation. In the New Testament *the church no longer exercises judicial/civil authority*. Since in Israel the church did exercise civil authority in the name of God, the permanent significance of the civil sanction remains firm: the adulterer stands guilty before the God of Paradise! And so we read later, in Revelation, that harlots, murderers and idolaters remain outside the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:15).

I judge our Reformed Confessions to be saying that the distinction between norm and form was expressed in the Torah and embedded in Old Testament revelation because God designed the law to be, among other things, a custodian to guide Israel to Christ, whose custodial function was taken over by Christ and fulfilled in him (Gal. 3:24-25). Elsewhere, the apostle Paul describes Christ as the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4). God knew that Someone More and Greater would be coming, Someone more than the law and greater than Moses. It was to him the law pointed, both in its constitutional norm of love for God and neighbor, and in the temporal form of a plurality of precepts and ordinances aimed at Israel's situation of covenant immaturity.

As we have seen, the Reformed Confessions themselves contain resources for answering the question as to *how* the minister moves from the Bible text to contemporary application, from "then" to "now," from the historical particular to the universally normative. This is called, within Christian ethics, our "ethical warrant." Our Confessions help us by pointing to three aspects of Old Testament legislation, and by identifying which among those three remains in force in the New Testament. That the Reformed Confessions are able to do this reflects a hermeneutic that was self-conscious on their part, resulting from a careful listening to God's Word. This confessional hermeneutic is normative for us today. In other words, we subscribe to both the confessional *content* distilled from Scripture and *the way our creeds "hear" and interpret Scripture*; both are normative for a church and theologians who wish to be confessional.¹¹

¹¹In my judgment, the *Form of Subscription*, which specifies the extent and nature of confessional allegiance with regard to the *Three Forms of Unity* in use among Reformed denominations, compels signatories to endorse not merely the *content* of the Confessions, but their *method of handling Scripture* as well. This is part of the Holy Spirit's testimony, that we confess all things contained therein *because* they agree — not insofar as they agree — with Scripture, in content and hermeneutic. The hermeneutic

John Calvin: Constitutio et aequitas

In addition to leaning on the Confessions, we draw further insight from the Reformed tradition. Although it is not normative, it is illuminative for answering the question of how we use Scripture in ethics.

I refer, of course, to John Calvin. In his *Institutes* he meets head-on the issue of properly interpreting and applying the Scriptures, particularly the Decalogue:

We must, I say, inquire how far interpretation ought to overstep the limits of the words themselves so that it may be seen to be, not an appendix added to the divine law from men's glosses, but the Lawgiver's pure and authentic meaning faithfully rendered (II.viii.8).

The first principle of interpretation and application is that in his law, God employs synecdoche, whereby one sin is mentioned to cover the whole range of related transgressions. Anyone who "confines his understanding of the law within the narrowness of the words deserves to be laughed at. Therefore, plainly a sober interpretation of the law goes beyond the words; but just how far remains obscure unless some measure be set" (II.viii.8).

And just what is this measure, the limit of proper application of a certain commandment? It is what Calvin calls "the reason of the commandment," why God gave the commandment, the purpose or *telos* of the precept or prohibition. For example, the substance of the fifth commandment is that "it is right and pleasing to God for us to honor those on whom he has bestowed some excellence." Moreover, it should be obvious to all that when a good thing is commanded, the evil it conflicts with is being forbidden; and when evil is forbidden, its opposite is being enjoined.

Later in Book IV of his *Institutes* we see Calvin at work employing his own rules, in a way that recognizes the *eternal norm* expressed in *temporal form*, evident in the covenantal-historical context of the Old Testament legislation. The subject is Israel's theocracy, and its relevance (normativity) for modern government. When Calvin addresses the matter of civil laws whereby modern states are to be governed, he writes:

employed by the Confessions is the same as that which God himself uses!

I would have preferred to pass over this matter in utter silence if I were not aware that here many dangerously go astray. For there are some who deny that a commonwealth is duly framed which neglects the political system of Moses, and is ruled by the common laws of nations

We must bear in mind that common division of the whole law of God published by Moses into moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws. And we must consider each of these parts, that we may understand *what there is in them that pertains to us, and what does not*. In the meantime, let no one be concerned over the small point that ceremonial and judicial laws pertain also to morals. For the ancient writers who taught this division, although they were not ignorant that these two latter parts had some bearing upon morals, still, because these could be changed or abrogated while morals remained untouched, did not call them moral laws (IV.xx.14; italics added).

The relevance of ceremonial and civil laws to the New Testament church Calvin explains further, when he insists that:

those ceremonial practices indeed properly belonged to the doctrine of piety . . . and yet could be distinguished from piety itself. In like manner, the *form* of their judicial laws, although it had no other intent than how best to preserve that very love which is enjoined by God's eternal law, had something distinct from that precept of love. Therefore, as ceremonial laws could be abrogated while piety remained safe and unharmed, so too, *when these judicial laws were taken away, the perpetual duties and precepts of love could still remain* (IV.xx.15; italics added).

All of this leads Calvin to declare:

What I have said will become plain if in all laws we examine, as we should, these two things: the constitution of the law, and the equity on which its constitution is itself founded and rests. Equity, because it is natural, cannot but be the same for all, and therefore, this same purpose ought to apply to all laws, whatever their object. Constitutions have certain circumstances upon which they in part depend. It does not matter that they are different, provided all equally press toward the same goal of equity (IV.xx.16).

So important is the law's *equity* that Calvin describes it as the goal, the rule and the limit of all laws. "Whatever laws shall be framed to that rule, directed to that goal, bound by that limit, there is no reason why we should disapprove of them, howsoever they may differ from the Jewish law, or among themselves." (Please don't be confused by the terms being used here. What we earlier termed Israel's "constitution" [the Decalogue, the concentrate which is permanent] Calvin identifies with the word "equity." And what we earlier termed "concretization" [the passing form] Calvin identifies with the word "constitution.")

Holy Scripture, ethics and preaching

The central problem which has served as the focus of these observations is the question with which every minister must wrestle in writing and preaching every sermon, namely: *How* does one move from the Bible text to contemporary application, from "then" to "now," from the historical particular to the universally normative?

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, the Holy Spirit wrote, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." Bound up in these verses is the indissoluble connection between hermeneutics, ethics and homiletics. Woven together from the same thread, the unraveling of one entails the unraveling of the other two. This is the tale told by the sad history of theological liberalism, European and North American alike.

There is certainly a priority among hermeneutics, ethics and homiletics. It is the order I have just given: the way you understand God's Word determines the way you apply it, and both determine the way you preach it.

Among the choices offered to Bible-believers today, we must identify the dangers inhering in the hermeneutics, ethics and homiletics of both *dispensational discontinuity* and *reconstructionist continuity*. The former tends to erect a wall between Old and New Testaments, while the latter tends to undervalue the redemptive-historical discontinuity between Old and New Testaments. We need instead — and both our confessional and theological tradition provide them to us, if only we will receive them — a covenantal-historical hermeneutic, ethics and homiletics.

I wish to conclude with a brief sample that attempts to demonstrate these three.

I refer you to Deuteronomy 14:1-2, where we read: "You are the children of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead. For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."

Notice, first, the surprising address: "You are the children of the LORD your God." That's something we would expect from Paul or John or Jesus. Here, in the Old Testament, we learn the biblical idea of sonship. And this isn't the first time, for in Exodus 4:22-23 we read of Moses being dispatched to Pharaoh to contend for the ownership of Israel, God's son. You see, God's son is in bondage — that is: as good as dead, for all practical purposes, since Israel was unfree.

Then came the exodus, Israel's birthday, so to speak, a day of freedom, a day of life. This was decisive for Israel's style, for her LORD had said, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This was the prologue to the law of life, the law defining Israel's *life-style*.

Now, Deuteronomy 14:1-2 teaches Israel, standing on the shore of the Jordan River, ready to enter Canaan, about the style of her grieving at the graveside. This address — "You are the children of the LORD your God" — was to remind crying Israelites, as they stood in the cemetery, that they were free, that is: *living*, children of the LORD. Their grieving had to be done in covenant style: like Father, like son! Burying the dead was covenant business!

All of this comes to bear on the activity proscribed by the LORD in verse 1b: "you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead." In Israel's time and among surrounding nations, there were many different grieving customs. We meet some of them in the Bible: sackcloth, ashes on the head, dirt on the head (cf. Job, David). These customs were shared by Israel's neighbors. But among those neighbors, mourners went still further, to express their grief by cutting their flesh, and by shaving their hair on their foreheads.

Why were these specific mourning customs forbidden among Israel? (Please understand that this is not a question of doubt; the text itself requires us to ask this question!) Because self-mutilation and shedding one's blood were symbolic of maintaining fellowship with the dead. And in Bible times, hair was not only a symbol of strength and virility, but also of freedom. P.O.W.s and slaves were shaved to symbolize their subjection into the hands of another.

But these expressions of grief were not in covenant style, because these practices failed to recognize — and bear testimony to — God's grace and Israel's status as his children. These practices of self-mutilation and hair-cutting confessed instead domination by the terror and awesomeness of death. Israel's neighbors were acknowledging by their grieving customs that death was decisive, final and irreversible!

But as the children of the LORD, redeemed from death, Israel's funeral habits had to reflect those they were. And in this prohibition the LORD sets a limit to his children's grief. For this law prophesies something coming. They may mourn and weep, beat their breasts, cover themselves with sackcloth and ashes — but that was all. Because one day life would overcome death — *Jesus Christ was on the way, Easter was coming!* And as a people, Israel was to bear testimony by her funeral customs to the coming Christ.

But then, why does the LORD add verse 2, that Israel is a holy people, and that he had chosen her from among all the nations? Once again he points her to her status: she is holy, chosen, possessed, owned by the LORD. Here we see one of the most fascinating applications of the doctrine of election: to be elect is to belong to the LORD, to be in his possession. Because God owns his people, he will not allow death to be the last word. For Israel, this meant that Easter would come — guaranteed! Guaranteed by divine election! God would not let his holy one see corruption (that is, remain in the grave)!

Now some ethics: (1) one of the blessings of living on this side of Easter is that we have the privilege of preparing our funerals as a testimony to the victory of life over death, in Christ Jesus! To discuss and plan our funerals in order to bear witness to God's victory over death in Jesus Christ permits grieving in covenant style. (2) If we are to testify consistently to life in the midst of our tears over death, then we must testify consistently to life while we are living. We live in a society preoccupied with death. In the fall of 1991 the number two best selling non-fiction book was *Final Exit*, by Derek Humphry, founder of the Hemlock Society. It's a book that gives tips on how to commit suicide. In modern society death is being glorified in rock music, in homosexuality (same sex has no future, in more respects than one!), through fiscal policies and political ideologies that are suicidal. In this kind of society we must bear witness as children of the LORD to life in Christ Jesus, by the music we listen to and perform, by the generation of a new generation, and by remaining financially and intellectually free to be slaves of Jesus Christ.

Finally, a homiletical structure: the theme of Deuteronomy 14:1-2 is *God calls his people to grieve in covenant style*, where

1. the covenantal *address* implies that life will overcome death (verse 1a);
2. the covenantal *activity* prophesies that life will overcome death (verse 1b); and
3. the covenantal *antithesis* guarantees that life will overcome death (verse 2).

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