

Western Fellowship of Professors and Scholars  
Manhattan Christian College  
October 8-9, 2010

“Christian Responsibility for the Public Ethic”

**Introduction:**

There appears to be no doubt that God is opposed to any kind of trading in human life. His judgment is pronounced on Gaza and Tyre because they delivered up conquered people to Edom. (Amos 1:6, 9) Yet, one may find numerous passages in both Old and New Testaments about proper treatment of slaves and servants. Instructions are given to both slaves and masters about proper behavior in such a relationship without commanding Godly masters to set slaves free or Godly slaves to seek freedom. It appears to be accepted in both Old Testament and New Testament that wealthy people would have “servants” in their households. The term “household,” typically referred to a family and the servants of that family. Such would be the implication in Acts 16 with the “households” of Lydia and the jailor. In Paul’s letter to Philemon there appears to be multiple motives and emotions, but there is clearly no indication that a Christian can’t have slaves. Rather, being Christian alters the relationship between slave and master, and “brother” becomes a more important word than “slave” for describing the relationship (Philemon 15-16).

This presents a dilemma for the modern Scripture reader and believer. Because our country fought a very bloody war involving the issue of slavery and because we recoil at the horrible stories of human trafficking today, we Americans might expect the prophets or Jesus to give specific directions regarding the release of people held in slavery. However, there is silence in this area. Extended reflection on this issue will cause one to ask whether God holds slavery to be acceptable or whether it simply isn’t the business of his people to rid the world of such

wrongdoing. Pursuit of answers for the situation will ultimately lead the serious seeker after truth to questions about the role believers are to play in development of cultures and governments. Are God's people responsible to him for correcting wrongdoing in the culture in which they live? Slavery is by no means the only practice that comes under such scrutiny. For instance, according to the Anchor Bible Dictionary, abortion was present and illegal in the Roman Empire,<sup>1</sup> but neither Jesus nor Paul speaks out against it. Indeed, from reading the New Testament one would not know it existed.

Productive pursuit of biblical insight into such areas of life and thought requires the faithful use of the principles of hermeneutics. It also requires one to ask and seek answers to the deepest and most troublesome questions about the role of believers in establishing, questioning, or criticizing the public ethic. Should the church be expending resources and energy trying to abolish slavery in the world? Should the church be expending resources and energy to promote laws against abortion? Does the "Render unto Caesar" rule apply only to the question of taxes that fostered the statement, or does it have a broader application? Obviously, one can add to the list of things that fit into this realm of thought, but making the list is not our purpose here. Rather, in this paper I will attempt to address with biblical authority the role of Christian believers in the cultures in which they live and in which such things exist.

A question that comes to mind early in pursuit of the issue is this, "If God judges nations for certain behaviors, does that give believers a mandate to eliminate those behaviors from the cultures in which they live?" This question then leads to questions about the nature and intent of the Great Commission. Is the presence of Christians in a society to be felt primarily in their evangelistic efforts, or does disciple making have a broader implication than evangelism? Is it

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<sup>1</sup> David N. Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, "Abortion", Stephen D. Ricks; Vol. I (New York: Doubleday, 1992). p. 33

the responsibility of Christians to keep nations from being judged by bringing cultural mores in line with biblical teaching, or is it to keep individuals from being judged by bringing them in line with biblical teachings about salvation? An attempt will be made to address such questions in the following pages.

### **Old Testament Perspectives:**

Complete coverage of all mentions of slavery in the Old Testament is not within the scope of this paper. However, a few interesting and significant issues will be addressed. First, we will look at the judgments of God on the nations as pronounced by the prophet, Amos. Of particular interest here is the judgment on Gaza, Tyre, and Edom. (Amos 1:6-12) While God's wrath is evoked by other nations for things such as ripping up pregnant women (Amos 1:13) and burning to lime the bones of a king (Amos 2:1), His judgment is brought on Gaza and Tyre because of their involvement in slave trade. Yet details of the text would indicate it is not that simple.

Of Gaza, in Amos 1:6 God, through the prophet, says, "I will not revoke the punishment; because they carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom." (RSV) Of Tyre in Amos 1:9 He says, "I will not revoke the punishment; because they delivered up a whole people to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood." (RSV) In both cases these nations have participated in slave trade with Edom. Two variations on the pronouncement on the two countries are worthy of note. First, Gaza is judged because they "carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom." Tyre is judged because they "*delivered up* a whole people to Edom *and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood.*" Speaking of the difference between "to deliver" in v. 6 and "delivered" in verse 9, Niehaus says that the Hebrew, "indicates

a different historical reality. Tyre (the Phoenicians) did not take captives but received them from others and acted as agents for those who took them. Ezekiel (27:13) and Joel (3:6) mention Tyre's role as a slave trader."<sup>2</sup> "If, therefore, Tyre is only charged with delivering up the captives to Edom, and not with having carried them away, it must have bought the prisoners from an enemy of Israel, and then disposed of them to Edom."<sup>3</sup> The difference between the sins of Gaza and Tyre is that Gaza captured people for the purpose of delivering them into slavery.

"Slavery was essential to many ancient civilizations, and prisoners of war regularly became slaves. Assyrian bas-reliefs contain representations of slaves, and there is legislation pertaining to slaves in the Code of Hammurabi. The reference here is to events in the reign of Jehoram when Philistines and Arabs penetrated Judah, entering Jerusalem and plundering the palace. They carried off the royal household ( 2 Chron. 21:16-17), plundered the temple (Joel 4:5), and sold the people into slavery (Joel 4:3); (Amos 1:9). Amos 1:11-12 implies Edomite complicity in these events."<sup>4</sup>

This being said, however, Exodus 21:16 says, "Whoever steals a man, whether he sells him or is found in possession of him, shall be put to death." (RSV) Clearly, kidnapping people for any reason carries the harshest punishment in the Mosaic Law. God's judgment on Gaza and Tyre in Amos 1:6-9 would indicate this is true whether on the individual or national level.

One more consideration must be noted when studying God's judgment on these nations as pronounced by the prophet, Amos. In the process of taking and trading slaves, they have broken, "the covenant of brotherhood." Amos 1:9 RSV. Edom's covenant of brotherhood would go back to the brotherhood between Jacob and Esau. "The covenantal relationship in view in Amos 1:9 is apparently the one between Solomon and Hiram of Tyre ( I Kings 5:26); see

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas McComiskey, ed. *The Minor Prophets, An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, Vol. I. "Hosea, Joel, Amos" (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992). p. 348.

<sup>3</sup> C. F. Keil, and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament; Vol. X, Minor Prophets*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, reprinted, 1978). p. 247.

<sup>4</sup> McComiskey, p. 345

I Kings 9:13 where Hiram calls Solomon ‘my brother.’”<sup>5</sup> This would seem to indicate that God holds people to covenants, whether those covenants are made with Him or with one another.

As God articulates his covenant with Noah he makes clear an implicit covenant that is shared by virtue of being human. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.” Gen. 9:6 (RSV) Hence, certain violations against humans are considered an affront to God and to an implicit covenant that is involved in being made in God’s image. One must consider that God will judge people and nations on the basis of this covenant whether or not they acknowledge that man is made in God’s image. This obviously has very far reaching implications for all kinds of wrong-doing between men.

Also on the table while considering the matter of slavery in the Old Testament is the case of Joseph’s use of slavery while in charge of Egypt’s internal affairs. After the people had used up all their money and livestock to purchase food, they suggested that Joseph take their land and themselves as slaves, making both the possessions of Pharaoh. This Joseph did. Further reading reveals that this “slavery” was not the kind of slavery we think of when thinking of the slavery in the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The slaves of Egypt continued to farm the land they had now sold to Pharaoh for food and kept four fifths of the crops themselves giving one fifth to Pharaoh (Gen. 47:20-21, 24-25). This is a closer parallel to the situation of collective farmers under Communism than the slavery involved in buying and selling human beings. It appears that it is also similar to the “tenant farmer” practice into which this writer was born at the end of the Great Depression. This writer judges that, because of this, it is not applicable to argue that, “Joseph sold people into slavery,” as an indication that God approves the kind of slavery we think of when people are conquered or stolen, then sold into slavery. It is also to be noted that simple historical narrative may record accurately what took place while making no

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<sup>5</sup> McComiskey, p. 348

comment on the relative morality of it. See Genesis 47:13-26 for the complete story of the transaction that made the Egyptians slaves to Pharaoh.

The context is quite different when Pharaoh makes slaves of the Israelites later in their sojourn in Egypt. While the same words for slave/servant are used, the context paints an entirely different picture. In Exodus 1:13-14 the enslavement of the Israelites is recorded. The same Hebrew words for slave are used for Egypt's enslavement of Israel in Exodus 1 and Joseph's enslavement of Egyptians for Pharaoh in Genesis 47. However, the context of the two stories is quite different. This bears out the danger of applying our concepts of the word, "slave," to all of our reading concerning slavery in the Bible.

"According to the Bible the Israelites were slaves in Egypt (Exodus 13:3, 14; Deut. 5:15; 16:2; 24:28, etc). They, however, were not slaves in the exact meaning of the word and were only obliged to perform forced labor for the pharaoh."<sup>6</sup> Uncertain results are always borne when one applies current meaning of a word backward in time to the use of that word in another time and place. Hence the importance of context and etymology for any word we study.

*‘ebed*). **Slave, servant.** The form appears 799 times in the OT.

While the most basic idea of *‘ebed* is that of a slave, in Israel slavery was not so irksome, since this status involved rights and often positions of trust. A fellow Israelite could not be held indefinitely against his will, but his period of bondage was limited to six years (Ex 21:2). Even the much protested description of a slave as his master's money (Ex 21:20–21) was not an "unsentimental thought," but served to control physical abuse by the master. Whenever evil intent could be proved (Ex 21:14), or the slave died (21:20), the master was liable to punishment. If the master's intent was debatable, an injured slave at least won his freedom (Ex 21:26–27), and the master lost his loaned money (21:21). Note also the servant's position of honor in Gen 24:ff; 41:12 (cf. 15:2).

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If we cannot depend on the word "slave" or "‘ebed" to convey something God is against, one might fairly ask how we are to know whether or not a given social practice or behavior (in

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<sup>6</sup> David N. Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, "Slavery", Muhammad A. Dandamayev; Vol. I (New York: Doubleday, 1992). p. 62

<sup>7</sup>R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, & B. K. Waltke, (1999, c1980). *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (639). Chicago: Moody Press.

this case, slavery) is to be permitted. Yet, there is another question that may hold at least equal importance regarding such things. Niehaus' comment on a nation's responsibility to God for its behaviors and practices may well open the door on a question of greater practical importance to the faithful Christian of today as well as to the faithful Hebrew of Amos' day.

While writing about the judgment of God pronounced on various nations in Amos 1, Niehaus says, "The warning for all generations is clear. Let no nation think itself exempt from obedience and reverence to God--even if God has used that nation to defeat militarily ("judge") other evil nations."<sup>8</sup> Is it possible that judgment and punishment for such things as slave making and trading is to be executed by God in his time and way and is not the responsibility of his people, whether under the old covenant or the new covenant? This question may fairly be asked about a number of behaviors that are part of the social structure of any nation. The answer to this question may be found more in the silences of Scripture than in the words of Scripture, an admittedly risky business. However, the teaching of principles and the formulating of commands in the absence of the words of Scripture is, at the very least, equally risky.

### **New Testament Perspectives:**

In the New Testament the instruction is quite clear concerning the relationship of slaves and masters without commenting on the right or wrong of the practice of slavery. In Colossians 3:18 - 4:1 for instance, Paul gives instructions for household relationships including husband - wife, parent - child, and slave-master. The emphasis of the chapter is that the things Christians "put off" and "put on" when they die with Christ and are raised with Christ is to affect every area of life and every relationship. This opens the door to pursuit of the questions about the Christian's role in addressing the culture in which one lives.

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<sup>8</sup> McComiskey, p. 341

Before doing that, however, it may be worthwhile to summarize what has been said about the issue of slavery. First, it is important to note that what is meant by the word “slave” is not the same in every age and in every culture. Therefore, one must be careful about carrying rules, laws, or the absence of such from one century or country to another without having more information than simply the use of the word. One country’s or century’s “slave” may be another’s “tenant farmer.” Second, while God’s people throughout the O.T. and N.T. had “slaves” and “servants,” it is clear that the kidnapping or stealing of people to sell them into slavery is punishable by death. God will even bring to an end, countries that do this, as in the cases of Gaza and Tyre. Third, a person’s relationship to God is what drives one’s behavior toward another whether slave or slave owner. This is seen in O.T. laws that protected slaves from many abuses. It is seen in N.T. teachings that raised the “brother or sister in Christ” relationship to the level of being more determinant in one’s behavior than the slave/master relationship.

### **Implications for Ethics of Culture:**

A significant question arises when thinking of social ills that are part of any culture in which Christianity exists. Whether slavery, homosexuality, abortion, or another issue historically spoken against by the church, what is the real responsibility for Christians, individually or corporately, to correct such behaviors in their culture? Often Christians think they can disciple enough people to change the culture from the bottom up. We tend to believe that if we would evangelize as the Great Commission indicates, there would be so many Christians behaving righteously and exerting influence righteously the culture would change naturally from the force of such overwhelming Christian behavior.

Historically, Christians have attempted to deal with this issue by taking different approaches to their relationship to the world around them. James Davison Hunter sorts these different approaches into three categories.

The three political theologies discussed in Essay II are, in fact, the leading public edge of more complex paradigms of cultural engagement that I call ‘defensive against,’ ‘relevance to,’ and ‘purity from.’ In using this phrase, ‘paradigms of cultural engagement,’ I do not mean to propose anything as ambitious and inclusive as a formal conceptual model, akin to the one proposed by H. Richard Niebuhr in his masterwork, *Christ and Culture*. I merely refer to relatively different understandings of the world, ways of being in the world, and ways of relating to the world. These are, in short, different ways of thinking about and pursuing faithfulness in the world.<sup>9</sup>

In the most general terms, the “defensive against” approach is found among Christians commonly known as “Evangelicals” or “Right Wing” as well as more liberal or “progressive” Christians. They are most likely to take a public stance against things they believe to be wrong in the culture. They typically attempt to exert political pressure in areas such as abortion and gay rights. This is not a new phenomenon. For instance this is the position taken by Henry Ward Beecher in Civil War days when he spoke against the leadership of President Abraham Lincoln.

Henry Ward Beecher in Plymouth Church sermons, in writings in the *Independent* blamed Second Bull Run on the “central imbecility” at Washington. “Certainly neither Mr. Lincoln nor his Cabinet have proved leaders. . . . Not a spark of genius has he [Lincoln]; not an element of leadership. Not one particle of heroic enthusiasm.”<sup>10</sup>

Sandburg’s further characterization of Beecher more clearly places him in the “defensive against” paradigm. “With a committee he went to the White House and earnestly warned the President to act. Beecher was a weathercock of current trends and knew his words counted. His books and sermons had given him a public.”<sup>11</sup> Whether it be Beecher in the days of the Civil War or James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, or Martin Luther King of more modern times, there are

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<sup>9</sup> James Davison Hunter. *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). p. 213

<sup>10</sup> Carl Sandburg. *Abraham Lincoln, The War Years*, Vol. I (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co.) 1939, p. 555.

<sup>11</sup> Sandburg, p. 556

always those who believe that the proper role of Christians and the church is to take political action to force the culture to do what they believe to be right. They see this as their Christian mission. Hunter addresses this concept from a very different perspective.

Politics is always a crude simplification of public life and the common good is always more than its political expression. As we have seen, the expectations that people place on politics are unrealistic for most of the problems we face today are not resolvable through politics. That, however, is not the most serious problem. Far more grave is the way politicization has delimited the imaginative horizon through which the church and Christian believers think about engaging the world and the range of possibilities within which they actually act. Politics is just one way to engage the world and, arguably, not the highest, best, most effective, nor most humane way to do so. This does not mean that Christians shouldn't "vote their values" or be active in political affairs. It is essential, however, to demythologize politics, to see politics for what it is and what it can and cannot do and not place on it unrealistic expectations. It cannot realize the various mythic ideals that inspire different Christian communities, it cannot even reduce the tension that exists between the concrete realities of everyday life and the moral and spiritual ideals of the Kingdom of God. At best, politics can make life in this world a little more just and thus a little more bearable.<sup>12</sup>

Hunter's position is consistent with Paul's admonition in I Timothy 2:1-3, "I urge that supplications, prayer, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior." (RSV)

The "defensive against" and "relevance to" positions are not easily relegated to one group such as "evangelicals," "right wing," "left wing," "liberals," or "conservatives." At different times and indifferent places all these groups have pursued both positions.

Historically, the "relevance to" paradigm of engagement was embraced by theological liberalism. Yet more recently it is a paradigm of engagement embraced by Evangelicals in the "seeker-church" movement and by more progressive Evangelicals in the "emerging church" movement, and such new initiatives as Catalyst, the Fermi Project, and other kindred organizations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hunter, pp. 185-186

<sup>13</sup> Hunter, p. 215

The third paradigm, “Purity From,” is most easily identified in the lives of the Amish, Mennonite, and any other groups that resist adaptation to the culture of the day. They, like those who operate in the “defensive against” paradigm, desire to preserve the historical truths of the Christian faith in the midst of a changing world. In order to keep themselves unstained by the world, they limit interaction with and adaptation to the culture around them. Hunter also includes in this group some factions in the traditionalist Catholic Church, some conservative Evangelical denominations, and most Pentecostals.<sup>14</sup>

The title, “Purity From,” does a good job of telling the story for this group. While they may work in the world to address various problems or ills they see, they do not identify with the world in which they live. This may be most easily seen in the physical demonstrations of the position through refusal to conform in dress or modern conveniences. The implications of this paradigm go much deeper than physical things we see, but these are the most readily apparent. While Christians in the “relevance to” group would downplay any differences between themselves and the culture, those in the “purity from” group want to keep those differences clear and well practiced. They see differences from their beliefs and practices as being wrong, and they want to keep distance between themselves and these wrong things. This is, in many ways, the opposite of the “relevance to” group that wants to make the message more and more appealing to those who are different from what Christians are perceived to be.

Such a tension between the faithful and the world sets up positions and perceptions that seem to this writer to cause Christians to believe it is their job to “fix the world” around them. This sense of their “job” then sends them off into their different ways of trying to do that. It is at this point of thought that one might do well to consider a different approach that would neither send the church into political action nor cause it to try to adapt its message to be more palatable

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<sup>14</sup> Hunter, p. 218

to the world in which it exists. All of this seems to swim around the question, “How do we change the world?” Once we agree that slavery is wrong, that abortion is wrong, that homosexuality is sin, we are still a long way from knowing what to do about those wrongs. It seems to be from this point that we have difficulty moving on together. James Davison Hunter suggests an approach which he calls “Faithful Presence” as the most biblical and effective means of addressing our thoughts and behaviors at this point.

### **“Faithful Presence,” A Different Approach to Ethics:**

One questions whether it is the responsibility of God’s people to make things happen or whether it is their responsibility to live by the standards taught by God’s Word and let God generate any changes that are to come. Do Christians have a mandate to make slavery, abortion, or homosexual behavior illegal in their time? If so, where is it commanded in Scripture? If not, could that be why stopping such things is not mentioned by Jesus? Do we get the sense that we must make the world right from instructions given in the context of theocracy in the Old Testament? Or perhaps we get that sense from living in a democracy where each citizen can easily participate in the political system. The reality is that making slavery, abortion, or homosexual marriage illegal would not necessarily bring God’s presence into one life. The concept of “faithful presence” offers an alternative to this pressure to make the world do right.

Hunter refers us to Miraslov Volf who comments on the relationship of church and culture in I Peter.

On the one hand, he argues, the dominant metaphor of the church in I Peter is that of “alien.” Christians are “aliens and strangers in the world” (I Pet. 1:1, 2:11), and for this reason they are a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (I Pet. 2:9). In its beliefs, values, ideals, and institutions, then, the church is distinct from the larger society in which it is found. By virtue of the new birth, Christians are not what they used to be nor do they live as they used to live. On the other hand, I Peter instructs its readers to accommodate to existing social realities. “Be

subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution" (I Pet. 2:13-17). And this pertains to the realm of politics (emperors and governors), economics (servants, slaves, and masters), and the household (husbands and wives). Both of these instructions are present in the text: accommodation to existing social realities and calling them into question by being different.

But rather than confusion, the contradiction is constructive. The purpose of Christian existence as a whole is to "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (I Pet. 2:9). To this end, Christians should conduct themselves "honorably among the Gentiles . . . so that they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (I Pet. 2:12). In short, as Volf puts it, "Christian difference is . . . not an insertion of something new from the outside, but a bursting out of the new precisely within the proper space of the old."<sup>15</sup>

One contemporary illustration of the kind of influence Hunter and Volf are noting is to be found in an event in Louisiana following the devastation of Katrina. People from a church in Kansas made several trips to the same small town where they joined people from other churches from throughout the country to clean up the rubble and build homes. On more than one occasion people said something like the following to them. "We would be devastated without your help. Neither the government nor any other organization has shown that they have noticed our need, let alone offered help. But we will make it through this because of you Christians." Compare the impact of this event for God's Kingdom to impact that may have been made on this same community if these same people had marched on Washington demanding more funds to help smaller communities in Louisiana.

In the first case, the event that actually happened, people in the devastated community were in personal contact with faithful Christians who were practicing the love of God for fellow human beings. If the second scenario had occurred, the people in the devastated community may have received some money, but they would not have received it in the context of "faithful presence" of God's people. This, like most illustrations, is an over simplification, yet it sheds some light on what might have been missed with purely philosophical/theological statements.

Along these lines Hunter says,

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<sup>15</sup> Hunter, 230-231.

Let me finally stress that any good that is generated by Christians is *only* the net effect of caring for something more than the good created. *If there are benevolent consequences of our engagement with the world, in other words, it is precisely because it is **not** rooted in a desire to change the world for the better but rather because it is an expression of a desire to honor the creator of all goodness, beauty, and truth, a manifestation of our loving obedience to God, and a fulfillment of God's command to love our neighbor.*<sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Once again, the pursuit of “Slavery, Hermeneutics, and Ethics” seemed to naturally broaden in scope as the study continued. Puzzling questions arise naturally about the presence of slavery in many of the Scripture narratives because the mention of slavery is not accompanied by instructions as to its right or wrong. While the Law instructs in specifics about the treatment and handling of slaves, it seems to assume the presence of slaves. The New Testament brings a consistent fresh perspective on the matter, instructing Christian slaves and masters to practice Christian behavior in their roles, but it still assumes the presence of slavery in the culture of the day without condemning it.

The pursuit of the accompanying dilemma has led me to consider a fresh perspective in the realm of ethics. In the simplest terms, it appears to move from incorporating given ethical positions into the culture by exerting social and political pressure to simply living the ethical position desired because the presence of God in us would lead us to do so. If this is truly the way God intends us to influence the world in which we live, it would explain why Jesus does not comment on abortion or slavery or other social ills which his followers may encounter in any place or time.

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<sup>16</sup> Hunter, 234.

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