

Reflections on Christian Courage

BY CANDACE VOGLER

The kind of courage that Christians living in relatively secure circumstances are likely to need these days is courage in honoring moral prohibitions. Certain kinds of acts are simply prohibited, regardless of the consequences that anyone might hope to gain by doing them.

In the early church, being called to Christ often meant being prepared to suffer for one's faith. It is no accident that the Greek term "martyr" meant *to witness*, and early Christian witness was perilous. This sort of suffering is anticipated in Scripture. For instance, the Apostle Paul writes, "For [God] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well" (Philippians 1:29). And in the Gospels, Jesus warns his disciples, "But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name" (Luke 21:16-17), and explains, "they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know the one who sent me" (John 15:21).¹

In many parts of the world again today Christians can find themselves facing persecution of kinds familiar from the early church, and we pray for their preservation and for God to be with them in the trials they face. But in the relative security and safety we take for granted in places like the United States, Christians are less likely to face rape, murder, mutilation, and the like because of their faith. What we face, no matter how unlikely it is that we will lose our lives or health or families if we stand firm, is a different sort of challenge—a sort that the world handles in one way, and that our faith should allow us to handle in a very different way. It is a challenge that arises at the intersection of justice and faith, not unrelated to the challenge

of being steadfast in one's faith in the face of actual or threatened persecution: the challenge to respect moral prohibitions.

G. E. M. Anscombe describes the recent shift in thinking that raises this particular challenge. It has long been a hallmark of "the Hebrew-Christian ethic," she notes, "that there are certain things forbidden whatever [the] consequences" we might hope to gain by doing them — things like intentionally killing the innocent in order to achieve some other good, embracing idolatry, committing adultery, falsely professing faith in God, and so on. Yet a number of modern thinkers invite us to be skeptical of such proscriptions, and instead let the consequences — that is, the good things we might achieve or the evil ones we might avoid — be our guide in moral affairs. Nothing is absolutely wrong, according to this sort of "consequentialism," if the outcome is positive enough; indeed, among these thinkers it "is pretty well taken for obvious...that a prohibition such as that on murder does not operate in face of some consequences." This is a quite remarkable turn in thinking, Anscombe observes, because "of course the strictness of the prohibition has as its point *that you are not to be tempted by fear or hope of consequences.*"²

MORAL PROHIBITION

The special character of respect for moral prohibitions is enshrined in ordinary practical reason (whether or not the rational being in question is a Christian). Respect for moral prohibitions is built into an orientation to the future that has it that good acts are supposed to bring good. In other words, any bad that follows a genuinely good act (which is to say, a good sort of thing to do that is done in a good way, under appropriate circumstances, with respect to appropriate other people, and so on) is supposed to be an *accident*, whereas the good that comes of good acts is foreseeable, even if we do not specifically foresee that good. Our respect operates with an implicit sense that good is supposed to come of good, and that this good could be incalculably greater than any good we can sense or see or envision when we are trying to pursue some good or ward off some bad here and now. I sometimes think of it as the *It's a Wonderful Life* principle — George Bailey of Bedford Falls discovered that had he not made many sacrifices, small and large, in the course of living his life, the entire community would have been a very different place. He planted seeds of goodness in a way that grew over the years without his ever imagining the ramifications of his many decisions to act for others' sake rather than for his own advantage.³

Like many basic principles of practical reason, this one has a flip side. It goes like this: all bets are off when people do things they know to be bad. Any bad that comes of a bad act, however unexpected, is no accident. Moral prohibitions attach to kinds of acts that are always bad and never good, always wrong and never right. Traditionally, acts of murder and rape fall under this category. "Genocide" is the name of a collective action that was invented precisely in order to mark a kind of act that is always wrong,

always bad. These acts are acts that are wrong or bad just because of the kinds of acts that they are.

There is room for reasonable disagreement about whether most things we might do or avoid doing on purpose will be good or bad under the circumstances, but where morally prohibited kinds of act are concerned, there is not room for doubt. If you like, the handful of kinds of acts that are morally

There can be no question of doing morally prohibited kinds of acts at the right time or in the right way. These acts are never to be done. Any good that comes of them is entirely accidental. It is not in the nature of such acts to seed goodness.

prohibited mark points on a boundary surrounding the much larger field of kinds of acts that are sometimes good, sometimes bad.

Respecting moral prohibitions requires (at the very least) avoiding committing acts of prohibited kinds. But beyond simply managing to avoid committing acts of murder or rape or genocide (or, I think, of torture) — a thing I hope will present no great challenge to people generally — we may also be called upon to intervene in

order to prevent others from doing such things (when we have a chance to do so directly), or, at the very least, to raise a protest against such acts. The kind of courage that Christians living in relatively secure circumstances are likely to need these days is courage in honoring moral prohibitions. Honoring moral prohibitions requires operating explicitly in a practical framework that expects good to come of good, and that refuses to do wicked things calculating that bad deeds will stave off catastrophe or else bring about some sort of excellent outcome.

Now, you may well ask, why on earth would Christians think that good should come of good? Do we just have some funny, sweet, sentimental attachment to the idea that good ought to be amplified by still more good? I don't think so. Actually, I think that this sort of orientation to the future is built into human reason in a perfectly general way, but that Christian faith — rooted in Judaic tradition — gives us actual *grounds* for the orientation.

In effect, because we understand that we have a just and perfectly loving Creator, we can know that any badness that comes of genuinely good acts is an accident. We don't do good expecting bad, even if we can foresee some bad coming of good. By exactly the same token, any good that comes of a bad act is an accident — we cannot do wicked deeds and expect good to come of them. How does our understanding of our Creator give us grounds for this conviction?

For starters, we know that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). In short, we know that evil is supposed to come of evil. More specifically, we know that some kinds of acts are, by their very nature, evil. We can spot these things in part through the amount of human attention and effort given over to figuring out which acts are instances of these kinds. Think, for example, of the amount of attention that has been paid to determining what acts will count as instances of rape or of murder or of genocide. We have an obvious case of genocide if my people round up your people and murder the lot of you. But we may also have a genocide in progress if, instead, my people take your children away, feed, clothe, and educate them, but do not permit them to speak your language, practice your religion, learn your customs, or learn the history of your people. By preventing your next generation from carrying your culture forward, my people can put an end to your people. With morally prohibited kinds of acts, there can be no question of doing the thing at the right time or in the right way. These are acts that are never to be done. An alternative way of expressing what I take to be the same point is that any good that comes of such acts is entirely accidental. It is not in the nature of such acts to seed goodness.

That we are in *any* position to expect amplified good to come of the good that we try to do is, I think, a quiet whisper of grace in our very ordinary way of reckoning what will happen if we act well. The whisper is always there to be heard, even though we may only feel the force of its voice when we think about things that should *not* happen and should *never* have happened to people struggling to lead upright and good lives in the face of every worldly pressure to do otherwise. This idea that some bad things should not happen is nothing that finds its support in our experience of the natural world. In the natural world, whatever happens is just what happens. There is no room for thoughts about what *should* or *should not* happen in physics or chemistry. There are unexpected events, but an unexpected event is just that—a surprise. *Unexpected* is not the same as *wrong*. The mere fact that we are surprised by a natural event does not even begin to suggest that the natural event ought not to have happened. When we think that bad things should not happen to people struggling to lead good lives, we are not making a prediction. We are trafficking in a very different way of orienting ourselves to the future. This different orientation, I take it, is the rational basis for Christian moral courage, the thing that we can hold onto when our faith is tested in ways large and small.

CHRISTIAN COURAGE

Traditional Christian thought has it that grace supplies more than this rational basis for us when our faith is severely tested. However well or badly we have done cultivating a virtuous character, grace can bring us special strengths (and the Holy Spirit can provide special gifts) to help us when we are in desperate need. It is obvious that we are likely to need such assistance

when we find ourselves facing death for the sake of our faith (provided that we have not run out *seeking* such a situation — foolishness is not a sign of strong faith, and Christian courage shows itself in fleeing when wisdom counsels flight). But we can find ourselves needing to call upon our faith even when the risk we face is much less serious. We can find ourselves needing to stand against inherently bad acts and policies — refusing to do or support a great many things that we know to be wrong — just because we understand that we cannot do or support wicked things in order to bring about something good or stave off something worse. What we need may not be the kind of thing needed to face martyrdom, but we may at least need faith to stiffen our spines in the face of worldly calculation. It is one thing to seek forgiveness of sin when we do wrong and repent of our wrongdoing. It is quite another to sin in the hope that we will save face or make the world a better place through sinning. All too often, worldly calculation sides with the latter.

I mentioned that the world has one way of understanding what is going on when we refuse to side with sin, and that we have a different understanding. The world thinks that we are doing one of two kinds of special calculation (because the world has a strong tendency to try to understand what people do by thinking about calculation).

First calculation: some will think that we are siding with faith because we are afraid that we will go to hell if we don't. Of course, if we believe in hell then we also think it is a circumstance that ought to be avoided. It's not that someone who fears eternal damnation has the wrong idea about eternal damnation. But this sort of calculation is at odds with both the rational basis of a Christian orientation to the future and the support we have from grace. The rational basis has it that any good that comes of sin is an accident. We get no credit for some good thing that happens to come about when we sin. Any good that emerges in the wake of a bad act is accidental. The wages of sin is death, not a better world.

The basis in grace is deeply rooted in both faith and love. Our job is to try to walk with Christ as best we can with his help. Christ did *not* sin when sorely tempted to do so. He did not do evil expecting good to come of it. He suffered when this was necessary, and stood firm. His is the example we have for courage as a core component of our faith.

The idea that we might follow Christ's example because we are afraid that we will suffer if we don't misconstrues Christianity at root. This way of reckoning our courage is, to that extent, just wrong.

The second way the world tries to account for Christian courage is by attributing to us a special sort of magical thinking. According to this way of thinking, it's not that cost-benefit calculation is the wrong way to understand Christian courage, it's that Christians think that God is the great cost-benefit guy in the sky. God just alters the payoff structure in such a way that, in the long run — and the long run could stretch to eternity — as a matter of fact, no great good will come of sin, and increasing good will come of

standing firm in our faith. God just arranges events so that good is rewarded and evil is punished. Eventually.

In reply we can say that it's not wrong to think God holds creation in his hands. But trying to account for God's care for creation on the model of some sort of morally loaded, magically balanced cost-benefit system misses the whole force of Christian courage by locating its appeal in the wrong sort of orientation to the future—the merely predictive sort. Again, this way of trying to understand Christian courage flies in the face of both reason and faith.

Reason teaches us that good is supposed to come of good, and that sin is not a wellspring of good. Sin is evil in action. As such, it is to be avoided, even when the world expects good from sin, and great evil from courageous refusal to sin. Faith teaches that our efforts to walk with Christ are efforts to be good human beings; they are efforts to live in such a way that our powers and passions are appropriately governed, we come as close as we can to rectifying our wills, and, as such, we are right with God. Christian courage follows the paths of right reason, appropriate emotion, and proper obedience. It tracks how things are supposed to go, whether or not things go in the way that they are supposed to go. As such, Christian moral courage exemplifies the way that Christians refuse to be drawn into merely predictive calculation in deciding what to do. We know better.

In this, I think, we can sense a lesson from the mysterious writing on the wall in Daniel 5: "*mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.*" In the story, Belshazzar adds insult to the injuries done by Nebuchadnezzar, reckoning that good can come of embracing a legacy of injustice in open defiance of God. Like Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar does wrong expecting good to come of it. God's judgment, interpreted by Daniel, uses the idiom of calculation as a condemnation. This can be

read, in part, as a warning against the whole business of relying upon the mode of economic calculation to determine what to do.⁴

Instead, we are charged both with cultivating ordinary practical wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage, and with opening ourselves up to divine help in faith, hope, and charity. We are charged both with developing plain, earthly courage and with orienting ourselves to the specifically Christian mode of standing firm in our faith when the world counsels siding with sin.

It is one thing to seek forgiveness of sin when we do wrong and repent of our wrongdoing. It is quite another to sin in the hope that we will save face or make the world a better place through sinning. All too often, worldly calculation sides with the latter.

I think that being called to Christ is being called to cultivate good character in the firm knowledge that both faith and reason teach that avoiding sin is crucial to this task, even though no amount of plain good conduct will lead us home to God. Our destination, like our source, is a gift of God.

The orientation to the future that informs Christianity is diametrically opposed to the usual stuff of cost-benefit analysis, even when the cost-benefit mode of determining what will happen next is shored up with some sort of special moral weighting system. It is not that cost-benefit analyses have no place in practical wisdom and right conduct. If I am trying to allocate the financial resources of my firm, for example, then plain economic reasoning may well be what I should employ (provided that the enterprise itself is sound, and I am a just employer). It is rather that cost-benefit analyses are subject to a prior moral order—an order that forbids choosing sin in order to bring about good or avert some other evil. It is that prior moral order, I think, that grounds Christian moral courage.

NOTES

1 See also, for example, Matthew 5:10; Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 3:16; Philippians 2:8; Hebrews 10:34 and chapter 11; 1 Peter 4:15-16; and Galatians 5:24.

2 G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy*, 33:124 (January, 1958), 1-19, here citing 10.

3 *It's a Wonderful Life*, motion picture, directed by Frank Capra (1946; Liberty Films).

4 There is tremendous controversy over how to interpret the writing on the wall. I mean my suggestion to be just that—a suggestion that underscores the distance between faith's orientation to the future and plain cost-benefit calculation.



CANDACE VOGLER

is the David B. and Clara E. Stern Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois.