



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Reflections on Christian Courage
(*Patterns of Violence*, pp. 28-34)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Depicting Martyrdom
(*Patterns of Violence*, pp. 56-59)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Christian Courage in a Violent World

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

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Philippians 1:27-30

Reflection

A hallmark of Judeo-Christian ethics is that certain sorts of acts are forbidden—things like intentionally killing the innocent, embracing idolatry, committing adultery, falsely professing faith in God, and so on. These things are never to be done, regardless of the bad consequences we could avoid or the good consequences we could gain by doing them in particular situations. Such moral prohibitions, Candace Vogler notes, define the limits to what we do—like “points on a boundary surrounding the much larger field of kinds of acts that are sometimes good, sometimes bad.”

Since the mid-nineteenth century, many writers and thinkers in the West have moved away from that point of view. Nothing is absolutely wrong, they say; any act is right if its consequences are good enough—that is, it brings enough pleasure, avoids pain and death, accomplishes a significant goal, and so on. We often hear such “consequentialism” expressed in serious discussions of terrorism and war, sexual ethics, family life, business activities, and social relations; it pervades the games we play and the stories we read, or watch on television and in movies.

It will take courage to stand against this trend and to respect moral prohibitions. That’s because respecting prohibitions goes beyond simply “managing to avoid committing acts of murder or rape or genocide (or, I think, of torture),” Vogler notes. “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.”

Why do we (and should we) respect moral prohibitions? Vogler says such respect is built into how people commonly think about the future: they believe “good acts are supposed to bring good,” and “any bad that follows a genuinely good act...is supposed to be an *accident*.” The Christian belief, rooted in Judaic tradition, that “we have a just and perfectly loving Creator” provides further grounds for this orientation toward the future.

How can we muster the courage to respect such prohibitions? Sometimes just reflecting on these truths will bolster us. But Christian tradition says “grace supplies more than this rational basis for us when our faith is severely tested,” Vogler observes. “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.” Just as God supports martyrs who witness for their faith, God can provide courage to “stand against inherently bad acts and policies—refusing to do or support a great many things that we know to be wrong.” Sometimes we will “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



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save face or make the world a better place through sinning. All too often, worldly calculation sides with the latter.”

Vogler concludes, “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. 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.”

Study Questions

1. What moral prohibitions are we tempted to skirt in a violent world in order to achieve good consequences? What prohibitions are we tempted to skirt in personal relationships?
2. What features of God as creator give us grounds for *expecting* good things to come from good acts, and bad things to come from evil acts? Why might there be accidents in this pattern—that is, good (bad) things coming from evil (good) acts?
3. How are some people tempted to reduce Christian courage itself to cost-benefit calculation? Discuss why, according to Vogler, such reductions would be wrong-headed.
4. How do Andrea Mantegna and Caravaggio depict the early martyrs’ courage as relevant for the artists’ own day? How is a Christian martyr’s courage related to the courage we need?

Departing Hymn: “God, Whose Love Is Always Stronger”

God, whose love is always stronger
than our weakness, pride and fear,
in your world, we pray and wonder
how to be more faithful here.

Hate too often grows inside us;
fear rules what the nations do.

So we pray, when wars divide us:
Give us love, Lord! Make us new!

Love is patient, kind and caring,
never arrogant or rude,
never boastful, all things bearing;
love rejoices in the truth.

When we’re caught up in believing
war will make the terror cease,
show us Jesus’ way of living;
may our strength be in your peace.

May our faith in you be nourished;
may your churches hear your call.

May our lives be filled with courage
as we speak your love for all.

Now emboldened by your Spirit
who has given us new birth,
give us love, that we may share it
till your love renews the earth!

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2003)[†]

Tunes: BEACH SPRING, ABBOT’S LEIGH, or HYFRYDOL

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Christian Courage in a Violent World

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To examine the nature of moral prohibitions and how they put limits to “consequentialist” ways of thinking about what we should do.
2. To understand why we are (and should be) drawn to honoring moral prohibitions.
3. To reflect on specific temptations we face to disregard moral prohibitions.
4. To consider how the courage that we require to honor moral prohibitions is related to the martyr’s courage.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Patterns of Violence (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “God, Whose Love Is Always Stronger” locate one of the familiar tunes BEACH SPRING, ABBOT’S LEIGH, or HYFRYDOL in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with an Observation

What kinds of hardships and suffering will we have to endure to be faithful followers of Christ? Where and when will Christian courage be required of us?

As Candace Vogler notes, “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 suffering is predicted 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).”

The courage required for martyrdom is still required in those parts of the world where believers “face rape, murder, mutilation, and the like because of their faith,” Vogler remind us. But what kind of courage is needed by Christians who live in relatively secure circumstances today? Her answer strikes home: we’ll need courage to do what is required and to avoid what is prohibited, even when we think there are advantages to doing otherwise.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to grant members the courage to be faithful in all their thoughts and actions.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Philippians 1:27-30 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In the previous study we discussed the temptation to deal with our problems by scapegoating. That process is usually disguised from us, but we may embrace other and similar forms of violence with more or less full awareness – for example, when we choose to do something evil because we think it will have good consequences (like avoiding a greater evil or bringing about a great good). Candace Vogler shows how the temptation to consequentialist thinking is rooted in our orientation toward the future. To resist it, we’ll need a new orientation and courage to live according to it.

Study Questions

1. In the contexts of international terrorism and warfare, our leaders may be tempted to abuse and restrict the rights of innocent co-religionists, to authorize torturing people for information, to disregard the deaths and suffering of bystanders as “collateral damage,” and so on. We are tempted to support them or (at least) look the other way. But we are also tempted to skirt prohibitions in our personal relationships: we find excuses for adultery and sexual immorality, lying to colleagues, betrayal of friends, abortion of the unborn, neglect of children, abuse of the poor, and so on, when we think some greater good (for ourselves, for others we care about, or for the world) will come of it.
2. Candace Vogler mentions the perfect love and justice of God the creator. God’s perfect love draws us into communion of purpose with God, and we have reason to believe God has made the world such that our good acts will contribute to God’s good future. In justice God has promised to punish evil, and we can trust that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). This is the pattern according to which creation is meant to function. But there is brokenness in the system: we may do what is good, but others resist our effort or even turn it to evil; or we may do what is wicked, but God and others turn it toward good in some way.
3. “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),” Vogler writes. The first way of reducing Christian courage to cost-benefit calculation is this: Christians believe there is always an immense cost to doing something evil – (the threat of) going to hell – and no amount of good can offset that cost. Vogler responds, “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.” Christians are motivated by God’s grace and desire to “walk with Christ as best we can with his help.”

The second reduction is this: Christians believe God makes good acts pay off more than bad acts in the long run (that is, in an afterlife). Vogler agrees “God holds creation in his hands,” but objects that this attitude adopts “the wrong sort orientation to the future – the merely predictive sort.” The proper attitude is “to walk with Christ...[and] to live in such a way that our powers and passions are appropriately governed.... 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.

4. Heidi Hornik describes how Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) and Caravaggio (1573-1610) exemplify the Renaissance and Baroque styles of painting respectively. Mantegna depicts the third-century martyrdom of Sebastian in a thoroughly contemporary Renaissance setting, but with elements (positioned in a classical Greek *contrapposto* stance and surrounded by decaying Roman ruins) that remind viewers of the martyr’s military position in late antiquity. Caravaggio’s figures have the very realistic physicality of contemporary art of his day; the straining men are dressed as poor workers might dress in the artist’s day. Both artists are saying, “This event might occur in our day.”

Of course, the martyrs from antiquity to the current day face greater threats and suffering than we do. But their courage is grounded in their faith in God’s goodness and their obedience to God’s prohibitions, and is graciously sustained by the Holy Spirit in the moment of their greatest trials. These are features of the courage we need in order to honor moral prohibitions and resist temptations to do evil things in order to bring about some good.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.