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PERSONAL PURITY: A BURDEN OF THE
TESTAMENTS

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Introduction

The subject of personal purity may be approached from many angles. In this paper,¹ I have decided against an approach using word studies and the like, because I believe most if not all of us share a consensus as to the semantic content of the substantive term. I have also chosen not to approach it from the standpoint of systematic theology, because of the fact of our differing systems. These systems place us squarely into such varying camps that we often cannot talk to each other using terms on which we all agree.

¹Editorial note: This article was first presented at a CETA meeting in the late eighties at the JTS (where Dr Vassel served as professor of biblical studies and theology); it was later published in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* 12: (1988), 359-368 (ERT). The following citation is from the ERT: "Vassell analyzes biblical characters in both the Old and New Testaments who exemplify this virtue of purity: Isaiah, Joseph, the Palmist, Paul, Peter, John. He convincingly shows how moral rectitude, a sense of God's Holy presence and true worship are its essential elements. He concludes that both the categories of the kingdom of God and parousia in the New Testament are fundamentally concerned with purity."

I have sought to take an approach that is more concerned with biblical theology. It is, therefore, an approach that seeks to identify a unifying motif throughout Scripture relative to the concept of personal purity. It assumes that there is a progressive clarification of the concept alongside the progressive revelation within Scripture. While the paper does not attempt to exhaust the subject, it seeks to identify some fundamental conclusions that may be reached using such an approach.

The motif that this paper identifies is that a personal appreciation of the living God inevitable ushers one into a life of purity in keeping with, and as a consequence of, that appreciation of him.

The Example of the Patriarchs

Joseph is a shining example of personal purity among the Patriarchs in the Old Testament. He may rightly serve as a paradigm of the biblical concept of personal purity. The episode in his life that best demonstrates this is found in Genesis 39:1-20.

A Relationship with the Living God. The text establishes the crucial factor relationship with God in this story by the words 'The Lord was with Joseph' in Gen 39:2. These words appear again in verse 21 and 23 of this chapter, as the conditioning and constant factor in face of the changing situations of Joseph's life. They have vital significance in the book of Genesis, in relationship to the covenant relationship that God had established with Abraham and his descendants.

So, in Genesis 26:3, as God reaffirms his covenant commitment to Isaac, Abraham's son, God says, '*I will be with you . . . and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham.*' The assurance of God's presence is thus associated inextricably with his covenant commitment. So in the words 'The Lord was with Joseph'. The covenant relationship between God and Joseph comes into sharp focus (cf. also Acts 7-9 – and note God and Joseph comes

into sharp focus (cf. also Acts 7:9-and note how Stephen emphasized this fact in his speech before the Sanhedrin).

Personal purity: a function of the relationship with the living God. Joseph's story develops in a way that demonstrates God's favour upon him. He is physically attractive and financial astute. He therefore rises to leadership and prominence in his master Potiphar's household. The narrative peaks, however, with a testing challenge to his commitment to personal moral rectitude. In the presence of ample opportunity and in the absence of any restraining group or written legal code, he is persistently enticed into a sexual relationship with his master's wife.

The personal purity of Joseph shines out in response to this challenge. He consistently and decisively refuses to cooperate. He states clearly his fundamental reason for consistently refusing in the famous words: 'How could I do such a wicked thing *and sin against God?*' With these words Joseph establishes that such an activity would scandalize the God that had graciously and faithfully committed himself in covenant to him, his ancestors and his descendants. The personal purity exemplified in Joseph's upright moral choice is shown to be a direct function of his consciousness of the living God in terms of a sacrosanct relationship. For him, the violating of this relationship was unthinkable.

The Experience of the Prophet Isaiah

A revelation of the living God. The Prophet Isaiah remembers a critical point in time when he 'saw the Lord' (v.1). Unveiled before him was the absolute authority of the living God, his dazzling glory and his overwhelming holiness. (vv.2-4). It was an awesome revelation to Isaiah. In the light of this revelation of God, Isaiah sees himself as one who stands condemned because he, a self-confessed 'man of unclean lips', has seen 'the King'. From an Old Testament perspective, no man expects to live, having seen God (cf. Gen. 32:30; Ex 33:20). The prophet realizes that, having seen 'the king', he is now completely at God's mercy.

Personal purity resulting from revelation of the living God. The revelation of God not only evokes what may be called 'Judgement day' honesty in the Prophet, shown in the admitting of his own 'uncleanness' before God, but also compels him to abandon any mitigating isolationist posture of individual self-righteousness ('and I live among a people of unclean lips'). He sees himself in the same way as all those around him. He recognizes and identifies himself with the common problem of his fellowmen which merits doom in the presence of a holy God. Thankfully, his woeful, impassioned cry does not go unnoticed. And so upon his humble and honest confession of his plight, instead of merited and expected condemnation, a gracious purging takes place which 'takes away his guilt' and makes atonement for his sin. He is now, *and only now*, able to speak God's words to his fellow men. Isaiah's explicit defenselessness before the holy God, and his implicit dependence upon him (being at his mercy), are theologically important precursors of the prophet's experience of personal purification and subsequent commissioning.

For the prophet, personal purification is not merely an end, but it is brought into the service of the public proclamation of God's will. Indeed personal purging is absolutely necessary if he is going to be God's prophet.

One notes with interest that the sin of which he is purged is that of having '*unclean lips*'. The focus on '*lips*' here indicates that the phenomenon of social relationships is implied. All social relationships are in fact mediated through oral communication, '*the lips*'.

It is reasonable to argue that since the Prophet's subsequently '*purged*' lips speak the word of God, which in this context is a word of justice truth and impartiality (cf. Is. 6:9-15), that the common sin which he shared with his fellow men ('unclean lips') points to conditions of injustice, falsehood and compromise which were systemic within and characteristic of contemporary society?

If this is the case, then the personal purging here which he experienced in the presence of the living God not only

delivers him from this damnable situation of corporate uncleanness, but also enables him to speak God's truth to it, and also necessarily against it.

The Expression of the Psalmist

A reflection upon God. The Psalms highlight the religious reflection of ancient Israel upon God in the sacred context of worship. They are uniquely the repository of the nation's theology, and this is a theology that is decidedly *theocentric*. Of the many Psalms that could be cited in order to highlight this issue of personal purity, Psalm 24 commends itself and in the words of verses 3-6 brings the issue into sharp focus.

*Who may ascend to the hill of the Lord?
Who may stand in His holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false.
He will receive blessings from the Lord
and vindication from God His Saviour.
Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, O God of Jacob.*
(Psa 24:3-6 NIV)

From verses 3 and 5 we deduce that the quintessence of blessing, in the mind of the Psalmist, is to be enabled to stand in the presence of the living God completely vindicated by him. Verses 4 and 6 describe the character and the conduct of the one who participates in this blessedness. That one has 'clean hands' and 'a pure heart', 'does not lift up his soul to an idol', or 'swear by what is false'. And 'such are the generation of those who seek him', who seek the 'face' of the 'God of Jacob'.

Personal purity as gift and demand. The Psalmist seems to integrate all the elements of personal purity already alluded to in this paper. For him ritual purification is not enough to guarantee the blessing of the right entry into God's presence and to stand there vindicated. 'The exclusive stress is laid on the moral purity of the worshipper' (Weiser 1962).

In his moral choice and actions, 'clean hands'; in his moral attitude and integrity, 'pure heart'; in his fidelity to the living God of covenant, he 'does not lift up his soul to an idol'; and in his social justice and integrity, nor does he 'swear by what is false'. Note, however, that it is those who specifically seek a right relationship with the God of Jacob, the God who redeems twisted characters, who receive the blessed privilege of entry in to the holy presence. The really deep desire to be in God's presence is then *both the motivation* for actions and attitudes indicative of personal purity and *the means whereby* a gracious saving God purifies one, and thus enables one to be ready to come in. 'Clean hands', 'pure heart', and the rest-moral rectitude in relationship² to God and man-are then indicative of the personal purity which for the Psalmist is both responsibility and privilege, demand and gift. At the moment of desire for true worship, the openhearted worshipper both receives a gracious gift and also meets the holy demand in the presence of the living God-the God of Jacob.

The Evidence of Participation in the Kingdom of God

The Rule of God. The New Testament presents the coming of God's Kingdom as central to its message. It has been argued convincingly that the failure to grasp the nature and centrality of this eschatological concept will lead to a serious misunderstanding of the whole New Testament (cf. Dodd, 50-51; Cullmann, 47-48; Ladd, 57-104).

Matthew's Gospel is particularly concerned with the concept of the eschatological Kingdom. It is often referred to in Matthew as the 'Kingdom of *Heaven*'.³ This 'Gospel' is the Gospel of the 'Kingdom'. Jesus is presented as the Messianic King in the Kingdom of God. Matthew, therefore, presents the principles of the Kingdom. It describes the participants in this Kingdom and in its record of various

² The Hebrew idiom 'his face' used in this context connotes the idea of favourable relationship (cf. Ps. 27:7-9).

³ The author's sensitivity to his Jewish audience's concern for circumlocution of the divine name is no doubt the reason behind this phenomenon.

parables and narratives of Jesus, it clarifies the nature of the Kingdom.

My understanding of the teaching regarding the Kingdom of God in the New Testament, and especially in Matthew's Gospel, may be concisely summarized in the following way. In the person and work of Jesus, the Messiah, the Kingdom of God has broken decisively into history (Mt. 12:28). There are eschatological blessings associated with this inbreaking of the Kingdom, the foremost of which is the real possibility, here and now, of becoming a participant in this Kingdom of God. However, notwithstanding the present inbreaking, there is coming a fuller and final consummation of the Kingdom of God which is as yet future, and for which the New Testament urges constant anticipation and preparedness in the certain hope of its coming. So the Kingdom of God is 'already' present in some measure, but 'not yet' consummated in its fullness. It is 'already' but 'not yet' (Cullmann, 81-93).

In keeping with my understanding of the doctrine of the kingdom of God, I regard Matthew 5:3-10 as a description of the characteristics of the blessed participants in the Kingdom of God. Verses 3 and 10 are all-inclusive and provide the clues to this conclusion: the poor in spirit and the ones who are persecuted because of righteousness are the ones to whom the Kingdom belongs. The other six 'Beatitudes' (4-9) are 'Kingdom characteristics' which are shared by all those blessed ones who are truly participants in the Kingdom of God. These people enjoy here and now the favour of God. They *are* the blessed. They stand blessed in an 'already' sense and look forward to more blessedness in a 'not yet' sense.

So they all display in the 'now' the characteristics of blessedness: they sensitively mourn, they are meek, they hunger and thirst for righteousness. They also experience in the 'now' a measure of the associated eschatological blessings: they are 'already' experiencing comfort, they have begun to be filled with righteousness, and so on. However,

they also look forward to a future fuller experience of these eschatological blessings which will certainly be revealed when the 'not yet' comes.

Personal purity as an evidence of the Rule of God. Within the hermeneutical framework, Mt. 5:8 ('Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God') takes on tremendous significance for our discussion. Personal purity is identified as a characteristic of those who now stand blessed, being participants in God's Kingdom: the pure in heart are *now* the objects of God's favour. Their purity of heart, however, relates to the fact that they have 'already' in some sense, begun to 'see God', the vision of whom is both the motivation and the means to purity as we have already discussed above, (Cf. also Paul in 2 Cor. 3:18 and John in 1 John 1:5-7).

The term 'pure in *heart*' conveys the idea of a condition that is intensely personal. Stott points out that this blessed characteristic is best described as a disposition of absolute openness to God's scrutiny and correction (which he describes as a 'Christian counter culture'). In this situation, there is a social dimension as it also frees one to be transparent before one's fellow men. There is consequently an absence of hidden agendas and ulterior motives. The facades of play-acting become ridiculous to such an individual, for *deceptive double dealing* and *secret moral corruption* have no place under the holy scrutiny of the living God to which he has submitted himself. If there is absolute openness and honesty before God, whom the pure heart begins to 'see' in his transcendental holiness, what does he need to hide from his fellow men, with whom he shares common human mortality and fallibility?

The Expectation of the Parousia

Personal purity, vital sign of Christian hope. Having discussed the issue of personal purity as it relates to the rule of God emphasized in the Gospels, the final consideration of this paper will be the relationship between the expected

return of our 'Great God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (the blessed hope' of every Christian), and the matter of personal purity. This will be examined in reference to the final phase of revelation, the Apostles' doctrine'.

Paul. For the apostle Paul, the triad of faith, hope and love, constitutes the essential, basic and sufficient element of genuine Christianity (cf. Col.1:3-5, 1 Cor. 13:13; I Th. 1:3-10). For Paul, these are three works of God in the lives of persons. Paul knows no genuine Christianity where these elements are absent. *All* true Christians love, all must have faith in Christ and *all* look in great expectation for his return.

In 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul gives personal advice to Timothy to whom he has assigned the demanding task of 'guarding the Gospel' (as John Stott's book title [1973] puts it) in Ephesus. In 1 Tim. 4:12 he assures Timothy that the 'only way to silence criticism' (Barclay 1975), is simply to be exemplary Christian, 'an example for the believers'. Timothy must be model, both in his speech and in his conduct, if he wants to be taken seriously. Paul elaborates the idea of exemplary Christian conduct in terms of three essential elements, '*love, faith and purity*'.

Here, the Pauline triad of essential Christian virtues seems at first glance to be disrupted. One would expect 'hope' to complement faith and love, in the triad; instead we see 'purity'. I believe, however, that there is a vital link between 'hope' and 'purity' in Paul's mind, and that the Pauline triad is not therefore violated. For Paul, *Christian purity* is simply and necessarily the corollary to *Christian hope*. The life of purity is the consistent reflection in this world of the life that hopes for the world to come. This emerges clearly if we allow Paul in Titus 2:11-14 to interpret Paul in 1 Tim. 4:12.

Paul writes to Titus in Crete a similar letter to that which he writes to Timothy in Ephesus. In the letter to Titus he makes unequivocally explicit the link between purity and hope.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14, NIV).

In the above passage, Paul explains concisely that the life of personal purity results from the disciplining⁴ of God's saving grace. He further shows that this life is lived in light of the dynamic expectation of the 'blessed hope', the content of which is the 'glorious appearing of our Great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ'. He concludes by asserting that it is Jesus Christ that gave himself in order to redeem us from all wickedness, and to produce a people designated as 'his very own' and characterized by moral purity, and an eagerness to do good.

Williams Barclay (1975), in commenting on Titus 2:11-14, says this:

Jesus Christ makes us able to live with the *prudence* which allows no passion or desire more than its proper place; with the *justice* which enables us to give both to God and to men that which is their due; with the *reverence* which makes live in the awareness that this world is nothing other than the temple of God.

He continues:

The dynamic of this new life is the expectation of the coming of Jesus Christ.... The Christian is the man who is always prepared for the coming of the King of Kings....Jesus can purify us until we are fit to be the special people of God.

In the light of this passage in Titus, we understand Paul's advice to Timothy in 1 Tim 4:12 as being an

⁴ The Greek word translated 'teach' in the NIV text implies more than mere instruction; it has the force of 'training' of 'disciplining' (Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich).

encouragement to demonstrate purity of life which, for Paul, is the corollary of Christian hope.

The apostolic witness of John and Peter corroborates the idea seen in Paul that Christian hope is inevitably reflected in Christian purity.

John. In John 3:1-3, the text speaks for itself, without the need for extensive comment. It says:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And this is what we are! The reason the world does not know us that it did not know Him. Dear friends, now are we children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

The concepts of hope and purity are obviously explicitly linked here. The passage however sheds more light on the *nature* of personal purity by showing that the standard of personal purity is to be 'just as that one': Jesus Christ, for whom we wait. It is Christlike purity. He further shows that the hope of the Christian is indeed to realize just that-Christlikeness at the time of the unhindered vision of Christ, when we shall see Christ 'as he is'.

Peter. In 2 Peter 3, Peter speaks about the 'day of the Lord'. For him, it is the day when God comes in final judgement and brings complete redemption. In vv. 13 and 14 he says, 'But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth; the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him'.

The consensus of the apostolic witness is that, without doubt, personal purity is a function of genuine expectant hope for the return of the Lord.

Conclusion

From this study, we have seen that throughout the Scripture there is the vital concept that an individual's deep

appreciation of the living God is a life-conditioning phenomenon. The occupation with the living God necessarily works out itself in history in terms of personal purity.

In the Patriarch *Joseph*, the consciousness of a relationship with the God of covenant informed his moral choices. It demanded moral rectitude, with no compromise. In the prophet *Isaiah*, his encounter in vivid revelation of the God of absolute power, glory and holiness draws out honest confession of defenselessness in his presence. This is the necessary precursor to God's gracious purging. In Psalm 24, reflection upon the awesome requirements necessary to approach the living God in true worship, leads the Psalmist to see beyond ritual purity to the many-faceted issue of moral purity, which takes in both relationship with God and man. He theologizes that it is both the holy demand of God, and the gracious gift of God.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we have seen that one definitive quality of those that have personally accepted into their lives the rule of God which Gospel of the Kingdom announces, is the distinguishing characteristic of purity of heart. These people begin to 'see God'. They are transparent before him and before men. There is no place for deception and hypocrisy. There is also the anticipation of fuller purity in the anticipation of a fuller vision of God.

Finally, in the apostolic teachings of the New Testament, we found that there was complete consensus between Paul, John and Peter in articulating the concept that personal purity is the proper Christian disposition lived in the light of a knife-edged expectancy of the return of our Great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Those who anticipate the consummation of the future, in the fulfilling purposes of the living God, live pure lives in hope and expectancy.

Bearing in mind our discussion of Titus 2:11-14 above, may we hear afresh the concluding challenge of the apostle Paul in reference to personal purity: 'These then are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.'

May we also resolve to be models, by God's grace, of that which we teach, rebuke and encourage. I am convinced that if we teach personal purity and also live pure lives, we will serve the Church in our time and our region in a way that glorifies the living God.

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