AN EXAMINATION OF THE THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL ISSUES RELATING TO 'SACRED CURSES' WITH REFERENCE TO CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES

by

MARK RAEBURN JOHNSTON

submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF THEOLOGY

in the subject

THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: PROF RS TSHAKA

February 2012
The Thesis Committee for UNISA certifies that this is the approved version of the following Thesis:

An Examination of the Theological-Ethical Issues Relating to ‘Sacred Curses’ with Reference to Church Discipline and Social Challenges

Committee:

Supervisor: Dr. Rothney S. Tshaka

Bernard Boyo (PhD)

Christopher Byaruhanga (Rev. Dr.)
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of praying sacred curses as a means of exercising ecclesiastical discipline within the Christian church. Through a brief analysis of selected social issues challenging the church in the United States, Chapter One addresses the question concerning the appropriateness of punitive praying as a means of furthering the Gospel of Christ. The question, “Is it ever right to pray for the failure, destruction or harm of another person, especially when such prayer is made by Christians in the name of God?” guides the subject of this thesis from both theological and ethical perspectives.

A word study on seven key Hebrew words used to designate a “curse” in the Old Testament is made in Chapter Two in an effort to provide the necessary background for the New Testament’s concepts and practices undergirding early Church discipline. The utilization of punitive prayers and the utterances of anathemas throughout the New Testament comprise Chapter Three and points to a significant dimension for church theology inside the community of faith. There is also evidence that such ‘killing prayers’ were used to check secular authorities hostile to the witness of the church.

Perhaps the most interesting use of the sacred curse comes from the record of Jesus “cursing” a fig tree, which dies as a result. This tree seems to represent both the religious dimension of Israel and the authoritative rule of the state, each characterized by unbelief and a rejection of the message of Jesus.

Chapter Four furthers the discussion concerning the ethical basis for a sacred curse, especially as reflected by the Ten Commandments, and more specifically, in the keeping of the Fourth Commandment, the Sabbath. In conjunction with this sense of discipline, the argument is made that the love of God is often exemplified through the exercise of the curse because persons so affected may be drawn to repentance and seek after God as a result.

Chapter Five concludes this study with an indictment on modern theology’s seeming failure to address matters of truth in social issues presently impacting both
church and state in the USA. This chapter calls for the use of the sacred curse on the basis of local church unity and cohesiveness, while recognizing that such unity may be impossible to achieve. Because there may be no consensus inside the church regarding the exercise of a sacred curse, there is most probably no possibility of realizing the power of such prayers as a means of correcting social issues at odds with perceived truths.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the University of South Africa and Dr. Rothney S. Tshaka, the Chair of the Department for Philosophy and Systematic Theology, for their willingness to matriculate me as a student. Dr. Tshaka’s patience and expert guidance accompanied my research from beginning to end. His involvement with the difficult subject matter this thesis examines reflects the highest quality of scholarship and pastoral care for students such as me. I also wish to thank my beautiful wife, Julia, who was a constant source of encouragement and help over the years of study, research and writing. She is an editor ‘par excellence’ and remains my best friend. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the United States Army Chaplaincy for the many wonderful opportunities afforded me in finally realizing this academic goal. Pro Deo et Patria!
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Chapter One

Church Authority and Discipline in the Post-Modern Church

“My own mind is my own church.”

Thomas Paine, [1794]

1.1 Introduction – Statement of the Problem and Method of Study

Is it ever right to pray for the failure, destruction or harm of another person, especially when such prayer is made by Christians in the name of God? Through a systematic study of the New Testament’s sacred curses and killing prayers\(^1\) this thesis studies the theological and ethical basis and implications for Church discipline\(^2\) in the modern era.

Exercising ecclesiastical discipline through prayer has been historically used for the issuance of anathemas, excommunication, shaming, shunning, and even the death of persons thought to be in rebellious discord within those particular communities of faith that practice discipline. But in this postmodern era we might ask if religious discipline is simply an ancient and outmoded means for correction. We might also question the effectiveness of any punitive practice in today’s society alongside the attendant repugnancy of a ‘sacred curse’ on the testimony of the Church.

Is there any biblical, theological and ethical basis for thinking that sacred curses and killing prayers are relevant in the general world of Christian belief and practice today? These are the concerns this thesis seeks to address and answer.

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1 I have termed the exhortations, commands, prayers and anathemas as “sacred curses” and “killing prayers” due to the severity of their supposed impact on the spiritual, social and sacred life of individuals and institutions.

2 Barth approaches the realm of theological ethics with the following questions; “What is it that God wants from man? What does He expect, what does He demand of him?” He answers with “That God wants to rule over him clearly means the He wants his obedience and the question of obedience is therefore put to him.” These questions are found in the arena of ethics and the doctrine of God. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. II.8.36.1 (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1977); “The Command of God; Ethics as a Task of the Command of God”; 509-510. Barth develops the doctrine of God’s grace as the answer to these questions (518) and the “over-lordship of God’s command over the whole realm of ethical problems” (522). Ethics belongs to the doctrine of God and its interpretation rests upon the revelation of His Word in Jesus Christ.
The choice of this topic is not meant to reflect some meanness of spirit that is earmarked by religious legalism. Rather, there are pragmatic and ethical concerns accompanying this study that have important implications for individuals and the communities of faith that locate their identities within Christian tradition and practice.

Those concerns become apparent through the outworking of this thesis. They deal with questions of biblical and ecclesiastical authority, social justice issues and practicality, the meaning of truth and the cultural mores that have changed within American society.

Over the past fifty years a disengagement from the once easily defined and traditional parameters of what it means to be “Christian” has also occurred within much of Western Christianity. This has impacted the greater institution we sometimes call the “Church” as a consequence.

We might debate, without resolution, whether or not any single definition can describe those communities of faith that are somehow tied to the person of Jesus of Nazareth and those historic doctrines, creeds and articles of faith that have been passed down through the centuries as the heritage of “Christianity.”

These changes have been especially pronounced in the United States because of tremendous cultural shifts resulting from the influence of postmodernism and the rise of technologies that define our “information age.” The trends of globalization have supplanted any easy means of identifying who we are and what we believe. As a result, it may very well be impossible to establish any homogenous Christian identity that all practicing peoples of the “Christian faith” agree upon.

This conundrum, however, is not new. Even at the outset of the Christian

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3 Alvin Toffler popularized some of these issues in an article entitled, “The Future as a Way of Life”, Horizon magazine, Summer 1965, Vol. VII, Num 3, which became the basis of his mega-best seller, Future Shock. His thesis was that the cultural shifts in society from industry to ‘super industry’ would overwhelm people. They would not be able to process the enormous amount of information that new technologies offered thereby falling victim to the unforeseen consequences of technology which was otherwise designed to make life easier. This victimization of social prosperity and advancement through technology would eventually alienate people from a sense of cohesiveness and community, creating individual stress and social trauma. This ‘future shock’ has proven to be caused by ‘information overload,’ another term coined by Toffler.
movement there existed differences of interpretation concerning what it meant to be a Christian and what the Church really looked like. But the difference between the earliest recorded Christian community and those that exist today is found in the incredible complexity of daily life, and the myriad attempts at describing reality and truth to make sense of this life.

At the heart of these issues is the broad terminology of the Enlightenment, modernism and postmodernism. As broad philosophies of life, reality and truth, they have each contributed to the questions of what it means to be a Christian, what the Church is and what role ecclesiastical discipline has in communities of faith.

To better understand the relationship of these difficult concepts to one another, we can begin with the most recent of these cultural influences, that being postmodernism, and work back to the meaning of modernism and the impact of the Enlightenment.

1.1 The Meaning of Postmodernism, Modernism and the Influence of the Enlightenment

Within postmodernism there is a great concern for the questions of reality. Postmodernist reality is not seen as some universal and coherent unity but rather as a social construct, thereby making allowance for many other and alternate realities. Truth becomes subject to one’s personal experience, and on a cultural level, truth can change as cultures change.

Social constructs that present their own “truths” within their own systems of reality provide adherents of these societies a means of living life with a sense of purpose and connection to community. Often, there is a sense of closeness within such social groups that is strengthened by the uniqueness of their own understanding of “truth”

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4 This is evidenced through the Book of Acts where we can see the dispute between the earliest followers of Christ regarding the inclusion of Gentiles with Jews, the role of circumcision, and the place of the Law. Cf. Acts 15 which summarizes the decisions of the first ‘Church Council’ in relationship to some of these issues, also the comments by Pelican in; Jaroslav Pelican, Acts: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005) pp. 170 f.
and by which the rest of the world is defined.

That such constructs of reality may be different from society to society does not negate the unique truths inherent within any one particular society, but rather, simply affords another way of living life with the necessary meaning attached by that society. It is within this framework of thinking that postmodernism allows room for many different beliefs and religious expressions. Religious pluralism is fostered and there is little room for absolutes that seem intolerant and elitist.

This description of a ‘postmodern community of faith’ is the logical legacy of modernism. Specifically, it is the failure of modernism to build a sense of community due to the emphasis of modernity upon the individual. Individualism alongside moral, social, ethical preferences pushed towards the horizons of anarchy, which postmodernism rejects.

Modernism challenged Enlightenment certainties, especially the Enlightenment’s optimism and dependence upon the rational reliance of scientific methodologies. By moving away from traditional cultural and religious boundaries in its search for alternative truths, modernism sought to propel humanity beyond the superstitious realms of religion and faith.\(^5\) Whereas the Enlightenment challenged any rational basis for transcendence, God and faith, modernism completely rejected religious thinking as passé in the evolution of humanity.

The Enlightenment’s challenge of any such notion as ‘divine revelation’ birthed a religious skepticism that modernist philosophies would develop and grow into doctrines of moral suspicion.\(^6\) Persons who reflected a traditional conservative stance

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on the meaning of truth were deemed irrelevant to modernism’s avant-garde. The Enlightenment’s shift to modernism can be visually demonstrated through the arts and architecture. No longer were the classical lines and colors of Enlightenment artists used on the modernist canvas, but rather, the brush of the minimalist, cubist, surreal and abstract became the stuff of the painter’s palette. In some similar sense, Postmodernism rejected modernist aesthetics as bland and created art and architecture with preferences utilizing any material, color or form.

Transformations have also occurred in the Church that parallel the cultural shifts of the Enlightenment (via the Reformation), modernity and postmodernism. These transformations have impacted the Christian faith theologically, ethically and socially in the United States. While we might demonstrate the ideological shifts from the Enlightenment to postmodern society via artistry and architecture without too much difficulty, demonstrating the same shifts in theology, especially in terms of church discipline and punitive prayer is more challenging. Complicating any such demonstration is the tendencies of religious beliefs and practices to pass from dynamic ideas into static doctrines. To better understand the mechanics of these shifts we need to frame the concept of the religious in terms of a model.

1.1.2 Man-Movement-Monument Model
Utilizing the sociological model of “man-movement-monument” we can better understand the religious and social changes that originate from idea and inception and develop into institutionalization. The religious movements of inspired people often

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9 The results of postmodern thought in theology can be traced with the rise of the New Theology which moved from objective truth claims to subjectivity. Truth was translated in the plural as truths. The debates surrounding ‘new theology’ were centered in the mainline seminaries such as Chandler and Princeton. Cf. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman, ed., The New Theology, No. 10; The Ethical and Theological Issues Raised by Recent Developments in the Life Science. (New York: Collier Macmillan Ltd, 1964).
10 There is some question regarding the origination of this model. Some attribute the model to the late John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard Church movement. Variations of this model might include man, message, movement, monument, and mausoleum. For the purpose of this study I utilize the three-
begin as visionary and forward looking. When such movements become more static, a status quo develops that requires attendance and maintenance, with a backwards focus on the past history of the movement. That status quo might be understood as tradition and doctrine.

In this sense, the message of the Kingdom of God delivered by Jesus of Nazareth initiated the movement which eventually solidified into the monuments of faith we might now collectively call Christianity. A description of the earliest Church recorded in the writings of the New Testament reflects a dynamic movement of people who witnessed and testified about the power and presence of God in their daily lives. These people lived in covenant communities dedicated to the evangelism of the world in and through the name of Jesus Christ who was identified as the savior of humanity.

These earliest believers were people of differing social and ethnic backgrounds who had a common focus to share the good news of Jesus Christ and teach about the Kingdom of God. They were a people who willingly subjected themselves to the authority of the apostles, the Word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives.

In some instances, these earliest believers were arrested and executed because of their convictions, thereby establishing a witness of their earnest belief that the Messiah had truly come into the world to deliver humanity from the awful wages of sin and death. Their sincerity to the faith “first delivered to the saints” was established through

fold man-movement-monument as a model to examine the growth of the Christian church. Religions often begin when men or women of profound conviction initiate great dynamic movements based upon some understanding of God. These movements, over time, eventually become codified into static monuments of faith defined by the doctrinal brick and mortar of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Often, the resultant monument has little to no resemblance to the earliest movement; cf. www.precipicemagazine.com for reference to Wimber’s use of the model.

11 One is tempted to speak of the “Church” as the universally accepted representation of the Christian movement, however, defining the Church as an institution has become very problematic in scholarship today. A more orthodox definition might include an adherence to the historic councils and creedal statements produced by people of Christian conviction and faith throughout the centuries. This still presents difficulties in defining what is meant by “Church.” Cf. Jaroslav Pelican, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1973–1990).

12 Acts 2:42; “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”
the saintly blood which was shed on behalf of God’s Kingdom and the revealed truth of Christ.\textsuperscript{13} The Church Fathers referred to the “blood of the martyrs” as the potent seed of the Church that spread throughout the world, taking root in innumerable human hearts.\textsuperscript{14} The Christian movement grew because of a vitality inherent in the orthopraxy of the earliest believers.

Optimism centered in the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection characterized the daily habits of these early believers. The Kingdom of God had finally appeared through the witness of the Holy Spirit who was believed to indwell the human heart. It was a Kingdom not defined by meat or drink, but by righteousness, peace and joy.\textsuperscript{15} Additionally, within the immediate vision of these earliest believers was the hope of Christ’s imminent return. Early Christian life was adapted to and modified around this expectation with great energy, driving the movement of the Church to answer the call for sacrificial service. Within the first three hundred years of this movement the entire known world seemed to be confronted with the claims of Jesus.

How this movement has changed over the centuries! The Christian missionary movement which pushed the boundaries of God’s kingdom within the Empire of Rome was eventually co-opted by political interests and power structures when Constantine, in 313, made the Christian Church the official religion of the state.\textsuperscript{16} The movement was on its way to becoming a monument.

The follow-on work of defining the Christian faith by state-sanctioned authorities necessarily identified and segregated the orthodox from the heretical in terms that were often more political than spiritual. Doctrine and theology were hammered out upon the anvils of state sponsored rule. No longer was the martyr shedding his blood for the

\textsuperscript{13} Jude 1:3
\textsuperscript{14} In his Apologeticus pro Christianis Tertullian (ca.160 – ca. 220 A.D.) wrote, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”
\textsuperscript{15} Romans 14:17
\textsuperscript{16} The Edict of Milan was issued in AD 313 and introduced Christianity as the official religion of the empire.
witness of the Cross, rather, it was the apostate from the accepted faith who was being executed as an enemy of both God and emperor. The message of the peaceable Kingdom was replaced with a forceful evangelism carrying the unique seal of the empire. Rome usurped Jerusalem in matter of authority and faith.

The subsequent rise of the Church as the conscience and voice of state sponsored truth led to corruption that is hard to imagine. Every institution within society had to bear the imprimatur of the Church otherwise it was ruthlessly shut down. Persecution that once derived from Nero now came from the Vicar of Christ. The holy ring and seal of the papacy was reverently kissed as a sign of submission by all who imagined their eternal destiny as belonging to the providence of the Church, and their temporal lives as subject to the realm of the empire.17

Those who betrayed this allegiance were consigned with Judas Iscariot to eternal damnation. But great thinkers and theologians continued to debate the true meaning of Christ even within the oppressive and authoritarian environment created by the marriage of Church and state. Some dared to posit ideas that threatened to turn the world inside-out and upside-down.

In their search for God, some of these thinkers turned their eyes heavenward to observe the movement of the stars and concluded that the world was not the center of the universe. The earth actually moved around the Sun, and in some sense of the word, humanity moved around the mysterious providences of God. Man was, in fact, not the center of God’s universe.

In this regard, the Church required an identity adjustment, which necessarily would require an adjustment to ecclesiastical authority and theology. Once man was dethroned from the center of the cosmos, the inferential authority posited in the

17 The standard Church histories point to the corrupting influence of the empire over time. However, there are important differences between the Protestant histories of the Church and the Catholic accounts. The Protestant histories of the Church were written some 1500 years after the events of the First Century and were often polemic arguments against the Papacy. Cf. Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, 8 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Reprinted 1971). Volume 6 especially details the Papal decline due to ecclesiastical corruption and political intrigue.
hierarchy of Church and state, which depended somewhat on the idea of the centrality of man in creation, was challenged and subject to dangerous change.

Such thinkers posed perilous consequences to the rule and authority of the Church and were often forcibly silenced.\(^{18}\) The monuments of religion could not be altered without irreparable harm to the entire ecclesiastical structure of the Church which believed herself to be the sanctuary of God on earth, and the pope as the vicar and voice of Christ.

Church sanctioned thinking was constantly reinforced by controlling literacy and access to knowledge. Only through the rigorous disciplines of the monastery could the average person learn to read and write. Those who entered the monastery were often groomed to become officers within the Church, so the average layman was bereft of any biblical knowledge outside the teachings of the parish priest.

Controlling sacred knowledge was reinforced through the control of the means of communicating that knowledge. The language of the Church usually did not communicate into the vernacular of those who attended Mass. The mysterious rites of the priest to bring heaven into the hearts of mankind were akin to a supernatural magic somehow sanctioned by God, and almost always communicated through the angelic tongue of Latin.

The priests became the gatekeepers to both heaven and hell. Knowledge of God’s sacred Word was the key to both realms, and precious few held that key. Only the successors of Saint Peter could be entrusted with this responsibility. The average peasant was considered either too ignorant or irresponsible for any such knowledge. Like shepherds, priests had a duty to herd the greater part of humanity as though they were the dumb sheep described by the Lord Himself.\(^{19}\)

This would have remained an uncontested fact of life until the revolutionary movements of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Each of these movements had

\(^{18}\) Both Copernicus and Galileo faced the fury of the Church when they proposed a heliocentric theory of the solar system.

\(^{19}\) John 21:16-17
well qualified personalities challenging the conditions that had contributed to the stagnation reflected in the Church and empire for more than a thousand years.

1.1.3 The Influence of the Reformation and the Enlightenment on the Idea of Individual Autonomy

Both the Reformation and the Enlightenment targeted the repressive authority of the Church. The Reformation worked within the Church to bring transformation while the Enlightenment worked outside the Church to initiate radical change. The Reformation sought to change the face of the church from oppression to compassion. An effort was made to wrest control of the Church from the hands of a few and give it to the many. This would be especially pronounced through Luther’s doctrine regarding the priesthood of the believer.20

The Enlightenment attempted to free society from the myopic reach of the Church and elevate the position of man, through the use of reason, above the lowly position assigned him by doctrine and dogma. Reason would replace what was considered “religious superstition” and allow thinking people avenues to personal enlightenment.

In response to these two cultural and religious movements people began to move away from the autocracy of the Church and the empire. With these moves came an intellectual freedom expressed by secular philosophies, often challenging and questioning the institutional authority of Church and state.21

A pronounced emphasis on the value of the individual over and above the institution began to dawn in the writings of people. A ‘subjective turn’ was slowly beginning to occur, a turn that would eventually find full expression through the

philosophies of Kant, Schleiermacher and Hume.  

People were becoming conscious of their own innate value, regardless of the values prescribed by the authority of the Church or the empire. By the time Thomas Paine wrote his famous pamphlet, Common Sense, the effects of both the Reformation and the Enlightenment were in full force. A move away from the objective authority of the institutions of both Church and state was underway.

Just as the American Revolutionary War of 1776 pointed to a republican right to individual conscience and life, a right separated and distinguished from the so-called divine right of kings, so there was an individual right and responsibility within the minds of people to know God apart from the dictates of any authority, including the authority of the Church. The breaking of the ecclesiastical stranglehold on the human right to pursue truth, personal happiness and destiny characterized those individuals who participated in the American experiment in democracy. That neither kings nor pontiffs would rule the American heart and conscience became the esprit of what it meant to be “American.”

The ‘liberty of the spirit’ was not to be divorced from a liberty that released the average person from worldly tyrants. The subjective and rational right of man to be himself, to know himself and to pursue his own destiny trumped the objective claims of both Church and state to any artificial rule over any man. People believed that they were created equally in the image of God. The emphasis of such belief was upon the

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22 The “subjective turn” is the terminology describing the ontological separation between an object and a person’s perception and knowledge of that object. Immanuel Kant popularized the separation between a perceived thing (which is perceived by one’s mind) and the thing itself, suggesting the possibility that the thing perceived might never be fully comprehended. In his attempt to combine the metaphysical with the empirical, Kant’s “Copernican revolution” sought to “move the criterion of truth from assertions about an external reality to the immediacy of the knowing self.” Cf. www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Immanuel_Kant


24 Like other free-thinkers of his time, Paine argued that the thinking man was his own authority. His mind was the final bar of judgment and reason before God and creation. His mind was his own church.

25 II Corinthians 3:17

26 Paine’s statement at the beginning of this chapter is meant to summarize this point.
concept of “equality.” This doctrine would also be written with the blood of the martyrs for free-thought.

But the Enlightenment did not originate the ideas of individual autonomy. It has been argued that the doctrines of the Reformation were responsible for moving men away from the oppressive and corrupt controls of the Church. A rejection of what was perceived to be superstition and magic and not Christian faith motivated the Reformers.

The priesthood of the believer, coupled with the doctrine of justification through faith, freed the individual from the powerful controls of the established Church. No longer were specialized priests depended upon for the salvation of one’s soul. Faith in God and personal responsibility to enact that faith did not require the vestments of a sacred class of people. The Word of God, which translated well into the vernacular of all people, was all that was needed by the community of faith for the communication of the saving grace of the Cross.

1.1.4 Different Interpretations of Scripture and Authority

However, with such a move from the collective authority of the Church as an institution over the affairs of truth and practice in the lives of ordinary people, there has also been an ongoing splintering of the “faith once for all delivered” to the Church.

There are innumerable interpretations and practices of people who claim to be orthodox, but seem far removed from the exegetical findings of scripture teaching and tradition. Strange and unique teachings, all claiming to be ‘truth,’ have erupted within the modern day Church. A departure from any common understanding of the “apostle’s doctrine” has evolved into numerous doctrines that compete for priority of

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27 The opening phraseology of the American Constitution reads; “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”
29 Jude 1:3-5
place.\textsuperscript{30}

Because the correct interpretation of the scriptures is so important to the identity, authority and function of the Church, numerous efforts to define the hermeneutical process have evolved since the Reformation. Exegetical methods that utilize a historical, grammatical and literal model for interpretation characterize many evangelical Protestant schools of learning.\textsuperscript{31}

Such hermeneutics tend to focus on linguistics, cultural history and objectivity in the interpretational process. A very firm conviction that absolute truth can be known is a central conviction of this process. As a consequence, any hermeneutics that produce different interpretations of scripture that challenge what is already determined to be absolute is suspect and resisted.

In contrast, the more liberal hermeneutical models found in many mainline denominations tend towards a reader-response theory whereby the personal space, the subjective world view and experience of the reader, becomes the valid basis of interpretation and meaning.\textsuperscript{32}

In the reader-response model it is argued that it is impossible to approach the reading of any text, including sacred scripture, without some personal bias. As such, any meaningful interpretation of scripture must ultimately address those personal needs and concerns brought into the interpretive process by the reader. It is within this model that the word of God is heard by the person who seeks to hear, and what is heard by one person may not be similar to that heard by another, even though the same scripture is read and studied.

\textsuperscript{30} We read in the Book of Acts that the members of the earliest church were unified, in part due to the singular teaching of the apostles. Cf. Acts 2:42

\textsuperscript{31} This is especially true within those seminaries and colleges that adopt pretribulational and premillennial doctrines. Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas, may be the preeminent school advocating a historical, literal and grammatical approach to the interpretational process of scripture.

\textsuperscript{32} Princeton Theological Seminary is a leading exponent of this method of interpretation. The pragmatic result of such scripture interpretation often leads to social justice concerns and issues. For a good history of this hermeneutical process cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, \textit{The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description}. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 1980).
In contrast to the more conservative hermeneutic, the liberal hermeneutic does not easily embrace an absolute position on truth. In this regard, the liberal hermeneutic is more in line with postmodernism which advocates the possibility of many truths coexisting. As a consequence, personal and corporate interpretations of the Bible often result with different emphasis, resulting in the creation of various denominations and religious sects. This splintering phenomenon of the Church is due to the non-conformity of hermeneutics and debates over ‘truth.’

This splintering contributes to one of the most extreme claims that can be made about the impact of the Reformation on the welfare of the universal Church. The rise of atheism as we understand it today may very well have been the logical consequence of the principles of the Reformation.\textsuperscript{33} The move from ecclesiastic authority to personal interpretation, from objectivity regarding faith in a transcendent God to a subjective faith (or lack thereof) in a Deity characterized only by immanence, has resulted on more than one occasion in a dismissal of the Judeo-Christian concept of God.\textsuperscript{34} In this case, the extreme boundaries of the Reformation have badly exceeded the intention of the Reformers.

Logical excess also occurred in the Enlightenment. Unshackling the human mind from ecclesiastical oppression began with a look back to the ancients of Greece and Rome for an inspiration that was missing in the Scholastic teachings of the Church.\textsuperscript{35} The popular move back towards the classics as the starting point for rebuilding true knowledge necessarily meant identifying the intervening centuries of Christian rule as

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid. pp. 51-59 and 273-274.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} As early as the thirteenth century, Petrarch began to advocate for a humanism that encouraged people towards knowledge. By the eighteenth century, leading intellectuals such as Berkeley, Diderot, Rousseau and Hume led the charge against the Church from the outside just as Luther had led the charge against the Church from the inside. Cf. Richard Hooker, \textit{The European Enlightenment; Seventeenth Century Enlightenment Thought}. Washington: Washington State University, 1996.
\end{itemize}
wasted and dark. As a consequence, those who dismissed the Church as only superstitious and dark were themselves subscribing to a myth, though more modern in its formulation.

The issues of knowledge, the questions of truth and the verification of experience were topics that flourished in the philosophies born by the Enlightenment. That the idea of God receded to the margins of such discussions is exemplified by the rise of Deist theology that seemed always to border on agnosticism. In this sense, uncertainty about God pervaded the human conscience. God was absent in the affairs of humanity.

The Enlightenment was more concerned with the rediscovery of man, a discovery that had initially occurred in the ancient Greek and Roman societies preceding the birth of Christ, but had since been shrouded through the rites of religious superstition and mysticism as practiced by the Church. Regaining human knowledge meant the possibility of regaining human identity. This discovery of the consciousness of man opened opportunities for discovery in every realm of knowledge, including theology. No longer was some dogmatic theology required as a starting point for human self-understanding.

Knowledge was the key that led to faith as opposed to Augustine’s dictum that true faith begins and leads to knowledge. The mind took precedence over the heart. Reason replaced faith. Faith became evermore the deficit of the unlearned. Superstition and faith could easily be resolved through the rigors of scientific empiricism.

Fact, not faith, would win the day in a world in need of hope. Man-made

36 The very terminology of the “dark ages” was the invention of the Enlightenment’s attempt to dismiss the intervening Christian centuries as a time of lost intellectualism and a subsequent loss of human identity. This excess in thinking was due to the logical ramifications of an Enlightenment philosophy that had no room for the positive contributions of the Church.
37 Cf. Emil Brunner, Christianity and Civilization, 2 Volumes (Gifford Lectures 1947-48). The thesis that Christianity has positively contributed to human knowledge and culture is established in the first chapter of the lecture.
38 Cf. the essay by Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” (1784); “Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! [dare to know] ‘Have courage to use your own understanding!’—that is the motto of enlightenment.”
optimism was better than any supposed gift from heaven. No longer was the image of God searched for within the heart of man, but rather, the image of man was searched for alongside any understanding of God. As Feuerbach would later write, “God was made in the image of man!”

The whole realm of human discovery required a certain skepticism regarding all things divine. The miraculous was subject to rational proofs. Doubt preceded knowledge. The Age of Reason had usurped the need for faith, especially an uncontested faith. An intelligent faith was necessary for the modern world emerging from the darkness of the middle ages.

Philosophy could examine truth from a perspective that did not require the presupposition of God. But such philosophy seemed too radical and early efforts to politely include God were made. These efforts proved to be disastrous to any argument for a rational faith. Descartes attempted to bring God back into the discussion by first bringing in the role of doubt. But this ploy failed and the father of modern philosophy unwittingly contributed to the death of God in philosophical enquiry.

The advances in science displaced God as the center of the universe while simultaneously challenging man’s right to the throne of existence and life. Birthed from the Enlightenment was a universe of reason that had no room for God. A new Humanism wrought from the pens of Spinoza and Hume could pave the way for humanity as the Church could never do, and thinkers such as Kant and Schleiermacher would struggle to awaken from their dogmatic slumbers in an attempt to rescue knowledge from the quicksands of faith.

The powerful forces unleashed through the Enlightenment not only disrupted faith as a means for knowledge, but consigned all of religion to a defensive posture within society. Brands of faith emerged that were distinct from the traditional dogmas

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39 Feuerbach’s ideas were published as Das Wesen des Christentums (1841) and translated by George Eliot into English as The Essence of Christianity. The emotional needs of the human condition are projected into an ideal that man calls ‘God.’ This would become the basis for Marx’s attack on religion as an ‘opiate’ for the suffering mass of humanity. Cf. Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity trans. George Eliot. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989).
and doctrines of the Scholastics. Deism saw a need for a Creator but could not reconcile any personal dimension between man and God. God was a watchmaker who had created the universe and left it ticking by itself. Man was orphaned upon an island of lonely existence. The English poet, Thomas Hardy (2 June 1840 – 11 January 1928), a generation later would mourn the passing of God from the society of the learned and ‘enlightened’ with his poetry describing the funeral of God.40

By the end of the nineteenth century Nietzsche could rail against the superstitious-religious and advocate the need for a superman who realizes in himself his own destiny and will to power. The death of God was something that could not be avoided in a rational world.

1.1.5 Inheriting the Whirlwind: The Postmodern Church in the United States

Legal actions against expressions of faith are increasing in today’s American society. Prayer is now illegal in the public school systems of the United States. Children are not allowed to reference their personal faith when speaking at graduations and the Bible is a forbidden book in the classroom.

The Ten Commandments have been removed from the public square,41 and the use of terminology such as ‘God’ on the public coinage is frequently challenged, because such religious terminology advocates a nation’s trust in a Supreme Being. The symbols of the Cross have been removed from public parks and buildings. The bible is

40 Jan Jedrzejewski, Thomas Hardy and the Church. London: Macmillan, 1996. Hardy’s poem, “Go’d’s Funeral” captures the sadness and uncertainty of those who abandoned faith in the midst of the Enlightenment;
‘O man-projected Figure, of late
Imaged as we, thy knell who shall survive?
Whence came it we were tempted to create
One whom we can no longer keep alive?’
(Stanza VI)

41 The Ten Commandments have become a flashpoint in the debate over Church and State separation. As a consequence, most public schools in the United States have removed the Ten Commandments from class rooms due to a fear of litigation from organizations and individuals that hold a separatist interpretation of the First Amendments of the American Constitution. In 2003 Judge Roy Moore, Chief Justice for the Supreme Court of Alabama, was sued by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to remove the stone monument of the Ten Commandments from his courthouse. Moore refused and was removed from his position as Chief Justice.
frequently consigned to the trash heap of history, and is no longer needed for public education, especially when science is speaking.

As a result, questions arise concerning the recovery of any doctrinal truth and the subsequent authority of the Church today, especially in terms of what seems to have been the blueprint of the earliest Church. Is it even possible to recover that primitive and ancient ecclesiastical identity without losing relevancy in the world today? Can we return to the golden era of the earliest Christian communities while remaining vitally integrated in today’s postmodern society? Can we look back two thousand years to Jerusalem, like the leaders of the Enlightenment who looked back to Athens for their inspiration, to recover a sense of communal identity, knowledge and purpose?

If our answer is in the negative, then it may be that the Church is itself a dead organism simply awaiting her own proper burial. In this sense, the Church is only a monument of some distant movement from the past, begun by some historically vague Jew who probably lived during the first century.

However, if we answer with a qualified affirmation, that the Church of the first century still has relevancy for today and remains alive, then we may also be capable of making a positive impact in society through those activities traditionally attributed to the roles and functions of the Church, including the role and function of prayer.42

In this regard, we recognize that the Church is an integrated faith community within the greater civil community of society. Identifying the purpose of the Church includes identifying the behaviors, beliefs and practices constituting self-professed people of faith in relationship to civil society. Whereas the Church is defined by various spiritual beliefs, it is employed in the world of flesh and blood.

If one of the functions of the Church is prayer, then we can rightly question the role of both positive and negative prayers in and through the community of faith. Our answers to these questions might then be applied to society-at-large and the attendant postmodern issues impacting both Church and state, such as abortion, homosexuality, homosexuality,

42 By referring to a “qualified” affirmation I am suggesting that there are many different forms, models and ways of doing ‘church’ and that not all look alike or agree on what it means to be “church.”
poverty, homelessness, hunger, war and other moral and ethical points of tension.

1.1.6 The Hypothesis of this Thesis

The hypothesis of this thesis is that a biblical basis for punitive prayer does exist within the framework of Church authority. Sacred curses and killing prayers are given as spiritual tools to check heterodoxy and ultimately, heresy, and that by such prayers, a turning towards God (demonstrated by ecclesiastical and social revival) can occur.

It is through the exercise of such sacred authority that the Church witnesses to the world at large as lost and condemned while simultaneously offering forgiveness and hope through repentance from sin. Proper Church discipline hopes for ecclesiastical and social revival and restoration of that which is lost. Rather than just the punitive response to a society at odds with the Christian faith, Church discipline seeks the redemption of the wayward soul with tough love.

The use of sacred curses and killing prayers also reinforces Christian identity in discipleship. Christian communities that recognize discipleship as essential to Christian identity and Church health can draw upon various sources for the making of disciples. But those communities who lose their emphasis on making disciples according to their traditional teachings eventually lose their Christian identity, either through change or disappearance, while moving towards variant forms of secularism at odds with the historic presuppositions of the Christian faith.

Faith communities that are losing their historic identities in exchange for newer structures of faith and action are sometimes recognized through the divisive conferences and synods read about in the daily news. Sometimes such identity shifts bring positive social results. Sometimes these identity shifts signal the diminishment of communal life within a congregation or denomination.

43 While many would admit that a loss of ecclesiastical identity is occurring in many denominations, such ecclesiastical differences can provide an important function that confirms identity, especially in terms of positive change and growth.

44 The abolishment of slavery in the United States had tremendous impetus and drive from within the churches of the United States. However, many within these churches felt betrayed by the stance of their abolitionist fellowships and left the community of faith. Cf. John A., Hutchison, ed. Christian Faith and Social Action: A Symposium. (NewYork: Scribner, 1953).
With the introduction of policies and doctrines that challenge their historic beliefs, many Christian communities of faith have lost membership. Many within these communities of faith see truth radically subjectivized and exchanged for individualistic and relativistic preferences that conform to socially accepted practices and beliefs at odds with biblically sound orthodoxy and orthopraxy. This is the inheritance from the whirlwinds of postmodernism.

Postmodernism is evidenced in some denominations where behaviors that were once identified as grievous sin and which resulted in an acceptable level of personal shame, are now viewed as an affirmation of an individual’s God given right to personhood. Issues surrounding abortion, euthanasia and the use of medicine and technology to relieve human suffering constitute ethical and moral problems confronting the Church. The Church community in the United States can arrive at no

45Many American denominations are not growing but are shrinking or dividing. Schisms are presently occurring within Anglican, Presbyterian and Lutheran fellowships due to the acceptance of practicing homosexual clergy. Southern Baptists in the United States have witnessed a split from their ranks by more moderate Baptists who view the bible as authoritative but not inerrant. Some smaller fundamentalist denominations are quarreling over the ordination of women to the priesthood, believing that at the heart of such belief is a failure to reflect the “salt and light” of the Christian witness. Cf. Mt 4:16; 5:14-16. Scripture often uses the imagery of light as a metaphor of witness and testimony. See thesidos.blogspot.com for contemporary thoughts on these schisms.
46 In the minds of many adherents, instead of a vibrant, radical, and revolutionary Church that stands in testimony to God and society, there are now only hollowed caricatures of the Christian faith that is subject to mediocre interpretations which in turn, nullify the Christian message of truth. Cf. www.barna.org and the study entitled: “A New Generation Expresses Its Skepticism and Frustration With Christianity,” 2007.
47 A departure from the Church’s historic creeds and catechisms as a source of objective truth introduces doctrines of individualism and egoism. Instead of the betterment of the greater community through the spiritual betterment of self, which often requires the individual’s sacrificial service to God and others, tendencies towards variant gospels occur which can efface true spirituality. Cf. Paul Tillich, A History of Christian Thought. (New York; Simon and Schuster,1968).
48 The celebration of sexual inclusiveness, which admits variances in practicing sexual orientation as something acceptable before God is a prime example of this social and theological shift. Rather than mourning homosexuality, trans-gendered surgeries and lesbianism as sexual brokenness in need of God’s healing and deliverance, which is the historical stance of the Church, these denominations have deconstructed the ethics of sex as described in scripture in the divine mandate and replaced it with a social construct advocating personal choice. ‘Sin’ is no longer the word used to describe sexual deviance and those who dare call homosexuality ‘sinful’ are subject to censorship and in some cases, legal action and censorship. Cf. www.lifesitenews.com recent article entitled; “Jeremy Kryn, “Academic conference seeks to normalize pedophilia.” (Aug, 2011) where discussion by the American Psychological Association to normalize homosexuality is placed alongside the efforts of pedophiles to normalize their sexual desires.
universal consensus regarding these issues.

Within the United States, the treatment of the poor and related social justice concerns, including forms of liberation and Marxist theologies, has further complicated the identity of many denominations regarding their historic understanding of the role of the Church. Is the Church meant to intervene on behalf of the oppressed and downtrodden, engage in political activities, educate about the Kingdom of God, or simply be a place for reflective worship and community fellowship? Or should all these and more be included in defining the role of the Church?

That the role of the Church is viewed differently by various faith communities who all claim some responsibility for “truth” exacerbates not only the problem of the identity of “who” and “what” the Church is but also the focus of what is or is not important to ministry.

As a result, some historic doctrines such as the doctrine of soteriology are increasingly challenged by a postmodern, pluralistic mindset where theology holds only marginal authority. In such circumstances, salvation is no longer uniquely based on the one “way, truth and life” of the Lord Jesus Christ, but is now discovered in many different ways whereby all paths lead to God. American Evangelicals respond that such beliefs open the Church to a universalism where many options and opportunities lead to a false knowledge of God. More mainline traditions challenge Evangelical convictions suggesting that conservative hermeneutics need revision along the lines of a more advanced social and theological understanding.

Such doctrinal dissipation infects the greater Christian community whereby many church-going people can no longer discuss any meaningful doctrine with any

49 Jn 14:6
50 For a well documented account of the rise of pluralism in the USA cf. D.A. Carson, The Gagging of God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) pp.14-17. Carson points out that the ethnic rise of immigrant groups in the US is accompanied by the religious beliefs that are brought by those groups. Additionally, New Age, cultic and occultist belief systems are making great inroads in what was once considered a Protestant nation.
certain clarity. Religious pollsters have discovered that many Americans claiming some affinity to the “Christian faith” are unable to name the Four Gospels.

Similarly, many people who attend “church” do not believe in any form of eternal punishment, Hell or final judgment. Other doctrines once commonly held are now subject to question or dismissal. This leads one to ask whether or not the Church that originated in the first century has any resemblance to the “Church” of the twenty-first century. In contrast to our present day situation, the historic Church diligently proclaimed the knowledge of God alongside doctrines of mercy, salvation and divine judgment. Through the history of the Church, the primary sources for such teachings were the scriptures and traditions of the faith, especially as taught through the Church Fathers. Until the developments of the schools of higher criticism it was thought that truth could be discovered in the bible, and that it was available to any who would prayerfully read its sacred message. The bible was viewed as the irrevocable revelation of God and therein was the basis for ecclesiastical authority.

Today, while many still believe that within the writings of the bible, God’s intent for humanity is forever revealed, there is little biblical literacy within the general population. Biblical misunderstanding and ignorance have increased with the advent of Enlightenment doctrines that warred against biblical inerrancy and authority. While many wonderful achievements came through the Enlightenment, the diminishment of the Church as an institution of authority began to wane in favor of individual preference.

With an increasing disagreement and ignorance of what the Bible says, there has

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51 Both Barna and Gallup provide such startling information. Cf. www.barna.org and www.gallup.com for more information.
52 The latest national “Church” controversy in the United States is over this very doctrine. Cf. Rob Bell, Love Wins (HarperOne: San Francisco, 2011). Bell raises questions but provides few answers. The conclusion of the book seems to be the possibility of a universalism in the greater plan of God’s salvation. Bell writes; “With all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number “make it to a better place” and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?” (pg.2). Bell goes on to discuss the issue as a discussion about beliefs.
been little ecclesiastical defense against those radical social agendas that are busy reengineering society. The Church is only as strong as the faith of those who comprising her, and without a proper and balanced knowledge of the bible, the Church remains disadvantaged as a force for ‘salt and light.’

Alongside the message of God’s revelation in the bible are the blessings and the curses associated with obedience and disobedience to God’s commands. The blessings and promises of God for the faithful are given in stark contrast to the curses that befall the rebellious and unbelieving. On any given Sunday in America, there are innumerable sermons detailing the means by which believers can be blessed. However, it is somewhat rare to hear about the curses that befall the disobedient. This phenomenon in preaching may be contributing to a decline in the doctrine of the “fear of the Lord” which in times past in the United States was viewed as an essential doctrine for the correction and guidance of the Nation in matters of blessing and prosperity.

Both the Old and the New Testaments contains multiple examples of sacred curses and killing prayers, exhortations and commands, designed to cause harm, thus presenting a theological and ethical problem for many modern Christians in both belief and practice. Historically, ecclesiastical discipline was expected to be carried out by the Church and the Lord of the Church through the agency and power of the Holy Spirit.

Maintaining a balance between the divine authorship of the Church and the human responsibility to carry the sacred call of God to the world has always presented difficulties. It is within this context that grace becomes an important dimension to any

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53 These will be detailed in the following chapters
54 There are many scripture passages relating the judgments of God towards the rebellious and disobedient. Cf. Ex 33:5: “For the LORD had said to Moses, Say to the children of Israel, ‘You [are] a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you.’”
55 This history begins in the Church with the account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11.
56 Barth defined the Church as the community of faith, called by God to obedience and relationship with His Word; “Let me begin by pointing out that the definition of the Church given as my first thesis is intended as a theological definition, a repetition of the definition which the Church gives of itself. The theological components of this definition are three: the Church is called (1) a community instituted by God himself, (2) a community of faith and obedience, (3) a community of the faith and obedience which
study of ecclesiastical discipline. Because we now live in a postmodern, post-biblical society, the Church is seriously challenged by the tensions of a Christian Gospel that promotes love and forgiveness and the acceptance of others alongside the necessary demands for discipline.

Discipline and discipleship have become antiquated notions in tension with secular society.\textsuperscript{57} Church discipline had the two-fold function of binding adherents of the faith closer together in the commission of their ministry, while correcting any who erred from the path of God.\textsuperscript{58}

The use of discipline as a corrective to the errant maintains an element of grace and compassion when restoration of the errant to the blessing of God is kept in view. This is the scriptural approach to discipline as recorded in Matthew 18:15, II Thessalonians 3:14-15, Hebrews 12:10-13 and other passages in the bible. Church discipline maintains the doctrines of the faith from corruption\textsuperscript{59} and promotes the fear and reverence of God.\textsuperscript{60}

Within the realm of the sacred, discipline becomes an act of restorative live from God's Word. The problem of the Church has a historical-sociological aspect as well as a theological. If we wished to define the Church in that aspect, we should have to omit mention of God and his Word, of faith and obedience. We should then have to speak of 'that sociological group which is concerned with religion', or more specifically of a community or a number of communities which share more or less the same religio-ethical convictions; or (although this shows a slight tinge of metaphysics) of the total effect of the organically existing and spiritually active force of the historical integration of life which proceeds from Jesus. But such definitions, even when advocated with the greatest religious fervor, are unsatisfactory because they include only half and that not the essential half of the Church. On the specific historical and social level of observation and judgment, they are certainly necessary, permissible and correct; and they are also informative theoretically.\textsuperscript{Cf. Karl Barth, Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920-1928. (trans.) Louise Pettibone Smith, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 334.}

\textsuperscript{57} Cf. Richard Heyduck, The Recovery of Doctrine in the Contemporary Church: An Essay in Philosophical Ecclesiology (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2002) 1&3. Heyduck writes; “To a large degree the United Methodist Church has systematically forgotten the place of Christian doctrine in their life. Marginalization, amnesia, theological indifferentism, incoherence — taken together they are symptoms of a serious doctrinal disease within the church. One can see doctrinal failure in other areas as well.” This is not a unique situation in the Methodist Church. Many mainline denominations are experiencing a decline in active membership due to similar concerns.

\textsuperscript{58} Sproul writes; “The church is called not only to a ministry of reconciliation, but a ministry of nurture to those within her gates. Part of that nurture includes church discipline.” Cf. R. C. Sproul, In Search of Dignity, (New York: Regal Books, 1983) p. 182.

\textsuperscript{59} Titus 1:13

\textsuperscript{60} I Timothy 5:20
possibility and compassionate service. This is in contrast to the idea of discipline in the secular realm. Secular punishment is often framed in terms of justice and recompense. The tensions between competing cultures, that of the secular against the sacred, of the kingdoms of this world against that of the Kingdom of God, places an important burden upon both the Church and the society it inhabits, to discern the appropriateness of punishments and disciplines that reinforce the identities of each. But the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline within secular society poses serious challenges to an understanding of the role of the Church.\footnote{In any discussion where faith and discipline intersect secular society, tension between the Church and state has existed. These tensions must be addressed. The uneasy coexistence of the sacred with the secular has often been the focus of scholarly study and debate-Cf. Augustine, The City of God, (trans.) Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), especially Books III, IV, IX, XI. Commenting on Augustine, Ray Petry writes; “In this human scene, men were constantly frustrated by their inability to distinguish between the two cities, one of God and the other of the Devil. These would remain comingled in part until the all-revealing Day of Judgment. The Bishop of Hippo pointed out to his people the necessity of watching for distinguishing signs. In so doing he called upon them to build their lives according to the standards of the ultimate rather than those of the temporary world order. He made clear his own devotion to the City of God. However much the predestined community during its pilgrimage on earth might be mixed with the citizens of another community, it had its final destiny in the kingdom beyond. Augustine admonished all men to follow the behests of the ultimate city as it made its demands upon them in the temporal realm.” Cf. Ray C. Petry, Christian Eschatology and Social Thought: A Historical Essay on the Social Implications of Some Selected Aspects in Christian Eschatology to A.D. 1500 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956) 108. This becomes the basis for many other writings such as popular evangelistic author, Charles Colson, who wrote; “The real tragedy is that both sides are so deeply entrenched that neither can listen to the other. Invective and name calling have replaced dialogue. Nothing less than obliteration of the enemy will suffice; either Christianize or secularize America. Many citizens feel that they must choose sides.” Cf. Charles Colson, Kingdoms In Conflict (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 1987) 46.}

The great divide between the Church as a community of faith\footnote{Bonhoeffer speaks of the inner dialogue that finally defines the community of faith; “The concept of Christian community appears as determined by its inner history. It cannot be grasped ‘by itself’, but only in a dialectic of history. In itself it is broken. Its inner history becomes clear in the concepts of the primal state, of sin, and revelation, all of which are fully understood only when seen as aiming at community. It is therefore impossible to present the concept of the church without placing it in this inner dialectical history. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 38. Within the ‘post-modern’ Church the boundaries of Church and State remain areas of contention; Cf. David F. Ford, “Holy Spirit and Christian Spirituality,” The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology, (ed.) Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 288; “Post-modernity has usually been suspicious of institutions and even of communities, acutely alert to the ways in which they can be structured and legitimated in the interests of the powerful, and can be oppressive to many of their own members or to outsiders. Religious institutions and communities have usually been seen among the least satisfactory in these respects.”} entrusted with the divine mandates of revelation and that of our postmodern society is magnified
when those claims argue for the prominence of ecclesiastical authority above the authoritative claims of the state. Within the United States, civil authority is most often considered to be the sole arbiter of punishments.63

The state turns to those systems of correction and punishment made legitimate by judicial systems codified into law. The members of the Church, who are “called out” from secular society, maintain an additional burden for discipline through their own faith-based beliefs and practices. Church members are also responsible to civil society and are subject both civil law and ecclesiastical law. The New Testament instructs believers to “obey civil laws” as a part of their greater testimony for the Kingdom of God.64 However, this does not mean that the members of civil society are necessarily subject to the laws of the Church.

Besides following the convictions of their faith, believers willingly subject themselves to the laws of their communities in accordance with scripture teachings to obey secular authorities. These adherents of faith will follow an ethos peculiar to their

63The “Age of Enlightenment” (mid-Sixteenth-mid-Seventeenth Centuries) comprised an awakening era where values guided by human reason sought to throw-off the oppressive mantles of religious authority. Cf. Richard Hooker, The European Enlightenment; Seventeenth Century Enlightenment Thought (Washington; Washington State University, 1996); “The basic tenets of the “Age of Reason” as it was sometimes called included the following; A) The universe is fundamentally rational and can be understood through the use of reason alone; B) Truth can be arrived at through empirical observation, the use of reason, and systematic doubt; C) Human experience is the foundation of human understanding of truth; authority is not to be preferred over experience; D) All human life, both social and individual, can be understood in the same way the natural world can be understood; once understood, human life, both social and individual, can be manipulated or engineered in the same way the natural world can be manipulated or engineered; E) Human history is largely a history of progress; F) Human beings can be improved through education and the development of their rational facilities; and G) Religious doctrines have no place in the understanding of the physical and human worlds.” I have opened this chapter with the quotation of Thomas Paine taken from his epochal The Age of Reason which argued for the removal of any overt religious influence upon the free-thinking society of man. In the opening chapter of his book, Paine confessed a belief in one God while simultaneously professing; “I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.” Cf. David F. Ford, “Holy Spirit and Christian Spirituality,” The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology, (ed.) Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 288; “Post-modernity has usually been suspicious of institutions and even of communities, acutely alert to the ways in which they can be structured and legitimated in the interests of the powerful, and can be oppressive to many of their own members or to outsiders. Religious institutions and communities have usually been seen among the least satisfactory in these respects.”

64 Titus 3:1
own identity as a community of faith.

However, to many outside the faith community, the contingencies of ecclesiastic authority seem somewhat irrelevant. This especially applies to any notion of punitive prayer, exhortations, sacred curses and other forms of church discipline which seems alien to the secular mindset dominating modern culture.

Pastors who have attempted to exercise a biblically based discipline outside the realm of their particular faith communities have met with severe criticisms from within and without the community of faith. Nevertheless, discipline does still occur in many fellowships where scripture is authoritative for faith and practice.

Instances where church discipline is still considered applicable includes problems with immorality, gossiping, slander, drunkenness and other behaviors not consonant with holy living and biblical instruction. Nevertheless, it is rare to see such issues disciplined by the average faith community in the United States. This is because the purpose of ecclesiastical discipline is itself in question by many communities of faith. The harsh history of Church sanctioned punishment and discipline have contributed to a nearly complete avoidance of any discipline in our current age.

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65 Robert M Kingdon, *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*. Vol 1 (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1996) xix; “The Consistory investigated drunkards, blasphemers, usurers, wastrels, beggars, dancers, singers of ‘improper songs’ healers, magicians, gamblers, and other ‘evil livers.’” Kingdon then states; “As we read the whole of these registers, an entire canvas of popular culture unrolls before our eyes.” A more recent example of Church discipline occurred within the Catholic Church and the censoring of Jesuit Roger Haight whose 1999 book, *Jesus: The Symbol of God*, has been suppressed for countering Catholic doctrine and faith. Haight’s theological position is that; “The normative revelation of Jesus posits that God’s grace is operative in other religions. And affirming the normativity of Jesus Christ, not simply for Christians but for all human beings, does not undermine the validity and truth contained in other religions.” Cf. "U.S. Jesuit Forbidden by Vatican to Teach as Catholic Theologian," *The Christian Century* (8 Mar. 2005)

66 The image of the pillory and stocks of Puritan America has created a lasting backlash of criticism against these public forms of Church discipline. The Dutch word for pillory, *schandpaal*, can be translated as 'pole of shame' suggesting the greater intent of this discipline. It is my contention that some Church discipline is needed within the greater communities of faith as a means of guarding the ethical structure and theological confession of the Church. Without such measures, spiritual entropy caused by sin eventually corrupts the Church. Cf. John B. Carpenter, “The Fourth Great Awakening Or Apostasy: Is American Evangelicalism Cycling Upwards Or Spiraling Downwards?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 44*, (The Evangelical Theological Society 2002). 44:666-667; The Puritans had
This forces the question as to whether or not we are wise to exercise sacred curses and killing prayers today. If we assume that such prayers are biblically relevant for our time, do we also assume the ability of a secular society to understand the purpose of such discipline? Is the use of the sacred curse or killing prayer applicable to the postmodern mindset that now dominates Western culture, or is such discipline simply an ancient convention of authority that has passed into obscurity and should be left alone?\textsuperscript{67}

If we decide upon the current applicability of punitive prayer through proper ecclesiastical authority, then we might also accept the challenge that comes from non-ecclesiastical structures of authority in response to the exercise of these prayers.\textsuperscript{68} In the past decade dozens of lawsuits directly tied to the exercise of Church discipline have been filed. This illustrates the increasing tension between the supposed separation of Church and state, and the willingness of secular courts to impose their will upon

\textsuperscript{67} While we must question the validity of any such prayer, the notion of a “sacred curse” still takes on potent consequences through those ecclesial actions that result in excommunication, shunning and alienation when practiced today. An example is the recent excommunication of 71-year-old Karolyn Caskey from the Allen Baptist Church in southwestern Michigan. Pastor Jason Burrick had Caskey forcefully removed from the church property because she questioned his spiritual authority. Karolyn Caskey had been a member of the church for nearly fifty years. Cf. online.wsj.com 18 January 2008 for the story.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid. In 2008 the \textit{Wall Street Journal} addressed this issue; “In the past decade, more than two dozen lawsuits related to church discipline have been filed as congregants sue pastors for defamation, negligent counseling and emotional injury, according to the Religion Case Reporter, a legal-research database.”
communities of faith.

Once the Church has lost its unique standing as the witness of God in a lost world, it compromises its ability to fulfill the calling and ministry found in the great commission and command of the Savior.69 When the Church has lost the sacred authority to fulfill the role of being a witness to the world regarding the love and truth of God, she has lost her ability to impact society for the betterment of all people. Any question of the Church regaining sacred authority must include consideration of these social factors.

1.2 Some Historical and Cultural Background of the State to Consider

So where does ecclesiastical authority ultimately derive? Does it stem from the ancient source of divine revelation found within the primitive Church, or is the state somehow the official fountainhead of true authority? Early American leaders were divided over their understanding of the roles of Church and state, prompting serious efforts to define the boundaries of each social institution while guarding against a trespass of both.

The American Founders did not want to reintroduce the state sponsored Church of European culture into the New World due to the corruption and abuses they had experienced.70 Neither did they want an absolutist republic that had no spiritual or moral conscience, such as what finally occurred during the French Revolution of 1789.

Finding a proper balance was deemed necessary for the American experiment in democracy to work. That balance meant having a legitimate separation of powers, and with this separation of powers there was to be an ongoing dialogue between Church and state to allow free thinking citizens every opportunity for personal growth, the pursuit of happiness and the quest for liberty. Sacred authority fashioned the basis of moral and ethical behaviors, codified, supported and enforced by the state through laws and statutes.

69 Mt 28:18 & Acts 1:8
But with the gradual dismissal of the Church from the public square, an increasing silence seems to have truncated any spiritual voice undergirding law and those moral tenets associated with the American experiment and Western civilization. This presents a quandary for the Church. If the Church ignores the state and singularly determines what constitutes moral law via her own faith-based definitions, she can lose the option for any civil assistance with the enforcement of morality. But if the Church relies upon the state for any authority to discipline, she may compromise her holy distinction and mute the sacred voice of God.

1.3 Some Historical and Cultural Background of the Church to Consider

Over the centuries since the Reformation, the degradation of ecclesial authority has become complicated by innovations directly tied to the Enlightenment, technology, and philosophies espousing radical individualism. Innovations in hermeneutics and post-modern attempts at re-engineering fellowship, as well as new definitions of spirituality such as that found in the documents of Vatican II have also contributed to the dismantling of modern Church authority.

Through the efforts of Vatican II the liturgy of the Mass became accessible in the vernacular of the parishioner. Alongside innovations involving technology (especially mass communication), and overtures to other Christian fellowships outside the Catholic faith, efforts to broaden the appeal of the Church have steadily increased.

While the very conservative Lumen Gentium propounded the necessity of

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71 Today, the moral basis of law is searched for apart from the spiritual and sacred tenets of faith. The writings of scripture are no longer considered relevant in judicial decisions regarding crimes. The reversal of a death sentence for a convicted rapist and murderer occurred in Colorado due to allegations that two members of the jury consulted a bible during the deliberation proceedings. Cf. Ted Frank, Bible Ploy Backfires at http://overlawyered.com/2005/03/bible-ploy-backfires.

72 The Mass was given in Latin for nearly fifteen hundred years before this decision. What is ironic is that through the four years of the annual autumn meetings the proceedings were given only in Latin.

73 Pope Paul IV and Eastern Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras both gave statements of ‘regret’ for past offensives committed towards each community of faith towards the end of the final council. Additionally, many Protestant leaders were invited as observers to the proceedings, resulting in a growing respect and understanding of interfaith groups.

74 The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church was approved by overwhelming vote on 21 November, 1964. The opening words in Latin, Lumen Gentium (“Light of the Nations”) designates its proper title.
allegiance to Peter’s recognized successor, room was made for those outside the Roman fellowship for the possibility of reconciliation in fellowship.75 While these moves signal a greater toleration within the Catholic Church for those outside her own ecclesial structures, there has also been a diminishment of distinctive Church authority. By accepting the possibility that other communities of faith might be tolerated, the issues regarding truth and doctrine necessarily follow.

The move towards an accommodation to the greater world outside the Church has also opened up questions of authority within the secular culture. The culture the Church finds herself within today is a fragmented culture with a lessening of Christian identity, and consequently, a lessening of any recognition of ecclesiastical authority.

The loss of ecclesiastical authority is not only true of American society, but is now the case within most European countries.76 As global Christianity emerges in other nations and hemispheres, especially in the southern hemisphere, many questions arise regarding the return of a theology that maintains historical ties with the traditional doctrines and dogmas of the past. These communities of faith are often grounded in a dependence upon the Holy Spirit, biblical teaching and ecclesiastical authority as represented in the explosive growth of Pentecostalism.

Additionally, biblical authority has suffered with the rise in higher criticism and the more subjective varieties of hermeneutics. Challenges to biblical interpretations to authority have resulted in the more main-line denominations opting for a lower view of scripture.77 The questions of inerrancy and inspiration have been resolved as pre-

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75 “Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines.” These concluding words of “The Mystery of the Church” signify the remarkable possibility of a larger sphere of fellowship within Christendom. It is noteworthy that the Catholic Church also brings in a caveat that those who know that Christ instituted the Catholic Church through Peter and refuse to enter into it are condemned to damnation (paragraph XIV). A small group of Catholics known as the Sedevacantists insist that the seat of Peter has been vacant since 1958 and that the ‘modernist heresy’ propounded by Vatican II eliminates a proper Pope from assuming the Papal Throne.

76 As such, Reformation nations like Scotland have recently proclaimed paganism to be an official religion of the land.

77 Contemporary social issues such as feminism and various liberation theologies are examples of the efforts of modern hermeneutics to discover the personal “space” the reader brings to the interpretive process, as opposed to the more traditional exegetical task of letting the text speak for itself.
modern conventions. The jettison of the traditional interpretations of scripture has had important consequences. This has been most clearly demonstrated in the debates over the ordination of women to the priesthood.

The importance of the modern church to remain relevant to the culture it serves has resulted in contemporary forms of worship that fall under names such as “seeker-sensitive” and “emerging church” models. Criticism of these models points to a loss in the traditional modes and understanding of liturgical worship. Uncertainty surrounds what the future of the faith community may look like as ecclesiastical re-engineering attempts to remain connected to secular culture in witness of God’s Word.

As a result, the core identity of the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox fellowships has been to move away from a centralized theological premise for corporate authority, especially as represented by ecclesiastical leaders, and to become a more open-ended ecumenical platform for interfaith dialogue where a high value is placed upon the individual rather than the institution.

1.4 Tensions between Authority and Individual Autonomy in Church Discipline
Catholic authority remains in flux as free-thinking people who identify themselves as faithful Catholics dare to question Papal pronouncements and decisions on contentious social issues. This is best exemplified by the issue of abortion78 and artificial forms of

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78 Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) established the legal precedent for abortion in the USA. Presently, an estimated 50 million unborn children have been aborted in the USA since the law went into effect. Dissenting Supreme Court Justice Byron White wrote; “I find nothing in the language or history of the Constitution to support the Court's judgment. The Court simply fashions and announces a new constitutional right for pregnant mothers and, with scarcely any reason or authority for its action, invests that right with sufficient substance to override most existing state abortion statutes. The upshot is that the people and the legislatures of the 50 States are constitutionally disentitled to weigh the relative importance of the continued existence and development of the fetus, on the one hand, against a spectrum of possible impacts on the mother, on the other hand. As an exercise of raw judicial power, the Court perhaps has authority to do what it does today; but, in my view, its judgment is an improvident and extravagant exercise of the power of judicial review that the Constitution extends to this Court.” This dissent illustrates the questioning of judicial practice at the highest levels, and necessarily involves the invested interest of the Church over the matters of life and death, the sacred and the profane. The Jewish debate on abortion is extensive with the Rabbis usually consenting that a fetus must be counted as a child if the head of the baby emerges from the womb. Abortion at that juncture demands capital punishment for the abortionist; cf. Daniel Schiff, Abortion in Judaism (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 65 “There are three who drive away the Shekhinah from the world, making it impossible for
birth control, which are officially considered out of synch with the recognized Catholic doctrine and theology promoting the sacredness of all life.

**Canon Law 1398** condemns offenders of the faith by stating: “A person who procures a completed abortion incurs a *latae sententiae* excommunication” but the perceived seriousness of this matter is debated by faithful adherents to the Catholic Church. Many otherwise devout Catholics recognize the benefits of artificial birth control and more than a few believe in a pro-choice agenda for women of all economic and ethnic backgrounds. This has prompted splinter groups in the Catholic faith to openly protest ecclesial policy, challenging the authority structure of the Church.

The strict prohibition against abortion finds additional support in the writings of ecclesiastical leadership; “Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral. This doctrine, based upon that unwritten law which man, in the light of reason, finds in his own heart (cf. Rom 2:14-15), is reaffirmed by Sacred Scripture, transmitted by the Tradition of the Church and taught by the ordinary and universal

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the Holy One, blessed be God, to fix God’s abode in the universe, and causing prayer to be unanswered…[The third is] the one who causes the fetus to be destroyed in the womb, for such a one destroys the artifice of the Holy One, blessed be God, and God’s workmanship… For these abominations the Spirit of Holiness weeps…” (*Zohar, Shemot 3b*).

78 *Latae Sententiae* refers to the Latin terminology in Canon Law indicating a punishment that is automatic when a serious violation occurs. Excommunication has occurred within the Church for centuries. Cf. Peter Huizing, "The Earliest Development of Excommunication *Latae Sententiae* by Gratian and the Earliest Decretists," *Studia Gratiana* 3 (1955): 279-309 and Mary C. Mansfield, *The Humiliation of Sinners: Public Penance in Thirteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995)123. Mansfield notes that excommunication and public penance have not always been distinguishable. Writing about Church discipline in thirteenth-century France, she notes; “The confusion, both theoretical and practical, between excommunication and public penance was thus of great utility for bishops. A specific case of this confusion was excommunication *latae sententiae*, that which fell automatically on anyone who committed openly or secretly one of a number of listed crimes, chiefly heresy, disobedience to the decisions of the Holy See, violence against a cleric, simony, clerical concubinage, and lay investiture.” Another example of a recent violation of Canon Law; cf. Rose Marie Berger, "Rocking the Boat: A New Wave of Catholic Women Answers the Call to Ordination and Priesthood-An Act of Ecclesial Disobedience," *Sojourners Magazine* (Mar. 2007) which details the story of women being ordained as Catholic Priests in violation of Canon Law 1024 which prescribes ordination only for qualified men.
Magisterium.”

Orthodox and Protestant Churches also practice forms of Church discipline based on their understanding of authority and in accordance with their own doctrines and dogmas. Censorship, avoidance, and other shaming techniques are embraced by these Churches. The issuance of rebukes and corrections typify discipline.

While simultaneously suffering from the effects of doubt and skepticism brought about by the post-Reformation philosophies and the Enlightenment, these communities of faith struggle with the questions of individual autonomy and institutional authority. Human freedoms are often in tension with the will of the Church whereby debates about prayer in schools, the wearing of religious symbols in public and hate speech constitute evening news stories in America.

Postmodern attitudes create the double problem concerning the place of man in the universe. On the one hand, man is not subject to the will of the Church and is autonomous as a free agent. He is free to create his own destiny. He is the center of his own world. On the other hand, science and technology have removed man from the delusion that he is something special in the universe. He is but a speck in relationship to the cosmos surrounding him.

The theocentric world view once propounded by the teachings of the Church and famously challenged by Copernicus and Galileo in the natural sciences, resulted in the realization that humanity was smaller and perhaps less important than once

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80 Cf. Evangelium Vitae. What is important to note in John Paul’s statement is the reference to “Sacred Scripture” for the authority behind the reasoning and argument of the “unwritten law.” The Scripture, alongside Church teachings, become the basis for the judgment exercised by the Pontiff. However, the Council, or the Magisterium, is the official conduit of sacred direction. This ecclesiastical authority is not always favorably received. Cf. Daniel T. Pekarske, Abstracts of Karl Rahner’s Theological Investigations 1-23. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003) 154; “Rahner is pessimistic the magisterium is capable of many advances where even relatively unfettered theologians have made little progress. This he finds discouraging in today’s situation where Christianity is on the defensive world-wide due in great part to the poor way in which it formulates and proclaims the faith. In addition, councils have poor track records of reading and responding effectively to the signs of their times. Though some of these issues may seem slight and inconsequential they may have an incalculable effect in the future. Still one must be sober, remembering that no law mandating renewal in the church can substitute for the work of the Spirit who alone can change and renew hearts. Hence, we must not expect miracles from the council not even in the area of church discipline.”
imagined.\textsuperscript{81}

To believe that mankind, made in the image of God, was not the center of creation as represented in the movement of the earth around the sun disrupted accepted thinking about both God and man. This thought process spilled over into the entire arena of epistemology. The advancement of science as a discipline at odds with theology was matched by the rise of humanist philosophies unfriendly to faith.

The move away from a rationalistic, objective confession within the Church to an egotistical individualism characterized by existential dependencies had the unintended consequence of removing authority from an ecclesial hierarchy and replacing it with the individual believer’s preferences.\textsuperscript{82} These preferences have affected behaviors, beliefs and attitudes, many of which are at odds with Scripture and doctrine.

The ongoing move from an objective authority as represented in the Church or the state to a subjectivism whereby the individual increasingly became his own arbiter for authority contributed to the degradation of institutional authority. This trend towards autonomy and individualism reflected the essence of both the American and French Revolutions and is often prized as an historic awakening towards human self determinism.\textsuperscript{83}
Such determinism became the seed-bed of enquiries into the nature and existence of God that popularized deism. The existence of God was increasingly questioned on the basis of human sense-experience thereby preventing any certain knowledge that could prove Divine existence. The emphasis on metaphysics was displaced by an equally, if not more profound reliance, upon physics as the true pathway to knowledge. Spirituality incurred suspicious avoidance by the thinkers and writers of the day. As a consequence, the entire enterprise of human knowledge based on Church teachings was brought into question. Alongside such questioning was the growing sense that human freedom was somehow more sacred than any dogma that argued for institutional servitude.

As doubt invaded the brightest minds, faith continued to retreat into the seemingly safe harbors of dogmatism. Atheism was still a repugnant idea and considered vulgar by most. However, the realization that the God of the bible was somehow different than what the Church had once taught tantalized people who could not accept the radical doctrine of the death of God. Theism was replaced by Deism by the pious. It was the heritage of the Enlightenment that forced the emergence of deism.

The Enlightenment philosophers examined the question of faith from the perspective of reason. Awaking from his own “dogmatic slumber,” Immanuel Kant, after reading Hume’s works, attempted to develop a compromise between sense-experience as represented in epistemology and the purely rationalistic thinking role of the Church, but there would be little patience for the oppressive doctrines of a Church out of touch with the needs of American colonists.

Hume’s best known arguments are found in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. The great arguments of the Scholastics which were forwarded as proofs for the existence of God were dismantled. Paley’s attempt at arguing for a grand Designer, Pascal’s popular “wager” and Descartes “Meditations” seemed insufficient as proofs for the existence of God. Cf. Katherine M.J. Osborne, Physics vs. Metaphysics: The Big Questions; http://physics.suite101.com, 2007

While the existence of God could not be demonstrated to any satisfaction, the belief that God created the known universe and departed for a season was not an unattractive alternative to those who still believed in the divine.
characteristic of rationalism. The consequence to theology was a move from God’s transcendence from beyond the world to His immanence within the world.

Schleiermacher followed Kant by arguing that the knowledge of God is found through humanity’s “unconditional dependence” upon God as the basis of personal being and identity. The turn from an external source of knowledge found in the world around us to an internal knowing or sense of dependency, to the conscious awareness of the self, became foundational for romanticists who attempted to explain human meaning from an existential perspective. Modern theologians such as Paul Tillich have followed Schleiermacher by expressing a sense of unconditional dependence experienced by man as an “ultimate concern” or the “ground of being” that points to the existence of God.

The impact of Enlightenment philosophy and theology was to break away from the moorings of traditional Church doctrine with the resultant sense of individualism and autonomy now present in post-modern society. The social effects of modernization have pushed the traditional understanding of the Church to the margins of society.

With the gains in human autonomy, there has been an increasing loss of community. People have become psychologically and spiritually dissociated at every interpersonal level. To assert any institutional authority concerning the role of

87 Kant and Schleiermacher both endeavored to “deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” by removing the objective burden of God’s existence on rational proofs and placing faith into the subjective being of man. This was an attempt to answer the skepticism of the empiricists, such as Hume and Locke. However, Schleiermacher disagreed with Kant’s efforts to provide a moral proof for the existence of God and believed that no such proof was possible. Cf. F. Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers, (ed.) R. Crouter (England, Cambridge Press, 1988).

88 Through his writings, Kant began the process of dismantling metaphysics as a source for knowledge. This resulted in a move towards subjectivism. Kant finally settled on the moral argument for the existence of God with proofs that supplanted revelation. The moral imperatives of Kant became standardized in the notion that the end of a matter did not always justify the means to reach that end. People were seen as an end in and of themselves, thereby promoting the importance of the “self” in the moral argument of life.

89 The existential ‘feeling’ of dependency within the greater universe became the basis for believing in the existence of the divine. This believing was based on the overwhelming sense of some existence impacting each of us beyond any subject-object distinction. Such dependence strikes individuals at the core of their being. People began to shift their understanding of God from the transcendent objective view of as given in the ancient creeds to a subjective, immanent understanding of God’s presence within the human heart.

discipline from either Church or state poses real problems in an era when people have become increasingly globalized while simultaneously being socially alienated and psychologically isolated in their daily lives.  

1.5 Some Secondary Questions

Does the Church have any authority to discipline others as a sacred response to sin? Can the Church exercise any right to levy a sacred curse or killing prayer in its duty for God? Throughout the history of the church, prophets and reformers have advocated such a right.  

The argument of this thesis is that the authority to issue sacred curses and invoke killing prayers remains a viable option for the Church today because scripture and tradition suggest a divine power is attached to such prayers when properly invoked.  

It is argued in this thesis that the Church not only has a right, but also a responsibility to confront the toxicity of a fallen culture with such sacred curses and killing prayers when guided through scriptural mandates and proper ecclesiastical authority.

Within the realm of this authority is the greater purpose of Church discipline to

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91 This is not a universal principle. In Africa the intertwining experience of spirit and matter are considered as inseparable, with great consequence for public and private life. My thanks to Dr. R. Tshaka for this insight.

92 Regarding an insight to the great Fifteenth Century theologian, Reformer and champion of Church discipline, Martin Bucer, Burnett writes; “Bucer acknowledged in theory the Christian's right to impose the anathema, which he defined as ‘the recognition and damnation of someone as completely and eternally cut off and separated from Christ our Lord,’ but such a sentence could only be pronounced over those who had sinned against the Holy Spirit, and knowledge of this type of sin came only through ‘the special revelation of the Holy Spirit.’ For all practical purposes anathema pertained only to false doctrine, not to individuals. The proper differentiation of the ban made in Scripture was between the temporary exclusion of the penitent, which the fathers had further subdivided according to the seriousness of sin and depth of repentance, and the more complete exclusion and ostracism of the impenitent. The sinner's repentance was always to be the goal of such shunning, and Christians were to treat the excommunicate in such a way that he neither underestimated the offense caused by his sin nor despaired entirely of forgiveness. In addition, where the ruling authority allowed excommunicated sinners to remain in public office or to retain other rights of citizenship, Christians were to continue to do business with them.” Cf. Amy Nelson Burnett, The Yoke of Christ: Martin Bucer and Christian Discipline (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994) 159.
bring healing and holiness within the community of faith and to provide a witness to the world at large. This includes restoration and reconciliation with God, the prevention of sin and the maintenance of holiness in life and practice, protection from elements of evil which seek the destruction of persons, and finally, honoring the witness and gospel of Jesus Christ who redeems the lost from the curse of sin upon Calvary’s Cross.

The evolution of Church discipline has grown with the numerical increase of members in the faith community. Such growth has required calculated efforts to maintain some sense of originality and faithful adherence to the teachings of Jesus. These efforts occupied much of early Church leadership. It was reflected in the first great Church Council (Acts 15:1-21) where certain prohibitions and restrictions were reinforced in order to maintain the unique identity of the Church as it incorporated Gentile believers.

As the Church became evermore an institution within secular society, the distinctive and sacred boundaries of the Church were often challenged, and blurred, by the habits and beliefs of both adherents and opponents. This was due to the cultural influences brought into the Church by new believers, which were often contrary with the nascent teachings of Christianity.

Such spiritual ossification remains an issue for the Church today. As new members join the various Christian denominations and spiritual-life communities there is an assimilation that often brings unorthodox beliefs along with the members joining.93 While this is unavoidable due to the place of the Church in society, Churches are increasingly challenged by the lack of biblical understanding amongst its members, often lamenting that we are now living in a post-biblical era where even the most basic

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93 This is still an ongoing concern as recently noted by Pope Benedict XVI in a 2006 lecture at the University of Regensburg. Cf. the article by Peter C. Phan, “Speaking in Many Tongues: Why the Church Must Be More Catholic,” Commonweal (12 Jan. 2007); “Benedict sees today’s dangerous cleavage between faith and reason not only in the Islamic concept of God, but also in a process which has occurred over the centuries in Europe, one the pope calls ‘de-Hellenization.’ In broad historical strokes, the pope outlines this de-Hellenizing process in three stages. The first began with the Protestant Reformation, with its sola scriptura principle. The second stage was ushered in by the liberal theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The third stage, which Benedict calls “enculturation,” is now in progress.
understanding of biblical and church teachings are missing. A sense of identity rooted in the teachings and traditions of the ancient Church is missing in postmodern American Christianity.

Ecclesiastical authority has a basis in dogma and Church tradition. This includes the authority found in the writings of the great Church councils, creeds and canon laws. These writings contain a history of corrective discipline for the sake of universal faith and fellowship within the greater world of unbelief.

It is within the boundaries of such discipline that the officers of the Church are called upon to instruct, build and exercise authority and oversight of their charge, sometimes with corrective instruction, while protecting and guarding the faithful from the predators of an ungodly culture. Luke records Paul’s admonition to the Ephesian leadership to guard the flock in the Acts 20:28-30 with this concern in mind;

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among your selves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.”

94 The five-fold offices of Apostle, Prophet Evangelist, Pastor and Teacher, designations once commonly held in the ancient Church, were instrumental in the protecting, communicating, guiding, shepherd and instructing of the flock of God. Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), "Holy Spirit and Christian Spirituality," The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology (England: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 288; “In the New Testament the Spirit is closely linked to learning and communicating Christian faith in apostleship, preaching, teaching, prophecy, prayer, worship, speaking in tongues, witnessing, knowledge, and wisdom, and these “gifts of the Spirit” are intimately related to building up the community.” Cf. Karl Barth, “The Holy Spirit and the Up-building of the Christian Community, The Order of the Community” in Church Dogmatics Vol. 4.2.67 (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1977) 710; Barth asks, “Who is to be responsible for the confession of the community, for its expression at the right time and place, and in the right form, as proclamation, teaching, and preaching, for its purity and depth, and ongoing interpretation and application, for giving it the appropriate form here and now in this historical situation?” He then answers, “All these questions can be gathered up in one question how the community thinks that itself and its members are brought under discipline by its Lord at the centre of its life, and thus to bring and keep themselves under discipline-Church discipline.” With the death of the final Apostle (John the Beloved - 90 AD), the role of the bishop became increasingly important. The episcopal hierarchy advanced by Cyprian’s theology was meant to centralize the teachings and doctrines of the faith while protecting the community. Due to erring bishops who embraced aberrant doctrines, creeds and catechisms were introduced as a supplemental guide to the greater Christian fellowship. Cf. Roger E. Olson, The Story of Christian Theology. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999)124-125.
The efforts of the Church to protect herself from those adverse forces that would destroy her can be traced to the earliest teachings of the Christian faith. Retaining her unique identity while remaining vital as a cultural witness has often resulted in various experiments for faith and practice that have challenged the understanding of what the Church is or is not.

Sometimes those challenges have been answered through isolationist and exclusionist tendencies where the faithful develop an identity apart from anyone outside their own fellowship. Such fellowships can become secretive and mysterious to outside observers, thereby reinforcing the estrangement that occurs between the sacred and the secular.

The community of faith can also manifest as a community engaged within secular culture through various degrees of accommodation. This posture makes the Church visible to the society she inhabits. This allows the Church to become ‘a voice in the wilderness’ in missionary work.

In either case, the Church has a responsibility to witness in accordance with her traditions and convictions. Denominational differences will determine variances in the matters and methods of that witness. Sometimes that witness is reinforced through disciplines that protect and guide the fellowship through the society it is rooted within.

95 Of the different typical constructs which attempt to categorize the place of the Church in relation to the society of man, H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic typology remains authoritative. Broadly put, Niebuhr’s model discusses the theologies of the Christian witness to society from the perspective of inclusionary and exclusionary points of view and the attendant intermediate possibilities (as the chapter titles of his Christ and Culture suggest; Christ Against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ Above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox and Christ as the Transformer of Culture); cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper, 1956). Other constructs describing modern theology include that of Peter Berger who was inspired by sociologist Max Weber. Berger’s The Heretical Imperative classes most theologies as deductive, inductive or reductive to explain the full spectrum of theology from fundamentalism to liberalism; cf. Peter Berger, The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation. (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979). Donald G. Bloesch has modified the Nieburhian model to that of restoration, accommodation, correlation and confrontation as evidenced in his seven volumes of theology in the Christian Foundation Series. Other types for theology include Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles, SJ. who approached modern theology from the perspective of revelation. His Models of Revelation classifies revelation as doctrine, history, subjective experience, dialectics and illumination. Variations of theological types can be discerned in narrative theology (Hans W. Frei), feminist theology (Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza), black theology (James Cone) liberation theology (Gustavo Gutierrez) and evangelical theologies.
Ecclesiastical discipline may also be variable and dependent upon a particular faith community’s vision of what the Church is or is not. Public shaming is practiced by numerous Protestant denominations as a recognized form of discipline intended to moderate behaviors and beliefs not in keeping with ecclesiastical expectations and authority. The practice of shunning occurs within some Amish, Mennonite and a few Baptist communities where the avoidance of persons who are deemed to have fallen out of fellowship takes place as a punishment for their sin while within the community of faith. The Roman and Orthodox churches issue anathemas and penances in warning the condemned and those who might be led astray by the damned.

At the opposite end of the Christian spectrum are those communities of faith that do not recognize the same need for discipline. These are usually the more independent churches that teach a prosperity doctrine that places importance on self-regulation as opposed to communal disciplines. In such fellowships, discipline is seen as antiquated and primitive within the post-modern world. The wrathful and avenging God of the Old Testament is not the same loving Savior of the New Testament.96

The post-modern argument against any form of ecclesiastical discipline advocates that the religious myths that bound pre-Enlightenment humanity to the issues of fear and shame have long been discarded. The transcendent has been usurped by immanence, and the traditional theologies of the Church which were based on theocentric logic (theologic) have been replaced with an anthropocentric positioning for meaning and faith.

While man understands that he is no longer the center of the natural universe, his ego demands that he be the center of his own life. All things are subjugated to the

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96 “The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the contemporary church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other.” Cf. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis, John H. Armstrong, General Editor. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1998). Chapter eight especially addresses the decline of many independent churches to exercise discipline for errant behaviors and beliefs. Also; James B. Twitchell, For Shame: The Loss of Common Decency in American Culture (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 35.
human intellect, feelings and will. This includes God and the Church. The individual right to self-actualization has grown alongside and in contrast to the demise of ecclesiastical authority. Enlightened congregations now embrace a more tolerant view of culture and are usually ecumenical and inclusive in their statements of faith. This is one of the positive developments attributed to the Enlightenment because people who are seeking God are welcomed into the sacred atmosphere of the Church. However, this inclusiveness contributes to the problem of church discipline because different theologies and doctrines compete for priority in these ecumenical congregations.

Special interest groups advocating a way of life once inconsistent with Church involvement now find support from many mainline denominations. Homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexual and transgendered sexuality, once universally considered to be grievous sins, are now considered blessed by God. Open and tolerant congregations claiming to be “Christian” are becoming more visible in this mix of post-modern enlightenment.

The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) serves as an example of this post-modern trend within the Church. Since its founding in 1969 in Los Angeles, California, the Metropolitan Community Church has experienced significant growth. As a result of fulfilling a social need not met by the more mainline and conservative congregations within mainstream Christianity, the MCC has franchised throughout the United States and around the world. The MCC has become crucially instrumental in advocating for same-sex marriages, thereby adjusting traditional interpretations of the family, which in turn, has contributed to the redefining of American culture.97

The reconstruction of social norms, that less than fifty years ago considered homosexuality as sexual deviance, is now impacting every institution of both secular and sacred society with a militant advocacy for the normalization of the homosexual lifestyle. On one side of the debate, homosexuality is framed as a civil rights issue. On

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97 The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) claims that approximately 6000 same-sex marriages are performed each year within its ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Presently, there are more than 250 MCC churches in some 23 countries.
the other side, it is viewed as sin and an aberrant way of life. Persons who are proud to be openly gay contend with others who point to the historic teachings and traditions of the Church in condemning the homosexual lifestyle.

We can trace the rise of this one social rupture as a result of the lack of proper theological training in the traditional sense of the word and the introduction of a replacement theology that is used to promote the homosexual lifestyle. The MCC has constructed Queer Theology in response to conservative critics while claiming its heritage on the Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds.

What was once considered to be on the fringes of society is quickly moving to the center of mainstream America. While the MCC insists that it is a Christian denomination within the broad spectrum of Protestantism, most would disagree and consign it to the realm of heresy and perversion. But the fact remains that there is a dispute over homosexuality within the American Church with no consensus regarding

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98 The assumption that homosexuality is a civil right issue similar to that of the American black population’s struggle for equal rights in the 1960’s is faulty logic at best. Ethnicity is recognized as something out of the control of an individual. Homosexuality has not been scientifically proven to be a genetically predisposed condition, but is arguably a choice of lifestyle and preference. Cf. www.bpnews.net, “Is There a Parallel Between Homosexual, Civil Rights?”

99 Queer Theology assumes many of the principles found in Liberation Theologies whereby a reductionist approach to interpreting theology, ethics within the modern social milieu occurs with little regard to the culture of the past. Schools offering courses in Queer theology include Vancouver School of Theology, Pacific School of Religion and the Chicago Theological Seminary. In an attempt to define Queer spirituality, the Reverend Mona West writes; “We have reclaimed ‘Queer’ as an active word, a questioning word, a creative word and a challenging word. When we ‘Queer’ disciplines such as history, literature or religion we are actively looking for Queer people who have been hidden or lost by those disciplines. To Queer these disciplines is also to challenge their homophobic biases. Queer is also an indeterminate or generative word, pointing to the ways all identities are fluid and changing.” Cf. the home page of MCC at; www.mccchurch.org, There is an ongoing effort by Queer Theologians to ‘rescue the Bible’ from fundamentalist Christians where traditional texts have been ‘misinterpreted’ and used to condemn homosexuality. Cf. John J. McNeill, Freedom, Glorious Freedom: The Spiritual Journey to the Fullness of Life for Gays, Lesbians, and Everybody Else (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Nancy Wilson, Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1995) and John Shelby Spong, Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991). As a community of faith, the MCC reflects the cultural shift in the Western world as represented by television programs such as the Emmy Award winning ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’ (produced by the Bravo Cable Television Network in 2003) and the normalization of homosexuality in media, politics, education and sports. Similarly, in 2009, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) voted to ordain homosexuals living in ‘committed relationships’ to the pastorate, occasioning an ongoing exodus of conservative congregations from the ELCA.
the issue in sight.

The effect upon the Church of just this one issue was evidenced by the historic and contentious ordination of American Episcopalian V. Gene Robinson in 2003. Openly homosexual and living with another man, Robinson was elevated to Bishop over the New Hampshire diocese by a synodical election. Some Episcopalian congregations have disaffiliated and formed the Convocation of Anglicans in North America with the support of the Nigerian Church, thereby propounding the beginning of a denomination schism.

It has often been argued that over the centuries, the uniqueness of the Church as people “called out from the world” seems to have occasionally devolved into an institution defined by the mundane interests of worldliness, whereby political power structures eventually ordered, and controlled, ecclesiastical concerns.

A hypothesis of this thesis is that restoration and revival can occur within the Church once authorized, biblical discipline is reintroduced. However, questions regarding how such revival is measured become important to discovering any working answers that Church discipline affords.

Through ‘discipline led’ revivals, the Church reclaims her unique witness to the world while standing in the world. The benefit to society reflected in the positive reinforcement of Christian values such as love of family and care of neighbor comes from those actions in the Christian Church which define revival. In defining revival

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101 For the purposes of this thesis the revived Church is identified through the marks of proclamation, Sacrament and discipline. Cf. Robert M Kingdon, *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin Vol 1* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996) x-xi; "Because wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there is no reason to doubt that there is a church." The preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the Sacraments comprised the two marks of the Church. A third mark was the ministry of discipline.

102 Speaking of Church discipline, Mentzer observes “These actions contributed to the civilizing process that reshaped early modern society. According to Calvinist standards, it was not primarily the natural constraints of traditional life and economics that played the significant role in binding individuals to
caused by a return to Church discipline we are defining the role of the church as a
guardian over the souls of her members in terms of shepherding congregants unto
truth, but also as a champion within secular society as a defender of the faith.

This defense by the Church against spiritual compromise has its origin in the
writings of the New Testament, which in turn, finds support from the Old Testament.
The record of the Apostles and the early Church clearly demonstrates tensions
accompanying the emergence of Christianity within the diverse first century confluence
of Judaism, Rome and Hellenism, and the ongoing struggle to define and preserve
truth.

One of the methods used to counter heresy, immoral behavior, anti-Christian
rhetoric and outright persecution was through prayers and exhortations that contained
anathemas and sacred curses. Ecclesiastical authorities engaged both God and their
congregations in fastings and prayer vigils that called upon God’s just intervention.

A sense of divine retribution attended the reading of the imprecatory Psalms,
and saints were called upon to protect and defend against the unrighteous. But this
was the habit of the ancient Church. Should the modern church ever “pray” a killing
prayer or issue a sacred curse that somehow affects others, or challenges the authority
of the State? Does the Word of God command actions that might be considered
unethical in today’s world? These are the questions that must be addressed by the
Church today. If we give an affirmation to the place of the sacred curse in the
Church, we position the community of faith in the community of man as a witness to

[footnotes]

103 There were other teachings that promoted the Golden Rule and the ethic of non-retribution as taught by Jesus. The First Century Didache reinforced the teachings of Jesus to “bless those that curse you” indicating an ongoing effort to engage the ethical teachings of Jesus within the Church. Cf. Joseph Barber Lightfoot, Apostolic Fathers. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889)1:7.

104 Cf. Karl Barth. Church Dogmatics (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1977) 546; “If we ask first concerning the basis of ethics, the first task which obviously confronts us is to understand and present the Word of God as the subject which claims us. It is to understand and present the Word of God in its character as the command which sanctifies man.”
judgment and grace. In this sense, the modern Church can regain a prophetic voice in her advocacy for the Kingdom of God.

The great Reformers, including John Knox and John Calvin, advocated a prophetic role within the Church in confronting the authorities of the state. Because these persons represented the Kingdom of God they could engage the kingdoms of men with an authority that pointed back to God.\textsuperscript{105}

Within the New Testament we can see that prophetic authority displayed by the Apostles who called upon the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the Righteous Judge over all, to execute righteousness on behalf of the faithful.\textsuperscript{106} This advocating of Scriptural authority to exercise punishment against the state set the foundations for the Declaration of Independence in the New World. The inalienable and God-given right of individuals to question state authority when it was thought that such authority was abusive and oppressive to the well-being of people seemed to be a given belief based on the doctrines of the New Testament Church.

Similarly, questions regarding the right of the state must be posed. Does the state have any recourse to address an institution that claims only final accountability to Heaven? Should the state reverse any ecclesiastical decision, for example, marriages performed inside a Church, and permit divorce through the secular court? Or should the state enforce the use of medicine upon those faith groups that view medical practices as outside the will of God, and when the life of a child is at stake? These are the ethical dilemmas that result from the confusion and competition of Church and state conflicts over authority.

It seems probable that the Church was commissioned to witness within secular


\textsuperscript{106} This is supported by Scriptural authority such as that found in Acts 5:29 where the Apostles argued against the legitimate authority in Jerusalem prohibiting the proclamation of God’s Word; “Peter and the other apostles answered and said: ‘We ought to obey God rather than men!’”
society while respecting those civil laws governing society. But to assume that the state is always right and beyond moral corruption is naïve, as is the idea that the state is always wrong and in need of reform. A balance is required in the assessment of an ecclesiastical response to state sponsored issues that challenge the doctrines of the Church. Does the Church have any recourse for legal complaint and response when the state government trespasses the authority of the sacred? What should Church discipline finally look like as a working model within the community of faith, while responsibly intersecting with the secular?

These are a few of the secondary questions that can be posed in tandem with this study. Additionally, we might question the role of Church discipline when it is solely directed against individuals. What does the New Testament say about those sacred curses and killing prayers that promote the harm of other people for the sake of the Kingdom of God? How should the Church respond to those biblical teachings which seem to be relevant for ecclesiastical discipline, authority and worship in our world today but are repugnant to a modern mindset which espouses individualism over the institution?

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107 Cf. Jesus warns the disciples about the authority and power of the magistrate in Lk 12:58 and Paul writes that “rulers” are positioned by God as a guard against evil. Cf. Acts 16:35-38 where civil Roman law is used in Paul’s defense.

108 These concerns contributed to the rise of the Rutherford Institute, the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) and the Freedom Foundation. These organizations perceive themselves as legal representatives of the Church and are endeavoring to have a voice in the public square of American opinion, politics and leadership. Cf. Jay A. Quine, “Court Involvement in Church Discipline” Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 149 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992) 149:223-224.

109 “Bucer listed four principles governing the exercise of church discipline. First, the magistrate should be encouraged to check false doctrine and blasphemy against the word of God and the sacraments, just as it acted against other crimes. Second, the pastors should consider all those who wished to be regarded as Christians as being under their care. It was the duty of the pastors to admonish not only publicly but also privately…; Third, those who openly rejected the word of God were to be held as ‘Gentiles and publicans’ if they would not accept admonition and refused to give up that which they acknowledged to be wrong. Bucer added that ‘if the magistrate is pious and wishes to perform its duty, it will see that the church uses this power without stirring up the city.’ The church imposed the sentence of excommunication, but the magistrate was to see that excommunication did not disrupt public peace. To those who protested that they had been wrongfully excommunicated, Bucer advised a sharp response: ‘You wish to be considered as a Christian, but your life is unworthy of this name. These men are pastors of the Christian flock. God has commanded them to cast out such yeast, so that the rest are not infected. Act and live out what you say and they will recognize you to be that which you desire to be called.’ Fourth, Bucer emphasized again
The decisions of the modern Church to exercise discipline are often based on the authority of those Scriptures that provide some guidance regarding the boundaries of fellowship. It is with this in mind that an examination of the unique New Testament passages prescribing discipline through sacred curses, prayers, exhortations and commands are examined alongside doctrines of forgiveness, tolerance and love.

The New Testament contains numerous instances of threats to those who violate prescribed doctrines of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. In some cases New Testament authority included deadly punishments for sins committed within the community of faith, as demonstrated in the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). On other occasions, the power to punish was extended to those who opposed or perverted the Gospel of truth as in the case of Simon, the Samaritan Magician, who wanted to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit with money (Acts 8:9-34). Paul’s encounter with Elymas the Sorcerer (Acts 13:6-12) who obstructed the presentation of the Gospel witness provides another example of apostolic authority and power.

If there is a resident power within the Church to levy a sacred curse or killing prayer then we must examine the basis of the authority and the implications of using such power. We must address how such prayers are to be administered, under what conditions they are administered and for what reasons.

1.6 Summary of Chapter One and Follow-On Methodology
This thesis is engaged in the general study of the doctrine of Church Discipline from a conservative, theological and ethical perspective. Specifically, questions regarding the ecclesiastical sanction and use of killing prayers and sacred curses are examined in light of a global post-modern culture, with special reference to the social issues impacting the
The primary question concerns the rightness or wrongness of praying for the harm, destruction or death of individuals or institutions due to extreme violations to Church authority and order. It is the hypothesis of this thesis that the Bible supports the exercise of such discipline today and that the use of sacred curses and killing prayers are theologically and ethically relevant to those modern and destructive tensions which negatively impact the Church and her mission to bring the saving Gospel of Christ into the world.

Through the use of sacred curses and killing prayers, the re-imposition of the fear of God as a corrective doctrine, as a preserving salt within a decaying society, may result in repentance, revival and restoration. If the Church is to exercise any authority within secular society, it must stand accountable within its own community of faith while becoming assertive with the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to an increasingly globalized world.

Establishing the basis for this hypothesis has required some discussion of the interaction between the Church and the State in the administration of discipline, and the tensions that exist between each as institutions of authority. The cultural move away from community towards personal individualism and autonomy has also contributed to a breakdown in authority structures. These factors help to explain why discipline, especially ecclesiastical discipline, is not routinely enforced or practiced in the post-modern Church.

Through a systematic study of selected words designating a “curse” as found in the Hebrew Old Testament, with attention given to the conceptual use of such words in the early Church, the following chapters will establish the sacred basis for Church discipline and the use of the sacred curse or killing prayer. This foundation will allow for an unfolding discussion of the ethical and theological use of killing prayers in the Church today as a means of establishing a witness of God’s love to a perishing world, with concluding considerations regarding the role of modern theology in confrontation
with perceived issues of truth in the United States of America.

The limitations of this study include the realization that the Church is a living organism, comprised of innumerable people from various backgrounds, socio-economic influences, and a myriad of other criteria. It is realized that theology is a result of the interaction between faith communities and people’s perceptions of truth, especially as they speak about God. Because theology is so diverse within the greater communion of the universal Church, statements concerning discipline cannot be dogmatic. This thesis is meant to address the condition and interaction of the American Church and American culture from an evangelical perspective.

The efforts of this thesis to illustrate the importance of the sacred curse as a means to ecclesiastical discipline cannot be regulated. Nevertheless, it is an important step in the recovery of a doctrine for Church authority and discipline, and proceeds on the assumptions of the author’s own understanding and research.
Chapter Two
Seven Old Testament Words for “Curse” and Their Influence upon New Testament Writings

“And there shall be no more curse...” Rev 22:3

2.1 Introduction

The last word in the last book of the Hebrew Old Testament is גַּזַּר which means “curse.” It is translated as “anathema” by at least one English version of the Bible and refers to the utter destruction that God can bring in concert with divine judgment. The New Testament also ends with a curse which is pronounced upon any who meddle with the words and prophecies of the Apocalypse. Such meddlers will be stricken with the very plagues mentioned throughout the Book of Revelation (Rev 18-19).

In some sense these ideas frame the story of the entire Bible. The “curse” placed upon the enemy of humankind, the serpent, begins at the outset of the story of the Bible. The Paradise of Eden must have contained many wonderful sights and sounds, but the warning God gave to the first man regarding the prohibition ‘not to eat’ from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was accompanied with a promised curse, the curse of death (Genesis 2:17). That curse became a reality in human history, giving subsequent rise to the miserable conditions of both creature and creation.

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110 The Palestinian Targumim of Jonathan ends with the Aramaic הקדר which means ‘destruction’ lending meaning to the idea of a ‘curse’ that destroys.
111 The Douay-Rheims Version of the Bible, American edition, 1889, uses the word “anathema” at Malachi 4:6 where many of the other English translations render “curse” (KJV, ASV, BAS, NIV) or “destruction” (CJB, ESV, NJB). The NET Bible translates with “judgment” which seems to miss the full force of the Hebrew word.
112 Cf. Lester K. Little, Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); “Thus it was the Bible—from the curse upon the serpent in the Genesis creation story through the parting, provisional curses of Revelation—that provided the principal source of material to the composers of liturgical clamors.”
The progression of the divine curse throughout human history culminates in the Cross of Calvary, finding complete expression in the death of Christ.\textsuperscript{113} The enmity and hurt caused by death is answered through the death of the prophesied Messiah who becomes a curse in the place of sinful humanity. The hope of salvation finds meaning in the fact that we have become blessed children of God in whom the curse is no longer occasioned.

In this sense, the curse is a historical consequence of sin, but is now answered through the righteousness of the Christ. For those who believe in God’s provision through the atoning work of the Cross, the curse is no longer empowered to bring eternal death. However, for those who remain in unbelief, the curse of sin and death remain in full effect.

A curse can also be a formulaic expression of impending harm and destruction. Such curses take on the characteristics of imprecations, execrations, hexes, the ‘evil-eye’ and those biblically mandated punishments that attend any violation of God’s covenant and law.

The expectation of a doomed consequence accompanying a given curse speaks of a power to influence a future outcome in the life of a person or thing. This power is differentiated between the agency of man and the agency of the Divine as the source for cursing. The power of cursing through human agency is often associated with magic and ritual. The power of cursing through divine agency falls into the realm of faith and response to the word of God.

In both cases, there is reliance upon some supernatural power to perform a curse;

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\textsuperscript{113}Cf. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. “O Foolish Galatians! An Exposition of Galatians 3:1-14” \textit{Emmaus Journal Volume 12} (Emmaus Bible College, 2003; 2004) 12:262 “That the Lord did become a curse is inferred by Paul in verse thirteen from Deuteronomy 21:23 ("Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"), a text that refers, not to our Lord’s death on a cross, but to the hanging of executed persons on a tree of shame. Criminals executed under the Law of Moses, usually by stoning, were then fixed to a stake, or “hanged on a tree,” as a symbol of the divine rejection of them. Such a hanged person was called, ‘God’s accursed.’ It is this that Paul sees as applicable to Christ. He hung on the cross after dying as a condemned and executed criminal (cf. Phil. 2:5-11). The cross emphasizes the reality of the curse; it is no fiction, as many contemporary theologians would have it.”
\end{flushright}
however, magic seeks to manipulate those powers whereas faith responds to the divine mandates of God in acknowledgment of God’s control over man. This second category of cursing comprises the primary interest of this thesis.

The sacred curses found in Scripture most often pertain to the responses of people to the revelation of God. Should these people disobey God’s word, they become subject to the penalties imposed by the sacred curse. Should they obey the word of the Lord, they are safeguarded and blessed. The interpretation of the sacred curse may vary between those who believe in God’s divine agency and those who do not believe, as though it was a matter of faith versus fate, but the outcome is the same. The sacred curse results in some great discomfort, perhaps even death, when exercised.

The question arises regarding whether or not the sacred curse is located solely in the province of God’s will, or if certain representatives of the faith community retain authority to somehow initiate a sacred curse apart from God? This important question focuses our attention on the role of the Church today as a mediator and a moderator between Christ and culture, heaven and hell, and the believer and unbeliever.

Can there be a possibility that the sacred curse, which begins with the prayers of the faithful towards those who are perceived as enemies of the faith, still exists as an awesome power resident in the Church? If such power exists, defining the responsible use of this power can also assist us with defining the community of faith in terms of doctrines and ethics. It informs us about the distinction between the sacred and the profane. We also gain insight on what the discipline of the Church might look like and the way that discipline should be administered.

To better answer this question, we need to examine certain words that refer to the sacred curse in Scripture. To accomplish this task certain English words and synonyms for “curse” are examined within this chapter. These words are derived from the Old and New Testaments and are examined through the lens of selected English translations.
2.2 “Curse,” “Cursed,” “Accursed,” and “Anathema” in Selected English Bibles

The Hebrew and Greek words that find their English equivalents in “curse,” “cursed,” “accursed,” and “anathema” form the basis for this chapter’s research. A comparative study of selected English bibles examining the use of the words “curse,” “cursed,” “accursed,” and “anathema” reveals some minor, but interesting differences in the translation choices utilized by Bible translators, possibly revealing shifts in the theological perspectives surrounding Church discipline.114 This may be evidenced by the publication dates of these English Bibles and the corresponding language choices reflecting the sacred curse or killing prayer in Scripture. With the more modern translations there seems to be an avoidance of punitive language while the older translations are more comfortable with words such as ‘anathema’ and ‘accursed.’

The following chart illustrates115 these similarities and differences found in the English versions of the Bible, including the King James Version (KJV), American Standard Version (ASV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New International Version (NIV), New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) and the Complete Jewish Bible (CBJ).116

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114 Cf. James Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) 19-20. “The contrast of Greek and Hebrew cultures and languages has its value because of the relation of the two in the New Testament; and also for its importance for us in disentangling the different threads in our culture since the beginning of the Christian era. But it is not really helpful for the study of the Old Testament, except perhaps in so far as the modern scholar has to learn to recognize in himself his own heritage of Greek thought before he can appreciate a tradition untouched by its influence. As for theological ideas of divine communication, the same arguments which emphasize the special place of the New Testament by pointing out its Hebraic heritage in language are in danger of obscuring any special place the Old Testament may have -- unless it is possible that the Old Testament, while sharing the grammatical forms of Semitic language to the full (to a much greater extent than the NT, for example, shares those of the OT), is able to express through them an outlook considerably different from that of the surrounding culture. But to say that this is possible is to break the close correlation of thought and language which is presupposed by so many theological arguments about the New Testament. …for theologians interested in the relation between the uniqueness of Christianity and the influence of its Hebrew background there are difficulties and snags in the use of the Hebrew-Greek contrast, independent of the validity of the use of linguistic evidence in support of it.”

115 Note that the number of times a word occurs (#times) is placed along side the number of verses containing that word (some verses have two occurrences in the same verse). The breakdown of word usage in the Old Testament and New Testament of each version is also included. The color highlighting is simply to provide an easier reading of the chart.

116 The English bibles used here represent various traditions that reflect on Jewish, Catholic and Protestant theologies. The King James Version (KJV) is that of the 1769 Blayney Bible following the general
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1611 editions. The Byzantine Text is mostly followed with dependence upon Erasmus Greek translation and the Bishop's Bible (1568). The American Standard Bible (1901) is based on the tradition of the Revised Standard (1881-1885) and utilizes the Masoretic text of the Old Testament and the Westcott-Hort text for the New Testament. The New Revised Standard Version was produced in 1989 in collaboration with the National Councils of the Churches in Christ in the United States. There are 85 books published in this bible representing the Apocryphal writings of the Septuagint, including Bel and the Dragon and Susanna. The International Bible Society produced the New International Version (NIV) in 1973 with an eclectic reading of the manuscripts. The New Jerusalem Bible (1985) is a Catholic translation of 73 books including the Apocryphal writings of the Old Testament. The Complete Jewish Bible (1998) is a Messianic Jewish effort that observes the traditional 66 books of the Canon.
As might be noticed in this chart, there are similarities and differences of translation within the tradition of the English Bible. What is most notable is the absence of “anathema” as a translation choice by most of these Bible versions. The KJV uses it once and the ASV uses it 5 times, all within the New Testament. The ASV reflects the accurate use of “anathema” from the Greek New Testament, which, of course, is itself influenced by the Greek Septuagint.\(^\text{117}\)

However, “anathema” is missing as a translation choice in each of the Old Testaments of these Bibles. The Greek Septuagint (LXX) uses ἀναθήματος 12 times in 9 verses (Lev. 27:28; Num. 21:3; Jos. 6:17f; 7:12f; Jdg. 1:17; 1 Chr. 2:7; Zech. 14:11), usually in translation of the Hebrew הָנָא which indicates a “devoted” or “banned” object or person, dedicated exclusively for the worship of God. This choice is not reflected in any of these English translations of the Old Testament.

Such peculiarities in translation may reflect a gradual departure from utilizing language that is no longer used or recognized by the Church in our modern era.\(^\text{118}\) Does it also speak of a diminishment in our understanding of the sacred curse as a means of discipline? If this is the case, then we can better understand the move away from legitimate Church discipline due to a reluctance to recognize the use of the sacred curse

\(^{117}\) The translation choices are pronounced with texts such as Gal 1:8-9. Wilkin identifies some major differences in the translation decisions regarding “anathema.” KJV “…let him be accursed.” NKJV “…let him be eternally condemned!” NIV “…let him be condemned to hell!” NET “…let him be condemned to hell!” Cf. Bob Wilkin “A Free Grace Perspective on Bible Translations” Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society Volume 17 (Irving, TX: The Grace Evangelical Society, 2004; 2005) 17.32.10; “The NIV and NET, are not really translations at all. They are interpretations. The word condemned is not found here. Nor are the words eternally or hell. The translators have allowed their theology to color their translation. Evidently they believe that there is no such thing as a regenerate person who at some later point actually promotes a false gospel. I would say that there is a lot of evidence in Paul’s writings and even in Galatians (see 2:14!) that some genuine believers fall doctrinally and actually preach false theology and even a false gospel.”

\(^{118}\) One of the dangers of any lexical semantic study is the assumption that language does not change with culture. Conversely, the assumption that a word understood in some contemporary way maintains original meaning is a fallacy of interpretation. Many words transform within culture over a period of time, often meaning something different than what the biblical text might originally have meant— in recent years the diachronic study of Hebrew and Greek lexicography has been greatly supplemented and corrected through synchronic studies—cf. D.A. Carson, Exegetical Fallacies 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996); Moises Silva, Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); These writers emphasize the synchronic approach to lexical studies.
in the role of Church discipline, or of some possible ignorance concerning the authority and power of the Church to exercise such discipline.

Through a study of selected Hebrew and Greek words, this second chapter seeks to establish an exegetical and theological basis supporting the concept of the sacred curse as normative within Israel and the Church. To accomplish this task, the primary Hebrew, Greek and English lexicons are relied upon in this study of the sacred curse.

The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament notes; “A striking fact is that there is such a proliferation of words in Hebrew which have been generally all translated ‘to curse.’ The list includes at least six: ārār, qālāl, ’ālā, qābab, nāqab, zā‘am. To group all of them together under the one general English equivalent, ‘to curse’ is much too superficial.”

English translations for the Hebrew understanding of “curse” seem impoverished. The various dimensions found in the Hebrew mindset includes a seventh word, ḥāram, which also finds an appropriate place in this list as it is almost always employed to indicate a “curse” in Holy Scripture. ¹¹⁹

While all cultures surrounding Israel and the first Christian communities embraced notions of a sacred curse, important similarities and differences existed. The idea and use of a “curse” was not unique to the society of the ancient Hebrews, but the emphasis regarding the authority and source of the curse often differed; “The mechanical magical execution of the treaty curse... stands in glaring contrast to the ego theological approach of prophetic writings... the ego of the Lord is the focal point of the threat, the execution and punishment of a curse... Curses of the ancient Near East, those outside the Old Testament, are directed against a transgression on private

property... but the moral and ethical obligation in connection with his duty to one God and love to his neighbor is not touched on.” 120

In other words, the sacred curse in Hebrew thought and religion centered upon the Hebrew God and Society in terms of moral and ethical relationships. Relationships were paramount in importance, as evidenced in the Covenant between God and his people. When those relationships were violated, the Covenant with God was also violated.

The call to “love God” with the whole heart, mind and strength established the moral foundations for this relationship. The great Shema (Deut 6:4-5) pointed to the religious and social obligations of the faithful. When that call was ignored or forgotten, God would send prophets into Israel as a reminder to return to His Covenant love and laws. When Israel refused to obey the prophetic voice of reconciliation they inevitably suffered the consequences of their trespass. God’s interaction with Israel was to correct and guide them back to the righteous paths that promised relational prosperity within the Law.

When Israel was incapable of restoration, they were sorely judged, often through the imposition of invaders or alien nations. The suffering experienced by Israel during the Exile contributed to the formation of a theology on punishment and discipline, and this remained in the memory of Israel in the time of Christ.121 This became foundational for the early Church which was comprised of many persons who were “one” in their

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121 Cf. Rainer Albertz, Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E, trans. David Green (Boston: Brill, 2004) 435; “No era in Israel’s history contributed more to theology than the exile. Vital elements that were to leave their mark on later Judaism and Christianity were reshaped or discovered in the exilic period: their heightened sense of sin and moral seriousness, their geographical spread and universality, and their sometimes utopian character. Never before had Israel experienced more profoundly the extraordinary range of action and depth of being of its God; never before had its God been the source of more painful suffering and enthusiastic joy than in the seventy-seven long years of the exilic period (597-520 B.C.E.): destructive in wrath and productive in mercy, upright judge, purposeful guide of history, Lord over all nations and their gods, Creator of the world-in short, the only God.”
witness and walk with God (Acts 2:42-47), and who were commanded to “love one another” even as Christ loved the Church (Jn 13:34; 15:12; 1 Jn 3:23, Eph 5:25). Israel’s blessing was perceived to be a consequence of national identity squarely positioned in the sacred tenets of the Law of God. Such identity included a sense of unified nationalism that was separate from the rest of the world. It was a unification of worship, work and a way of life.

In a similar sense, the blessings found in the early Church were due to the sense of some unified identity in Christ, where the members of the primitive community considered themselves to be the “body” with Christ as the “head” over all. The subsequent breaks in Christian community were due to factions, diverse and hurtful doctrines and moral failures. These problems became the cause for exercising those sacred curses recorded in the writings of the New Testament in an attempt to restore that primitive unity where blessing and holy power once prevailed. Through a brief study of selected Hebrew words, we can gain some insight of the early Church’s understanding of their authority and responsibility to repair and defend the Church, which was believed to be the prophetic manifestation of Old Testament hope.

2.3 Seven Hebrew Words for “Curse”

a) ḥl’a’ı’

The first of the seven words considered in this thesis is the Hebrew word ḥl’a’ı’ (transliterated as ḥl’a) and it is found 36 times in 32 verses within the Authorized Version of the Bible. The meanings range from “oath,” “swear,” “execration” and “curse.” As an oath, ḥl’a’ı’ usually refers to a covenant promise (Deut. 29:12) that is held between people or with God. When such solemn promises were broken, ḥl’a’ı’ is then used to mean a “curse,” often originating from God and directed upon those who violate their vows (Deut 29:18, II Chr 34:24, Num 5:23).123

122 Cf. James Strong, Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007); Listed as H423 with the meaning “curse” 18 times, “oath” 14 times and “execration” twice.
123 In the Qal the word refers to taking an oath or swearing a vow, and to cursing others by reason of some ethical violation. In the Hiphil, the meaning implies the subjection of a person or thing to being bound by a vow or an oath, and to the effects of a curse when a trust is broken.
Gesenius defines the meaning of הָלַח into three broad categories; a) as an oath that is entered into by persons with one another (Gen 24:41, 26:28); b) a covenant established by God with Israel through vows (Deut 29:12) and c) an execration or curse (Isaiah 24:6, Daniel 9:11).\textsuperscript{124} A sacred curse directed against the enemies of Israel can be found in Lamentations 3:65 where הָלַח\textsuperscript{125} is used to indicate an execration, and which the New Jerusalem Bible reads; “Lay hardness of heart as your curse on them” giving the sense of an objective punishment placed upon rebellious people by the living God.

One of the more interesting uses of the word occurs in Numbers 5:11-31 regarding the “oath of testimony.”\textsuperscript{126} Here, הָלַח is used in Numbers 5:21 as an oath given by women for the purpose of judicial testimony. Women suspected of committing adultery were made to swear an oath under threat of severe repercussions should they be guilty.\textsuperscript{127} These repercussions were embodied in a sacred curse;

\textsuperscript{124} H.W.F. Gesenius, Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1990)

\textsuperscript{125} TWOT (94b)

\textsuperscript{126} Sometimes called the ‘trial of suspicion’ or the ‘trial of jealousy’ in the commentaries. For an interesting analysis of the Rabbinic interpretations of this passage see: Andrew Durdin, “The Spectacle of the Sotah: A Rabbinic Perspective of Justice and Punishment in M.Sot 1.” Unpublished MA Thesis (Georgia: College of Arts and Sciences; Georgia State University, April, 2007), fn. 1, pg. 1. Durbin notes that the word sotah “is derived from Numbers 5:12 on the root הַלַח ‘to stray’ [becoming] the term used to describe the wife suspected of adultery and the trial she is subjected to as laid out in numbers 5:11-31.” TWOT elaborates the ritual; “Num 5:12 speaks of a woman who is suspected by her husband of having left the true path, so that she ‘goes aside’ to commit adultery. It says that if she ‘goes aside, and trespasses a trespass against him,’ he may take her to the priest who will cause her to drink the bitter waters of judgment. Apparently by a special supernatural action God so acted as to make the guilty woman desperately ill from the water, while the innocent drank it with impunity. This procedure would in any case settle the matter and calm a suspicious husband, while at the same time frightening onlookers into remaining pure. It was not really a trial by ordeal as some have called it, for there was no inherent danger in the water. If anything, it included a lie detection provision. Any woman who could take such solemn oaths as were required without betraying guilt was probably innocent” cf. TWOT #2250.0. However, to simply assume that only a psychological fear is created in the participant does not address the actual imposition of an objective, sacred (divine) curse that resulted in some physical harm when the woman was found guilty of the suspected offence. This is clearly the message in this passage of Scripture. Cf. J. M. Sasson, “Nu. 5 and the Waters of Judgment.” BZ 16 (1972) 249–51 and J. Morgenstern, “Trial by Ordeal among the Semites in Ancient Israel.” HUCA Jub. Vol. (1925) 113–43 and Mishnah Tractate-Sotah which details the entire process.

\textsuperscript{127} Budd writes; “It stresses the occasion on which such an ordeal is to be used, brings what is essentially a magical rite under the aegis of Yahweh and his power, and emphasizes the question of guilt or innocence.” Cf. P. J. Budd, Vol. 5: Word Biblical Commentary: Numbers (Dallas TX: Word Incorporated, 2002) 60.
“The priest shall bring her and have her stand before the LORD. Then he shall take some holy water in a clay jar and put some dust from the tabernacle floor into the water. After the priest has had the woman stand before the LORD, he shall loosen her hair and place in her hands the reminder offering, the grain offering for jealousy, while he himself holds the bitter water that brings a curse. Then the priest shall put the woman under oath and say to her, ‘If no other man has slept with you and you have not gone astray and become impure while married to your husband, may this bitter water that brings a curse not harm you. But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and you have defiled yourself by sleeping with a man other than your husband’—here the priest is to put the woman under this curse of the oath—‘may the LORD cause your people to curse and denounce you when he causes your thigh to waste away and your abdomen to swell. May this water that brings a curse enter your body so that your abdomen swells and your thigh wastes away.’ Then the woman is to say, ‘Amen. So be it.’”

The power of this “sacred curse” to make a woman sick and barren becomes a foundational thought in Jewish law regarding the reprisals of God. The consequence of violating God’s covenant was severe, often resulting in death (Lev 20:20; Deut 17:12, 18:20, 22:25, 24:7 etc.). The “turning to the side” from the Law or going astray from the Lord is thematic of evil-doing in both the Old and New Testaments. In this sense

128 NIV
129 Cf. Andrew Durdin, “The Spectacle of the Sotah: A Rabbinic Perspective of Justice and Punishment in M. Sot 1.” Unpublished MA Thesis (Georgia: College of Arts and Sciences: Georgia State University, April, 2007). There are similar rituals in other religious traditions, including some of the animistic belief systems in Africa. See James. MacDonald, Religion and Myth. (New York, NY: Scribner, 1883) 123; The “ordeal poison” used to detect someone guilty of a capital offense in Wayao religious practice has similar results as the Jewish ordeal with the exception that the Wayao shaman assumes a magical responsibility for exercising the effects of the curse.
130 The LXX translates παραβίασις (going astray) with παραβαίνειν and each use in the Old Testament refers to the possibility of either physical adultery (Numbers 5:12, 29) or spiritual adultery (Deuteronomy 17:20). The use of παραβίασις in the New Testament always implies disobedience and wrong-doing. The most noteworthy instance is in Acts 1:25 regarding Judas Iscariot who “turned aside” (παραβίασία) to go to his own place. II John 1:9 uses παραβαίνων to state that any who “stray” from the doctrine of Christ do not have God. Whereas the direct correlation of the sacred curse in Numbers 5:21 cannot directly be tied into these examples, the idea that “turning aside” or “going astray” has connectivity to the doctrinal and theological
Scripture admonishes a steady consistency in following after God and keeping his ordinances. Those who would follow the Lord must not stray from the path of God. The way of God is “narrow” and not broad. It is specific and not general (Mt 7:13-14).

A New Testament parallel to the sacred curse of Numbers 5 might be found in Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians to “examine themselves” before taking the Lord’s Supper;

“Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (I Cor 11:28-30). 131

The act of eating and drinking the Holy Communion as a testimonial of our faith cannot be lightly done without the possibility of sickness, illness and possible death. The importance of having a good conscience in God’s presence is a primary focus in these two examples. The sacred curse is levied as a warning to those who violate God’s Covenant in both Testaments.132 Whereas we understand the violation of conscience through the ordeal by water in Numbers to be a violation of the marriage vows, we might ask what comprised a violation of conscience in the New Testament parallel with the Lord’s Supper where Paul admonishes not to eat or drink in an “unworthy manner?”

In his classic commentary on First Corinthians, Hodges writes;

“To eat or drink unworthily is in general to come to the Lord’s Table in a careless, irreverent spirit, without the intention or desire to commemorate the death of Christ as the sacrifice for our sins, and without the purpose of complying with the engagements

underpinnings of these New Testament documents and the theological idea of being “outside God.” There is a textual variant (προσεγγισμος) found in K01 A02 B03 and is read παραβαινον in K018, L020 P025 in Tischendorf’s appendix.

131 NRSV
132 The Greek Septuagint (LXX) uses οἱ ἀρκοὶ τῆς ἀρραὶ to translate the “oath of cursing” (הֲלָה הָאֶל) with ἀρραὶ as the primary word for “curse” and ἐν ἀρραὶ καὶ ἐνορκίου to translate “a curse and an oath” from לְכָּל הָאֵל הַנְּבָה. Swearing an oath that could result in punitive consequences if taken under false pretentions became synonymous with an understanding of a “sacred curse.” The women who made such judicial oaths were subject to death through the curse brought about by the mysterious power of the water they drank as the judgment of God.
which we thereby assume. The way in which the Corinthians ate unworthily was, that they treated the Lord’s table as though it were their own; making no distinction between the Lord’s supper and an ordinary meal; coming together to satisfy their hunger, and not to feed on the body and blood of Christ; and refusing to commune with their poorer brethren. This, though one, is not the only way in which men may eat and drink unworthily. All that is necessary to observe is, that the warning is directly against the careless and profane, and not against the timid and the doubting.\textsuperscript{133}

That taking the Lord’s Supper can be done with irreverence and result in some penalty is assumed in most Christian confessions.\textsuperscript{134} This belief exists today as demonstrated during the recent campaign for the presidency of the United States. The Catholic Church in America argued to restrict pro-abortionist candidates from Holy Communion repeating an earlier debate from 2004 when Catholic Bishop Michael Sheridan penned a pastoral letter entitled “On the Duties of Catholic Politicians and Voters.”\textsuperscript{135}

In that letter, Sheridan wrote, “Any Catholic politicians who advocate for abortion, for illicit stem cell research or for any form of euthanasia \textit{ipso facto} place themselves outside full communion with the Church and so jeopardize their

\textsuperscript{133}Charles Hodges, \textit{An Exposition of I Corinthians}. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1995) 256-258. Hodges elaborates on the differences between the Roman, Lutheran and Presbyterian views of the Communion Table.

\textsuperscript{134}In the history of the Church the debate over the issues of Transubstantiation resulted in acknowledgements of “unworthiness.” The Heidelberg Catechism was issued three separate times in 1563 with a growing reference to the Eightieth Question regarding the supposed actual presence of the Body and Blood of the Savior in the Roman Mass. The Heidelberg statement viewed the Roman position as “a denial of the one sacrifice of Christ, and as an accursed idolatry.” The third edition of the Catechism was issued as a Protestant ‘counter-blast’ in response to the issuance of Roman Anathemas at the Council of Trent against Protestant interpretations of the Lord’s Supper. Cf. Philip Schaff, \textit{The Creeds of Christendom} 3Vols. (New York, NY: Harper Publishers, 1919) 535-536

\textsuperscript{135}“There must be no confusion in these matters… It is for this reason that these Catholics, whether candidates for office or those who would vote for them, may not receive Holy Communion until they have recanted their positions and been reconciled with God and the Church in the Sacrament of Penance.” Cf. Michael J Sheridan, “A Pastoral Letter to the Catholic Faithful of the Diocese of Colorado Springs on the Duties of Catholic Politicians and Voters.” cf. www.ewtn.com/library for a full transcript of the letter.
salvation.”¹³⁶ This controversy polarized conservative Catholic Church leadership from liberal leadership and became a flashpoint for determining who was or was not a good Catholic.

During the U.S. presidential elections of 2008, an election guide for Catholic voters was published with the warning that, “a candidate's position on a single issue that involves an intrinsic evil, such as support for legal abortion or the promotion of racism, may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support...”. Before his death, Cardinal Dulles explained that by “imposing penalties, the Church is trying to protect the sacraments against the profanation that occurs when they are received by people without the proper dispositions.”

b) ¹rar

The meaning of ¹rar (¹rar) is “to curse, doom, imprecate evil or to “bind”¹³⁸ and can be found sixty-three times in the Old Testament, translated as “curse” in the Authorized Version 62 times and “bitterly” once.¹³⁹ The imprecation against idolatry found expression through ¹rar (Deuteronomy 27:15) alongside eleven other curses delivered in the warning of Moses to Israel. It is used to denote a cursed and wicked life (II Kings 9:34), and points to those ‘cursed persons’ who wander from the Law of God (Psalm 119:21). The word designates an oath of violence directed to a specific

¹³⁶ Shortly following that letter, Father Robert Drinan, former Massachusetts Congressman and presently an instructor in law at Georgetown University angrily replied alongside other Congressional Democrats that such threats mired the Church in partisan politics. He compared the efforts of the Church in its efforts “to dictate morality with tactics akin to Caesar.” Cf. John Nichols, The Nation “Kerry and Communion” June 14, 2004


¹³⁸ Cf. Francis Brown, Samuel Driver, and Charles Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996) 76 #865-As a participle אָרָא is also found in Numbers 5:18; 'the curse-bringing waters.'

¹³⁹ Cf. Judges 5:23-TWOT #168-The majority of use is in the Qal stem. Of this usage, the passive participle is used some forty times.
person or thing (I Samuel 14:24, Jeremiah 11:3). The curse attached to the “oath of testimony” in Numbers 5:22 uses הֲמַסְרָם to describe the waters of “cursing.”

TWOT observes; “It will be observed that the majority of "curse" sayings with ārar fall into one of three general categories: (1) the declaration of punishments (Gen 3:14); (2) the utterance of threats (Jer 11:3; 17:5; Mal 1:14); (3) the proclamation of laws (Deut 27:15-26; 28:16-19).” The very first instance of a curse in the Old Testament occurs in Genesis 3:14 where the Lord God (יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהֵי) pronounces a curse upon the being and destiny of the serpent who beguiled Adam and Eve; “The LORD God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed (מַסְרָם) are you above all the wild beasts and all the living creatures of the field! On your belly you will crawl and dust you will eat all the days of your life.’”

This curse is followed by a curse upon the earth from which the sustenance for life is derived. The punishment for the disobedience of the Woman would come in bearing children through much pain and labor (שָׁבָט) while Man would sustain life only through the equalizing punishment of hard work and toil (עִצָּבּוֹן). The curse of that “most subtle beast” and the earth utilize the same root-word מַסְרָם whereas the

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140 TWOT pg. 168a; “On the basis of Akkadian araru ‘to snare, bind’ and the noun iritu ‘noose, sling’ Brichto, following Speiser, advances the interpretation that Hebrew ārar means ‘to bind (with a spell), hem in with obstacles, render powerless to resist.’” Thus the original curse in Gen 3:14, 17, ‘cursed are you above all cattle’ and “cursed is the ground for your sake” means ‘you are banned/anathematized from all the other animals’ and ‘condemned be the soil (i.e., fertility to men is banned) on your account.’” Cf. NIDOTTE 1. 525; “The Heb. מַסְרָם is cognate with the Akk. araru, curse, treat with disrespect, and its associated nom. arratu (“curse”); There are also cognates in South Arab. and Eth. With the מַסְרָם root the curse operates as deterrent and as judgment. Cain is ‘under a curse and driven from the ground’ because of his fratricide (Gen 4:11), and the scheming Gibeonites are reduced to perpetual servitude for their deception (Josh 9:23). In their case the probable parallel of the Ugaritic Keret Epic (ll. 111-14), in which the hewing of wood and the drawing of water are both associated with female labor, suggests that they suffered the indignity of a typical Near Eastern effeminacy curse (cf. II Sam 3:29 [see REB, NRSV]; Jer 50:37).”

141 Ibid.

142 The ground is “cursed” as is the serpent-שָׁבָט

143 In direct opposition to the three-fold blessing (רָבָיָה) pronounced on the creation (Genesis 1:22), the first humans (1:28) and the Sabbath (2:3), there would now be pain, hard work and ongoing misery finalized in death. cf. (BDB). pg. 138, #1467.

144 “Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which Jehovah God had made.” Genesis 3:1 in the ASV.
pain and labor bestowed upon our first parents indicates a punishment that would befall the entire human race. The punishment of humanity through “toil” is distinct from the “curse” used upon the serpent and the ground.\textsuperscript{145}

The curse lodged against Cain after slaying his brother Abel is a “curse from the ground” which suggests that Cain would never prosper by the earth’s fruitfulness and abundance (Genesis 4:11). Ham’s moral trespass brings the curse of Noah upon his son, Canaan (Gen. 9:25). \textsuperscript{145} is used in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-4) to describe the “curse” that God will levy against any who “curse” Abram, suggesting an eternal quality to its meaning.\textsuperscript{146} This intent is repeated when blind Isaac passes on the Covenant’s blessing and cursing (הָרְאַתָּוֹן) upon his son Jacob (Gen. 27:29), and forms a portion of the final impartation of Jacob upon his sons, Simeon and Levi (Gen 49:5) whose cruelty became the object of Jacob’s curse (רָאָתָוֹן).

Perhaps the most infamous attempt at pronouncing a curse in the Old Testament is the one attempted by Balaam (Num 22:5-24:25).\textsuperscript{147} Hired by Balak, the king of Moab and the enemy of Israel, Balaam was forewarned by the Lord not to collaborate with Moab in their attempts to call down a curse upon Israel. Refusing Balak’s offer of money, Balaam is finally sent by divine mandate to Balak to speak “only” what the Lord instructs him to speak. These will be words of blessing, not cursing. They are delivered on three separate occasions to the chagrin of Balak.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{145} Genesis 5:29 refers to the “toil” of man and the “curse” of the earth in the same verse. In this verse we also read about the naming of Noah, who would eventually fulfill the prophetic hope of his father Lamech. That hope occurred in the building of the ark and the deliverance from the wrath of God during the Deluge. The ark rested upon Ararat (חָרֵד) which is a probable word-play reflecting on the “curse” that came into the world and God’s resultant judgment.

\textsuperscript{146} רָאָתָוֹן - This is the only instance in the Hebrew Bible where the verb Qal imperfect 1st person common singular of רָאָת is found.

\textsuperscript{147} In Numbers 23:7b-8 we find four of our studied words for “curse” used;

\begin{align*}
\text{} & \text{ךָרַאַתָּוֹן} \text{ יִתְּכֹּתָל} \text{ הָלוֹקֵה} \text{ שַׁמְּתָה} \text{ הָרְאַתָּוֹן} \text{ רָאָתָוֹן} \\
\text{He} & \text{ would not} \text{ heap} \text{ upon} \text{ them} \text{ their} \text{ full} \text{ measure}.
\end{align*}

These verse portions read; “curse (from āran) Jacob, and defy (from zā‘am) Israel” and Balaam answers the king of Moab saying, “How can I curse (from nāqab) what God has not cursed (from qāḇab) or defy (from zā‘am) what God has not defied (from zā‘am)?”

\textsuperscript{148} The Deuteronomic account of Balaam’s curse (Deut 23:4-5) utilizes רָאָתָוֹן (from רָאָתָוֹן = noun common feminine singular absolute + רֹאָת particle direct object marker homonym 1 + particle article הָרְאַתָּוֹן) to
It is in this context that we recognize certain pagan beliefs about the sacred curse. This includes a belief regarding the inherent magical powers of a prescribed curse or imprecation. Such magic finds its source of power in the spoken formula or ritual initiating the curse (or the blessing) as is attested in Balak’s understanding of Balaam’s abilities. In such thinking, the deity is obligated and controlled by a set ritual to perform certain deeds on behalf of the one calling for the curse or blessing. This is what defines magic.

Magic is the human ability to control supernatural powers through symbol, formula, and rite. That the Lord God is not bound or controlled by the rituals of man, but is independent and alive to bless whom He will bless and curse whom He will curse speaks of something greater than human ability. This is summarized by the describe the effort of the false prophet (found seven times through the Old Testament at Gen 27:12; I Kg 2:8; Psalm 109:17-18; Prov 27:14; Jer 29:22; Zec 8:13). The question may arise regarding the source of the Balaam sayings, especially those posed through source criticism. Martin Noth argued for a single Deuteronomistic historian (redactor) who was responsible for the whole complex of the literature. The various multi-redactionist theories failed to explain the “overarching unity to the books” that is otherwise dissolved by the older approaches. The majority of Old Testament scholarship now holds to a unified redactor theory, especially from Judges through Kings, due to the following: A) The unity of the literature is “visible in pivotal interpretive speeches which look backwards and forwards’ in the text; B) There is a common “chronological scheme” utilized in all the texts; C) A “single purpose of tracing the history of disaster that led to the events of conquest and deportation” is maintained in the texts; and D) “Unity is also created by a prophecy-fulfillment schema by which historical periods are bridged by the announcement of a word from YHWH and its subsequent fulfillment.” Cf. Richard D. Nelson, The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); Cf. NIDOTTE 4. 437; W. Albright, “The Oracles of Balaam,” JBL 63, 1944, 207-33 who supports the antiquity of the oracles and R. Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative. (NY: Basic Books, 1981), 104-7 who supports the literary unity of the seven oracles of Balaam.

James Frazier, The Golden Bough (New York: MacMillan Publishers,1922); chapters 3-6. Frazier’s classic work describes magic as contagious and sympathetic. He breaks these categories down into theoretical magic and practical magic; “Homoeopathic magic is founded on the association of ideas by similarity: contagious magic is founded on the association of ideas by contiguity. Homoeopathic magic commits the mistake of assuming that things which resemble each other are the same: contagious magic commits the mistake of assuming that things which have once been in contact with each other are always in contact. But in practice the two branches are often combined; or, to be more exact, while homoeopathic or imitative magic may be practiced by itself, contagious magic will generally be found to involve an application of the homoeopathic or imitative principle.” Mircea Eliade advocates an archetype for the ritualized magic in a sacred curse; “Every ritual has a divine model, an archetype, it acquires effectiveness to the extent that it exactly repeats an act performed at the beginning of time by a god, a hero, or an ancestor.”cf. Mircea Eliade, W. C. Beane and W. G. Doty, ed. Myths, Rites, and Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader, 2 vols. ( NY: Harper Collins, 1975) 1:134.
observation in Numbers 23:23; “For there is no spell against Jacob, nor is there any divination against Israel. At this time it must be said of Jacob and of Israel, ‘Look at what God has done!’”

Balak’s frustration with Balaam is centered on the inability of the seer to call down a curse upon Israel. Even though the ritual is followed with the prescribed construction of altars and subsequent sacrifices, God overrides the attempts of men and actually does the reverse to bless Israel.

The story of Balaam and Balak became an instructional point of doctrine and discipline for the early Church. In II Peter 2:14-16 we read; “Their eyes, full of adultery, never stop sinning; they entice unstable people. They have trained their hearts for greed, these cursed children! 150 By forsaking the right path they have gone astray, because they followed the way of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness, yet was rebuked for his own transgression (a dumb donkey, speaking with a human voice, restrained the prophet’s madness).”

The “way of Balaam” is a doctrinal way of error. It is a teaching that promotes God’s curse upon those who hold to such doctrines. Such errant ways end in judgment. Already, in Revelation 2:14 we begin to see an indication that the primitive Church is in need of correction and reform. The author of the Apocalypse records the solemn warning of the Lord to the Church at Pergamos; “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, 151 who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality” (Rev 2:14).152

The sin of Balaam is closely associated with the false doctrines that the early Church confronted, whether in doctrinal truth or ethics. 153 The “way of Balaam” is the way of anthropocentrism whereby man becomes the center of universal control and

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150 “cursed children” (κατάρας τέκνα)-The Septuagint uses κατάρα to translate both רע and לְּלֵל
151 τῆν διδαχὴν Βαλαάμ “the teachings of Balaam”
152 NKJV
153 Pergamos was also entertaining the hated doctrines of the Nicolaitans Rev. 2:15 whose “deeds” were hated by God (Rev 2:6).
power, epitomized by pagan magic and ritual. This is the “error” that promotes man above God, which suggests that God is somehow subservient to the human will.

It is the foundational sin of pride in the creature countering the truth of the Creator (Rom 1:25) as found in the story of Genesis 3:1-7 and Isaiah 14:12-14. The story of Balaam and the Moabite king typifies this worldly attitude towards the spiritual truths of God, an attitude that thinks it can purchase and control the power of God with money or some other means of influence.

We find some parallel to this attitude in the New Testament stories of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) who thought that their money could purchase spiritual influence within the early Church, and of Simon Magus, the Samaritan sorcerer who offered Peter money for the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:9-24). In the story of Ananias and Sapphira, they both blasphemed the place and position of God in the early Church community through deception and manipulation. Thinking that the Jerusalem community would honor their partial gift (which was intentionally misrepresented as the full purchase price of their sold property), they practiced a form of deception that eventually led to their untimely deaths.

Through the agency of the Holy Spirit, Simon Peter was made aware of the deception and pronounced the death sentence that befell both husband and wife. The

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154 Mishnah- Tractate Sanhedrin 10:5-6 concerns ‘false prophets’ and commands their execution; “A. A false prophet—one who prophesies concerning something which he has not actually heard or concerning something which was not actually said to him, is put to death by man. but he who holds back his prophesy, he who disregards the words of another prophet, or the prophet who transgresses his word words is put to death by heaven, as it is said, ‘I will require it of him,’” The execution of false prophets was prescribed of both man and ‘Heaven’ (God); 1. 1:1: Our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority: Three false prophets are put to death by man, and three are put to death by heaven. He who prophesies concerning something which he has not actually heard or concerning something which was not actually said to him and one who prophesies in the name of an idol — such as these are put to death by man. 2. 1:2: What is the source of this rule? Said R. Judah said Rab, “It is because Scripture has said, ‘But the prophet who shall presume to speak a word in may name’ (Deut 18:20) — this refers to a prophet who prophesies concerning something which he has not actually heard....”

155 Especially in the idea of the creature assuming the role and authority of the Creator; “You shall be as God” (Gen 3:5); “I will be like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14); Cf. Ezekiel 28:2; “I sit in the seat of God.” These scriptures establish a foundation for the doctrine that exalts itself “against the knowledge of God” (II Cor 10:5).
threat presented by Ananias and Sapphira was a threat to the integrity and “oneness” of the greater community. The resultant deaths of these two served to unify the Church through a holy reverence for God. There can be little doubt that the deaths of these two people in the earliest Christian community contributed to some belief that God was more than willing to kill persons who violated the integrity of the sacred community.

This gives impetus to the concept of the sacred curse which can result in the untimely deaths of those who violate God’s word. Simon the Sorcerer was considered to be the “Great Power of God” due to his abilities in the magical arts (Acts 8:10-11). Peter’s stern rebuke prompted the magician to beg for Peter’s intercession that “none of the things” spoken by Peter would befall him.

This rebuke carries the power of a sacred curse and we can recognize the Samaritan’s response as that of a person who understands the consequences of such a curse. Again, the secondary effect of the sacred curse brings unification within the Church while glorifying and reverencing the Lord. As opposed to the anthropocentric doctrines of heretics, the theocentric or God-centered emphasis of the early Church teachings pointed to a faith that responded to the voice of God.

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156 NIV reads; “And all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, ‘This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.’”

157 The Latin Apocryphal Acts of Peter takes the story of the Samaritan magician’s encounter with Peter to fantastic lengths, describing the contest between the two in mythological and Gnostic terms.

158 Giving God the preeminence in all things is reinforced in the book of Acts through such stories. In Acts 12:19-23 we read of king Herod’s gruesome death due to his exaltation as the “Voice of God” cf. the old text of the Geneva Bible; “And the people gave a shout, saying, ‘The voice of God, and not of man.’” It is the Voice of God the addresses John on Patmos and reveals the blessings and curses that are coming into the world.

159 The “voice” of God becomes a doctrinal point of truth for the early Church. It is through the voice of God that the church knows her Master. It is by the voice of God that the Christian is guided into truth and Kingdom service. This Voice is first introduced to us in Genesis 3:8 after the Fall of humanity from the Presence of God; “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.” Genesis 3:7-8 in the KJV. The modern versions translate אֲזִיבָה as “the sound” of God. This is a possible translation of אֲזִיבָה but is unfortunate for our understanding of theology. By choosing with the KJV to translate as “voice” we are better able to understand the intent of verse 10 where Adam responds to the questioning of God with; “I heard thy voice in the garden...” This becomes
That voice was found in the teachings of Jesus through the Apostles and the Holy Spirit. Faith subjects the will of the creature to the will of the Creator.\textsuperscript{160} The Old Testament’s emphasis on the word and voice of God culminates in Jesus Christ, the incarnated Word.

This emphasis includes God’s “curse” upon Christ who carries humanity’s sins upon the Cross, as prophesied in Hebrew Scriptures. The God who becomes Man takes the place of the man who would be god in punishment and death. The anthropocentric doctrines of fallen humanity are replaced with the theocentric love of God in Jesus Christ, the Word. This becomes increasingly clear through the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Septuagint’s (LXX) translation of \textit{rWr\textsuperscript{U}a} is often rendered by \textit{\textepsilon\textpi\textkappa\textkata\textepsilon\textrho\textalpha\texttau\textomicron\textomicron\textomicron\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron} which is solely used in ecclesiastical literature\textsuperscript{161} for the imprecation or sacred curse.\textsuperscript{162} Paul draws upon the Septuagint when reminding the Galatians of the “curse” of the a thread for John’s Gospel who speaks about the “Word” who becomes flesh and enters the world in search of the lost (Jn 1:1, 14 etc) and who speaks as no other person speaks (Jn 7:46). The “voice of God” remains a topic of importance in the New Testament. Cf. Rev 1:10 & 12; 21:3 etc. T.F. Torrence errantly argued that the Jewish community (\textit{lhq\textsuperscript{U}}), the ‘assembly’ (qahal) stemmed etymologically from the \textit{\textlambda\textalpha\textomicron\textnu} (voice) of God, through the Word of God, as being “summoned” to serve Jehovah ~cf. Torrence, T.F. “Israel and the Incarnation” \textit{Judiaca} 13, 1957, 1-2. This presents an illustration of the difficulties attending lexical study where words are traced to give support to presumed meanings.

\textsuperscript{160} This dichotomy between the Creator and the creature, faith and reason, the sacred and the secular, is clearly exposited in the influential writings of Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) in books which exposited a Biblical approach to metaphysics and ethics for modern man. His writings influenced theologians from evangelical circles including persons in the Christian Reconstructionist and Dominion movements. Cf. Francis Schaeffer, \textit{True Spirituality} (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1971). In these and other writings, Schaeffer argued against secular humanism which puts man at the center of the universe while leaving God on the margins. One of the more recent theologies stemming in part from Schaeffer’s writings is the magnum opus of Carl F.H. Henry who developed a thorough analysis of modernism through a presuppositional apologetic similar to Schaeffer. Cf. Carl F. H. Henry, \textit{God, Revelation and Authority}. Vol. 1-6. (Waco,TX: Word Publishers, 1976-1983).

\textsuperscript{161} Cf. Joseph Henry Thayer, \textit{Thayer’s Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament} (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996); #2068; Also, The occurrences of \textit{\textepsilon\textpi\textkata\textepsilon\textrho\textalpha\texttau\textomicron\textomicron\textomicron\textomicron\textupsilon\textomicron} in Jn 7.49 and \textit{\textepsilon\textpi\textkata\textepsilon\textrho\textalpha\texttau\textomicron\textOMICRON\textOMICRON\textOMICRON\textOMICRON\textupsilon\textOMICRON} in Gal 3.10 imply much more than being cursed by some person. In such contexts, the real meaning is that these individuals “have already been condemned by God or are under the threat of such a condemnation.” Cf. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Nida, \textit{Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament, Based on Semantic Domains} (NY: United Bible Societies; 2nd edition; 1988); “Communication” entry 33.475.

\textsuperscript{162} It is found 37 times in the LXX, with 6 instances of use in Genesis and 17 times in Deuteronomy 27. The LXX reads \textit{\kappa\textalpha\tau\rho\omicron\mu\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\omicron\upsilon\omicron}\textit{\sigma\epsilon\kappa\tau\alpha\rho\alpha\omicron\sigma\omicron\omicron\omicron} at Gen 12:3.
Law. His reference to Deuteronomy 27:26 in Galatians 3:10 is meant to convince the reader of the cursed consequence of violating God’s word.  

Similarly, in Galatians 3:13 Paul associates the intent of Deuteronomy 21:23 (κεκατηρωμένος) with the work of the Christ “who became a curse” by hanging on a tree. Throughout Paul’s writings the ecclesiastical notion of being “cursed” beyond God’s redemption is answered in the healing curse of the Cross. This is one of the underlying themes in Romans where the Gentile is no longer cursed and outside the blessings of God (Rom 1:16; 2:9-10; 10:12), where the ‘wild olive branch’ is grafted into the domestic olive tree of Israel (Rom 11:17-24). The curse of God is resident on those who remain outside Christ, but the blessing of God resides on all who have been “adopted” (Rom 8:15; 23; 9:4) by God.  

It is the reversal of the universal curse that Paul celebrates in the Gospel. Whereas the Gentile nations seem to be open to this Gospel, the Jews remain blinded to its truth. Within the immediacy of his thinking, Paul could wish himself accursed for

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163 The use of ἐπικατάρατος is also found in John 7:49 to express the indignation of the Pharisees towards the “cursed” people who do not know God’s Law, indicating an eternal and divine dimension to their theological understanding of what it meant to be “cursed.” It was assumed that certain people were doomed to eternal destruction because they were without any proper knowledge of the Law of God. This becomes the predication for the maltreatment of people by the religious authorities in Jesus’ time. It was because of such hostility to people by the religious leadership of Israel that we better understand the seven mighty “woes” given by the Lord in his reproach of Pharisees and scribes (Mt 23:13-29). The lack of compassion and basic respect for the average person by religious leaders outraged Jesus.  

164 The Greek word for “tree” is figurative of the Cross-Cf. Louw-Nida, 4501 ξύλον (f) cross 6.28  

165 This idea of adoption for the believing Gentile nations answers the Old Testament’s exclusive status of Israel as God’s chosen heirs of the divine promise. Galatians 4:3-7 expresses this in context; “Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.” This theological truth becomes the basis for Paul’s inclusion of Jacob and Esau in his discussion of God’s righteousness (Rom 9:13) where God’s mercy is not controlled by the external will and whims of man, but is given in accordance with God’s own counsel (9:18). Then quoting Hosea, the great Apostle to the Gentiles writes, “I will call them My people, who were not My people, And her beloved, who was not beloved. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people’ there they shall be called sons of the living God.”
the sake of his own people, Israel, that they might come to know the Messiah (Romans 9:3).  

166 Paul’s word for “accursed” is the word anathema (ἀναθῆμα) from the Hebrew קדש.

167 קָדָשָׁם is found 33 times in its various forms in the Hebrew Scriptures and usually refers to great indignation and anger by God. Cf. NIDOTTE 1.1129; “The vb. occurs mainly with God as subject, and the object is usually personal.”

168 Paul uses ἐμποσά in Romans 9:13 to describe God’s “hatred” of Esau, an important argument to the Calvinist understanding of predestination where the Lord refuses to “choose” Esau, the older twin, over Jacob, the younger twin. Cf. Timothy Friberg, Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981) #18563 notes that ἐμποσά is “opposite ἐλέγξα (choose, select) as divine election.”

169 Cf. NIDOTTE 2. 276-277; “The vb. is used only in the causative stems hi. (48times) and ho. (3times) and designates a special act of consecration.” Also, “The nom. (29 times) denotes the act of consecration, extermination, and killing.” The use extends into Jewish middle-ages to signify excommunication.“In medieval Jewish literature the nom. corresponds to secular outlawry and excommunication from the community. It was probably this influence that led to the usual but misleading translation, ban.”

170 Cf. Thayer’s entry for “anathema”
describes a peculiar relationship between the sacred and the profane. That which is dedicated solely for the sanctuary of God is and cannot be redeemed away to the service of others. When something is dedicated to destruction by God, is also employed. In this regard, anything “hostile to theocracy” becomes devoted for destruction and is irredeemable (Lev 27:29). This includes both men and beasts. The person devoted (anathematized) for destruction was doomed without hope of redemption; “No person who has been sentenced to die, and thus unconditionally consecrated, can be redeemed; he must be put to death.”  

Such complete destruction befell idolatrous nations and the people subscribing to false religions and practice (Deut 20:6, 13; Joshua 6:17). The inability to redeem those so sentenced to death gives foundational support to the doctrines of reprobation. Persons engaged in false forms of worship were cursed as idolaters. Idolatry took on an anathematized distinction as found in Deuteronomy 7:26 where the idol is itself “anathema” and doomed by God; “Neither shalt thou bring any thing of the idol into thy house, lest thou become an anathema, like it. Thou shalt detest it as dung, and shalt utterly abhor it as uncleanness and filth, because it is an anathema.”

It is seen as something (Joshua 6:19, 24) or someone (I Kg 20:42, Is 34:5) opposed to and by God. Such things and people became “cursed” as was first realized in the battle of Israel with the Canaanites (Num 21:2-4) with the complete destruction of Hormah (cf. Joshua 6:17, 21, 8:26, 10:28 and 11:11). It is here that a total annihilation occurs through holy war as a devoted service to God.

When is used of an animal, it is “devoted to death” as a sacrifice to God (Lev 27:28). This concept of total and devoted destruction translates through the Septuagint with the use of anathema (ἀναθημα) and this then becomes a synonym for being “cursed”

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171 Complete Jewish Bible (CBJ) Leviticus 27:29; The Hebrew reads;
172 DRA
173 The name of the Canaanite city becomes known as Hormah after its complete destruction by Israel. The name is derived from the sense of a total devotion for destruction (ניherits) that came through battle. According to Judges 1:17, Hormah (הָרְמָה) was originally called Zephath (זֶפַח). The LXX translates the name of the city as “anathema” (ἀναθημα) from Ἰρμὴ.
by God. That which was devoted to God for destruction was irredeemable and counted as anathema. To be “accursed of the LORD” points to the dual ideas of God being glorified “upon” people through judgment as opposed to those persons who are devoted in service to the LORD whereby God is glorified “in” them. Both ideas gained prominence through rabbinical teachings and became equated with being separated unto the awful judgment of God through excommunication.

Excommunication became that person or thing which was separated or devoted for destruction or consigned to becoming off-limits for human use and intercourse. Over time, it took on the meaning of a judgment. That which was excommunicated was deemed judged by sacred society as something or someone placed outside the bounds of fellowship.

Excommunication held in Jewish communities could vary in the severity of punishment for the offender subject to such discipline. These levels of excommunication were roughly divided into three categories. The ban called Niddui was mostly administered due to bad financial transactions such as the non-payment of debts, and usually lasted for a short period of time of no more than thirty days. This penalty might require that the excommunicate make entrance into the Synagogue through the exit door rather than the entrance of the sanctuary when attendance to

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175 The fully developed concept of excommunication matured in the Rabbinical schools of the Middle Ages where Talmudic instruction examined 24 causes for the punishment’s occurrence, including calling an Israelite a “slave” or selling property to a non-Jew which might result in the harm of Jewish citizens. Cf. Solomon Schechter and Julius H. Greenstone, *The Jewish Encyclopedia* 12 vols. (New York, NY: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901-1906) 285-287 “Excommunication.”

176 Excommunication in Fifteenth Century England was often exercised without proper understanding of canon law; cf. James C. Spalding, *The Reformation of the Ecclesiastical Laws of England*, 1552 (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992) 22; “Next to heresy, the matter of greatest concern to the laity in ecclesiastical courts was excommunication, which would severely damage one’s credit in the community and could involve imprisonment. The critic pointed out areas in which, if canon law was enforced, a person could be excommunicated for carrying out temporal matters under common law. Furthermore, canon laws were ambiguous about those matters wherein a person might run into the danger of excommunication.”

worship was still allowed.

Niddui mandated that a distance of ten to fifteen feet be maintained between those within the community and the persons placed under such discipline. Persons subject to this ban were expected to walk about un-bathed and unshaven, without shoes, as a sign of remorse. While there was no sacred curse enjoined at this level of punishment, the family of the one so punished might be prohibited from attending school or worship services as an additional hardship, thereby simulating the hardships of a curse. If persons so “excommunicated” happened to die during the time of the ban, there was to be no mourning by the community of faith as was usually customary, but a hasty burial without ceremony would ensue. A stone was placed upon the casket of the deceased offender as a symbol of the “stoning” that condemned persons might incur. Again, no “sacred curse” accompanies the harshness of Niddui, but one is tempted to think that this discipline approximated a curse upon those so affected.

If the excommunicated person continued in offensive behaviors, the period of time for the ban could be extended. However, once those extensions were exhausted, the second level of punishment was enacted. This was the more severe means of excommunication. The נִדּוּי would be levied as a ‘sacred curse’ through the leadership of the community, comprised of no fewer than ten voting persons within Judaism. Fellowship meals were forbidden with such persons, and restoration from this curse could only occur through a recognized authority, such as a prominent rabbi. There is a hint of such discipline in the writings of Paul to the Corinthian fellowship:178 “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner -- not even to eat with such a person” (I Cor 5:11).

The severity of excommunication could result in a third class of punishments known as “execrations” whereby the offending person is damned through ecclesiastical authority. This sham’mata’ might thus be reflected in the sacred curse exercised by the

178 NKJV
Apostle Paul regarding the specific offender in the Corinthian fellowship;

“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (I Cor 5:4-5).  

Paul may have been intending the same severe punishment when writing to Timothy regarding Hymenaeus and Alexander whom he “delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” Other indications of excommunication found in the New Testament might include Luke 6:22 which may suggest a possible gradation of punishments;

“Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake” (1 Tim 1:20).  

The idea of “hating, excluding, reviling and casting out” forms the basis of excommunication in sacred communities. However, it is usually not a hatred for the person, but rather a hatred of what is contrary to a faith community’s understanding of sound doctrine and ethical practice, which de facto, is violated by some person. Within the New Testament, persons who violated Pharisaic authority could be “put out of the synagogue” in accordance with ecclesiastical direction.  

That the Old Testament use of הָרַע resulted in an understanding of some judgment approximating a sacred curse is captured through the Greek ἀναθέμα. Anathemas are always used with a destructive sense within the New Testament either through curses and oaths or swearing. The New Testament uses anathema in the description of the solemn vows taken by the Jews who wanted to kill the Apostle Paul

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179 NKJV  
180 NKJV  
181 Cf. John 9:22: “His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue;” John 12:42; “Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue;” John 16:2; “They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.” (NKJV)  
Apparently, Christians followed this example by expelling those they did not agree with—cf. 3 Jn 1:10
(Acts 23:14) and who would not eat food until they accomplished their deadly mission. These Jews were devoted to the destruction of Paul and were bound under a “great curse” (ASV, KJV)\textsuperscript{182} until their mission was completed.

‘Anathema’ is descriptive of swearing (καταθηματίζειν) such as that done by Simon Peter when he vehemently denied knowing the Lord (Matthew 26:74 and Mark 14:71). Paul tells the Corinthian Church that no one possessing the Spirit of God can say “cursed be Jesus” (Ανάθημα Θεούς) and be a true believer. Paul concludes his Corinthian letter with the famous ἀναθήματα μαραθήσεσθαι ὑμῖν \textsuperscript{183} which has been interpreted as a final curse upon all who reject the Gospel of Christ. \textsuperscript{184} Those who are placed under an anathema are subject to damnation as in the case of those who preach a different Gospel (Gal 1:8-9). We are to “mark” those who cause divisions (Romans 16:17), “reject” heretics (Titus 3:16) and not bid ‘god-speed’ to any who counter Christ (II John 10). Those who are disobedient to authority in the Church must be ‘avoided’ and ‘made ashamed’ yet not as enemies, but as brothers to be admonished, corrected and restored (II Thes 3:14).

In a curious use of the word the great Apostle to the Gentiles could wish himself “accursed” from Christ for the sake of his Jewish kinsmen (Rom 9:3).\textsuperscript{185} The impact of this sentiment is probably influenced through Old Testament personalities like Moses

\textsuperscript{182} Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible is too wooden here in describing the more than 40 Jews; “who having come near to the chief priests and to the elders said, ‘With an anathema we did anathematize ourselves -- to taste nothing till we have killed Paul.’”

\textsuperscript{183} Many of the English versions translate I Cor 16:22 with; “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come!”

\textsuperscript{184} There was a custom, recorded in the Gospels (Mt 10:14; Mk 6:11 & Lk 9:5) and Acts (13:51 & 18:6) regarding the rejection by the Gospel messenger towards those who refused the Gospel message. The “shaking of dust from the feet” by the messenger whereby a sandal was loosed and symbolically shaken in front of those who rejected the message of Christ comprised a type of “sacred curse” not too far removed from the sense of the anathema used in 1 Cor. 16:22. This was a custom practiced by observant Jews who had journeyed through unclean territory belonging to Gentile nations-Cf. Mishnah comments in m Toharot and m Oholot.

\textsuperscript{185} Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, Romans 9-16 Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 38B: (Dallas, TX: Word Incorporated 2002) 524: Dunn notes, “In cases like this it is always wise to ask not simply, What did the author intend to say? but also, What could the author have expected his readers to understand by this language? At the very least we have an expression of passionate concern for and intensely felt commitment to the future good of his fellow Jews.”
(Ex 32:32) who prayed that his name be “blotted out” of God’s Book for the sake of errant Israel. The idea of a “sacred curse” falling upon Paul in order that his brethren’s salvation might occur seems to fit into the passion behind the use of ἀναθῆμα within these Scriptures. What is certain with Paul is his understanding of being “cut-off” or excommunicated from the presence of God when utilizing ‘anathema.’ This became a standard way of interpreting the use of the word in the early Church. It became a synonym for damnation, just as בָּאֵב had become a term for destruction in the Old Testament.

e) בָּאֵב

TWOT informs us that the use of בָּאֵב is found some fifteen times in the Hebrew canon and that it was usually used to describe a cursing formula, a practice common amongst Gentile peoples. Balaam questions his employer regarding the power of such cursing;

“How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? And how shall I defy, whom Jehovah hath not defied (Num 23:8)?”

This indicates that all power to curse (or to bless) comes from the Lord and not from the magical incantations of man.

The Tanakh interprets this same verse and word with the notion of damning;

“How can I damn whom God has not damned, How doom when the LORD has not doomed?” This idea of damning by Jewish translators points to a providential power which could bring utter destruction. The temporal dimension is breached when we

186 Cf. John McClintoch, and James Strong. *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1982) Vol. 1; “Excommunication in the New Testament is not merely founded on the natural right possessed by all societies, nor merely on the example of the Jewish Church and nation. It was instituted by our Lord (Matthew 18:15, 18), and it was practiced by and commanded by Paul (1 Timothy 1:20; 1 Corinthians 5:11; Titus 3:10)."

187 Cf. NIDOTTE 3. 860; “The vbs. בָּאֵב and בָּאֵב are evidently by-forms, with the only certain occurrences of the latter in Lev 24:16, in connection with blaspheming the name of God. Eight of the occurrences of בָּאֵב feature in Balaam’s attempted cursing of Israel as described in Num 22-24.”

188 Cf. Num 22:8 & 11

189 The English translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the *Tanakh* uses “damn” in the following passages; Num. 22:17; 23:8, 11, 13, 27; 24:10; Job 3:8; and “damned” in; Num. 23:8; Mal. 1:4; Prov. 24:24-cf. *The Jewish Bible: Torah, Nevi’im, Kethuvim.* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).
utilize such words as “damned” or “doomed” indicating an eternal consequence. This notion includes that of total and complete devastation. This is the sense of the word in Isaiah 24:1 & 3, Jeremiah 51:2 and Nahum 2:3.

We find בְּרִית used in Leviticus 24:11 concerning the son of Shelomith, who is brought before the council for “cursing” and blaspheming the name of God. His sentence is decided upon by the Lord who directs Moses and the children of Israel to stone him to death on the outskirts of the camp. רַעַב is also poetically used to describe Job’s “curse” during his time of profound grief and we find this same form repeated in the Proverbs.

f) בָּרָאת qāl

In the Pual בָּרָאת refers to “being cursed” and in the Piel it refers to “levying a curse.” Both uses imply a power to make someone or something contemptible in the sight of God and man. Nehemiah uses this word in describing the prophet’s stern rebuke of those who married foreign women outside Israel. Shimei so curses David as a “bloody man” and a “man of Belial” and David allows this insult as coming from the hand of God (II Samuel 16:5-13).

This is the word describing God’s covenantal promise to Abraham (Gen 12:3) stating that those who “bless” Abraham shall be blessed by God, and those who “curse” Abraham shall be cursed by God. The “cursing” of one’s father or mother would result in certain death (Exodus 21:17; Lev 20:9).

Deuteronomy 21:33 speaks of the divine “curse” (בָּרָאת) upon any who “hang

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190 Job 3:8 from verb, Qal, imperfect 3rd person masculine plural with 3rd person masculine singular suffix; cf. Proverbs 11:26 & 24:24 where the same form is used and translated as “curse”. “He that withholdeth grain, the people shall curse him” (Proverbs 11:26) & “He that saith unto the wicked, Thou art righteous; Peoples shall curse him” (Proverbs 24:24). The Vulgate translates from the Hebrew with the Latin forms of ‘maledition’ (from maledicent) thereby indicating an understanding of the inherent evil found in this sense of “curse.” This sense of evil or harm befalls any who are subjected to the “curse.”

191 The use of בָּרָאת in the piel and puel can be found about 43 times. “The curse could have deadly effect (II Kgs 2:24; cf. Prov 30:10), though one uttered without good cause is doomed to be ineffective (II Sam 16:12; Prov 26:2).” Cf. NIDOTTE 3. 927.

192 Nehemiah 13:25 (בָּרָאת)

193 cf. fn. 30 above for בָּרָאת.
on a tree” and commands that the corpse be buried the same day. This prophetic Scripture speaks of impending death of the Messiah fulfilled in the hanging death of the Cross and his burial the same day.\textsuperscript{194} The Greek Septuagint translates this “curse” with κεκατηραμένος indicating a perpetual curse upon the victim.

The LXX also translates בָּקַז in Nehemiah with κατηραδήμην which when used in the New Testament has eschatological consequences (cf. Mt 25:41). Those so cursed will perish forever outside the presence of God. This is reinforced in Hebrews 6:8 with the illustration of thorns being consumed by fire. That some are “accursed” (II Pet 2:14) speaks of a predestined condition not to be undone by human agency and reinforcing the doctrine of Paul (Gal 3:10).

The use of κατηράω in Mk 11:21 refers to the supernatural powers of God to destroy as demonstrated through Jesus in his “cursing” of the fig tree. Such “cursing” (κατάρα) by the child of God is discouraged by James (Jm 3:1) as inconsistent with the blessing we are called on to provide, noting that those made in the image of God ought not be “cursed” (Jm 3:9). Paul admonishes that we “bless and curse not” (Rom 12:14) echoing our Savior’s command to “bless those who curse us” and “pray for those who mistreat us” (Lk 6:28).

\textsuperscript{195} Cf fn. 42 above

\textsuperscript{195} NIDOTTE points out that the use of בּקַז is not always morphologically clear; “Five times in the q. the root seems to signify designate something as bad, i.e., to curse or blaspheme, though this sense for the root is not without question. In three of these occurrences morphological ambiguity clouds the analysis. The impf. or prefix conjugation is used: רָבַק (2x; Job 3:8; Prov 11:26) and בּקְז (Lev 24:11). Morphologically, these spellings could be transitive forms of a q. impf. of the root בּקָז or the root בּקֶז, curse. Such a quasi-Aramaic spelling of the q. impf. of the root בּקַז, where the first root consonant is doubled, is not uncommon among geminate roots in BH. That the root בּקָז carries a sense of curse or blaspheme seems clearer in Lev 24:16, where both a q. act. part (זַכָּז) and q. inf. const. occur after the ambiguous impf. form and the root בּקֶז, curse, and where the textual environment demands a sense of blaspheme for this root. These occurrences argue for the probability that בּקָז underlies the three morphologically ambiguous forms, though the root בּקַז must remain a possibility. The three occurrences in Leviticus (Lev 24:11, 16 [2x]) refer to a disrespectful or inappropriate treatment of Yahweh’s name.” Cf. NIDOTTE 3. 149.
to the superstition that prohibited even pronouncing the sacred Name. \( \text{שָׁמַע} \) is closely related to other words for swearing or blaspheming.

As such, it reflects the power of words to bring shame, dishonor and disgrace, reflecting frustration and anger on the part of the one “swears.” Of the words studied in this thesis, this word is of the least importance regarding the spoken formulas that bring about harmful consequences. The “sacred curse” as defined in this thesis does not fully include \( \text{שָׁמַע} \) as one of the cognates describing its function or use.

2.4 Summary of Chapter Two

This chapter has examined seven words for “curse” in the Hebrew Scriptures, with some study of the Greek words used in translation as found in the Greek Old Testament and New Testament. The basic premise of each word, with the exception of \( \text{שָׁמַע} \) is similar throughout, that a sacred curse carries harmful consequences; that God can levy these curses, and that humanity can be impacted through such curses.

The theological implications of the sacred curse extend into the realm of the New Testament. However, it is important to realize the individuality of the Old Testament story, especially in those dark years of exile and ‘excommunication’ from Zion’s lovely hills. What we learn from the Old Testament calamities brought on through the sacred curse and judgments of God is instructive for our own understanding for life and faith.196

The New Testament basis for the sacred curse is squarely rooted in the Jewish notion of God’s judgment and blessing upon both his people, Israel, and those outside Israel. This extends to the Church as demonstrated by the Apostles in the New Testament. The discipline of the early Church was built on the reality of certain harm

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196 Cf. Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.*, trans. David Green (Boston: Brill, 2004) 441; “In situations of crisis, only theological interpretation can lend history the clarity that enables correct decisions and produce the consensus to carry them out. Only such an interpretation of history makes it possible to take a critical stance toward the supposedly predetermined course of history and discover history’s hidden ethical dimension. I therefore believe it essential for Christian theology in the twenty-first century to recover God’s action in history as an object of serious theological reflection and to develop criteria for protecting the theological interpretation of history from abuse and trans-formation into ideology.”
coming to those who opposed God’s word and people. This power was resident in God himself and was exercised through prayer and faith. This is different than the magic used by pagan nations which turned to formulized ritual in an attempt to manipulate the supernatural into doing the will of man.

That God is not obligated to perform any cursing or blessing apart from His own council speaks of a required dependence upon the Lord for any real discipline to occur within and without the community of faith. Those who would bless or curse must be in communion with God. That communion comes through a spiritual affiliation made possible through the work of the Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ. This authority to levy a ‘sacred curse” befell those Apostles who were commissioned to take the Gospel message to the world at large, and to better discipline the Christian fellowship when necessary.

Already in the New Testament, we can see first-hand the exercise of the sacred curse in various modes of excommunication and punishments. That the New Testament era engaged such discipline raises the question of how the sacred curse was carried forward into future generations of faith. With the deaths of the original Apostles we might wonder if the power of the sacred curse also vanished.

Outside of the formal procedures of excommunication, shunning and avoidances, we might ask if the power of the sacred curse remains a viable tool for correction, discipline and authority within the Church today. If we answer in the affirmative, then we must first look at the theological implications of sacred curses and killing prayers on our understanding of those important doctrines related to soteriology, harmartiology and other related doctrines. This becomes the basis of the next chapter.
Chapter Three

The Theology of Sacred Curses and Killing Prayers within the New Testament

And Peter, remembering, said to Him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered away.”

Mark 11:21

3.1 Introduction to Chapter Three

For many people, prayer may seem as natural as breathing. Most people pray to some divine power or god over the course of life. Our hopes, fears, concerns and other life related issues comprise the stuff of prayer. Individuals often pray with some directed focus, petitioning, interceding, praising and thanking the Almighty. It is through the institutionalization of such prayers that a religious system of belief and practice can often be defined.

Prayer reflects what we believe in and hope for, and over the course of time, prayer contributes to the foundations for theological and ethical thinking. We pray in accordance with our understanding of God and the way we should conduct our personal lives, even when such prayer is not in keeping with some strict orthodoxy.

This chapter examines the ‘sacred curses’ and ‘killing prayers’ found within the New Testament and the subsequent theology and ethics implied by these prayers and exhortations. In the last chapter, an examination of seven key Hebrew words for “cursing” helped to establish a basis for an enquiry into the New Testament regarding the influence those words have made on the idea of a sacred curse.

The ideas pertaining to a sacred curse are resident in the Old Testament and find pragmatic expression through the interpretation of the early Church. The ancient hermeneutic of the first Christian community involved both a literal and eschatological perspective where theology and ethics intertwined through practical living. It is with this in mind that within this chapter, we seek to determine the purpose of New Testament sacred curses as interpreted by the leadership of the early Church and the authors of the New Testament writings.
Specifically, the sacred curses and ‘killing prayers’ discovered through this process allows for some possible and meaningful categorization within the framework of faith and doctrine. These categories are defined by ‘who’ initiates the curse, the ‘genre’ that the curse is found within (Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Revelation), the object of the curse, and the doctrines affected by the curse. The following categorizations are used throughout this chapter to assist us with identifying the New Testament’s use of the sacred curse:

A) Curses Originating from Jesus

B) Curses and the Golden Rule

C) Curses Implying Predestination

D) Self-Imposed Curses

E) Curses as Punishment for Sin

F) Curses against Communities, Cities and Countries

G) Curses Due to the Rejection or Perversion of God’s Word

These categories of the sacred curse are approximate and do not necessarily stand isolated from one another and may overlap. In some instances, the curse may be levied at a community due to the sinful behavior of its citizenry, while simultaneously including a rejection or a perversion of God’s Word (such as those sacred curses against the Seven Churches in Rev 1 & 2). However, to better understand the nature of these imprecations, this thesis utilizes a simplistic approach that attempts to isolate the main emphasis, whether it is directed at a community, or due to a perversion of God’s Word,

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197 In a few cases we discover that the form of the sacred curse is that of a prayer, or an implied way of praying, advocating the destruction or harm of another person. It is this form that specifically constitutes the identity of the ‘killing prayer’ in the New Testament.

198 We can classify the sacred curses of the New Testament according to the kind of document such curses are found in, whether Gospel narrative, Church history, Epistle or Apocalyptic writings; as to whether or not they address believers or unbelievers; and by what authority these curses claim for use and practice. Did the curse originate with the authority of a recognized Apostle such as Paul, John or Peter, or is it a curse derived from the direct teachings of Jesus or some other source?
or perhaps, the rejection of the Gospel message.

By placing these categorical criteria and boundaries upon the New Testament’s sacred curses and killing prayers, we are better able to move towards some understanding of the theological and ethical implications these curses were intended to have, and to determine the importance of those curses for practice in and by the community of faith. It is through the formalization of these curses, blessings and prayers that many religious doctrines and practices often developed.

As illustrated in Chapter Two, the practice of “cursing” those who are unbelievers or enemies of the faith can be clearly traced from Old Testament writings such as the famous Imprecatory Psalms of David. The Hebrew practice of cursing unbelievers was also practiced among the other religious systems contemporary with the religion of Israel, and this practice did not cease with the emergence of

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199 Psalms 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137 and 139; all contain prayers for God’s judgment on the Psalmist’s enemies. Cf. Day, John N. “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (April-June 2002): 166—86; Also Johannes G. Vos, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms” *Westminster Theological Journal* 4:2 (May 1942), an older article but with a relevant issue; “Whether it is right for a Christian to use these Psalms in the worship of God” and subsequently, “to pray for the destruction or doom of others.” He answers these issues in the affirmative as long as they fall short of requesting the death of people (138). Also, J. Carl Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms” *Sacra* 159 (January 1981): 138-44 who studies the ethical problems of killing prayers, and questions how the spirit of vengeance can be reconciled with the precepts of the New Testament.

200 The Jewish prayer quoted at the outset of this chapter probably resulted from the explosive rise of Christianity in the first two centuries and became used as a ‘sacred curse’ against a perceived Jewish heresy. Cf. Jack P. Lewis “The Offering of Abel (Gen 4:4): A History Of Interpretation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 37* (The Evangelical Theological Society, 1994; 2002) 37:490-491. Such prayers were not unknown to the synagogue of the first and second centuries. Synagogal prayers dating between AD 150 and 300 speak to the Lord: “You received the gifts of the righteous in their generation; Abel, especially – you beheld and accepted his sacrifice.” Another prayer addresses the Lord: “And while indeed from Abel, as a devout man, you favorably received a sacrifice, from the brother-murderer Cain, you turned aside the offering as from an accursed person.” The other Abrahamic religion, Islam, also contains prayers that provide sacred curses against unbelievers and infidels at odds with the message of Mohammed. The Qur’an contains more than one instance of a “killing prayer” directed against the unbelieving, the apostate and the heretical. Perhaps the most damning of these is found in the 9th Surah, sometimes called the chapter of Repentance (Al Tawbah-from 9:104; “Know they not that Allah doth accept repentance from His votaries and receives their gifts of charity, and that Allah is verily He, the Oft Returning Most Merciful?”) or the Disavowal or Immunity (from Bara ‘ah, the opening word of the 9th Surah). This Surah does not open with the prayer of Bismillah, “In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful” distinguishing it from all the other Surahs (there are 113 Surahs collectively in the Qur’an) due to the violence directed in it’s exhortation. Samples from this Surah include;” But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them, and lie in wait for them in every
Christianity.  

It is important to remember that the earliest Bible of the ancient Church was the Old Testament, and that within a century after the Resurrection of Christ, the writings of the New Testament evolved to replace the Old Testament’s authority. These writings were based on the recollected sayings and works of Jesus of Nazareth and early Church leadership which grew through aggressive evangelism. As that evolution occurred, the tensions between God’s love and law were experientially realized.

The Christian witness of God’s love in Christ was accompanied with stern exhortations, warnings, sacred curses and killing prayers that were directed against any who sought to nullify the work of the Cross. However, these curses were not isolated to just the work and teachings of the disciples of Jesus. Indeed, the Lord himself had uttered certain curses and taught the disciples to do the same. The missionary movement of the earliest Christians was tempered by the understanding that God’s love was not divorced from God’s judgments.

3.2 Foundations for Sacred Curses in the Gospels

Within the Gospels there are numerous instances of the sacred curse and killing prayer being used. The categories for the curses in the Gospels include each of the aforementioned categories for this study.

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201 Cf. Lester K Little, *Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) 59. “The principal source of the clamor…was the Hebrew Bible, especially Deuteronomy and the Psalms. Considerably less important, although not insignificant as a source, was the Christian Bible.” Whereas the Old Testament provides the foundational ground-work for such discipline, it is the New Testament’s interpretation of that discipline that amplifies the importance of the sacred curse as a continuing means and method of discipline.
Curses Originating from Jesus in the Gospels

Within the four Gospels there is one very clear example of a spoken curse made by the Lord Jesus Christ. In Matthew 21:19-22 we read;

“And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither away so soon?” So Jesus answered and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”

Mark’s account in 11:13-26 is longer;

“And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response Jesus said to it, “Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.” And His disciples heard it. So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. Then He taught, saying to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a den of thieves!” And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching. When evening had come, He went out of the city. Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter, remembering, said to Him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away.” So Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray,
believe that you receive them, and you will have them. And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

The story is missing in Luke and John, and presents differing details in these two accounts. Matthew’s story illustrates the power of faith and prayer with the fig tree used as an object lesson. The disciples are surprised at the quick results that come with the curse as the tree withers away, presumably before their very eyes.

Mark’s account of the curse is interspersed with Jesus going to Jerusalem to confront the corrupt money-changers in the Temple. It is followed with an ethical mandate to forgive others when prayer is made to God. In Mark’s account of the cursing of the fig tree, the withering of the tree occurs over a period of time and is noticed by the disciples the next morning. Some see Mark’s use of the fig tree as a symbol or metaphor for Israel and the “curse” as the judgment of God upon an unrepentant and unbelieving Nation.

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202 NKJV
203 Commenting on Matthew 21:19, Robertson observes; “Strictly speaking this is a prediction, not a prohibition or wish as in Mk 11:14 (optative phagoi).” He goes on to point out that; “the double negative ou mê with the aorist subjunctive (or future indicative) is the strongest kind of negative prediction. It sometimes amounts to a prohibition like ou and the future indicative.” Cf. A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol.1 (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 1973).
204 The fig-tree is occasionally used as a symbol for the Nation-State of Israel (Cf. Jeremiah 24:1-3; Hosea 9:10: Micah 7:1 where figs are symbolic of people). Mt 24:32 incorporates the analogy of Israel which is “like” a fig-tree. Evangelicals often point to the prophetic picture of the fig-tree to discern the predictive stages impacting Jerusalem. Cf. Marie Noonan Sabin, Reopening the Word: Reading Mark as Theology in the Context of Early Judaism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 70; “Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Micah use the image of the barren fig tree as a metaphor for Israel when it has turned away from God (Isa. 28:4, Jer. 8:13, Hos. 9:10, Micah 7:1). By the same token, they describe the End Time as a coming age when the fig tree will bear fruit and each person will have his own vine and sit ‘under his own fig tree.’ The latter phrase first appears in 1 Kings 4:25 where it describes the prosperity of the days of Solomon; it is subsequently used as the image of future well-being in Isaiah 36:16, Joel 2:22, and Zechariah 3:10. The blossoming fig tree also appears in the Song of Songs as the sign that the winter is over and a new spring has come (2:13). When the fig tree appears here, therefore, revived and blooming, it points not to the destruction of Israel but to its End Time restoration.” However, Cf. John N. Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics” Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 159 Dallas Theological Seminary; 2002; 2003). 159:183; “this cursing of the fig tree was an imprecation against faithless and fruitless Israel, who had so stubbornly rejected Him.”
The use of the sacred curse in these Gospel stories illustrates the power of prayer and the authority of the believer that is accessible to persons of faith. This is instructive for a theology of prayer because we have an actual instance of a curse connected with a teaching on prayer. The irony is that the command to forgive by the Lord contrasts sharply with the destructive act of cursing. The point seems to be made that prayer can simultaneously invoke curses and forgiveness when uttered by the faithful.\textsuperscript{205}

That the curse is uttered by the Lord himself establishes a precedent for the Church as a model for exercising any such destructive authority.\textsuperscript{206} But under what circumstances is this authority exercised? It seems that the qualifying factors demanding the response of a sacred curse are two-fold.

In Matthew’s account the Lord curses the fig-tree the morning following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his entry into the Temple and the expulsion of the money-changers from the Temple. This is followed by his subsequent rejection from the religious authorities who governed the Temple.

In Mark’s account, we read that the Lord cursed the fig-tree prior to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. After the cleansing of the Temple and experiencing rejection by the religious authorities Jesus and his disciples returned to the site of the tree which had withered away.\textsuperscript{207}

The two principle issues predicated by the symbolic act of cursing the fig-tree are the rejection of the Messiah by Israel, and the corruption of the religious practice in the

\textsuperscript{205} There are other interpretations advanced by those who see forgiveness and restoration as the emphasis in this “curse” Cf. Marie Noonan Sabin, Reopening the Word: Reading Mark as Theology in the Context of Early Judaism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 84; “The emphasis on forgiveness forecloses the possibility that Mark meant us to conclude that Jesus desires or approves the withering of the tree; instead, he quotes Jesus saying words that urge forgiveness and imply restoration. And forgiveness and renewal, not judgment and damnation, seem to me to be the key motifs in Mark’s Gospel as a whole.”
\textsuperscript{206} In Matthew 25:41 we read of instance where the Lord uses “cursed” to describe those who will suffer damnation in the future judgment of the world; “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”. The idea of a “cursed” people in the eschaton points to those who are unredeemed and damned.
\textsuperscript{207} That Matthew does not record the cursing of the fig-tree prior to Jesus entry into Jerusalem does not mean that the Lord did not curse the tree as recorded by Mark. Matthew is concerned with the results of the curse and summarizes the account, whereas Mark establishes the basis for the curse and gives the fuller account of what took place.
Temple. These two issues become more prominently elevated in the early Church and provide occasion for the sacred curse to occur again.208

Because the curse was issued upon the fig-tree, we might question whether or not such a curse should be exercised on people. There is an eschatological meaning behind the cursing of the fig-tree in that a judgment from God is impending upon unbelieving Israel. That judgment may have been fulfilled in the overthrow of Jerusalem in 70 AD through the invasion of Titus. If this is the case, then the curse of Jesus becomes a prophetic pronouncement against unbelieving Israel and illustrates the consequence of Israel’s choice concerning Jesus.209

On the other hand, we are also informed about the corrupt practices of the money-changers who have turned the Temple of God into a ‘den of thieves.’ Should the cursing of the fig-tree be directed against such corruption, then the actual sense of a sacred curse is that of an immediate judgment. The long term effects of that judgment should not be confused with any eschatological doctrine designating the national status of Israel in the ‘end times.” In other words, the deadness of the fig tree is symbolic of the deadness of the Jewish religious system that pretended to worship God but was instead solely interested in making money. Both of these issues demanding the curse of Jesus have relevance for the Church today and will be addressed in the next chapter.

Curses and the Golden Rule in the Gospels

The use of κατηράσω in these accounts is related to the use of καταρωμένου210 in Luke 6:28; ”bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you” (cf. Mt 5:44). But here, the teaching of Jesus in Matthew and Luke points to an ethical reversal of the Law’s talionic justice and punishments (Ex 21:23-25; Lev 24:19-20), thereby raising

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208 See the chart at the end of this chapter for a list of similar curses.
209 This rejection is understood by dispensationalists as a necessary and prophetic fulfillment of Scripture which allows the Gentile nations to come into the promises of God. This “parenthesis” in the time-line of salvation is a break in the history of Israel’s blessing so that the heathen nations might experience the “engrafting” of God for salvation. In some sense of the word, Israel becomes ‘cursed’ in order for the Gentiles to become blessed. This is a reversal, or at least a suspension, of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3) and is temporary in nature.
210 καταρωμένου is a verb participle present middle or passive deponent accusative masculine plural from καταρωμαι meaning “to curse or wish evil upon.”
the preference of blessing over that of cursing.

The curse that is levied by others is not to be returned according to Jesus. Instead, we are to refrain from “cursing” and actually return a “blessing” thereby elevating the new ethic of the Kingdom of God above the ethic of vengeance. Such “blessing” may have occurred in the form of prayer, or as a verbal response to those who publicly uttered a “curse.”

The ethical choice to bless has associations with the Golden Rule.\textsuperscript{211} We are to “do unto others as we would have them do to us” (Mt 7:12 & Lk 6:31).\textsuperscript{212} However, it is one thing to suggest an elevated ethic of blessing over cursing; it is another thing to practice such an ethic. The severity of Jesus teaching is often missed by readers today. This is evidenced in another variation of a curse given by Jesus in the eschaton which occurs due to the ethical failure of honoring the Golden Rule. This curse of Jesus is found in Mt 25:41-46 which reads;

“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me. And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

\textsuperscript{211} Cf. Jeffrey Wattles, \textit{The Golden Rule} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 68; “The emphasis on the golden rule as a leading ethical principle, however, derived primarily from the New Testament repetition of Hillel’s teaching that the golden rule is the quintessence of the law and the prophets.”

\textsuperscript{212} Over the course of time, the Talmud mediated talionic punishments from the severity of “an eye for an eye” to that of monetary compensation, but Jesus eliminates any compensatory act by commanding the giving of blessing to offending parties. Cf. J.K. Miklisanski, in: JBL, 66 (1947), 295–303. Also Flavius Josephus, \textit{Antiquities of the Jews} Book 4 Chapter 8, provides ample evidence that talionic justice was still invoked in the first century.
The future judgment of those damned (οἱ κατηραμένοι)\textsuperscript{213} will occur by reason of their rejection of the Christ and the ethical failures of people who remain unconcerned with the well-being of others. This becomes another criteria for exercising the “sacred curse” of God.\textsuperscript{214} The Church must recognize the difference between its act of confession and its acts of compassion. Simply confessing Christ does not necessarily mean that we obey Him.

Another mention of a “curse” seems probable in the admonition of the Lord to refrain from calling someone “raca.”\textsuperscript{215} Persons who break that admonition are endangered with the curse of the fires of Hell (Mt 5:22) and eternal damnation. This instruction supports a certain dimension of respect for others, as well as compassion and mercy. God’s judgment falls upon those who violate such respect and mercy.\textsuperscript{216}

\textsuperscript{213} There are differing views regarding who those on the left hand are; Meyer argued that they were Christians who failed in their duties of love and charity; Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, \textit{Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew}, 6th German edition trans. and ed. by Peter Christie and William Stewart, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879) 2:178–79; Dean Alford suggests that these are unregenerate peoples; Alford, \textit{Greek Testament}, 1:256; A.B. Bruce thought these were the condemned unbelievers who mistreated believers; Alexander Balmain Bruce, “The Synoptic Gospels,” in \textit{The Expositor’s Greek Testament}, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll (1956 reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 1:304; Blomberg thinks this refers to the whole of humanity; Craig L. Blomberg, in vol. 22 of \textit{The New American Commentary}, ed. by David S. Dockery (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman, 1992) 742; Walvoord held to an end-time scenario that classed unbelieving Gentiles as the “goats” John F. Walvoord, \textit{Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come} (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 201.

\textsuperscript{214} Cf. Mt 25:41; Lester K. Little, \textit{Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France} (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993); “[The last of Jesus’ teaching before the events that culminated in his death was a foretelling of the Day of Judgment. He described that most grandiose scene, centered upon the throne of the Son of man, come in all his glory with a retinue of angels. Before him are gathered all the nations, and he begins to separate the sheep from the goats, the saved from the damned. The saved gather on his right hand; he praises them and invites them to receive as their inheritance the kingdom that has been prepared for them. With a symmetry that recalls Moses facing Mounts Gerizim and Ebal, he then turns to those on the left side and says: ‘Depart from me, you that are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’ (Matt. 25:31-46).” James addresses this as well in his polemical message (Jm 2:15-16). Wattles recognizes the seeming paradox; “Therefore, whoever would take the initial, obvious sense of Jesus’ golden rule as its final sense faces a challenge when interpreting the rule in context. Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7 and Luke’s comparable Sermon on the Plain (6.20-49) may appear to associate the rule with inferior standards: Give to others, or face the punishment of God.” Jeffrey Wattles, \textit{The Golden Rule} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 52.

\textsuperscript{215} Raka; an indeclinable form from an Aramaic word meaning ‘fool’ or ‘empty-headed and senseless.’

The early Church taught varying forms of the Golden Rule in response to their understanding of Jesus teachings. The great Apostle writes an addendum to this teaching of Jesus in Romans 12:20-13:1; “Therefore, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Paul alludes to the teaching of Jesus as a means of bringing conviction into the consciences of the unbeliever while fulfilling the principle of the Golden Rule (Prov 25:22).

Through the use of narrative and exhortation, the sacred curse has an eschatological value while simultaneously serving as a functional means for discipline within the community of faith. The parables and stories utilizing the sacred curse as a reminder of God’s future righteous judgment are translated into the daily lives of the faithful through the epistles. These letters are designed to engage behaviors within the greater Christian community and promote a sense of holiness and righteous living. This then becomes a means for witnessing the power of God in the life of the Christian community. Through prayers, letters, exhortations and commands, the reinforcement of holy living occurs.

Curses Implying Predestination in the Gospels

The belief that God’s “curse” would selectively befall the worst of people was commonly held in Jesus time. In the Gospels, there are two instances of an implied “curse” occasioned by some sin not necessarily committed by those who are the victims of the curse. In these stories the doctrine of predestination and generational accountability for sin come into view.

In the first story, Luke records the teaching of Jesus regarding the sudden deaths of Galileans and “eighteen on whom the tower of the Siloam fell” (Lk 13:1-5). These stories are meant to challenge the disciple’s belief that the untimely deaths of the eighteen were due to the severity of their sins, and presumably, the severity of the sacred curse that comes with sin. The Lord corrects his disciple’s faulty understanding by telling them that such destruction will come upon any who do not “repent.”
The idea that God can and will punish people who fall into disfavor with His Law generates numerous teachings concerning the fear of the Lord. Even within the Church today there are teachings advocating the untimely and early deaths of those Christians who somehow backslide into grievous sin and remain unrepentant.217 This teaching provides the basis for believing that there are some sins that fall beyond the grace of God thereby demanding judgment.218 Jesus places everyone on the same level ground with these stories.

A second instance of similar debate among the disciples occurs in the story of the man “born blind” (Jn 9:1-3). The question arises regarding the source of the man’s condition, which is presumably due to some sin, either committed by the blind man’s parents or by the blind man himself. The response of the Lord is that neither the man nor his parents sinned, but that the blindness was caused so that the “works” of God would be revealed to him.219 There are two immediate issues raised by this passage of Scripture.

The first issue concerns the ethical question of the moral rightness of human suffering being used to glorify God. The categorical imperative that prohibits the use of someone as a means to an end, whereby the person is not an end in and of himself, suggests that God is Himself somehow immoral in causing blindness to occur so that some work by God might also occur.220 The issue of God’s predetermined will in the

217 This doctrine is widely held in Pentecostal, Charismatic and Holiness churches who base the doctrine on 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” Cf. Heb 6:1-11 etc. which may impact the doctrine of soteriology.
218 Cf. 1 John 5:16; “If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.”
219 Some parallels to this story can be found in Acts 3:1-10 regarding the healing of a man who was born “lame from his mother’s womb.” In this story, Simon Peter and John are used to bring healing into the man and the resultant glorification of God. Also Jn 5:1-13 below.
220 Kant’s categorical imperative addresses both the universality of an ethical (moral action) in the First Maxim and the importance of treating persons as an end in and of themselves in the Second Maxim. Cf. Immanuel Kant, translated by James W. Ellington. Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals 3rd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co.; [1785] 1993) 30. What theologians must argue is that God, the
lives of people is addressed and answered by Paul in the same manner (Rom 9:11-24).

The second issue is the notion that a “curse” befalling a person might be traced back to the generational curse found in the Law (Ex 20:5) whereby God “visits” iniquity through a prolonged judgment which extends beyond the death of the guilty into the lives of those who are the progeny of the offender.221 In this sense, the children suffer the consequences of the parent’s sins. If we look at the question of why innocent people suffer from seemingly random curses designed for the guilty offender, we might arrive at the conclusion that a generational sin is somehow in play. This notion is not uncommon in many churches today, and has given rise to ‘deliverance’ ministries where prayer is made over afflicted persons and curses are ‘broken’ through the Name of Jesus Christ.

There is an unwillingness to admit the sovereignty of God in the rational logic of man that asks, “Why must the innocent, the good, suffer?”222

Self-Imposed Curses in the Gospels

This understanding of a “sacred curse” is reinforced by Matthew who places such a “curse” into the mouths of the Lord’s accusers (Mt 27:24–26);

“When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it.’ And all the people answered and said, ‘His

Creator, is not subject to the laws of human morality in the same manner as people. This is the argument Paul advances in Romans 9:11-24.

221 Cf. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Signer, eds., Christianity in Jewish Terms (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000) 295; “The Torah speaks of ‘visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children’ (Ex. 34:7), a point displayed clearly early in the first story after the expulsion from the garden, when Adam’s first son Cain murders his brother Abel simply out of envy. If Jews do not want to use Augustine’s phrase ‘original sin’ to describe the conditions in which human life naturally transpires after Adam, they can be referred to the words of Genesis 4:7 — ‘Sin crouches at the door’—or Genesis 8:21: ‘The devising (yetser) of man’s heart are evil from his youth. Judaism also has a Hebrew term that, like ‘original sin,’ is suggestive of a state or condition that limits the human ability to be in free contact with God. This term is ‘galut,’ exile.”

222 This was, in part, the dilemma of Job. Many have wrestled unsuccessfully with the idea that God could allow or cause a righteous person so much pain and suffering. One of the more interesting attempts with such wrestling comes from the pen of C.G. Jung, Answer to Job. Cf. David Sedgwick, “Answer to Job Revisited: Jung on the Problem of Evil”; San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal 21, no. 3 (2002): 5–21. San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal 21, no. 3 (2002): 5–21.
blood be on us and on our children.’”^^223

It becomes clear that the Jewish community believed in something akin to a generational ‘sacred curse’ as these words demonstrate. But because they believed that what they were doing was right in the sight of God, there is little doubt that this “sacred curse” was never considered as something that would actually come to pass.

Any theological legitimacy for believing in a generational curse must include the initial transgression of our first human parents and the ongoing continuation of the curse pronounced by God in Genesis 3:14-17.^^224 The concept of “original sin” carries over from such an understanding whereby the human condition is so affected by the results of the Fall (Gen 3:1-15) that all people suffer in some sense from a ‘generational curse.’^^225 The human condition is determined by the first curse in human experience.

^^223 Cf. Later in the history of the early Church the Sadducees bitterly complain against the Apostles. Cf. Acts 5:28-29; “And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, ‘Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!’” The controversy over this curse was recently high-lighted by the film, The Passion of the Christ which attempted to give an accurate portrayal of the events of the Crucifixion as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel (to the point that the actors actually used biblical Aramaic in their acting dialogues). The outrage by the American Jewish community over the inclusion of Mt 27:24-26 forced the producers to edit the verbiage from their scripts.

^^224 Cf. Heb 7:9-10 which approximates a pre-born action of righteousness by Levi “who… paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.” Paul argues that the consequence of sin extends from one man to all men in Rom 5:14, and writes; “even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam.” The consequence of sin’s curse, death, extends to all human beings (I Cor 15:22) just as the blessing of Christ’s righteousness is now offered to all.

^^225 Cf. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Signer, eds., Christianity in Jewish Terms (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000) 294; “Jews usually think that Judaism lacks parallels to these Christian notions of sin as an evil condition and of atonement and redemption as divine gifts. Humans are not mired in a ‘state’ of sin; they naturally can choose to do the good (Deut 30:14), which is not far off from them (Deut 30:11). They therefore are in no need of an atoning redeemer. The rabbis of the first six centuries of the common era who developed rabbinic Judaism address sin not so much as a condition or state but as a transgression of the elaborate system of ritual, civil, criminal, and ethical mitsvot or commandments laid down in the written Torah and developed in the Talmud and its commentaries…. The simple Jewish view is that Christianity begins with a world plagued by sin and ends with Christ as savior; Judaism begins with a world as ‘very good’ (Gen. 1:31) and ends with Torah as its complement and Shabbat as its completion (Gen. R. on Gen. 2:12). Lacking a notion of original sin means that sin, atonement, and repentance are not the central concerns for Jews that they are for Christians.”
Death is the result of that curse (Rom 5:12-21; I Cor15:22).

Ignorance of God and His Law also constitutes grounds for being “accursed” by the Divine. The religious leadership of Jesus’ time considered many, if not all the people outside religious orders as “cursed” from God. John records; “This rabble knows nothing about the Law -- they are damned.”

Knowledge of God’s Law is the pre-condition for blessing (Ps 119:1-6; Lk 11:28). Those who are immersed in the knowledge of the Lord are rightly blessed, but those who know not his Word are doomed.

Curses as Punishment for Sin in the Gospels

The idea that sin can cause sickness, lameness or some other terrible ailment is not foreign to the greater concept of the “curse of sin” in Holy Scripture. After healing a certain lame man (Jn 5:1-14) Jesus tells the healed man; “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.”

Scripture reinforces the destructive consequence of breaking God’s Law with the

226 Some would rightly suggest that the pain of child labor and the sweat of cultivating crops for sustenance comprise the curse delivered by God in Genesis 3:16-19. Others find a “prescriptive” or “prophetic” word instead—cf. Roger Nicole, “Biblical Egalitarianism and the Inerrancy of Scripture” Priscilla Papers, Vol. 20, No. 2. Spring 2006; “Whatever we may do to alleviate God’s curse is legitimate in the matter of subordination, no less than in providing some relief from the pains of the delivery of children and the sweat in cultivating the ground and earning a living.”

227 NJB translates as “damned.” The NKJV translates; “But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.” (Jn 7:49). Impacting our understanding of soteriology, the sacred curse in Genesis is answered by the Cross on behalf of those who “believe” in the Son of God (Jn 3:15-17).

228 Many present day Pentecostal fellowships teach that sickness is the result of sin, thereby placing the burden of one’s health on their ability to obey the Law of God. The holiness movements embraced a doctrine of perfectionism that often resulted in teachings advocating additional “blessings” from on High. The “double cure” for the sin-sick soul was framed within the doctrines of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and, occasionally, a “baptism in fire” which comprised a necessary condition to the work of the Cross for the truly regenerated Christian. The great hymn by Augustus M. Toplady, ‘Rock of Ages’ promotes this teaching in the first stanza;

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood,
from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure;
save from wrath and make me pure.”

229 We have a similar saying found in John 8:11 where the Lord Jesus tells the woman caught in the act of adultery to “go and sin no more.”
curse of sin. Those who obey the Law of God are subject to protection from the curse, which is the harmful consequence of sin.

There is an implied immediacy to God’s judgment in this passage. Those who break God’s Law are subject to something harmful occurring in this life, as well as the next. Judgment is not only reserved for the end of the world, but can be executed today. What is important to note here is the responsibility of the person to remain free from such discipline. That requires obedience to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. Those who maintain such obedience remain free from the fear of God’s wrath upon sin.

**Curses against Communities, Cities and Countries in the Gospels**

The Gospels include a number of “woes” that can be construed as “curses” but most probably should be understood as exclamations of distress and warning. Did Jesus curse the cities of Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum (Mt 11: 20-24; Lk 10:13-15) or did he merely lament their unbelief while warning them of the judgment to come?  

If he cursed these cities, we might ask whether or not the sacred curse was an immediate judgment on the unbelief of the citizens of those cities after encountering and rejecting the Word of God, or if the curse only had eschatological consequences. If we assume an eschatological consequence to unbelief in the Word of God, then the obvious “curse” resulting in the damnation of, not only these cities, but the entire world can be posited.  

But how does one curse a city? Examples from the Old Testament prophets

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230 **oὐλοι** is translated as “woe” 33 times in the NKJV New Testament; 12 in Mt; 2 in Mk and 13 in Lk as well as 1 time in I Cor and in Jude, and 4 times in Revelation. It is an expression indicating direness and despair. On one occasion it may indicate a divine ‘curse’ (I Cor 9:16) as a consequence of not “preaching the Gospel” but other interpretations exist suggesting a penalty or some personal grief caused by a lack of obedience to the Gospel call. Most often it is used as an expression to “warn” those who are addressed.

231 It was an assumed belief that the eschatological destiny of a city so cursed was that of certain damnation. Quoting Deut 13:14, *Mishnah-Tractate Sanhedrin 11:4-6* explains; “the townsfolk of an apostate town have no portion in the world to come, as it is said, ‘certain base fellows sons for Belial have gone out from the midst of thee and have drawn away the inhabitants of their city.’”

232 This is the meaning behind Jude who writes; “And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (Jude 1:6-7).
abound. The question the Church must answer is whether or not whole communities can or should be “cursed” in like manner. There is an instance where Jesus is rejected by a certain Samaritan village, and James and John enquire as to whether or not they should call down fire to destroy that unbelieving community (Lk 9:54). At this the Lord rebukes the disciples and tells them that He has come, “not to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” There is also the Old Testament precedence of negotiating with God through His mercy and righteousness as found in the story of Abraham who interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah. Through such intercession, the curse of God upon the wicked might be abated when the righteous intervene.

_Curses Due to the Rejection or Perversion of God’s Word in the Gospels_

The immediacy of judgment upon those who rejected the Gospel message is signified by “shaking off the dust” from the feet of the messengers while making a testimony of that judgment (Mt 10:14; Mk 6:11; Lk 9:5, 10:11 and Acts 13:51) against unbelievers. This “curse” implies a judgment by God on what people believe and how they respond to what they believe. In this sense, doctrine drives ethics. Belief is the foundation for behavior. The prophetic act of shaking the dust from ones feet is symbolic of God shaking off those who reject His messengers, because in so doing, they reject God Himself.

_3.2.1 Summary_

The theological implications of the ‘sacred curse’ as recorded in the Gospels impact our understanding of God (theology proper), our understanding of man (anthropology) and the issues of salvation (soteriology) tied to predestination and redemption. The problem of sin (harmartiology), sanctification and piety (prayer and conduct), as well as eschatology, are also effected through the power of the “sacred curse” found in the Gospels.

The pertinent questions regarding God’s willingness to judge people through a

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233 Gen. 18:16-33
234 See the contrast of blessing with a similar idiom in Isaiah 52:7 and Romans 10:15.
“sacred curse” with immediate and eternal consequences provides some foundation for the ongoing practice of the sacred curse as a means of discipline within the Church today.

It is apparent that the teachings of the Lord regarding the power of prayer, whether it be for forgiving others or for ‘moving mountains’ and destroying ‘fig trees’ is a power given to and for believers. The propagation of the Gospel message is accompanied by an authority to levy a sacred curse upon unbelievers who reject the Good News. The world is subject to the community of faith when it comes to the proclamation of truth. The rejection of that truth will most certainly result in penalties ascribed to the sacred curse of God, whether in this life or the one to come.

3.3 Foundations for Sacred Curses in the Acts of the Apostles

The Acts of the Apostles includes numerous instances of sacred curses and killing prayers. Curses implying predestination, self-imposed curses, curses as a punishment for sin, and for rejecting or perverting God’s Word can be found within its pages.

Curses Implying Predestination in the Acts of the Apostles

Luke’s history of the early Church is filled with instances of harsh judgments and sacred curses. The opening chapter of Acts tells us that Judas was predestined to betray the Lord and suffer death, thereby establishing the basis for a predestined curse resulting in his death;

“Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus” (Acts 1:16).

Peter directly ties this prophecy in the Psalm of David to the actions of Judas.235 The Scripture is again utilized as the bedrock of Providence;

“For it is written in the book of Psalms: ‘Let his dwelling place be desolate, And let no one live in it’; and, ‘Let another take his office’” (Acts 1:20).236

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236 Cf. Psalms 69:25 and 109:8-15. The sacred curse found in Psalm 109 reads; “Let his children be fatherless, And his wife a widow. Let his children continually be vagabonds, and beg; Let them seek their
Finally, the record of Luke tells us that Judas has gone to “his own place” indicating that the betrayer of the Lord has perished in Hell (Acts 1:25). The Apostles’ acknowledgement of a prophetic curse upon Judas comes through their quoting of the Scriptures.

On the heels of this acknowledgment of a curse, they pray to the Lord and invoke the name of Judas who has gone to “his own place” as a statement of recognition regarding the open bishopric. They request the Lord’s favor in selecting a suitable replacement and they cast lots which result in the selection of Matthias, which is itself a matter of faith in the sovereign, predestined will of God.

The fear of the Lord was pervasive in the early Church, and the life and death of Judas Iscariot served as a reminder of the Lord’s ability to fulfill Scripture prophecies. This narrative establishes a dependence of the early Church upon the Old Testament writings as authoritative and prophetic. There is an understanding of providential intent in these Scriptures. This becomes a basis for the belief that through the Word of God the Voice of God can be heard and discerned.

Self-Imposed Curses in the Acts of the Apostles

The antagonism of the Jewish unbelievers against the Apostle Paul grieved him...
no end. This antagonism included the adversaries of Paul taking a vow that invited the “sacred curse” of God upon themselves except they kill the Apostle;
“…some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, ‘We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near.’” 239

We must imagine that their vow not to ‘eat or drink’ until they had accomplished their morbid task was understood that either Paul would die or these Jews would perish. Going before God and making a vow that calls upon the Almighty to witness, we can assume that they also called upon God for help in their killing mission. There is no doubt that they thought themselves right in the sight of the Law, and the Lord of the Law, which prescribed death to heretics of old for departing from the paths of truth. 240

However, Paul would never fall into their evil trap, and he would live to testify to the power of Christ to many more in his lifetime.

Curses as Punishment for Sin in the Acts of the Apostles

At the conclusion of Acts Chapter Four, we read about the community fund which is supported by the generous gifts of those who are able to give. One such person is Barnabas who has a field and sells it. The money he makes from the sale of his possession is given to the faith community and becomes the possession of the Church.

239 Acts 23:12-15, 21. There may be reference to this vow in chapter 25:2-3 where the high priest makes petition to Festus to transport Paul from Caesarea to Jerusalem with the intent of ambushing and killing the Apostle.

240 Cf. Lev 27:29; Judges 9:27; Josh 7:15; Neh 10:29. The Mishnah has an interesting teaching on killing ‘non-priests’ who presume to serve in the Temple—cf. Mishnah-Tractate Sanhedrin 9:6; “A non-priest who served in the temple — R. Aqiba says, ‘he is put to death by strangling’ (Num. 18:7) and sages say, ‘he is put to death at the hands of heaven.’”
Then, in Chapter Five, we read about Ananias and Sapphira who also sell a possession with the intent of supporting the faith community. But instead of giving all that came from the sale of the property, they secretly hold back some of the proceeds. This is discovered by Peter through the agency of the Holy Spirit, and as a consequence, both the husband and wife die a sudden death.

The first death comes as a surprise. Peter is addressing Ananias regarding the deception he has propounded against the Holy Spirit, and as he is speaking, the man drops dead. The second death is different in that Peter meets Sapphira some three hours after the death of her husband (Acts 5:7). Unknown to Sapphira, her husband has already passed from this life into the next. Peter soon ushers Sapphira into the next world with the statement; “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.”

After hearing those words, Sapphira “immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last.” Then we read that “the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband” (Acts 5:9-10). While this cannot be categorized as a killing prayer, it is certainly a killing curse. This account in Acts comprises the first Scripture record of deaths in the earliest Church!

An intended consequence of this and other sacred curses and killing prayers is the expanded consciousness of people’s responsibilities in the presence of a holy God. The “fear of the Lord” swept across the early Church upon the news of this sacred judgment against two of their own.

The theological impact of this curse points to the nature of God as a righteous and willing Judge over the lives of those called to be the Church. That God could kill

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241 We often hear that Stephen was the first martyr, which is technically correct. But the very first recorded deaths ascribed to the Jerusalem Church occurred here in Acts and that by the hand of God through Peter!

people in the Church due to their grievous sins is supported here.\textsuperscript{243} It also lends support to Ecclesiology and Church discipline.

Right behavior is required in the Body of Christ. Finally, there is something to be said about the oversight of the bishop in a given fellowship. The polity of a Church is necessarily protected by those appointed as overseers in fellowship. Does God reveal the sins of people who are submitted under pastors that ‘walk with God’? If so, can God grant power for severe discipline of those Church members who subvert fellowship?

It seems that if we accept the story of Ananias and Sapphira as factual, then there may be a lethal authority given to anointed and faithful pastors to ensure good order and discipline in the local community of faith. The other option in answering these questions is to admit that this event occurred in the early church but that a cessation of such powers has long since been the norm.

As stated earlier, Peter may not have realized the effect of his words while first discussing the issue with Ananias, but he certainly understood the consequence that awaited Sapphira, and he did not hesitate to pronounce the sacred curse that resulted in her untimely death.\textsuperscript{244}

The Book of Acts suggests that God is both willing and capable of executing punishments which lead to personal harm and death. This is implied in the story of King Herod’s death (Acts 12:22-23). In this gruesome account, Herod receives the adoring praises of his people as they elevate him to the status of deity;

“And the people kept shouting, ‘The voice of a god and not of a man!’ Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God.

\textsuperscript{243} Cf. fn. 99. The idea that people can be taken “home” through death, and that earlier than what might normally be expected due to sin, seems supported by this account in the early Church. Cf. I Cor 11:30. According to the biblical accounts of the Old Testament, the Lord killed people who displeased Him (cf. Gen 38:7, 10 etc).

\textsuperscript{244} A cursory study of I Peter 5:1-10 seems to indicate a softening approach to Church discipline in the aged Apostle Peter’s ministry. One wonders if the events surrounding the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira impacted his later years.
And he was eaten by worms and died.”

Scripture informs us that Herod did not give God the glory and an angel of the Lord “struck” Herod with some loathsome disease which eventually consumed him.

The ‘sacred curse’ of God is not dependent upon the utterances of the Church, but can be initiated at the pleasure of God. It is noteworthy that the King represents the ruling civil authority, the power of the nation state, and that such powers are still subject to the authority and discipline of God.

This becomes an important point for our discussion in the following chapter as we seek to determine the boundaries of the Church alongside the State in the exercise of authority and discipline.

Another instance within the Acts of the Apostles regarding the belief in God’s severe judgment for sin occurred after Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta. According to this account, Paul was gathering sticks for a fire when a poisonous viper

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245 Lange notes that the word “immediately” is “an awful appendage to the acclamation of the people, illustrating the saying: ‘He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision’ (Ps 2:4).” He then goes on to compare Peter who is ‘rescued’, and Herod who is struck down by angels. Cf. Peter Lange, A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, 12 Vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1960) Vol. 4, 254. It is noteworthy that the death of the King follows quickly upon the death of the Apostle James. Vincent writes; “While the martyrdom of Stephen is described at length, that of James, the first martyr among the apostles, is related in two words.” Cf. Marvin Vincent, New Testament Word Studies 4 Vols. (Peabody, MD: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984).

246 Little writes; “A letter sent by a group of Anglo-Saxon bishops to King Aethelbald of Mercia (716-757) warns the king against following the ways of his predecessor, who was notorious for his greed and violence in dealing with ecclesiastical lands and personnel: ‘While he sat feasting amid his companions he was suddenly stricken in his sins with madness by an evil spirit, who had seduced him into rash defiance of the law of God. So without repentance or confession, raving mad, talking with devils and curses [abominans] the priests of God, he passed on from this life to the torments of hell.’ Cf. Lester K. Little, Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). Vincent’s comments on this verse are interesting: “Eaten of worms (σκωληκόβρωτος -Acts 12:23 BGT). Only here in New Testament. Of Pherezia, queen of Cyrene, distinguished for her cruelties, Herodotus says: ‘Nor did Pherezia herself end her days happily. For on her return to Egypt from Libya, directly after taking vengeance on the people of Barca, she was overtaken by a most horrid death. Her body swarmed with worms, which ate her flesh while she was still alive.’ The term, as applied to disease in the human body, does not occur in any of the medical writers extant. Theophrastus, however, uses it of a disease in plants. The word is used by medical writers of intestinal worms. Compare the account of the death of Antiochus Epiphanes, the great persecutor of the Jews. ‘So that the worms rose up out of the body of this wicked man, and whiles he lived in sorrow and pain, his flesh fell away, and the filthiness of his smell was noisome to all his army’ (2 Macc. ix. 9). Scylla, the Roman dictator, is also said to have suffered from a similar disease.”
suddenly emerged and fastened itself to Paul’s hand (Acts 28:4). Upon seeing this, the natives of that island said that;
“No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow him to live.”

In this regard, the natives believed in the supernatural and harmful fate awaiting any who tampered with divine ‘justice.’ This understanding lends itself to the idea of a sacred curse that cannot be escaped when certain violations of God and nature occur by errant man. Paul’s ongoing good health convinced the heathen that he was a ‘god’ of some sort, and Paul was most probably quick to correct that line of thinking.247

Curses Due to the Rejection or Perversion of God’s Word in the Acts of the Apostles

The early Church grew rapidly as a consequence of Pentecost and the salvation of some three thousand souls in one day. With the sudden infusion of people into the otherwise cloistered community of faith, there came the problems of the world.

Christian fellowship organized around the hope of the Parousia and a communal order of life ensued. An end times expectation rooted in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ created an expectant atmosphere of surprise, challenge and change.248

The preaching of the Apostles began to “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) and with it came the outrage of those religious authorities charged with keeping it aright. The first instance of the Apostles being arrested and questioned by the Sanhedrin Council resulted in the command not to “speak or teach in the Name” of Jesus (Acts 4:18) upon penalty of severe punishment.249

247 This was not the first time people had claimed Paul to be a ‘god.’ Cf. Acts 14:11-18
248 Cf. Charles L. Holman, Till Jesus Comes: Origins of Christian Apocalyptic Expectation (Peabody, MA; Hendrickson Publisher, 1996) Holman writes; “The New Testament is eschatological. The early Church which gave us our NT saw itself as an end-time phenomenon (cf. I Cor 10:11; Heb 9:16; I Pet 1:20; I Jn 2:18). In fact the NT breathes the air of fulfillment of the OT prophetic (eschatological) hope; and beyond that, anticipation of a yet greater fulfillment. Therefore, to understand the eschatological orientation of the NT is essentially to understand the NT. Conversely, not to understand the eschatological origin of the NT is really not to understand the NT.”
249 The Name takes on almost magical powers. Cf. Lester K. Little, Benedictine Maledictions: Liturgical Cursing in Romanesque France (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993); “For the ancient
The Apostles report their experience to the faith community in Jerusalem with resultant prayer to God. This prayer quotes Psalm 2 which is a Psalm of victory over the heathen elements of the world. It is a Psalm of Sovereignty that mentions the “Son” who is the predestined Ruler of the universe.

The saints call upon the Lord to “look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word” (Acts 4:29) and to support their mission “by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.” (Act 4:30). At the conclusion of their prayer, the building is shaken by a powerful earthquake, signifying to the reader that God is willing and able to grant the petitions of the saints. Shortly following that prayer, all of Jerusalem would be shaken as the disciples take the Name into the furthest regions of the Empire.

The Acts of the Apostles reinforces the use of the sacred curse and killing prayer from an Old Testament mindset. We read the implied sense of a sacred curse levied against the religious authorities in the great sermon of Stephen. His argument for faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is met with opposition. He finally pronounces judgment upon his hearers in Acts 7:51-53;

“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the Hebrews, a name expressed the essential nature or character of its bearer—knowing someone's name was to know that person, and to know the name of God was to know God. Nothing existed unless it had a name. A change of name meant a change of character. One's existence continued posthumously in one's name, and thus to blot out or erase or eradicate or cut off a name meant nothing less than to destroy its bearer.” Little notes that “another standard component of maledictions was the striking out or eradication of the name or memory of the person being cursed.” Was this in the mind of the persecutors when they threatened the disciples with punishment should they persist in using the Name? Or was it perhaps in the minds of the community of faith as they prayed in the sacred Name? Within the United States there is an ongoing effort to censor those occasions that typically use the name of Jesus Christ in prayer or in words such as ‘Christmas.’ People are told that it is ‘offensive to pray in the name of Jesus’ and some are insisting on calling the Christmas tree a ‘holiday tree’ instead.
direction of angels and have not kept it.”

Through the Scriptures, the prophets foretold the killing death of the Messiah, and Stephen implies that those in his hearing audience are the very ones who have fulfilled the prophecies. This implies a destiny set apart from God, something these religious leaders hated to hear. They are accused of murdering the Messiah and Hope of Israel just as prophesied in the Scriptures. Like Herod, who turned his jealous wrath upon the infants in Bethlehem in order to prevent any threat to his throne, so the religious authorities persecuted the Christ who threatened their authority as guardians of God’s Torah.

They in turn kill Stephen (Acts 7:58-60). The proclamation of God’s Word brings blessing and cursing, peace and violence. Standing as a witness to the stoning death of Stephen is Saul of Tarsus, a young Pharisee accustomed to the harsh legalities of the Law. In a sudden turn of events, this great persecutor of the Church becomes a Christian and eventually, the most influential of the Apostles. Knowing the power of God, the Apostle Paul exercises blessings and curses throughout his ministry.

In Acts 13:44-52 we see the symbolic expression of the sacred curse delivered by Paul and Barnabas as they remove the sandals from their feet and shake the dust of condemnation upon the unbelieving Jews, telling them that the Scriptures foretold the mission of the Gospel to the Gentiles.250

This suggests that a Scripture precedent was understood to exist in the minds of the earliest evangelists regarding the intent of God to bless and to curse. They see themselves as fulfilling the conditions that promote this blessing (to the Gentiles) and cursing (to the unbelieving Jews). Because Paul reaches out to the Gentiles, the expansion of Christianity from a Jewish corner of the house of Israel moves to the entire living room of humanity.

This scheme of salvation allows the eternal councils of God to reach the lost Gentile nations who were not chosen as the receptors of the life giving oracles (Rom

250 Acts 22:22 records the unbelieving Jews throwing “dust into the air” in protest of Paul’s message. The use of dust often illustrates a judgment of grief or condemnation to death.
Paul’s action in cursing his Jewish brethren is not one he relishes, as he later relates to his Roman audience (Rom 9:1-5) where he could wish an “anathema” upon himself instead. But Paul’s reasoning powers seemed to be frustrated in the general presentation of Christ to his Jewish brethren. As Acts closes its record, we read that Paul “disputed” with the Jews for nearly two years, and finally told the unbelieving that the Holy Spirit spoke “rightly” when He said;

“Go to this people and say: ‘Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; And seeing you will see, and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.’ Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!’”(Acts 28:26-29).

The salvation message of God was prophetically realized through these Scriptures, indicating a set foreknowledge by the Living God. God’s love for humanity is not relegated to just one nation or people. The Lord is Lord of all, and His truth endures forever. He seeks the outcasts of Eden in and through the Gospel message. But some deny the grace and power of that message, and thereby incur upon themselves the sacred curse.

Dispensational theology considers this mission to the Gentiles a ‘parenthesis’ in the timeline and outworking of God’s eternal plan of salvation for Israel. The separation of the Church and Israel comprise an important dimension to dispensational hermeneutics and an understanding of soteriology. This folds into dispensational eschatology where the future of Israel and the Church remain distinct in the economy of God and only merge in the Second Advent of Christ. Even there, dispensational theologians disagree about the nature of the Millennial Kingdom, as well as whether or not two different methods of salvation exist, one for historic Israel and the other for the Church. As a consequence, modern dispensationalists have abandoned some of the rhetoric of their classic theologians (Chafer, Scofield) and revisionist dispensationalists (Walvoord, Ryrie) to initiate a progressive reinterpretation of the dispensational scheme (Bock, Blaising, Saucy) where a reexamination of the New Covenant is made. Cf. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Craig A.; Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1993); Robert L. Saucy, The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1965). For arguments against progressive dispensationalists see; Ron J Bigalke Jr., Progressive Dispensationalism (Lanham, MD: University Press, 2005).
The potential for the violence of a sacred curse is repeated in the story of Simon the Samaritan sorcerer. He is made aware of the “power of the Holy Spirit” through the preaching of Philip the deacon, and Peter. After witnessing the reception of the Holy Spirit through the Apostle’s laying on of hands, Simon attempts to purchase that power from Peter;

“Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.’ Then Simon answered and said, ‘Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me’” (Acts 8:17-24).

Peter’s words, “Your money perish with you” causes the Magician to earnestly seek Peter’s intercessory prayers for deliverance from the sacred curse. We do not know if Peter said anything other than what we have here recorded, but we are assured that

252 Known as Simon Magus (Simon the Magician) in the early Church and throughout Church history. The Vulgate (Acts 8:9) is the source for his surname “Magus” in history; “vir autem quidam nomine Simon qui ante fuerat in civitate magus seducens gentem Samariae dicens esse se aliquem magnum.” The Apocryphal Acts of Peter details the contest of powers between Magus and the Apostle in the most fantastic terms. In that story, Peter causes Magus to fall from the air after demonstrating his ability to fly. The fall breaks his leg in three places, and eventually, Simon dies at the hands of physicians. But this occurs only after the “anathema” is made by Peter. Hood records a similar tale of Saint Patrick as repeated by Muirchu, “One of the druids was insolent to the saint's face and disparaged the Christian faith in arrogant terms. Saint Patrick glared fiercely at him as he spoke, and then, cum magno clamore, confidently addressed the Lord: ‘O Lord, who can do all things and in whose power all things lie, who sent me here, may this impious man who blasphemes your name be carried up from here and die without delay.’ At these words the druid was carried high into the air and then dropped from above; he fell headfirst and crushed his skull against a rock, was smashed to pieces and died before their eyes. The heathen were frightened.” Cf. A. B. E., Hood, ed. and trans. St. Patrick: His Writings and Muirchú’s Life, with an introduction by John Morris (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978) 77 & 98.
Simon the Samaritan Magician realized the mortal peril of those words.

In a similar fashion, the Apostle Paul, while on his first great missionary journey, must confront a sorcerer who obstructs the message of Christ. A sacred curse is given by the Apostle Paul against Elymas, the sorcerer of Paphos, through a temporary blindness. This sorcerer was with “the proconsul, Sergius Paulus” (Acts 13:7) and he opposed “Barnabas and Saul” in an attempt to turn the proconsul away from the message of the Gospel Paul places a curse upon the sorcerer;

“O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.”

The Scriptures then relate that;

“immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13:10-12).

This drastic power to bring blindness upon the enemies of God’s Light comprises a judgment not unlike the judgment of the angels upon the Sodomites (Gen 19:11). The sorcerer seeks someone to lead him by the hand while the proconsul “believes” in the Word of God. Those who would oppose the message of the Gospel oppose both the messengers and the One who sends the message.

This becomes ever more the demarcation line deciding upon the use of a sacred curse or killing prayer in the Book of Acts and the New Testament. The battle over truth sets the stage for other curses and killing prayers. This battle rages even today as the Church confronts a fallen culture with the claims of Christ.

**Summary**

The “sacred curse” of God overshadows both Jew and Gentile. The Book of Acts teaches us that an understanding of such curses and killing prayers formed a part of the fabric of life and death from the earliest beginnings of the Church. The community of faith feared the Apostles of the Lord in a manner reflective of the Old Testament prophets.
The Old Testament prophets could call down fire, bring drought, and even cause death. To be on the receiving end of a sacred curse was not something anyone desired. The authority of the Church to levy a killing prayer gave impetus to the spread of the Gospel in a culture hostile to the Jewish heresy called Christianity. The sacred curse was understood as a part of the holy arsenal of the Church militant and could be used in appropriate moments where the truth of the Gospel was threatened or challenged.

3.4 A Foundation for Sacred Curses in the Epistles

Within the Epistolary letters of the New Testament we encounter the use of sacred curses and killing prayers that affect both believers and unbelievers. It is within this body of writings that we encounter the Old Testament’s ‘anathema’ now employed by New Testament authors.

Paul’s use of ‘anathema’ is found five times (Rom 9:3; I Cor 12:3, 16:22; Gal 1:8-9). These “curses” express a range of emotions and concerns from the pen of Paul who is the founder and over-shepherd of numerous faith communities. However, Paul is not confined to just this vocabulary as he also utilizes other language to communicate sacred curses, and there can be little doubt that the Apostle to the Gentiles was deadly serious about the Gospel message of Jesus Christ as represented by these curses.

_Cursing and the Golden Rule in the Epistles_

Paul also instructs us to resist from returning curses, or evil, following the ethical teachings of Jesus (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:28; Rom 12:14; I Thes 5:15). Paul writes;

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” He then commands; “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but _rather_ give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance _is_ Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. Therefore ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:18-21).

This Proverb quoted by Paul is the basis for a personal blessing while providing conviction upon the conscience of the recipient of the good (Prov 25:21-22). God will
repay the violator of God’s people (II Thes 1:6-8). The Christian life is meant to reflect a
different way of living than that of the world. The Magna Charta of the New Covenant
Community of Faith is the Sermon on the Mount. It is a Kingdom life guided by
heaven’s principles as opposed to a worldly life directed by the lusts of the flesh and the
seduction of evil. Those who would live and teach about the Kingdom of God are
subject to a “stricter judgment” (Jm 3:1) and must beware the use of their words. As
James ironically writes; “Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing.” He then
instructs;
“My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and
bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine
bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh. Who is wise and
understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in
the meekness of wisdom” (James 3:10-13).

The power of the tongue to bring blessing and cursing is reinforced by Peter (I
Pet 3:9-11). The important distinction between the ‘sacred curse’ and those worldly
persons who levy insults and threats is that the ‘sacred curse’ is spoken from a mouth
not accustomed to cursing and swearing, but rather, from a sanctified tongue more
accustomed to praising and blessing the Lord and His people. Prayer made in
accordance with the will of God receives an answer from God (I Jn 4:14-15). The power
of the Church to levy a sacred curse is based on knowledge and obedience to the will of
God. It is based upon recognition of the truth, and a willingness to live “as much as
possible” in a state of peace with all people (Rom 12:18).

Curses Implied Predestination in the Epistles

The hardened heart is subject to divine retribution as demonstrated in the
comparison of Jacob and Esau. Paul uses the twin boys of Isaac and Rebecca to illustrate
the predestined and predetermined counsel of God’s will, including the imposition of
mercy and punishment, blessing and cursing. The fact that God has “loved Jacob” while
“hating Esau” points to the hardening of the heart in those who depart from God’s
ways as represented by Esau’s ongoing choices to disobey the Word of God while pursuing his own fleshly appetites (Heb 12:16-17). This also establishes the doctrine of foreknowledge by a just and righteous God who judges all impertinent peoples.

Through the election of Jacob, the younger of the twins, over Esau, the older twin (Rom 9:13) the choice of God is realized in the affairs of man. The doctrine of salvation is affected by that choice. In a similar sense, the “sacred curse” follows from the eternal counsels of God upon the Pharaoh, who became an object-lesson to the world regarding the power of God (Rom 9:17).

**Self-Imposed Curses in the Epistles**

The use of an anathema by Paul is found in Romans 9:3 where he expresses his great angst over the lost condition of his “brethren according to the flesh.” This compassionate expression of concern is reflected by Paul who could wish himself “accursed” for their sake. Paul has a sense of the dire consequences that attend the lost condition of unbelievers. He recognizes the full absence of hope and joy, and those other qualities of life that earmark the saved. Paul is keenly aware of the great Messianic hope of Israel becoming fulfilled in the Advent of Jesus the Christ.253

There is an understanding of what the rejection of Christ means eschatologically. This use of anathema suggests an understanding of the severity of the “curse” in the mind of Paul as he recognizes the eternal fate of the lost, those who will forever perish

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253Haacker’s comment is insightful; “It may be that Paul's determination to visit Jerusalem, irrespective of the dangers of that journey (see 15:31) and in spite of prophecies that warned him (see Acts 20:22-24; 21:10-14) was due to his readiness to become a martyr of his passionate love for his people.” Cf. Klaus Haacker, *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 79. Haacker (132) later refers to the concept of the ‘noble death’ popular in Rome, and perhaps a contributing cultural influence on the Apostle; “Paul's conclusion in Rom. 5:8 is that God's love in Christ surpasses all human examples of 'noble death'. As far as I can see, a specific Roman version of ‘noble death’ has not yet received sufficient attention in the interpretation of Romans. It should be considered as a possible background of Rom. 9:3, where the apostle refers to his readiness to sacrifice himself on behalf of his fellow-Israelites.” Also, C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 Vols. ICC (Edinburgh; T&T Clark, 2004); vol. 2, where he sees a parallel with Moses (Ex 32:31). Thomas R. Shreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008) 478-482, recognizes the soteriological points of connection between the phraseology of the “children of promise” and the story of Esau and Jacob as supporting parallels to his argument in Romans 9.
outside the presence of Christ and His Kingdom. 254

Some see Paul’s prayer as similar to the one Moses made in Ex 32:32; “Yet now, if You will forgive their sin -- but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.” 255 It is in this regard that we begin to recognize the Apostles self-understanding of who he was in the mission work of the Gospel, and the supreme importance of acknowledging that Christ is the Messiah and Lord Israel had awaited for so many thousands of years. Paul’s broken heartedness becomes a teaching point for the proper execution of ministry that should transfer into today’s Church.

Curses as Punishment for Sin in the Epistles

Paul opens his letter to the Romans with one of the most powerful social analysis ever given in literature. The condemnation that follows those who have replaced truth with falsehood, who have worshipped the creature instead of the Creator, and who are given over to the filthiness of immoral, sexual sin, demands the sacred curse of God. The “penalty” due homosexual conduct speaks of a curse that attends that life-style (Rom 1:27). 256 God’s curse falls upon those who maintain the supremacy of the lie over truth, who worship idols instead of the Living God, and who practice abominations in the place of righteousness (Rom 1:32). 257

Another instance of an anathema given by Paul is recorded in I Cor 12:3 where he writes that it is impossible to speak in the Spirit of God and simultaneously “curse”

254 The Church Fathers commented on this verse as well. Origen (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans) compared Paul’s willingness to perish with the example of Jesus “who poured himself out” and became a servant to all, while Chrysostom (Homilies on Romans) addressed the love of God in Paul and the broken-heartedness of the Apostle towards those accursed Jews who blasphemed God.

255 Sanday, William, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Romans. ICC Commentaries (Edinburgh: T&T Clark) 355; Sanday points to Clement of Rome’s comments on this verse regarding the “great love” of the Apostle. Sanday argues for the language of feeling over the logic of reasoning in Paul’s writing.

256 Some have speculated on the HIV/AIDS crisis as a prophetic fulfillment of that penalty. Cf. http://www.gotquestions.org/AIDS-HIV.html for an example of this speculation.

257 Second Peter follows this line of reasoning telling his readers that the message given by false prophets results in destruction and those who propagate such are subject to eternal damnation. Peter uses ἀπόλλυται to describe the fate of those “false prophets and teachers” who bring in “damnable heresies” (αἱρέσεις ἀπολλύταις 2 Pet 2:1 KJV) and “destruction” in 3:16 to describe those who ignore the Scriptures written by the Apostle Paul.
Jesus. This implies an understanding of the “anathema” in the realm of the Divine. Can God curse God? Paul is advocating that this is impossible (I Jn 4:3). This allows us an insight on the deity of Christ, who is God (Rom 9:5).

While we understand that the doctrine of the Trinity was not formulated until Augustine in the Fourth Century, we can already see the implied teachings of the New Testament pointing to the Godhead of ‘three-in-one.’ This is worked out extensively in Paul’s understanding of the Cross and the sacrifice of the Son. There is comparison between Isaac, the son of promise, with Ishmael, the son of the Egyptian slave (Gal 4:24-31). There is a contrast and tension between the curse of the Law and the blessing of Grace. This tension is resolved through the curse, and blessing, of the Cross.

Paul writes regarding the “curse of the Law” and the “curse of the Cross” which answers the Law;

“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Yet the law is not of faith, but ‘the man who does them shall live by them.’ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us, for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’” (Gal 3:10-13).

The curse of the Law is found in its unrelenting condemnation of sin and the end result of death. This directs us back to the original curse of death given by God in the Garden of Eden when Adam was warned that death would follow disobedience and any trespass of the Tree in the center of the Garden.

Such disobedience was not foreign to the early Church. The first real instance of a killing prayer seems to be directed against a disobedient believer who was living in an immoral relationship with his step-mother. This “killing prayer” calls for the expulsion of the believer and the destruction of his flesh by Satan (I Cor 5:1-5).258 We assume that

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Paul made this “turning over” through prayer. As such, it comprises a killing prayer if this is in fact how he accomplished the sacred curse.

Whereas this sacred curse could be interpreted as simply a call for “excommunication” from the safe harbers of fellowship, thereby exposing the immoral believer to the harsh torments of wickedness and the power of the devil, there seems to be a sense of finality to the destructive power Paul has consigned the Corinthian to, and thereby, seems resigned to the fate of the man placed into the hands of God.\[259\]

Paul’s understanding to “give up” or “turn over” is echoed in his theology of God’s judgment and curse upon the unrepentant (Rom 1:24) where the Lord “gave over” those who practiced immorality to the destructive consequences of lust.\[260\] The penalty of death is implied by Paul in these writings as illustrated to the Corinthian fellowship;

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God

moreover, that the Church could, by a solemn anathema, hand an outrageous sinner over to Satan with disastrous physical consequences (1 Cor. 5:5; cf. 1 Tim. 1:20). Quoting C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London, 1968), 126, Hurst notes that “handing the man over to Satan indicates the ‘realm in which Paul himself [also] received Satan’s attentions’ (1 Cor. 12:7).’ Paul personally understood the buffeting which accompanies spiritual purification.” 109 fn. 58. But see Knight who disagrees on the form and outcome of the punishment; “We note however that the action Paul enjoins is not that of stoning but rather of putting him out of the fellowship with a view to his repentance (cf. 1 Cor 5:5). That this spiritual action becomes the NT principle for church discipline in general, rather than the act of stoning, is borne out by his comments in 2 Cor 2:6–8 where he urges that one who had been disciplined should be forgiven, comforted and restored (impossible if he has been stoned to death); George W. Knight, III, “The Scriptures Were Written For Our Instruction” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Volume 39 (The Evangelical Theological Society;1996) 39:10

\[259\] Mark Harding, “Church and Gentile Cults at Corinth” *Grace Theological Journal* Volume 10 (Grace Seminary;1989; 2002) 10:215. Harding addresses the aspects of magical incantations; “A similar phrase to that which occurs in 5:5 is to be found in a third century A.D. magical papyrus—an incantation for the driving out of a demon—in which the following occurs, ‘I give you over to black chaos in utter destruction…But as C. K. Barrett and G. D. Fee properly point out that there is a considerable difference between the Pauline injunction and the magical incantation. In the former the transgressor is not handed over to Satan’s complete control. The expectation is that he will be reclaimed if the discipline of excommunication is administered. In the latter, however, the powers of darkness are given complete control over the one into whose power he has been consigned.”

\[260\] The Greek use of παράδοσις is used to describe Christ being “turned over” or “given over” to the death of the Cross (Mt 26:2; Lk 24:20; Gal 2:20, Eph 5:25 etc).
is holy, which *temple* you are” (I Cor 3:16-17).

Paul knew the power of death as a consequence of the violation of God’s ordinances, as reflected by the desecration of the Lord’s Supper (I Cor 11:30), reminding his readers that “many sleep” as a result of that violation.

The authority of Paul to levy a sacred curse upon select members of his Corinthian congregation may have caused terror (II Cor 10:9) when communicated through his written letters. But his intent was to bring edification and holiness, and not destruction, into their way of life (II Cor 13:10). Paul was concerned with the good order and discipline required for service to God and the extension of the Kingdom.

The Church had a sacred duty to follow the teachings of Jesus and not grieve the Holy Spirit. Paul writes to the Ephesians that those who choose to live in disobedience to the holy precepts of God will suffer the “wrath of God” (Eph 5:6). Paul is concerned with holiness in the Church and has the authority to execute discipline where moral violations occur.

Those who rejected the Holy Spirit were subject to the most severe penalties as the author of Hebrews writes;

“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace” (Heb 10:29)?

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews emphasized the importance of holiness in the lives of believers. Beginning with the controversial passages at the beginning of the sixth chapter, the writer exhorts his readers to “go onto perfection” in accordance with those things that accompany salvation (Heb 6:1-9). Those who are constantly recycling through the process of repentance and recommitment to Christ continue to put the Lord to an “open shame” and this sort of behavior is akin to ground which is always watered and cared for, but instead of producing good fruit, produces thorns and briars and is subject to becoming “cursed” (Heb 6:8).

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261 κατάρας-noun genitive feminine singular from κατάρα.
The imagery of this passage of Scripture faintly echoes back to Genesis 3:17-18 and the subsequent “curse” that befell the earth due to the sin of Adam and Eve. That which is not “grown” by faith is doomed to be burned and is subject to the curse of God. That the believer could be subject to a fiery judgment is suggested by Hebrews. However, Paul speaks of the judgment fires testing the works of the believer, but not endangering the salvation of the believer himself (I Cor 3:15). The believer will have experienced God’s discipline as though it were a fire.

But what of those believers who continue in sin? There are some that we can “pull from the fire” (Jm 1:23) but there are others that we are forbidden to pray for, especially those whose particular sin is not subject for saintly intercession;

“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death” (I Jn 5:14-17).

We might enquire about the nature of such a sin that should not be prayed over. Is John suggesting that there is a sin not covered by the atoning work of the Cross? Or is this a command not to pray for a specific action that is particularly at odds with the community of faith? Is John saying that we are to pray life for certain sinners, and withhold such prayers for other sorts of offenders? Is the reference to death a physical death, or is it a reference to a spiritual death of some sort?262

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262 Smalley argues for a “spiritual death” instead of a physical death in the text. He notes that “sin leading to death is occasionally found in Jewish literature” and then says that “nothing in this part of I John indicates that ‘sin leading to death’ must be understood as sin punished (and thus detected) by fatal bodily illness.” Cf. S. S. Smalley, 1,2,3 John Vol. 51: Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Publisher, 2002) 297. There is no question that a spiritual emphasis can be made in I John, however, to distinguish between the physical and spiritual components of human nature is not in keeping with the overall intent of the Epistle. Commenting on this verse, the Geneva Reformers wrote: “We have to make prayers not
John seems to be alluding to a “sacred curse” that leads to death in these Scriptures. The traditional interpretation of the “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 12:31; Mk 3:29; Lk 12:10) which can never be forgiven comes closest to this teaching in John. Those who cannot be forgiven are condemned to eternal damnation. The exegesis of this verse may hinge on John’s definition and use of the word “death” (θάνατον) in the text. It seems that most often, θάνατος suggests an immediate physical demise as opposed to an eternal state of damnation.263

John does refer to a state of being that is equated with death.264 Those who “do not love” abide in death (I Jn 3:14). In this sense, death is the condition of all who have not passed into life via the Cross of Christ. Those who are born of the Spirit (Jn 3:8) are persons who love others.265 The “living dead” is not a concept foreign to the teachings of Jesus who said, “Let the dead bury their dead” (Mt 8:22; Lk 9:60).266 The concept of spiritual deadness stems from the account in Genesis where the Lord God told the first man and woman that they would die “in the day” that they ate of the forbidden fruit. Yet, we are told that Adam lived some nine hundred and thirty years before his body collapsed from the penalty of sin, in death.

The concept of spiritual death is supported in New Testament theology through those teachings requiring spiritual regeneration through the Holy Spirit in order to have eternal life (Jn 3:5-8; 20:22 etc). In this Epistle, we might assume that John is referring to

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263 θάνατον noun accusative masculine singular from θάνατος John uses θάνατον which has as a primary meaning the death of the body. Cf. Phil 2.27 where it is used with the dative to describe a sickness unto death. The Vulgate uses ‘mortem’ in translation.

264 John uses πρὸς θάνατον three times in his writings, twice in these passages and once in the Gospel, John 11:4, referring to the death of Lazarus. The preposition with the accusative is only found here in John’s writings.

265 “Love” is mentioned 36 times in the NKJV of I John.

266 However, the Greek reads; “Ἄφες τοὺς νεκροὺς θείαι τοὺς ἐνεμῶν νεκροὺς” utilizing νεκρούς (νεκροῖς adjective accusative masculine plural no degree from νεκρός) instead of θάνατος. “Some scholars, however, understand this expression as merely a figurative reference to various types of people and thus translate ‘let those who are spiritually dead take care of their own dead.’” Cf. Louw and Nida; “Interpret, Mean, Explain” entry 33.137.
some heinous sin that cannot be repented from, and if the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is what he is referring to, then the double meaning of spiritual and physical death might apply.\footnote{The Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is the denouncing, through unbelief, of the Spirit’s testimony and witness concerning Christ Jesus. In essence, to call the Holy Spirit a ‘liar’ is to discount the testimony of the Spirit and therefore remain in a state of ‘death.’ Could John possibly be referring to such with this verse? If so, the spiritual state of death remains in such unbelievers who have shunned the testimony of God the Spirit, and their impending physical death is also near.}

If it is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, then the verse addresses unbelievers outside the Body of Christ, and the “curse” is the result of a rejection of God’s Word. If it is directed towards those in the fellowship of faith, then it cannot be the sin known as the Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit but some other sin committed by one who has already confessed Christ. To assume that the Scripture is addressing the unsaved person is the easier course of reason to reconcile the message of John. If it is a believer, then we are dealing with Scripture that parallels that found in Paul’s admonition to the Corinthian Church (I Cor 3:17).

Curses Due to the Rejection or Perversion of God’s Word in the Epistles

Paul finishes his letter to the Corinthian Church by saying that “if anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ” he is cursed (I Cor 16:22). Then he adds the prayerful exhortation, “Come Lord!” Exegetically, the use of εἴ τις “if anyone” takes us to important points in Paul’s argument throughout the epistle (I Cor 3:17-18; 7:12-13; 8:2; 10:27; 11:34; 14:37). These are hypothetical conditions that Paul places into his letter in order to address problems in the Corinthian community of faith that are factual, or that have the potential of becoming real.

The use of the hypothetical “if anyone” suggests that there are people who, in fact, fall into the various categories addressed, whether it be the misuse of the body, the issues of marriage and divorce, eating things sacrificed to idols, taking the Lord’s supper in vain, or assuming the role and office of a prophet. Each of these instances of εἴ τις carry an implied judgment that comes in violation of God’s commands.

The final “if anyone” summarizes an important point for Paul’s argument that
loving the Lord Jesus Christ does not permit one to “curse” him, implying a practical theology of living that is ethically and doctrinally sound. It is impossible for ‘anyone’ to love Christ and remain in a state of blasphemy. Those that truly love the Lord will live their lives in accordance with the ethical and moral mandates imposed by the nature of love itself. Those that do not love the Lord will remain outside God’s saving and sanctifying grace, remaining under the curse of sin and death.

Paul understood the full force of the curse of the Law as he taught the Gospel of Grace. It is in Galatians that we see the “anathema” first used by Paul.268 The introduction of a false Gospel into the Galatian fellowship stirs the Apostle to the severest rebuke he can muster. The sacred curse of God falls upon any, including “angels” who dare bring a message not in keeping with Paul’s Gospel.269 The implied angelology of Paul suggests that there are deceiving spirits in this world that seek to pervert God’s truth in Jesus Christ.270

The perversion of the Gospel remains a thematic reason for the issuance of the “sacred curse” in the Epistles. The ongoing opposition to the Good News of the Cross brings strong words of execration from each of the writers. Often, the opposition to the message of the Gospel is found in the practical outworking of the Gospel life. Whether it be the abuse of the Lord’s Supper (I Cor 11:30), or the ongoing sexual immorality of Church members (I Cor 5:5), the penalty is often death.271

The “Gospel of God”272 requires personal obedience otherwise the end of those

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268 The Epistle to the Galatians represents his earliest letter, and the use of the ‘anathema’ reflects a first recorded instance in the history of his writings.

269 Jude also alludes to an angelic curse, but this time it comes from the lips of the archangel Michael who rebukes the devil, saying; “The Lord rebuke you!” (Jude 9; cf. II Pet 2:11 for a NKJV parallel to “reviling accusation”). Jude tells us that there are evil spirits who have entered our world and who are under the curse of God (vv.6-7).

270 Cf. II Tim 2:26 where Paul speaks of the “snare of the devil” as though the active perpetration of wicked spirits against the naïve is an ongoing phenomenon (cf. I Peter 1:8-9 for the same sense of evil offense). Also I Tim 3:7 indicating the Church leadership is not immune from such attacks—cf. I.H. Marshall, The Pastoral Epistles, ICC Commentaries (London: T&T Clark International, 2004) 767-768.

271 I Cor 5:5 uses δακρον from δακρος which means “ruin, destruction and /or death.” It is used in I Thes 5:3; I Tim 6:9 to refer to destruction and ruin. It is used to refer to “eternal destruction” in II Thes 1:9.

272 The verbiage “Gospel of God” can be found seven times in the NKJV; Rom. 1:1; 15:16; II Co. 11:7; I Thess. 2:2, 8, 9; I Pet. 4:17.
who disobey is certain destruction. The sacred curse falls upon those who have hardened hearts and are; “treasuring up...wrath in the day of wrath” thereby subjecting themselves to the; “revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness -- indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek” (Rom 2:5-9).

Condemnation follows the unbeliever whereas the believer is free from the curse of condemnation (Rom 8:1). Paul labors in the message of grace and forgiveness and encourages the lost to all upon the Lord (Rom 10:9-11).

However, Paul does not retain this posture of grace when it comes to the message of the Gospel. Those who oppose the Gospel are “turned over” to Satan for destruction. This was the fate of Hymenaeus and Alexander (I Tim 1:20).

We might wonder how such a ‘turning over’ occurred. Was it through a formal pronouncement or prayer? We do not have a record within the Scriptures that guides such turning over, but the practice of “turning over” apostates, heretics and blasphemers in the early Church gave rise to the formal pronouncements of anathema found in the Middle Ages.

Those who have been introduced to the saving message of the Lord and rejected it are especially “cursed” (Heb 6:4; II Pet 2:21). Peter writes; “For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the

273 παρέδωκα -verb indicative aorist active 1st person singular from παραδόω meaning to “hand over” or “deliver.” (παραδονω) is used by Paul in I Cor 5:5 as part of the excommunication formula. This is the same word describing the ‘betrayal’ of the Lord by Judas Iscariot (Mt 26:23). Persons excommunicated from the protection of the sacred community were subject to the powers of evil.
holy commandment delivered to them” (II Pet 2:20-21).

Peter also confirms that the writings of Paul are to be counted as “Scripture” which “ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction” (II Pet 3:16). This “curse” applies to those who have rejected the saving message of Christ. Those are the ones who will perish “in flaming fire” with the Lord “taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (II Thes 1:8-9).

**Summary**

The Epistles address the conduct and behaviors of both the saved and the unsaved. The curses that fall upon the saved are due to the immoral behaviors that corrupt fellowship within the community of faith. Those curses are severe and can result in death. The curses that come upon unbelievers are due to their opposition to the Gospel, through either an obstruction to the message of Christ or a hindrance to the messengers of the Church.

These curses present a sense of doom upon the recipients who are at war with the Christian community, and we are given to understand, at war with God. The sacred curse and killing prayer are understood realities within the first century Church and present a dimension to Church discipline that was known and feared by Church adherents. Great fear characterized the early saints, but it was not simply a reverence or respect for God but a recognition that the Holy One was somehow involved with the affairs of people and the community of faith as well as the secular society the Church existed within. This realization brought an awe of reverence and revelation to the immediate Presence of God.

The Church of the first century was aware of God’s immediacy as demonstrated

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274 ἀπολέων-noun accusative feminine singular from ἀπολέω meaning “to destroy” and means the loss of eternal life, the exclusion from the Kingdom of God and the hopeless perdition of the soul outside God’s salvation.
in miracles of healing and miracles of damning. The witness to Christ and the Kingdom of God came in power, not just word (Rom 15:18-19).

In this respect, the Church grew at a supernatural pace and began to influence society in every conceivable way, finally displacing much of the heathen darkness with the light of hope discovered in the resurrection of Christ, and the answer to the curse that was introduced into this world through sin.

3.5 Foundations for Sacred Curses in the Revelation of John

The Revelation of Saint John the Apostle begins on the isle of Patmos where the beloved disciple was exiled due to his faith. Scripture informs us that John was “in the Spirit” on the Lord’s Day (Rev 1:7) when his visions began. Through a series of powerful images, voices and sounds, John records what has become the most controversial book in the New Testament.

The curses found within the text of the Apocalypse are difficult to sort out due to their overlapping character. At the outset, the Lord Jesus Christ is depicted as speaking to the Seven Churches through the Apostle. The Lord’s messages to each Church are filled with admonition and warning. The sacred curse accompanies each message alongside the promise of blessing that will come with either disobedience or obedience.

For the purpose of this thesis, these curses are categorized according to their nature and object. That the Lord Jesus Christ is the author of these curses can be sustained, and therefore, each category includes origination from Jesus in addition to the subject and object of those other categories used within this chapter to designate the sacred curse.

_Curses Originating from Jesus & as Punishment for Sin in the Revelation of John_

Some have attempted to find dispensational schemes and messages in the descriptions of the seven Church communities listed in the opening chapters of John’s

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275 Robert Thomas, “The Imprecatory Prayers of the Apocalypse” Bibliotheca Sacra 126 (April 1969) 124-131; “A rarely discussed, but very prominent source of God’s eschatological wrath is the prayers of the saints. These prayers loom large in the Apocalypse and in each case take on a vindictive tone.”
Revelation. Many look for a futuristic fulfillment of the curses contained within the Patmos vision. This seems especially true with the plagues brought about by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev 6:1-8) and the question posed by the martyred “saints under the altar” of God who cry out for vengeance; “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev 6:10).

The idea that a series of curses will come upon the earth in set periods of time remains attractive to many in the prophecy movement. Attempts are frequently made to discern if we are presently in one of these last-time eras of a particular horseman. It seems best to suggest that most of the Apocalypse is concerned with a description of the coming future judgment of the world, and that this vivid and detailed description combines into a general curse due to the complete rejection of God.

That there are singular curses in John’s writing is seen with the appearance of the Horsemen and what rider each represents. These curses are released upon the earth as a portion of the great judgment that will befall an unrepentant humanity. The sacred curse of God brings certain destruction and death upon those who are visited by these judgments.

Curses Originating from Jesus & Due to the Rejection or Perversion of God’s Word in the Revelation of John

As one finishes the reading of the Apocalypse, we are reminded that;
“If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (Rev 22:18-19).

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276 This is especially true with dispensational theology. C.I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer and other classical dispensationalists saw each of the seven churches as an historic archetype within church history. Thyatira was especially recognized to be the Catholic Church in these schemes. The 1909 Scofield Bible included notes to this effect. But with the passing of time, those notes were modified. There is no reference to the Catholic Church in the revised edition of the Scofield Bible.
The last curse in the Bible seems directed to those who disbelieve John’s message. Either through adding to the message or subtracting from the prophecy, those who tamper with God’s Word will receive the end-times curse described by John.

_Curses Originating from Jesus & Against Communities, Cities and Countries in the Revelation of John_

That Christians were subject to a strict discipline that could result in a loss of fellowship and life is supported by the Apocalypse of John. The letters to the Seven Churches establishes such a discipline with God communicating severe punishment to those who have gone astray in dogma and in practice. Christian theology and ethics may not have been well defined when the Apocalypse was transcribed, but the expectation of God is forcefully revealed for all the Church to see and believe.

Of the Seven Churches, only the second and sixth churches, the Church of Smyrna and the Philadelphian Church, are spared the rebuke of God’s Spirit. The Ephesian Church has left its first love, and the Lord commands it to return through repentance. Otherwise a sacred curse will occur upon the Ephesians with the removal of its light, and we might presume, the blessing of God.

Pergamos is also called upon to renounce the “doctrine of Balaam” which involves some sexual immorality. Otherwise, the Lord will come and fight against the offenders “with the sword of his mouth.” This implies the power of His word being put into destructive effect upon those who violate God’s truth.

Thyatira is also subject to the sacred curse because it has embraced idolatry and practices sexual misconduct. The Lord threatens; “unless they repent of their deeds...I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works” (Rev 2:22-24).

To Sardis, the Lord reminds them to remember what they received and heard in respect to the grace of God, and they are warned that if they do not overcome then their

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277 The Church of Philadelphia, “brotherly love,” may have fulfilled the greater expectations of the commands of Christ through love and faithfulness.
names will be “blotted out of the book of Life.”

The Laodiceans are neither hot nor cold, and as a consequence are threatened with being “vomited out of the mouth of God” in a judgment that can only mean exile from the Presence of God. What these churches represent, besides being actual locations of early Christian fellowship, may indicate something about the nature of God as the Lord of the Church universal. These sacred curses are meant to correct the errant fellowships and restore the vitality of their witness to the truth and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

That the Church is the subject of these profound rebukes must not be dismissed as an unfortunate fact of the First Century. That God is willing to severely chastise the Church, even with the “killing of her children” points to a somber need for our own examination and spiritual inventory.

We should be amazed at the suddenness of the corruption that influenced the early Church as recorded in these Scriptures. In less than one hundred years after the Resurrection of Jesus from the grave, while the last of the Apostles was still alive to testify of this incredible event, the Church had already become compromised by evil influences deserving the sacred curse of God. In contrast, we might question where the Church in the Second Millennium stands today. Alongside such wondering, we might also speculate on the willingness of the Living God to exercise a sacred curse upon those apostate congregations who deny the grace and holiness of His truth.

That the writings of Revelation may prophetically address these concerns is believed by many in the Church today. The last days teachings and doctrines that

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279 Cf. Art Azurdia, “Recovering the Third Mark of the Church” Reformation and Revival Volume 3 (Reformation and Revival Ministries, 2003) 3.4.74. “Discipline reinforces the true nature of body life. Evangelistic methods which stress a ‘personal relationship to Jesus’ have taken their toll on the church. The concept of the local church as a living organism has been lost and an atomistic view has taken its place. Gone is the idea that Christians are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”
many evangelical churches espouse point to certain prophetic fulfillments occurring as stated in the Apocalypse. Some of that prophecy entails the great and mighty ‘woes’ that are yet to happen in human history.

The “woes” that come in tandem with the judgment point to this notion of a curse, similar to that of the curse upon communities that reject God’s Word. The three “woes” of Revelation begin in 8:13 in anticipation of the trumpet blasts that will come from three angels. These ‘woes’ are described in 9:12 and 11:14, culminating in 12:12 with the third ‘woe’ and the appearance of the Devil on earth. These “woes” counterbalance the three satanic “blasphemies” recorded in the Apocalypse (2:9; 13:5-6; 17:3). The unrepentant “blasphemed the name of God,” (Rev 16:9), “blasphemed the God of Heaven” (16:11) and “blasphemed God” because of the great plague thrown upon them. The sacred curse falls upon the unrepentant in the earth in the last days. Those that worship the Beast shall endure the full wrath of God;

“If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name” (Rev 14:9-11).

interpretations often “regard the text as an inspired, detailed prediction of the course of end-time events, which the interpreter usually expects to begin imminently. At a popular level, such interpretations are still widespread, especially among churches influenced by Dispensationalism. Other interpreters, sometimes labeled ‘historicist,’ have seen the text as a prediction of the whole of human history. A difficulty with this kind of approach is that each interpreter following it tends to impose on the book a pattern leading up to his or her own particular time. Neither the ‘futurist’ nor the ‘historicist’ method shows convincingly what the message of the book might have been for its original audience.”

The book that launched the pop-prophecy movement was the publication of Hal Lindsey’s Late, Great Planet Earth in 1970. Lindsey pointed to the prophetic return of Israel as a nation State for the third time in human history as a fulfillment of God’s prophetic end times plan. Cf. Hal Lindsey, The Late Great, Planet Earth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970). The phenomenal success of Tim Lahaye’s Left Behind book series is a testimony to the interest that exists in end-time prophecy. To date, nearly 80 million copies of the sixteen-book series have sold.
God’s curse reflects upon the lost who know not the Lamb of God and who do not have their names written in the book of Life (13:8). The cursed will not inherit the Kingdom of God. They will be barred from entering into the New Jerusalem. It is only those whose names are found in the Book of Life who will know the end of the ‘curse’ (Rev 22:3).

Summary
The Apocalypse of John was not always welcomed in the canon of the New Testament because of its polemical nature, and because of its dreadful portrait of those future events describing the end times. Those events are filled with the horrors of the sacred curse and killing prayer visited upon both the believing, but errant Church, and the unbelieving and unrepentant portion of humanity.

The Book of Revelation is too often used as a whip in the hands of those who seek justification for harshness in ministry. With it, they might imagine driving out the profane from the Temple of God as an act of righteous indignation and zeal. Yet, the Apocalypse is also a prophetic utterance that suggests an end goal to the human misery that presently invades our world. The hope of the Apocalypse is realized in the coming of Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and the descent of the New Jerusalem into time and space.

We might seek some direction for the administration of the sacred curse as demonstrated in the Lord’s address to the Seven Churches. It is within that context that we recognize the willingness of God to use that power that “kills” the unrepentant. But do we dare suggest that such power is somehow made available to recognized ecclesiastical authorities today? Are we certain that the social turmoil of the present, post-modern society is deserving of any judgment that the Church might imagine being justified in praying for and using? If we are willing to admit that such power and authority exists for the Church today, we must also address the issues of mercy and forgiveness. Where does forgiveness fit into the end time scenario of Revelation, a

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282 The Book of Life is referenced to in Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; 22:19. These seven references point to the final judgment of God upon unbelievers.
scenario many believe exists today?

Indeed, the saints under the altar pray for the vengeance of God to be speedily exercised, and the Lord responds with the admonition for patience and the certainty that such judgment is coming. But does the Church have a role in the execution of that judgment, or is sacred vengeance visited by the Lord upon the unbelieving and hostile elements of darkness without the involvement of the Church? These questions become the basis for the next chapter as we seek to understand the role of the Church as a steward of the sacred curse and killing prayer.

3.6 Chapter Summary
This chapter has focused on the sacred curses and killing prayers of the New Testament with reference to the theological and ethical implications they represent. From the Curse of Jesus in the Gospels to the imprecations of the Apocalypse we are reminded that the God of love who “gave his only begotten son” is also a God of wrath. The curse of God upon unrepentant people is an ongoing reality according to these writings.

The curse of God is especially highlighted by the paradox of the Cross, whereby the beloved Son of God became the cursed object of the wrath of God. It is in the work of the Cross that that the curse that fell upon all humanity through the transgression of our first parents is mitigated. We might understand the symbology of the crown of thorns, placed upon the head of the Lamb of God, as indicative of the answer to that original pronouncement of cursing that so impacted the earth and subsequent labor of man.283

Additionally, we must reconcile the prophetic curse of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 with the hanging death of the Savior on Mount Calvary.284 Even though it was the

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283 We might point to the “ram” caught in the thorny thicket by its horns thus becoming the substitutionary sacrifice for Isaac, the ‘only son’ of Abraham (Gen 22:1) as an indication of God’s prophetic answer to the ‘curse.’

284 The recovery of the Temple Scroll has shed light on the Jewish meaning of the “hanging curse” that Paul and Peter reference in their epistles. Because the historicity of crucifixion as a means of capital punishment was not commonly practiced in Israel, doubts regarding the cries of the Jews to “crucify Jesus” after the plea of Pilate for his release have been questioned. However, 4Qp Nahum (the pesher of Nahum found in Qumran Cave 4) explicitly commands the hanging deaths of political and religious
Romans who crucified the Messiah and that along the lines of Roman methods for capital punishment, it was through the lens of Jewish Law that the hanging curse of the Christ occurred. This prophetic element of God’s sacred curse coming to fulfillment in the very person of the Christ suggests a deeper meaning behind the nature of cursing, and by extension, killing prayers.

We must examine the potential good that can result from the sacred curse when it is executed along biblical lines of thought and reason. Only then can an ethical justification for utterance of a sacred curse be discovered. There is no room in the New Testament ethic of forgiveness and passivity for a “curse” to otherwise be levied. We must believe that the highest good is within the mind of God when the Church is called upon to make an anathema. It is the final well-being of people that is hoped for, as exemplified in the killing prayer of I Cor 5:1-5.

To subjugate the sacred curse under the broader umbrella of Christian chastisement (Heb 12:5-11) cannot be entirely incorrect for an understanding of Christian discipline. But what about those who are outside the community of faith? How do we reconcile the sacred curse and killing prayer for those who “know not” the Lord and for whom the King of Glory died? Do we assume that these are still under the original curse stemming from the Fall of humanity as recorded in scripture? If so, then we can acknowledge that any sacred curse or killing prayer is but an affirmation of a

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285 Swinburne argues that “it is morally permissible for God to bring about these bad states for the sake of good states which they make possible, i.e. that he has the right to do so; and, secondly, that the expected value of allowing the bad states to occur is positive, i.e. roughly that the goods which they make possible are at least a tiny bit better than the bad states necessary for them are bad.” Cf. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 223; John White and Ken Blue, *Church Discipline That Heals*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985) 209; The authors challenge the church to “gird the sword” and conquer those sins that beset the Church. They argue for churches that are not “suffocated” by a need for image over holiness (pg. 59).

286 Cf. D. Patrick Ramsey, “In Defense Of Moses: A Confessional Critique Of Kline And Karlberg” *Westminster Theological Journal Volume 66* (2004; 2005), 66.2.387; “Church discipline is necessary in order to prevent the wrath of God falling upon the corporate body of Christ. God is just in “cursing” His Church “if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.”
state of being already in existence. In this sense, the curse becomes an ontological confirmation of the human condition.

In other words, those who have not benefitted from the power of the Cross remain under the sacred curse of God and are subject to its pronouncements in space and time, to include the occasional utterances of the Church. What we must acknowledge is that the sacred curse is already in place and functioning in the world today as an indictment against humanity. The confirmation of that curse is realized through the experience of death, which affects all persons. It is the Cross that overshadows and protects from the ongoing influence of the curse as the “death of death in the death of Jesus Christ” makes possible. This is why the Resurrection becomes so foundational to the Church’s understanding of forgiveness.

Through the Resurrection of Christ we are given the certification of God’s forgiveness and our subsequent release from the power of the sacred curse. The Resurrection of Christ is the witness and testimony that the curse of the Law, death, has been overcome through the work of God. The work of God is “finished” in that the blessing of life now issues forth from the pierced side of the Savior who has become the embodiment of the curse.

Therefore, the utterance of the Church against those who pervert the Gospel is an utterance of “binding or loosing” in light of the full bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a confession of God’s ongoing, continuous work that is imparted through directed prayer and petition, allowing the Church to realize the miracle of forgiveness or the alternative sacred cursing which testifies to the Gift of God. This becomes the basis for Church discipline within and without the community of faith.

We are called upon to exercise the sacred curse or killing prayer as a witness to the love of God exemplified in the Cross. It is an expression of anger against the evil forces of darkness while simultaneously a call to love, life and light. The sacred curse

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287 Fear of punishment hereafter and the suffering it engenders are beneficial to all who are starting out on the spiritual way. Whoever imagines that he can make a start without such suffering and fear . . . thinks he can build in the air without any foundations at all’ (St Symeon the New Theologian, ’ One
is the power of the Church to shape the testimony of the Cross in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the influence of light disrupting and overcoming the darkness, whereby darkness is no longer triumphant in the lives of people. Darkness had not overcome God’s precious Light. (Jn 1:5).

However, God is also merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. He is known to have “repented from evil” (Jonah 4:2) when it comes to judging the wicked. As a God of justice, our prayers might include the acknowledgement of God’s longsuffering and great mercy whereby iniquity and forgiveness of transgression occurs, while withholding such mercy for the unrepentant even to the third and forth generations (Num 14:17-18).

In such manner we might pray in accordance with the Psalmist;
“O remember not against us former iniquities: let thy tender mercies speedily prevent us. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of thy name: and deliver us, and purge away our sins, for thy name's sake.”288

Or petition with Jeremiah;
“Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against thee.”289

It is in this spirit that we acknowledge;
If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.290

What we discover through this chapter are the broad categories and boundaries for such curses to occur. Our next chapter examines more closely the ethical responsibilities of the Church to levy the sacred curse within the social context of both Church and State, along the lines of mercy and righteous anger.

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288 Psalm 78:8-9
289 Jeremiah 14:7, 20
290 Psalm 130: 3-4
Chapter Four

The Legal Basis for the Sacred Curse

“...it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you...”

II Thessalonians 1:6

4.1 Introduction to the Chapter

The first three chapters of this thesis have provided the social, biblical, and linguistic framework for what now follows in this fourth chapter. The fourth chapter is concerned with the theological and ethical reasoning for the administration of killing prayers and sacred curses from a perspective inclusive of both the Old and New Testament.

This perspective is framed and examined through the idea of the curse resulting from the Fall as recorded in Genesis and the importance of the Decalogue as the basis for sacred laws that can guide the Church and influence society.

Additionally, the ministry of Jesus Christ who answers both the curse of the humanity’s Fall and the curse resulting from the broken Law of God is theologically considered. The subsequent answer of God to meet these curses through the work of the Cross admits to an evangelical interpretation of the Bible.

Through the Fall, humanity departed from the society of God to build the society of man. The underlying motivation for that departure was a denial of the completed work of God, epitomized in the meaning of the Sabbath rest.

Man’s Fall represents the rebellion and departure of the human soul from the presence of the living God. The separation of Adam and Eve from Paradise symbolizes the lost condition of humanity and is a reminder of the need for restoration. According to the Biblical account, Paradise was a perfect place of peace, beauty, harmony, rest and life, unstained by the miseries that have haunted the world of humankind ever since.

Whereas the Fall was a result of human decision, the Law represents the choice of God. The Law is the virtual presence of God within the society of man and is a reminder of holiness and divine order. The Law speaks truth to the creature of sin. It
is the certification that humanity is outside the presence of God and condemned to death.

Both the Fall and the Law are testimonies of the divine curse upon the human condition. This curse reflects the unrest of the human soul in its search for God. The curse brings to light the emptiness and wandering of the creature that is lost and in need of redemption. The curse of God upon the sinfulness of man is a witness regarding the need of the human race.

It is always framed as a testimony against the creature who pretends to be God, who seeks to ignore the reality of the Creator while living in the delusion of autonomous constructs. The emergence of the state as a social contract between people who share a common vision for life is challenged by the individualism of persons who can find no sense of Paradise in their daily lives.

The destiny of man is circumscribed by the fact of death, and this is the cause for his restlessness. Man seeks a place of rest that is immune from the cessation of life and conscious existence. The human condition naturally looks for something better than the constant suffering life actually offers. Accordingly, the Sabbath was God’s means of giving His people a respite that paralleled what once was common in the Garden of Eden. The Sabbath was the place where God met with people and people met with God.

In this regard, the Fourth Commandment becomes the vortex for examining the first three Laws of the Decalogue concerning man’s relationship with God, as well as the following six Commandments which focus on the relationships people have with others.

Identifying the Sabbath rest as a metaphor for Eden’s pre-Fall peace and tranquility provides us with a theological bridge between the curse of sin and the Cross of Christ. The Sabbath becomes a pivotal point between the first and the last Adams.\textsuperscript{291} In the first instance, Adam sinned by attempting to become as God. In the second instance, God, who became a man, was laid to rest and would only rise after the

\textsuperscript{291} I Cor 15:45
completion of the Sabbath, the first day of the week. Even in his death, Christ kept the Law.

The theological underpinnings of the sacred curse can be traced from Eden through Sinai to Calvary. By examining the place of the Law, with special attention given to the role of the Sabbath in the Law, we can gain some understanding regarding the ethics of praying a killing prayer or curse upon others.

The sacred curse is intended to become a corrective to the human or demonic disturbance of God’s economy on earth. It is a tool and a weapon in the fight against evil. The transcendence of Heaven’s peace into a world at war with sin and death is accomplished by the reality of a Sabbath rest that never ends.

A “peace that surpasses understanding” (Phil 4:7) is welcomed into the affairs of human existence through the Holy Spirit and the entrance of God’s Kingdom (Rom

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292 The sacred curse and killing prayer are very much instruments needed by the Church to combat evil. Evil is something more than a perverse and damning expression of human individuality. It is personified through those people who have surrendered to its cause, but evil is also a power in and of itself that battles against God and fights above the plane of flesh and blood. Both Catholic and Protestant faiths recognize the presence of evil as a primary issue for the Church today. Cf. Mary Catherine Hilkert, and Robert J. Schreiter, eds., The Praxis of the Reign of God: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 81; “Schillebeeckx remains convinced that the problem of evil, concreteized most disturbingly in the suffering of the innocent, is both the primary issue that has preoccupied religions and philosophies of the past and present, and the most urgent challenge faced by Christianity today.” Henri Blocher describes evil as an unjustifiable reality; “evil is ‘something’ that occurs in experience that ought not to be.” Cf. Henri Blocher, Evil and the Cross (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994): 10. For a good description of the Judeo Christian concept of evil cf.: Hans Schwarz, Evil: A Historical and Theological Perspective (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, 2001).

293 Ex 33:12-14 speaks of a divine rest that accompanies obedience and faith; “Moses said unto the Lord, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee. And he said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” The author of Hebrews understood something very similar as a result of the work of Christ;

“For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: ‘So I swore unto the Lord, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee. And he said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.’ The author of Hebrews understood something very similar as a result of the work of Christ;

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14:17). To this end we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.”

Here it is important to recognize the distinction between the ontological curse brought about through the Fall where human sin originated, and the answer of God through the work of Christ, which sets humanity free from the covetousness of sin and the weariness of death.

Christ became the object of God’s curse upon the Cross, the tree of cursing,294 in answer to the violation of that Edenic tree, occasioned by disobedience to the Word of God by the first parents of humanity. The answer of God to this act of disobedience was both a curse and a promise.295 Here, the spoken curse of the divine is realized in the actual death of the Messiah. From this death derives the life-giving blessing that comes to all who repent and believe. Resurrection to life is destined to come through the death of the Cross.

The uttered curse is patterned on a responsive understanding of the violations of the Law and truth as found in the Old and New Testaments.296 Both the ontological curse and the act of praying a sacred curse are connected by the legal basis for sin and salvation. Both forms of the sacred curse are answered in Christ, who became accursed for humanity and who also prayed that God forgive that curse.297

Had there been no Law there would have been no judicial basis for a curse. As Paul writes; “I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart

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294 Gal 3:13: “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”) and Deut 21:23 “his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.”

295 Gen 3:15; the promise of a Messiah is first made alongside the curses given by God.

296 Deut 27:26 “Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them. And all the people shall say, Amen.”

297 Cf. Mt 9:6 as a text that establishes the authority of the Son of God to forgive sin on earth. The prayer of the Lord from the Cross reflects a universal petition on behalf of all who would benefit through faith in the work and death of the Son-Lk 23:24.
from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.” (Rom 7:7-9 NKJ).

This scripture establishes the biblical basis for the power of the Law to earmark expose and condemn sin. Without the Law, sin would be a moot point.

The Law is a reflection of the divine nature of God, and is prescribed for those created in God’s image. The Law is a witness to life. The Law is not the means to holiness but is rather the result of holiness. Because man is not holy, he is not able to successfully reflect the dictates of the Law. Because man cannot keep the Law, he is condemned to death through the witness of the Law which speaks of life.

God’s interaction with humanity requires that a distinction in holiness from sinfulness be acknowledged. No profane thing can enter into the presence of a sacred God. To allow the profane to occur in worship is the basis of idolatry. Such idolatry invites the judgment and wrath of God, often in terms of curses against those who practice idolatry.

4.2 The Importance of the Sabbath

The Pharisees and Sadducees were responsible for maintaining the sanctity of the Law of Moses in the covenant society of Israel. They were a separated community of caretakers who specialized in the things of God.

The Ten Commandments had been delivered atop Mount Sinai in the wilderness by God to Moses, and those Laws were passed from generation to generation to a special class of religious authority responsible for maintaining, reminding and propagating God’s law to a ‘hearing’ people. This was a sacred duty assigned by God and upheld by the faithful in the covenant community. Through a faithful reading and remembrance to follow God’s Law blessing would occur. To hear and disobey God’s Word would bring certain cursing. 298

298 Joshua 8:34 is demonstrative of the importance of “hearing” and heeding God’s word; “And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law.” Cf. II Kings 28:8-13 which describes the recovery of God’s Law and the recognition of the king that the people have suffered the wrath of God due to their disobedience to Divine decree. Also, Nehemiah 8:3-9:3.
It was in this sphere of influence that human beings could somehow contribute to the holy intention of the Lord for a fallen humanity. Through strict observation and obedience to the Law, Israel, the chosen people of God, exemplified a distinctive witness to a holy way of life to the darkened world around them. Worship of the true and living God was positioned in stark contrast to the gross paganism that abounded in the nations surrounding Israel.

Each of the Commandments held a special message of God’s expectations for Israel concerning the ethical means of conducting daily business in a fallen world. The Commandments provided a spiritual boundary around those who were called Jews and protected the covenant community from any compromise that would separate Israel from the blessings of the Lord.

Each of the Commandments contained transcendent principles for both life and death. With each Commandment there was the promise of blessing when the Law was faithfully observed and the certainty of cursing when the Law was broken.

As a consequence, the religious authorities entrusted with the interpretation and guardianship of the Law were exacting in their demands that every citizen in the covenant society of Israel follow the Commandments. Not only was individual prosperity determined by one’s efforts to obey the Law, but the national welfare of Israel was also affected.

Of the Ten Commandments, only the Fourth Commandment, the keeping of the Sabbath, had a consistently empirical means of practice and verification. The simplicity of keeping the seventh day of the week, which meant the avoidance of mundane work and labor, could be recognized by simple observation. People knew what their neighbors were doing or not doing on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath reflected a social contract between neighbors to pause from their weekly grind and look heavenward in adoration and thanksgiving. Through the practice of the Sabbath rest, people were able to reflect on the true meaning of life, love and light, especially with the reading and hearing of the Torah.
The Sabbath afforded a dimension of civility that was dependent on some understanding of God’s Word and revelation. Unlike the other days of the week where competition, money and sweat prevailed, the Sabbath was intended to remind practitioners of a time in human history when “God walked with man.” Through the recitation of the Torah, in homily and sermon, the faith community was transposed on a weekly basis to the parameters of Eden.

Unlike the other Commandments, there seemed to be some uniqueness about the Fourth Commandment in its seeming transparency. Whereas lying, murder, disrespecting parents and other related crimes might also be observed whenever these sins were committed, there were spiritual dimensions to the other nine Laws that could be trespassed without any social recognition of trespass. A person could covet his neighbor’s property through thoughts and attitudes without ever being seen as covetous by those around him. Similarly, a person could hatefully wish the murder of another without committing murder and without revealing his hatred to any other person in society.

The spiritual dimensions of the Commandments were addressed in the ministry of Jesus. A man who “looked upon a woman with lust” had already committed adultery. One who hated his neighbor was already guilty of murder. But the spirituality of the Sabbath was inverted and practically demonstrated. People who practiced the Sabbath rest were visibly participating in the one day of the week where God’s Presence, especially through the reading of Torah, was invited into the community of faith.

The Fourth Commandment became the only Commandment located in the purview of human ability to dutifully fulfill and experience without any metaphysical question or debate.299 Whereas the other nine Commandments had deeper significance at the level of the human heart, the keeping of the Sabbath was obvious to any who could observe. Those that practiced keeping the Sabbath were blessed while those that

299 The metaphysical debates concerning the meaning of the Sabbath resulted in some 614 different rules designed to regulate daily life during the weekly rest day.
violated the Sabbath were accursed. The blessing pointed back to the Edenic nature of Paradise whereas the cursing reflected the lost wanderings of those exiled from the presence of God.

To lose this revelation in any sense of the word was akin to re-losing Paradise, an event already understood in historic and mythic terms, and continuously realized through the catastrophe of misery and death in the daily lives of people. The Sabbath was the weekly event held in the community of faith that signified God’s favor and man’s hope.

It was during the Sabbath rest that the possibility of God’s presence could arrive as it once had in Eden with Adam and Eve. The Sabbath was a reenactment of that sacred time before the Fall of humanity when the Lord actually walked with man in the “cool of the day.”

Once the Sabbath commandment was received at Sinai, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden seemed reversible by the efforts of man in the world who would practice Sabbath keeping. There was the possibility of walking once again with God in space and time upon the Sabbath day of rest. It was on that day of rest that the toil and work caused by sin, signified in the sweat of hard labor, was temporarily suspended while the grace of God was experienced.\(^\text{300}\)

### 4.3 The First Three Commandments and the Sabbath

The first three commandments concerned issues of the divine preeminence and the human ability to understand the difference between metaphysical realities concerning idolatry and true worship. These first three Commandments were specifically oriented to the intent of the human heart, something Jesus addressed to the astonishment of those who heard his teachings on the Law. What human controls were possible in keeping these first three Commandments? Who could possibly know what false gods were worshipped within the inner conscience of man? Only God, the one who searches

\(^{300}\text{Gen 3:19}\)
and knows the heart, could determine the accuracy of such interior knowledge.\textsuperscript{301}

The Sabbath was a welcomed invitation to participate in following hard after God, a following that was somehow measurable through practical standards of living. There would be no question of intent in the keeping of the Fourth Commandment. The very visible effort not to work, but to rest, was something the keepers of the Law could measure by acknowledging certain behaviors that were consonant with what ‘rest’ looked like.

\textbf{4.4 The Sabbath and the Last Six Commandments}

The Fourth Commandment was also a bridge to the following six Commandments where neighborliness and community functioned.\textsuperscript{302} Honoring one’s parents was similar to honoring God who created all living things. Parents were a reflection of the mystery of the Creator in terms of bringing life into a world of death. Birth was an acknowledgment of divine mystery, and parents were to be treated with the utmost respect as stewards of that mystery. But even in the time of Jesus, the religious authorities had found ways to rationalize what “honoring” a parent meant.\textsuperscript{303}

The follow-on Commandments strengthened the sacredness of life over death in the community of the faithful. The prohibition to murder is self-explanatory.\textsuperscript{304} Religious expression had the capability in ancient times, as it does in our own day, of rationalizing the killing of those who were considered at odds with God’s Law.

\textsuperscript{301} The wickedness of man is first alluded to as “thoughts of the heart” (Gen 6:5) and is deserving of judgment. See Gen 8:21 where the Lord determines never again to curse the ground in the manner of the Deluge, because “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” Psalm 58:2-3 reconfirms this conviction.

\textsuperscript{302} The idea of the good neighborhood as something structured through the Decalogue is advanced by Miller who writes; “From two directions, ‘neighborhood’ presents itself as an image for rich thinking about moral community in relation to the Commandments. The most obvious is the use of the ‘neighbor’ as a defining moral category in the Commandments. The other impetus for appropriating this image is the way in which spatial notions, language and imagery have come into play for both moral reflection in general and speaking about the Commandments.” Cf. Patrick D. Miller, \textit{The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology}, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) pp.51-67.

\textsuperscript{303} Mk 7:11-13

\textsuperscript{304} However, in the context of religious practice where worship of the living God is an expression of life and hope, there is the story of the murder of Abel by Cain in the first biblically recorded instance of homicide.
The death of life, especially the religiously inspired death of another was reflective of both the darkened understanding of man to correctly worship God and to love a neighbor as oneself. The Sixth Commandment, a number significant of the sixth day upon which mankind was created, seemed to be positioned in the Table of the Law as a reminder that true rest, true worship, and true community could never be experienced once that Commandment was violated.

The control of the Sixth Commandment seemed on the surface, easily managed. The legal authorities could maintain the sanctity of life by punishing the violator. Murderers were executed according to the Law and the community was repositioned into a state of harmony and balance.³⁰⁵ No murderer would be tolerated in the community of the faithful on penalty of God’s sacred curse. Those so cursed were executed outside the city gates in testimonial to the eternal banishment of the murderer from the presence of God and man.

The Seventh Commandment also addressed life and death, and was physically controlled, like murder, from social regulations and punishments. The adulterer was a destroyer of family covenant, and covenant was the sacred bond of communal life in the family and with God. The death of the family was inferred when a spouse broke the covenant commitment in marriage through an act of adultery. The death of the home, the place of life and nurturing was the result of the sin of adultery.

Occasionally, the nation of Israel would be compared to a bride that was spotless when faithful to the covenant of God and to a whore deserving death when unfaithful to God.³⁰⁶ But how could lust at the level of the heart be controlled by the guardians of the Law?³⁰⁷ The tangible rules of social interaction were weak attempts at controlling the interior sins of men and women. Jesus addressed all of these when he spoke of the heart as the place where sin resides. The weakened abilities of the Pharisees and

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³⁰⁵ Ex 21:23-25 places an exact equivalence of justice upon trespass.
³⁰⁶ Ez 6:9 is typical of the pronouncements of judgment that the Lord sent to Israel through the prophets.
Sadducees to control heart attitudes were superficially strengthened only by the introduction of numerous rules and regulations which attempted to separate the sexes from any casual interactions that could lead to the sin of adultery.\textsuperscript{308}

Violations of the Sixth and Seventh Commandments resulted in the curse of excommunication from society and resultant death of violators. Knowing the truth of a person’s heart was impossible outside of the Divine. Human beings could not know the real interior truth of another person. They could only observe the empirical behavior as an accurate reflection of truth.\textsuperscript{309}

Similarly, stealing and theft were violations of neighborliness and broke the covenant trust within a community. No community could survive the lawlessness associated with theft and the trespass of personal property. Theft contributed to impoverishment and victimization. Stealing another person’s property caused fear and suspicion within communities. Questions of trust and integrity could break a community into pieces due to stealing.

One of the more serious consequences of theft would be the destruction of one’s livelihood due to the loss of tools, instruments or livestock that otherwise insured productivity and financial support. The theft of important items necessary for work could jeopardize a family’s very survival.

Kidnapping was considered the most grievous form of theft and was punishable through death. However, similar to the other Commandments, there was no real way to monitor covetousness, which is at the base of theft (as well as all the other violations

\textsuperscript{308} To this present hour, the Orthodox Jew will not pray alongside a woman. Jerusalem’s famous “Wailing Wall” is divided by a fence dividing the sexes in their prayer and worship of God.

\textsuperscript{309} The Bible in Basic English presents this well;

“Because from inside, from the heart of men, come evil thoughts and unclean pleasures, the taking of goods and of life, broken faith between husband and wife, the desire of wealth, wrongdoing, deceit, sins of the flesh, an evil eye, angry words, pride, foolish acts: All these evil things come from inside, and make the man unclean.”

(Mk 7:21-23 BBE)
of the law). The Eighth Commandment was only executable when a crime of theft was observed or proven to have occurred.

The Ninth Commandment concerns the assassination of another person’s character or reputation. The bearing of false witness against another person placed the integrity of the accused into doubt and suspicion. In this fashion, the destruction of truth occurred through the introduction of a lie and was akin to the lie of the serpent that brought about Eden’s first failure. The lie of the serpent led to the sin and subsequent deaths of Adam and Eve.

God’s curse came upon all creation as a consequence of the failure to believe in God’s truth. Slandering God’s integrity by disbelieving His Word resulted in the subsequent decisions to disobey God’s commands. Human destiny crumbled into misery due to a false witness.

The potency of the serpent’s lie was based on the false assumption that man would never die, and that man could be as God. It was an assumption against the Divine love of God as Creator and sustainer of life. The creature attempted to elevate self to the status of the Creator through the power of the lie.

The theology behind the Ninth Commandment might be more deeply examined in light of the nature of issuing a sacred curse or killing prayer. The deception of a false witness confused the creature regarding the nature of the Creator. Man, who was created as flesh and blood, denied his own essence and being in time and space while attempting to assume the eternal dress of the uncreated and living God. This denial...

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310 There are two primary Greek words in the New Testament designating covetousness; πλεονεξία and ἐπιθυμία. In the AV the a – privative; ἀφιλάργυρος (Heb 13:5) designates being “free from the love of money.”
311 Gen 3:1-7
312 Gen 3:14-19
313 False witness became the tool of condemning and crucifying Jesus-Cf. Mk 14:56-57. This stands in contrast to the Lord’s bearing a true witness of God the Father-Jn 18:37.
314 Is 14:12 details the five “I wills” of Lucifer who boasts that he will become ‘like the Most High.’ Theologians have tied this boast with the serpent’s lie in Genesis 3 to establish the identity of Satan.
315 Brunner notes the impossible chasm dividing the Creator from the creation; “There is no greater sense of distance than that which lies in the words Creator-Creation. Now this is the first and the fundamental thing which can be said about man: He is a creature, and as such he is separated by an abyss from the
was a denial of love and truth.

Love was denied by the beast who would not acknowledge the love and trustworthiness of God. The ‘mark of the beast’ first entered human history with the destruction of the image of God in mankind, a destruction that resulted with the entrance of sin into the human heart. That marring of the image of God is the basis for the death of human individuality and freedom, not just the death of the human body. It is a spiritual death with consequences for the whole man.

The spiritual death of our first parents occurred in the very moment that truth was denied. That truth was the very identity of man. Truth regarding who we are as creatures of the Most High was subverted and replaced with the lie that we are in fact the creators of our own destinies and lives. In such thinking, there is no room for the presence of God. The creature that pretends to be Creator relegates God to the margins of thought and society.

Within the realm of the lie, God is forced into the non-existent. In the speaking

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Divine manner of being. The greatest dissimilarity between two things which we can express at all – more dissimilar than light and darkness, death and life, good and evil – is that between the Creator and that which is created.” Emil Brunner, Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology, trans. Olive Wyon. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 90.

316 That ‘most subtle beast’ remarked, “Hath God said…?” indicating some doubt upon the veracity of the Creator.

317 The destruction of the imago dei in humanity due to the lie of the beast may be the root meaning behind the ‘mark of the beast’ and the ‘mark of God’ in scripture, thereby displaying an ontological condition and a soteriological answer to the destruction of God’s image. Cf. Rev. 13:6, 17-18; 14:11; and contrast 7:3. Cf. Rev 17:5 as a symbolic representation of unrepentant fallen humanity. This becomes more intriguing when one considers the Church as the Bride, the New Jerusalem, in opposition to the ‘whore of Babylon.’

318 The scripture says that the first humans would die the very day they disobeyed God’s word which forbade eating from the prohibited tree. Yet Adam and Eve lived for hundreds of years following their trespass. What might be implied by the scripture is that death would enter the human malefactors the very moment they sinned, and that this death would begin with the death of their spiritual being. If this is the correct interpretation it gives us an understanding of Jesus words regarding the “dead burying the dead” (Mt 8:22) and the need to be spiritually “born again” (Jn 3:1-16)

319 Cf. Rom 1 as a text describing the results of truth abandonment in society. John MacArthur writes: “Abandon a biblical definition of truth and unrighteousness is the inescapable result. We see it happening before our eyes in every corner of contemporary society. In fact, the widespread acceptance of homosexuality, rebellion, and all forms of iniquity that we see in our society is a verbatim fulfillment of what Romans 1 says always happens when a society denies and suppresses the essential connection between God and truth.” John MacArthur, The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception, (Grand Rapids, Ill; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007) 5.
and maintaining of the lie, worship of the living God is impossible and the true destiny and purpose of man is unattainable.\textsuperscript{320} The curse of death in the creature is the necessary consequence that comes with the abandonment of truth. Truth and life are intertwined as one sacred element in the existence of human identity. Truth is not subject to relevancy. Truth is not a category of subjectivity. Truth is the factual existence of the Creator in the universe of life, love and light.

It is upon this foundation that truth becomes the means of worship. Those who worship God must do so in spirit and in truth.\textsuperscript{321} To maintain the falsehood of the lie, whether in the deepest confines of the human heart and intellect, or through the slanderous opinion of another, is to betray both truth and spirit. God, who is Spirit, cannot honor the lie with anything but the curse of death.

For a person to violate the Ninth Commandment is to deny not only the neighbor with whom a covenant of life is structured, but with the God of the Covenant. Slander, gossip, and other sins of the tongue betray the word of truth and are dimensions of such a violation.

The lie contradicts the Word of God who speaks to the human conscience in testimony of life, love and light. The intermittent absence of the Voice in the Garden of Paradise who walked and called unto Adam, “Where art thou?” was itself lost\textsuperscript{322} with the acceptance of the lie as truth. The subsequent expulsion of humanity from Eden was an exile from sacred fellowship.\textsuperscript{323} It was a cancellation of human identity otherwise

\begin{footnotes}
\item[320] The Westminster Catechism opens with the first question; “What is the chief end of man?” And answers; “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The Church has long realized the importance of man’s purpose as defined in relationship with God.
\item[321] Jn 4:24
\item[322] I Sam 3:1 tells us that the Word of the Lord became rare and in the times of Samuel with limited revelation.
\item[323] The KJV (1611) translators preferred the word ‘voice’ for ‘sound’ when looking at Gen 3:8. The Hebrewpeech אמקל Themes אֲלָחָם can be translated as “when they heard the sound of the Lord God walking” or “when they heard the Voice of the Lord God walking.” If we choose to side with the second interpretation that utilizes the “walking Voice” we can find conceptual and theological support in John who patterns his Gospel after Genesis (“In the beginning…) and encounter the “Word” or “Logos” who tabernacled with men (Jn 1:10). This suggests a personalization of God in Christ as the Word who speaks, who walks and has discourse in the affairs of people.
\end{footnotes}
founded upon the purpose of worshipping the living God.

The entrance of the lie into the hearts and minds of our first parents destroyed their spirituality. The wilderness wanderings east of Eden were accompanied by thorns, thistles, fears and a fading remembrance of what once was before the loss of Paradise. The introduction of the Law in the wilderness provided a temporary means of walking and calling to a lost, wandering humanity in search of God’s Presence.

The curse of the Law, which is death, was levied due to the inability of people to maintain truth. Instead of the Creator, the creature was frequently introduced into the covenant community as an object of worship. The golden calf became the symbol of the beastly lie still resident within the hearts of people who disbelieved the promise of the living God. The visible creation of the gold artifice designed and structured by human hands and darkened minds, provided a weak substitute for the invisible God, who could only be known through faith.

People recognized that the problem with the Law was not simply human behavior, but more importantly, human belief. What was believed was sure to be demonstrated in practical living. The hard realities of life and death pointed to something beyond the control of the creature who would pretend to be the Creator. Efforts to understand and control death occupied most of life.

What was believed, or not believed, to constitute truth, especially God’s truth, could hasten death or extend life, depending on the nature of one’s faith in God and their subsequent behaviors. In this sense, belief determined behavior. If wrong beliefs were accepted and practiced as truth, then the greater harm would occur through associated behaviors that those faulty beliefs produced. That harm would include not just the individual, but the community within which the individual lived.

4.5 The Need for Grace

The spiritual death of humanity that began with the sin of Adam and Eve made it impossible for anyone to meet the God of truth by the works of the Law. The inability of

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324 There are numerous references of God actually killing people due their wickedness and misbehavior. Cf. Gen 38:7-9 as examples of God personally slaying known people.
the spiritually dead to perform the spiritual duties within the spiritual dimension of life transformed the Law, which is good and holy, and a means to life, into a judge and condenser of the human condition. What was intended to bring life instead brought the curse of death.

The Law became a mirror to the facelessness of man. The Law gave stark testimony to the sickened condition of humanity. Man had lost his sacred identity through the lie and instead had invited the subsequent sin and death that entered the human race. The Law reflected God’s glory and holiness into the darkness of the human heart and thereby revealed the broken image of God in man. The Law displayed the sacredness of love, life and light above and in contrast to the empty void of the fallen creature.

In Paradise, the creature had attempted to ascend into heaven and occupy the throne of the Creator. The failure of that ascent was the subsequent crash of humanity. While ascending into heaven was not permitted to anyone, it was in an act of humble obedience that an act of ascension did occur in the wilderness. Moses alone was permitted the dreadful climb to Sinai’s crest to meet with the God of truth. He then descended back into the covenant community with the stone tablets of the Law bringing a message of blessing and cursing alongside the hope of God’s redemption. That hope was the promise that God would someday reveal His face to his children. In so doing, He would recreate the face of the exiled creature like that of His Son.

Moses descent from the mountain was accompanied with the wearing of a veil that covered his face. Even Moses remained faceless after viewing the glory of God.

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325 “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.” Cf. Rom 7:12-25.
326 Cf. Gen 1:1-3 for this understanding of a destructive “emptiness” in creation. God’s light and word are necessary for any order to occur within the chaos of a fallen creation. Bringing an ordered ’cosmos’ out of chaos is a supernatural work requiring the Presence of God’s Word, Light and Spirit.
327 The beatific vision in Christian theology is often considered the ultimate experience of the saints in heaven. Beholding the face of God is the consummate blessing of the redeemed. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologicae, Vol. 1 Question 12 and I Cor 13:12.
328 Gal 4:19; II Cor 3:12-18 & Rom 12:2 & 13:14. The very word “Christian” was originally used by mockers of the early Church but eventually adopted by believers because it reflects the truism of becoming Christ-like in one’s personal identity and behaviors.
Law could not correct the faceless condition caused by the iconoclast, it only magnified the glory of God and the need of man.

The broken image of God in mankind remained an ontological reality even after the reception of the Law.\textsuperscript{329} Those who recognized Moses as the intermediary of heaven and earth were followers of the Law written in stone. The weight of that Law was burdensome and impossible to carry. But the guardians of the Law relentlessly refined the Commandments through numerous regulations and ordinances in an effort to control and carry that burden.

Whereas the Law was impossible to regulate at the level of the human heart, it could be regulated and controlled in the public square. Of all the Laws, only the Fourth Commandment was observable by all to witness. Those who worked on the Sabbath were subject to penalty. Rest was mandated through some 613 regulations that exactly defined what work was or was not.\textsuperscript{330}

The tendency of the creature to deny the place of God in the covenant community is the trajectory of fallenness.\textsuperscript{331} This trajectory continued even with the appearance of the Christ. When the Word became flesh, the incarnation of God into human dress, the reversal of the Fall was prophetically realized, and also prophetically denied.\textsuperscript{332}

Answering the creature’s failure to ascend into heaven and become as God, God

\textsuperscript{329} The Reformed and Lutheran doctrines of the imago Dei distinguished between the \textit{forma substantialis} and the \textit{accidentalis} of the imago Dei. The substantial image of God was revealed in Christ whereas the accidental image, comprised of certain characteristics such as the capability to be righteous, holy and wise, were traits of that image created in man. What was lost at the Fall of humanity were those capacities to be holy and righteous. The imago Dei \textit{accidentalis} are the gifts of grace given in the work of God’s salvation. Cf. Richard A. Muller. \textit{Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology} (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985), 143-146.

\textsuperscript{330} The 613 Mitzvot (commandments) include regulations such as “belief in one God,” “the creation of humanity in the image of God” and the importance of the Torah as the divine revelation of God. Instructions of washing, walking distances and cooking can also be found in the catalogue of commandments regarding the Sabbath.

\textsuperscript{331} Dostoevsky’s short story, the \textit{Grand Inquisitor}, illustrates the more modern interpretation of religious authority rejecting the rule of Christ.

\textsuperscript{332} “Who hath believed our report?” was the question posed by Isaiah regarding the coming of the ‘suffering Servant’ of God (Isaiah 53:1-2).
descended into our world and became as Man. While flesh could never assume spirituality, the Spirit did assume flesh and testified of God’s love.

What the Law could not do was finally resolved through an act of grace. God himself became the embodiment of the Law in human form and displayed the judicial ability to forgive sins and remedy the curse upon humanity.

4.6 The Answer of Grace

When the Word became flesh, the Law was introduced in living, embodied form. The Shekhinah (Jn 1:14) that walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Paradise, and journeyed as a cloud and fire in the wilderness, now tabernacled with men in Jerusalem, the city of the covenant.333

The Voice that had called to Adam was now the incarnated Word speaking liberating truth to the world imprisoned in the bondage of the lie. The administration of the sacred curse was dependent upon belief or unbelief in the words of Jesus. Those who believed were blessed with eternal life. Those who disbelieved were condemned to eternal damnation.334

The issue of the Law and the keeping of the Sabbath became the external and

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333 John explicitly refers to this concept in opening verses of his Gospel; “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (Jn 1:14 NKJ) The Greek word for “dwelt” is ἐσκήνωσεν (Jn 1:14 BGT) which comes from σκήνω and can mean 1) to fix one's tabernacle, have one's tabernacle, abide (or live) in a tabernacle (or tent), tabernacle 2) to dwell; Cf. TDNT - 7:385,1040; v. The NET Bible adds the following note: “The Greek word translated took up residence (σκήνωω, skēnō) alludes to the OT tabernacle, where the Shekinah, the visible glory of God's presence, resided. The author is suggesting that this glory can now be seen in Jesus (note the following verse). The verb used here may imply that the Shekinah glory that once was found in the tabernacle has taken up residence in the person of Jesus.”

334 The following quote from Jn 3 summarizes much in this present chapter; “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (Jn 3:13-21 NKJ)
visible testing point of truth in the ministry of the Word. The Pharisees and the Sadducees embraced their control over the religious institutions built on the Sabbath principle. God would only walk with the faithful during the Sabbath rest. No work reflecting the aged curse of the Fall could be permitted into the covenant community. This was contested by the words and actions of Jesus, who claimed that those who came to him would “receive rest.”

For the stewards of the Sabbath this was a difficult teaching. If God were to visit Jerusalem, a city occupied and filled by pagan Romans, it would be on the condition of the Sabbath rest which would reflect the conditions of a pre-Fall Paradise. Such a visit would determine the fate of the world because God’s Messiah would overcome and conquer the pagan influences affecting the Holy City. Clearly, Jesus of Nazareth had not displaced the Romans from Jerusalem.

4.7 The Ministry of Jesus

Jesus proclamations of setting captives free, of bringing good news, and of the spiritual truths of the Law were difficult enough for the religious guardians. But his insistence that he was also the Lord of the Sabbath, that the Sabbath was made for men, not men for the Sabbath, combined with his feats of healing, often done on Sabbath days, violated the very hope of the religious authorities who imagined their efforts as necessary for God’s blessing and eventual appearance into human history.

It also contradicted the human controls that had been refined by the religious authorities in an attempt to regulate truth. Jesus teachings and ministry as the Word of God dismantled the power structures of the lie that had first entered creation through that most subtle of all beasts, the serpent in Eden.

The Creator had become as the creature in order to free the creature from the

335 Mt 11:28
336 It may not be coincidence that the Pax Romana was in effect when the Lord visited our world. A type of rest covered the entire known world as a consequence of Roman rule for approximately 207 years (27 BC to 180 AD).
mark of the beast, the reality of sin and death and eternal separation from God. The Creator had come into the world to bring a blessing upon the creature and to remove the curse of damnation. Through belief in the Word of truth, the One who said he is the ‘way, the truth and the life,’ people could experience the blessing of spiritual rebirth, and subsequently become true worshippers of God.

The tree of cursing that occupied the central place in Eden would be replaced with a similar tree of cursing that was destined to occupy the central place in all human history. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, once tasted, separated man from God. The tree of the Cross, once tasted, joined man to a special knowledge of God. The cross of Calvary would overshadow the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The death of God upon that tree outside Jerusalem’s gates would answer the death of humanity caused by Eden’s tree of knowledge. Life would spring from the second tree for those who believed in the death of God. For those who disbelieve, they are condemned already. The invitation of Christ is that believers “take and eat” of his flesh and blood in order to obtain eternal life. Jesus has become the fruit of the tree of Calvary. Those who eat of that fruit “will surely never die” and become children of God.

But those who disbelieve the Gospel remain under the curse of sin and death and are subject to the wrath of God. It is within this theological and ethical framework that the prayer of the sacred curse is examined.

4.8 Interpreting the Ministry of Jesus in Relationship to the Fall, the Decalogue and the Sacred Curse

The importance of Jesus’ ministry in relationship to the Fall of humanity and the Law of

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338 The Lutheran dogmatician, Flacius, argued that the image of God in man was completely lost and replaced by the image of Satan, the Imago Satanae. The Fall altered the human makeup resulting in an evil creature incapable of doing any good. Cf. Richard A. Muller. Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology (Baker Academic, 1985), 146.


340 Cf. Jn 6:54. While this scripture plays on the concept of the heavenly manna it nevertheless points to the idea of eating and ingesting Christ as the food of life.
God concerns much of the New Testament. Paul addresses the comparative features of the first Adam and the ministry of Jesus in Romans 5:14 and I Corinthians 15:22-45. Adam and Eve are mentioned in I Timothy 2:13-14 as a proof text regarding the role of women in the Church. The point is that the theology of the Fall was expressed and imported into the teachings of the New Testament Church.

The curse of death was answered in Christ who became our substitution in judgment. Christ, who perfectly fulfilled the Law of God, was not legally subject to the penalty due the lawbreakers. That penalty is death.341

Yet, Christ, the embodiment of the Law, died. Because Christ fulfilled every aspect of the Law, including the spiritual aspects, he should have escaped any judgment bringing the curse of death.342 But as expressed in Scripture, Jesus became our curse;

“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Yet the law is not of faith, but ‘the man who does them shall live by them.’ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us, for it is written; ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’” (Gal 3:10-13 NKJ)

The predetermined will of God to allow Christ to be crucified on the cursed tree was the means of reversing the horrendous impact of the Fall.343 Because Jesus had never sinned in life, death had no legal claim upon him. Because of his own righteousness, he became the perfect sacrifice for all who would believe in him. Dying in the place of humanity to salvage the lost was his purpose for coming into this world. Death once visited upon the Lamb of God made the divine payment complete.344

But death was powerless to hold him in the grave, because the Law had never

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341 Peter proclaims that it was ‘impossible’ for death to hold the Messiah, cf. Acts 2:24.
342 I Pet 2:22-24 where Jesus is described as having never sinned.
343 Eph 1:3-11
been violated by Christ. The legal basis for death is sin, and the sinless One overcame that state of death both as an individual and on behalf of all sinful humanity. He became the new Adam who would propagate a new humanity through the new birth.

His physical, bodily resurrection was a testimony of the power and righteousness of God. The curse of sin, which is death, was magnified through the Law, but would be overshadowed through the righteous light of Christ.

The Ten Commandments reflect the truth about the human condition as a sinful and broken condition. Humanity is estranged from God because of sin. The shattered image of God in humanity is incapable of fulfilling the holy perfection of the Law of God. The attempts to satisfy the Law, especially through the efforts of Sabbath keeping, comprised and concerned the religious authorities of the covenant community during the time of Jesus. But Jesus challenged the traditional understanding of the Law through numerous innovations regarding the interpretation of the Law, especially in the matter of the visible keeping of the Sabbath.

The Lord healed the lame and the crippled, restored sight to the blind and caused the mute to sing praise, all occasioned upon the Sabbath. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees as hypocrites because of their own internal filthiness. While pretending to be holy and righteous, they conspired to murder the Lord due to the miracles Jesus performed and the unorthodox message of grace he communicated.

Instead of understanding the reversal of the effects of the Fall in the works of Jesus, which is also the true intent of the Sabbath, the Pharisees and Sadducees could only perceive Jesus as a threat to their social order. The miracles performed on the Sabbath testified to a fulfillment of the long-standing hope of Israel that God would once again walk within the society of man, and Jesus brought this testimony to full fruition during his public ministry. But the religious authorities had somehow abandoned such hope and replaced it with a well honed skepticism that typifies much

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345 Acts 2:24
346 I Cor 15:56; II Tim 1:10; Heb 2:14-15, 9:15; I Pet 3:18; Rev 1:18;
in religious practice that has moved from a movement into the status of a monument.\textsuperscript{347}

Religious duties were practiced as an end in and of themselves. The overarching purpose of religious ritual was no longer concerned with the invitation of God into the community of faith. As a result, religious practice devolved into structures of elitism and oppression.

Jesus cursing of the fig tree is meant as a prophetic and a symbolic confrontation of this failure of the religious leadership, and by extension, the entire covenant community, to obey and properly fulfill the Law of God.\textsuperscript{348} The curse of Jesus is an acknowledgement of the death already present in the Jewish system of religion and the world as a whole. The tree of Israel, like that of the world, could not bear figs worthy of eating. God’s severe judgment affects the very root of the entire system.

The curse is not limited to just what can be seen, but also to the unseen, buried in the heavy ground and soil of tradition, superstition and ultimately, nourished through the subterranean aquifers of the lie.

The death of the fig tree “from the roots up”\textsuperscript{349} and the subsequent withering of that tree imparted a picture to the disciples of judgment and the general failure of religion. Whereas the religions of the nations surrounding Israel were admittedly erroneous and filled with idolatry, the heathen were removed from a primary responsibility to carry God’s truth as Israel had been commissioned to do. The religion of Israel was considered to be the true religion that faithfully brought the revelation of God back to man. That this belief was subverted is evidenced by the curse of Jesus. Even that which was considered sacred is not immune from the wrath and judgment of God, especially when the ‘sacred’ is in opposition to the truth of God. This is the worthlessness of a religion that has lost its saltiness. It is fit for nothing.\textsuperscript{350}

The utterance of a curse upon the socially acceptable tenets of religion might be

\textsuperscript{347} Cf. Chapter One addresses the ossification of a dynamic faith into a static system of tradition and practice.
\textsuperscript{348} Mk 11:13-28
\textsuperscript{349} Mk 11:20
\textsuperscript{350} Lk 14:34-35
necessary if we accept the premise of the foregoing interpretation of the curse of Jesus. This communication of a sacred curse might occur within the jurisdiction of the Church as it addresses impotence in true worship. It might occur when perceived injustices overwhelm the exercise of truth in society.

The sacred curse may tie into the history of faith that recognizes the true condition of humanity as fallen and broken, the power of the Law to establish right and wrong, while admitting the weakness and inability of man to fulfill the Law, and the ministry of Christ who answers the failures of humanity with his own blood. In so doing, the sacred curse becomes a tool of the redeemed to prophetically confront a toxic culture. The sacred curse becomes the antidote to the poisonous lies that would detour human hope from the power of God’s salvation.

In this regard, the utterance of the sacred curse or killing prayer can become a means of mercy. By disturbing the fig tree there may be repentance and a seeking after God. The sacred curse points to the lost condition of man while promoting the Cross of Christ. Instead of praying for the general blessings of God to befall the lost, the dead in spirit, we might carefully and compassionately pray that the fig tree that promises figs but never delivers, be uprooted and destroyed for the sake of any who would then call out to God for their salvation.

The administration of the sacred curse should never be taken lightly. It is imperative to recognize that God’s methods for bringing people into the Kingdom seem most often accomplished through relational demonstrations of love. People caring for others, praying and practically helping neighbors and strangers, brings the light of Christ into the darkness of the lie.

The heart touched with the life, love and light of Christ through compassionate conviction will be more receptive to the salvation message than some program of dogmatic enquiry lacking personal care. The old saying, “people don’t care about how much you know until they know how much you care” rings true at every level of the Christian witness.
But the exceptional prayer invoking a sacred curse has biblical precedence in both the Old and New Testaments. Those occasions demanding a sharp rebuke while petitioning God’s punitive touch places the authority of the Church above the society or the individual who has attacked, demeaned and marginalized the Christian witness.

Such authority to invoke a sacred curse or killing prayer seems to originate in the corporate structure of the Church, the covenant community of faith, not simply by the whims or preference of individuals. This requires some understanding of what the Church looks like.

4.9 Interpreting the Ministry of the Church in Relationship to the Fall, the Decalogue and the Sacred Curse

Apart from the New Testament blueprint defining the earliest Christian fellowships, the Church today is comprised of numerous hierarchical, congregational Presbyterian and independent models. This poses challenges to any common identity of the community of faith in relationship with other communities of faith that differ in polity.

Denominationalism is checkered with histories of factionalism, splits, excommunications, shunnings and outright persecutions against others professing faith in the same resurrected Lord and Christ, but differing in matters of polity and doctrine.351

Additionally, many congregations have moved away from any denominational association and are now recognized as “community churches” spinning off parachurch ministries that further alienate other Christian fellowships. Church governance can reflect differing leadership philosophies that may imitate a corporate business mentality, or a coaching and mentoring approach to ministry, or have an emphasis on being seeker sensitive, emergent or even “hip” in order to become more relevant to

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351 Bonhoeffer gives a convincing description of what the Church looks like in relationship to the proclamation of the Word: “The word of the apostles’ preaching is the same Word which bore the sins of the whole world in his Body. That Word is the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit. "Christ in his Church" is the sum of the apostles' teaching, the apostolic preaching. This teaching never renders itself superfluous. It creates for itself a Church which remains steadfast in it, because it has been accepted by the Word, and is daily confirmed in its faith. This teaching creates for itself a visible Church.” Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 280.
Some congregations are dedicated to ethnic or specialized groups such as the Messianic Jewish congregations which will not utilize the anglicized “Jesus” but the Hebrew equivalent, “Yeshua” when referring to the Messiah. These kinds of differences make cross communication amongst churches very difficult.

This further complicates the question of this thesis regarding whether or not it is ever right to pray a sacred curse or killing prayer. Under the assumed guidelines already posited that such prayers should be commissioned within the recognized context of the covenant community, we might rightly question which covenant community reflects the closest affinity to the New Testament blueprint of the earliest Church, especially with respect to the issuance of discipline.

We might ask if such affinity is even necessary for the proper execution of a sacred curse, or whether or not any God honoring community of faith can commission such punitive prayers. The immense differences found in covenant communities of faith makes any generalized approach to a sacred curse or killing prayer questionable at best.

Because the Church is no longer unified by the same social and theological definitions that once united her, we are right to wonder if there is any possibility of the legitimate existence of a sacred curse in society today. This variance in theology impacts

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352 A reference to the “hipster faith” church can be found in a recent article by Brett McCracken, “Hipster Faith” Christianity Today, Sep 2010, pp. 24-30. Pastors are casual in their approach to the Gospel. Some actually will use curse words from the pulpit while delivering their messages in order to be more relevant with those in attendance.

353 Bonhoeffer is worth quoting again regarding the nature of the Church; “Church order is divine both in origin and character, though of course it is meant to serve and not to rule. The offices of the Church are "ministries" (διακονία, I Cor 12:5). They are appointed in the Church of God (I Cor 12:28), by Christ (Eph 4:11) and by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). They are not appointed by the Church. Even where the Church makes itself responsible for distributing offices, it does so only under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2 etc.). Both ministry and Church spring from the triune God. The offices exist to serve the Church, and their spiritual rights only originate from this service. That is why the Church has to adapt its offices to the varying needs of time and place. The offices in the Church at Jerusalem had to be different from those in St Paul's missionary Churches. Though the articulation of the Church is of divine appointment, its form is adaptable to varying needs and subject only to the spiritual judgment of the Church itself as it ordains its members for service. In a similar way the "charismata" which the Holy Spirit confers on individual members of the Church are subject to the strict discipline of the ministry in the Body.” Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 282.
our understanding of God and our theological discourse with one another.\textsuperscript{354}

The ministry of the Church in relationship to the Fall, the Decalogue and the ministry of Jesus is subject to numerous interpretations throughout Christendom. We are hard pressed to discover any universal principle that binds the Church together today, except, perhaps, the gospel story in its broadest strokes, and the pre-supposed presence of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{355}

The story of Christ as the One who answered the curse of sin for humanity by dying on the Cross and being bodily raised the third day establishes an important plank in the orthodoxy of the Church.\textsuperscript{356} The indwelling work and presence of the Holy Spirit also brings a unifying factor into the Church via the sameness of the one Spirit indwelling the millions of believers world-wide.\textsuperscript{357} These two absolutes may serve to

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\textsuperscript{354} Even our understanding of God is subject to modernity. Cf. Alistair McFadyen, Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian Doctrine of Sin (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 6; “We live in a culture which is basically secular, which affirms the world’s integrity and independence from any external, non-worldly reality so that it may be understood in its own terms, without immediate or explicit reference to God. Such secularity is neither necessarily nor intrinsically atheist, but it does issue a special challenge to faith and theology: if the world may be understood and lived in without transcendent reference, what place is there for God, and what point is there in speaking of God?”


\textsuperscript{356} But even this is subject to debate as groups claiming to be Christian deny the physical resurrection of Christ. These groups are not considered orthodox but are called “cultic” and include Unitarians, Mormons (Latter day Saints), Christian Scientists and Jehovah’s Witnesses among numerous other cults.

\textsuperscript{357} The testimony of the Holy Spirit (Spiritus Sancti) is an internal witness awakening the believer to the possibility of others who are one with him through the faith born in Christ. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 280. “Furthermore, when this Word comes, the Holy Spirit comes, showing to Christians, both individually and corporately, the gifts of the incarnate Christ to man. He produces faith in his hearers, that they may discern in the preaching the entry of Jesus Christ. He opens their eyes to see Christ coming into their midst in the power of his Body to tell us that he has received us and will receive us again to-day.”
\end{flushright}
bind all Christians together in a generalized sense of the word.

The metaphysical reality of the Church is comprised of real, physical presence of people who often differ in many points of doctrine, tradition and teaching. But a third absolute may also exist because of the reverence and position of the Bible by most Christian communities. Within these communities is a conviction that the Bible contains our most important sources for the gospel story of Christ.

Similar to the Torah in Jewish communities, the Bible usually holds the authoritative place among the great majority of Christian faith communities. However, the Bible continues to fluctuate in this sense of “absolute” as denominations argue from critical viewpoints regarding what is original to the early Church and what emerged as a consequence of the early faith.358

The sacred curse or killing prayer may best be located in the community of faith that is unified on the major points of what truth is, thereby defining that community in terms of what is real, unreal, important, unimportant, and sacred or profane. An example of this generally held truth might be a belief in the physical, bodily resurrection of Christ. For a community to disagree on this cardinal point of doctrine would insinuate a divided fellowship that could not worship together. In this situation, worship is based on the presupposition of truth existing as an absolute while reflecting something about the nature and Person of God. To deny the truth of the resurrection as commonly held by orthodox fellowships implies a denial of a supposed truth that is

358 While this paper does not examine the history of critical enquiry into the scripture traditions, it must be acknowledged that the results of redaction criticism, form criticism, source criticism and the other disciplines of scholarship have challenged any sense of absolute authority that once was maintained. One of the better analysis of the issues is Dr. Geisler’s Presidential Address to the Evangelical Theological Society in 1998 where he argues that naturalist philosophies are at the root of destructive biblical criticism; “Naturalism is the philosophy that denies there are supernatural interventions in the world. It is at the root of modern negative biblical criticism which began in earnest with the publication of Benedict Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus in 1670.” Cf. Norman Geisler, Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars, JETS 42/1 (March 1999): 6; and Grant Osborne, Higher Criticism and the Evangelical, JETS 42/2 (June 1999): 210. The well-known argument of Robert Guelich that the “exegetical atomization of the Gospels leads to the distortion of the literary products,” thereby contorting the whole of the Gospel message, is relevant to the diminishment of sacred authority within society today. Cf. Robert Guelich, “The Gospel Genre,” in Das Evangelium and die Evangelien, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), 219.
essential to defining what it means to be “Christian.”

We might conclude that if the Church is the holder and carrier of absolute truth, then the Church is also responsible for the conveyance of that truth through those acceptable means and methods found in her jurisdiction and related to the “spread of the Gospel.” Those who hold such a doctrinal position believe that they are indwelt by the Word of truth, the Holy Spirit and the hope of God, while comprising the population of the Church in an organic sense. They are the corporate Body of Christ made up of individuals who have their identity fashioned through their understanding of the Cross, where the Adamic curse is removed through the blood of Christ and the blessing of life has been imposed through faith and justification.

The responsibility of sharing and maintaining the truth is given to them who have “seen the light” and have been “born again.” For persons to subvert God’s truth after coming into the knowledge of that truth presents the possibility of some punitive action occurring, either from God or from the Church herself. In this sense, the Scripture that “judgment first begins in the house of God” places individual believers in a relationship with both God and man that can be both rewarding and punitive.

Also in this context we might ask whether or not it is ever right to punish those who are blind to the truth of God. Is it right to utter a sacred curse against the heathen mind-set that denies the light of God, especially “light” that is uniquely held by a

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359 “It is not always easy to see where a legitimate school of thought ends and heresy begins. That is why a doctrine may be tolerated in one Church and proscribed as heresy in another (Rev 2.6, 15 ff). But once a heresy has become an open scandal it must of necessity be proscribed. The heretical teacher must be excommunicated, and all personal intercourse with him avoided (Gal 1.8; I Cor 16.22; Titus 3.10; II Jn 10 ff). The word of pure proclamation must visibly bind and loose. The space which the Church claims for its proclamation and order is thus made clear as an ordinance of divine appointment. We must now ask whether we have adequately described the visible nature of the Church, or whether it claims further space in the world. The New Testament gives a clear and definite answer. The Church needs space not only for her liturgy and order, but also for the daily life of her members in the world. That is why we must now speak of the living-space (Lebensraum) of the visible Church.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 284.

360 This is especially true in the more evangelical fellowships, such as the Southern Baptists in the USA, that hold to the centrality and importance of the Great Commission found in Matthew, 28:18-20.

361 “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1Pet 4:17 NKJ)
distinctive sect or denomination? Has the revelation of God’s Word brought condemnation to people who reject that revelation?\textsuperscript{362}

4.10 The Use of a Sacred Curse in a Secular Society

Clearly, conservative, evangelical interpretations of the Scriptures suggest that those who do not believe in the message of Christ remain “already” condemned in their state of fallenness.\textsuperscript{363} But does that condemnation merit the additional punitive action of a sacred curse or killing prayer? What possible avenue exists that would permit the unbelieving person, institution or society to escape from the wrath of a holy and righteous God? How can the unbelieving secularist repent and petition for the mercies of God while ignorant of the “truth” of God’s revelation?

Within the realm of general Church discipline there have always been means provided for repentance and restoration of the wayward believer. Confession, the precursor to modern day counseling, was a Church innovation that sought the well-being of that soul who recognized the error of his ways.\textsuperscript{364}

The means of escaping certain judgment is made available to the covenant

\textsuperscript{362} Wills argues this point; “Attention to the meaning of church discipline should temper the notion that its significance resided simply in its function as a device of social control. It is true that evangelical churches were ‘moral courts …But viewing discipline as social control goes only a short way in explaining its place in the lives of churchgoers. The faithful did not exercise discipline in order to constrain a wayward society. That was the task of families, communities, and governments. Churches disciplined to constrain confessing saints to good order and to preserve their purity. Church discipline was not about social control but about ecclesiastical control.” Cf. Gregory A. Wills, Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

\textsuperscript{363} “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (Jn 3:17-21 NKJ) Note the words “condemned already” as they suggest a state of being that reaches back to the dawn of human history.

\textsuperscript{364} Confession led to penance in the Medieval Church and remains a constant in today’s liturgical fellowships. Cf. Mary C. Mansfield, The Humiliation of Sinners: Public Penance in Thirteenth-Century France (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) 18. “Penance in the most general sense was obviously about reconciliation: the payment of a moral debt, the restoration of social relations, the reinstatement of the excommunicant, the renewal of peace between a sinner and God.”
community of faith.

But the question arises concerning those persons who are outside a specific faith community. What happens to the unbeliever who is ignorant of Scripture teachings, especially as promoted by a distinct faith community that claims knowledge of absolute truth? It seems that in this construct, persons of faith are better equipped to seek God’s forgiveness than those outside the faith. This can place a burden upon those faith communities to shepherd both the saved and the lost as defined by their doctrines of soteriology and social responsibility.

The evolution of the Church’s responsibility as a guardian of the society she resides within seems to have colored the perception that the Church is responsible for not only the saved within her boundaries but also the lost in the darkness outside.365

There seems to be some evidence of the Lord’s rejection of such social concerns, especially when it involved issues within the political sphere.366 However, on the other hand, there is some New Testament doctrine that instructs the Church to be at peace with secular rulers in authority, thereby making possible a dimension of ecclesiastical interaction within secular communities.367

In today’s contemporary American culture the voice of the Church has often been relegated to the margins of social interaction and political involvements. The public square does not readily acknowledge the presence of the Church in social debate. The table of reason has no chair for the presuppositions of faith and the internal

365 When this perception occurred is subject to debate. While none would argue against the ancient Judeo concept of God and society, and the subsequent influence of the First Century upon the earliest Christian communities, others would point to the Edict of Milan (AD 313) whereby political authority married ecclesiastical authority and formed the theocratic empire of Constantine. The rise of this two-headed institution, State and Church, was attacked in the Reformation teachings of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli who advocated the supremacy of God’s governance over man’s authority.

366 Lk 13:31-32 & Jn 18:36. Jesus avoided the ambitions of the Zealots while recognizing that His Kingdom was not of this world. It is ironic that many of the present theological discussions suggest that the advancement of a political cause is the proper work of the Kingdom. This is best exemplified through Liberation Theology, Dominion Theology and related ideologies connected to Roman Catholicism. Cf. Mark Saucy, The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus (Word Publishing, Dallas, TX, 1997). The proper question regards defining the necessary balance between the Kingdom of God and the empires of man.

367 Titus 3:1 & Rom 13:3
doctrinal turbulence that pervades competing Church authorities. Public hostility towards opinions that are religiously inspired is more evident today than in recent years when the sacred and secular community placed the Church in the town square next to city hall and the courthouse. A cooperative coexistence of the sacred and the secular harkens to an earlier time in American history when the sharp distinctions between Church and state were not as pronounced and politically charged as they are today. Such cooperation is often strained in this modern era.

The questions of the balance of powers, exemplified by the ecclesiastical powers of the Church alongside the secular powers of the state, frequently engage in debate regarding the convictions of truth in any given situation. These convictions may bias one institution against the other due to their peculiar interests and beliefs. Additionally, the separation of the Church from the state occupies the interests of numerous groups, both sacred and secular, who seek to quarantine the Church as an unwanted influence in matters not tied to ecclesial practice.

As a consequence there is an increasing contentiousness in American society between matters of faith and politics. Both the Church and the state battle for their own interpretation of the American dream and often are at odds with one another. Painful legal actions are brought by and against both Church and state as matters of truth in society are fought over. This has created a very embittered and divisive cultural context within the United States whereby compromise between Church and state are difficult to


369 Organizations such as Americans United for the Separation of Church and State argue against any inclusions of the sacred with the secular. This is born out in social issues to include prayer in public places, the use of school vouchers administered through tax payer monies, the political involvements of churches from their preachers and pulpits, and numerous issues centered on the use of religious symbology in government buildings or land. Organizations that argue for a tempered inclusion are also numerous, such as the American Center for Law and Justice, the Rutherford Institute, and the Christian Coalition to name but a few.
obtain. Such compromise seems impossible in the practice of sacred cursing.

A recent example suffices. Mikey Weinstein,\textsuperscript{370} founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, has filed suit against Gordon Klingenschmitt, a former U.S. Navy chaplain, to “stop asking Jesus to plunder my fields ... seize my assets, kill me and my family then wipe away our descendants for 10 generations.” This lawsuit is seeking limitations upon the public praying of a person who has issued a sacred curse against a perceived enemy of the faith.\textsuperscript{371}

The Constitutional issues at stake are the concerns over freedom of speech and religion.\textsuperscript{372} Does praying a killing prayer or a sacred curse qualify as “hate speech?” According to Weinstein, a “fatwah”\textsuperscript{373} has been issued against him by reason of this prayer; “Klingenschmitt... issued a “fatwah” calling upon his followers to commit violence against, or even kill, Michael Weinstein and even his family...”\textsuperscript{374}

Other sacred curses or killing prayers have been directed against the President of the United States, significant personalities and institutions perceived to be at odds with significant truths within the Church.\textsuperscript{375} What seems certain is that there exist people, and perhaps institutions representing ecclesial authority that are willing to pray a sacred curse against someone considered outside their fellowship. The covenant community of faith is not circumscribed in its behaviors by reason of an unbelieving

\textsuperscript{370} Weinstein is not new to this type of drama. He sued the US Air Force Academy over the supposed proselytizing of cadets by teachers at the Academy in 2005.
\textsuperscript{371} Cf. Diane Jennings, “Lawyer sues to end Dallas group’s ‘threat’ prayers” Dallas Morning News, 4 October 2009. According to the article, “The suit also asks the court to stop the defendants from "encouraging, soliciting, directing, abetting or attempting to induce others to engage in similar conduct.”
\textsuperscript{372} Primarily the First Amendment to the US Constitution; “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”
\textsuperscript{373} A “fatwah” is a legal pronouncement in Islam. Fatwahs are issued in Islamic communities when perceived violations against Allah have occurred. Usually they are death warrants that offer some financial reward to the one who executes the intended punishment of the fatwah.
\textsuperscript{374} Cf. scienceblogs.com for a short history of this prayer
\textsuperscript{375} Imprecatory prayer against the President is not as uncommon as we might first believe. Cf. Bob Allen, “Drake, former SBC officer, says he’s praying for Obama to die” Associated Baptist Press, June 2009.
outsider or a person who is perceived to be at odds with that faith community.

There seems to be both Old Testament and New Testament authority giving such faith communities a basis for issuing a sacred curse or killing prayer, whether it be against a believing member of the community or someone outside that community. If we accept the presuppositions that such is the case, that there exists a scriptural foundation and a historical tradition for making a sacred curse against a secular individual or institution, then we are forced into the questions of “who” decides when these curses occur.

As argued earlier in this chapter, that becomes a problem if a collective, unified agreement to seek God’s retributive power is required by the Church, because within the Protestant community at least, such agreement is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain, especially at the level of those community churches that have no trans-local authority. This is the crux of the problem with issuing a sacred curse or killing prayer.

It seems unlikely, based on the seeming evidence of scripture, that God will honor the vendettas of angry individuals who seek the irreparable harm of others by utilizing the sacred curse. It may be more likely that God might honor the petition for a sacred curse or killing prayer offered by a local community of faith that perceives a need for divine intervention and retribution to occur within that specific community. But such local faith communities might only expect local results as a consequence.

The issue of biblical Church authority comes into sharper perspective as the means through which ecclesial prayer and imprecation occur. The greater the authority and reach of the Church, the greater the authority and reach such prayers and curses may have.376

Communities of faith maintain some authority to issue prayers of blessing and cursing in ratio to the spiritual authority they possess.377

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376 For the blueprint of this concept we turn to Act 2-4 where the saints were together in unison. Their prayers for spiritual boldness and God’s intervention seem to have been answered because of their oneness in spirit and purpose.

377 The modern era has forgotten the influences of the Church upon the state (and vice versa); Cf. Robert Louis Wilken, “Gregory VII and the Politics of the Spirit,” First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and
overreaches her authority in such prayers, it is doubtful that any meaningful consequence will result.\textsuperscript{378} To issue a sacred curse effectively, a covenant community must biblically agree on the cause for such prayer and the relevance of that prayer to the realm of her spiritual authority. To exceed that realm of spiritual authority is to pray amiss and in vain.\textsuperscript{379}

\textbf{4.11 Summary of Chapter Four}

The legal basis for the issuance of a sacred curse or killing prayer is due to the Fall of humanity from the presence of God and violations of the Law (the Decalogue), especially the disturbance of the Sabbath rest. The ontological curse resulting from the Fall, death, has been answered in Christ who died on behalf of humanity. Jesus became the object of the sacred curse of God in the stead of humanity while hanging upon the cursed tree of the Cross.

The Decalogue was intended as a guide for life within the Covenant Community of Israel, but violations of the Law engendered God’s curse instead of divine blessing. The Law condemned man as a law breaker. The curse of the Ten Commandments was also answered through the ethical life of Christ who fulfilled the Law on behalf of any who would believe. Being justified through faith in Jesus Christ, Law breakers were

\textit{Public Life} Jan. 1999: 26; “The authority of the lord in ecclesiastical matters was symbolized by the practice of lay ‘investiture.’ This term originally referred to the ceremony in which a lord handed over land to a vassal in exchange for an oath of fealty. As a symbol of the transfer the lord would give the new vassal a staff or a sword or a spear. In time a similar practice developed at the installation of a bishop. At the time of consecration the king or his representative handed over the symbols of the office to the bishop (or abbot), usually a staff or crosier and a ring, and the king said: ‘Receive the church.’ The bishop was then consecrated in an ecclesiastical rite by other bishops, but the symbols of authority had been transmitted by the king, not the bishops. It was obvious that this system encouraged greater loyalty to the local lord than to the pope or to the Church as a universal communion.”


\textsuperscript{379} Cf. Judith Frishman, Willemien Otten, and Gerard Rouwhorst, eds., \textit{Religious Identity and the Problem of Historical Foundation: The Foundational Character of Authoritative Sources in the History of Christianity and Judaism} (Boston: Brill, 2004) 95-96 “…all forms of authority tend to become, in the end, formal legal structures that are accompanied by sanctions. In religion these sanctions feature as confessional loyalty or orthodoxy, protected by rules of admission, limits to the community and, finally, excommunication. The tragedy is that the fundamental persuasive character, even of confessional orthodoxy and ecclesiastical community rules, has often been intertwined with civil force and human hatred, which is responsible for religions violent past.”
pardon and engrafted into the Tree of Israel as citizens of the Kingdom, and children of God.\textsuperscript{380}

Those who did not believe were akin to the cursed fig tree that received the full impact of the penalty of Christ’s words, “from the roots up.” Never bearing fruit, in the sense of this metaphor, unbelievers are “condemned already” to an eternal death that remains a part of the curse still present in the world today.\textsuperscript{381}

Society is comprised of both believers and unbelievers. The role of the Church as a shepherding influence over both the sacred and the secular may be debated, but that the Church provides a witness to both realms is undeniable. The witness of the Church within her own boundaries of authority may include disciplines that utilize a sacred curse or killing prayer. Excommunications, shunnings and chastisements are expected within that realm of authority.

Ecclesial authority to witness outside the community of faith to the lost is biblically grounded and must abide within the territory of the covenant community’s spiritual reach. A church community has authority to speak to the world at large as long as that “world” falls within the boundaries of the speaking Church. For any church community to pray a sacred curse against a foreign city violates the principle of spiritual authority as indicated through scripture. For a church in New York City to pray an anathema against an individual or institution in Johannesburg, Africa, would be wrong and without consequence according to the theory of this thesis.\textsuperscript{382}

However, if the Church in Johannesburg issued an anathema against an

\textsuperscript{380} Rom 11:17-24  
\textsuperscript{381} John 3:18  
\textsuperscript{382} In this sense, the boundaries of the Church must include the location and geographical positioning of the adherents of that faith community. This principle is well argued in; W. E. Hewitt, "Roman Catholicism and Social Justice in Canada: A Comparative Case Study," Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology 28.3 (1991): 303; “Specifically, it may be argued that the quality of a local level social justice commitment is a function not only of the bishop's own personal perspective or orientation, but also of his willingness and ability to utilize specific types of resources to institutionalize change-oriented initiatives. It is this ability to create an institutional base for change, furthermore, which contributes to the success or failure of local Church authority in entrenching the social justice commitment at all levels of the local organization.”
individual or institution within Johannesburg, having obtained unified consent within its own ecclesial structures of authority, then a sacred curse becomes a potential weapon against the power of the lie. Evil can be countered and checked through such prayers.

When a Christian community of faith is unified in her vision and purpose, the power of the resurrected Christ becomes evidenced through the potency of prayer and the follow-on activities of faith. The sacred curse and killing prayer are extreme examples of such potency in both spiritual and pragmatic terms.
Chapter Five

Truth and the Failure of Modern Theology

"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you…”

Jesus

5.1 Introduction to Chapter Five

In this concluding chapter, an attempt is made to answer the question of this thesis; “Is it ever right to pray for the failure, destruction or harm of another person, especially when such prayer is made in the name of God?”

The short answer is yes. As demonstrated in previous chapters, there is a biblical and theological basis for the administration of a sacred curse or killing prayer. Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with sacred curses that have resulted from disobedience to God’s word, whereby God has levied a condemnation upon a person or an entire population.

There are also curses that have been occasioned by people speaking against people. Curses have originated from the idea that there exists a power in the spoken word to inflict harm upon the recipient of a curse. The source of the sacred curse can be divine or human. In either case, the prayer of a curse is intended to hurt another and is often justified, rightly or wrongly, by the one levying the curse.

But the longer answer is what is needed here. It is an answer that qualifies the ecclesiastical conditions and order for a sacred curse to occur. In other words, a sacred curse or killing prayer does not have any possible merit except certain conditions be

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383 Matthew 5:44
met first. This thesis then concludes with an assessment of modern moral theology’s failure to speak to society as a voice of conscience. Some recommendations for the administration of a sacred curse follow.

5.2 The Importance of Truth for the Administration of the Sacred Curse

A sacred curse or killing prayer must meet certain biblical standards that are consonant within a given faith community’s convictions about truth in order to be valid. The faith community’s understanding of the nature of truth becomes the means for action in that community’s reasoning to levy a sacred curse, an anathema, excommunication or killing prayer.

Violations of religious truths are frequently guarded against by the teachings of dogma, tradition and doctrine. Similar to many other religious systems, the perception of what truth is becomes a primary means for identity and power within the Church. Differing definitions of truth distinguishes one community from another. Within the Christian tradition, truth is an important key to understanding the nature of God, man and the universe.

Because of the importance and place of “truth” within most Christian communities, there is an equally important emphasis on recognizing those teachings, doctrines and beliefs which are not the truth. These “un-truths” or lies are frequently consigned to the demonic realm in terms of spiritual warfare.

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386 However, those conditions were often subject to debate and disagreement, leading to the mutual “excommunication” of opponents. Cf. William Kurtz Gotwald, *Ecclesiastical Censure at the End of the Fifteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1927) 20.

387 Such conditions are often recognized as set by the sin or disobedience of the one punished: “Then maybe you will believe that we take our church affairs as seriously as you take your affairs of state." In short, church discipline and, if it comes to that, excommunication, which is simply the public statement that a person has by grave, knowing, obdurate, and public sin separated himself from the communion of the Church.” Cf. "The Bishops' Problem," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* Oct. 2003

388 However, there have been numerous historical instances where the power to curse or excommunicate had nothing to do with matters of truth, but rather, issues over power. This is reflected in the great struggle within the Papacy over what was mockingly termed “the Babylonian captivity” where Popes and anti-Popes took turns “excommunicating” one another. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) for interesting biographies of these competing Popes.

389 The biblical notion of spiritual warfare is found in texts such as Eph 6:10-20.
It becomes the responsibility of the Church to test, verify and uphold truth claims in this fallen world as she combats the power of the lie. The Church often emphasizes that it is the human soul that is at stake in this battle over truth and lies. If the power of the lie succeeds in overwhelming the power of truth, then all is lost. Many believe that the Church advocates a non-violent militancy in its duties to propagate truth as defined by the Church. It is the truth that finally sets people free from the curse of sin and death.

But the question Pontius Pilate posed, “What is truth?” recognizes the difficulty in assessing absolutes, especially absolutes about God and morality. The difficulties associated with attempts to define truth have engaged theology and philosophy throughout the ages.

One of the reasons so many denominations exist within Christendom is that the “what” comprising absolute truth has never been agreed on. A biblical standard is often pointed to by most communities of faith, but the differences in biblical interpretations of key biblical texts continue to divide rather than unite these faith communities.

For a biblical standard to be recognized there also needs to be some reference to the ancient teachings of the Church in relationship to the traditions of that particular faith community and their evolution through the course of history. The teachings of the Church have not evolved in a vacuum. There are historical precedents, debates, writings, creeds, catechisms and records of the effort of the Church to establish the proper standards for measuring truth claims.

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390 Jude 1:3
391 The Salvation Army has captured the full force of this military metaphor in their use of paramilitary dress, regulations, verbiage and planning. Their central publication is the “War Cry” and they speak of persons being “promoted to glory” upon their deaths in similar language used by military units who “promote” to higher ranks and responsibilities.
392 Cf. Jn 8:32; “The truth will set you free” is a biblical text pointing to the power of God’s truth to release the oppressed and captive soul from the bondages of sin and death.
393 Jn 18:38
394 This is the crux of the problem regarding those divisive social issues already referenced in Chapter One.
Alongside such efforts to determine truth, there is a need to identify the historical precedence for the administration of a sacred curse that can be identified within the long past of church tradition and activity. Any such precedence is often assigned an authoritative status within the faith community that seeks to deploy a sacred curse or killing prayer. These historic precedents are frequently rooted in the biblical exegesis of the words and formulas found in the Old and New Testaments.396

Social issues that require a sacred curse must first be tested against these standards pertinent to a faith community. Just like doctrine, the administration of a killing prayer is also not done in a vacuum, nor is it based on the prejudices or whims of people outside the authority structures of that faith community.

Rather, the administration of such severe punishment is occasioned by the Church when overt challenges to her identity and purpose require nothing less than these kinds of prayer, and when there seems to be no other diplomatic option left in resolving a conflict with the truth the Church is entrusted with guarding and defending.

5.3 The Importance of Legitimate Authority for the Administration of the Sacred Curse

The authority of recognized leadership within a particular faith community is also necessary in the exercise of a sacred curse. This authority has both sacred and secular limitations. From a pragmatic and biblical viewpoint, a sacred curse cannot extend beyond the boundaries of those provinces the Church is engaged within and responsible for. A faith community must first recognize the legitimate reach of her own spiritual authority.397 Spiritual authority is assigned by recognized leaders within a

396 This can be recognized through a perusal of Chapters Two and Three.
397 One of the more recent cultic teachings concerns the “Local Church” movement led by Witness Lee. Founded by Witness Lee (1905-1997), the Local Church is sometimes called “The Lord’s Recovery.” These “Local” churches are usually called by the name of their cities (e.g. ‘the Church in New York City’). The debates regarding the status of this movement as whether or not is cultic have embroiled well know persons on both sides of the argument. The exclusivity of the Local Church movement which denies the
particular faith group and it is within those groups that such authority has any impact.\textsuperscript{398}

For a local community of faith to assume global authority is itself a misunderstanding of what the local church looks like according to scripture.\textsuperscript{399} There are geographical and practical limitations to the authority of local churches that seek the disallowance of spiritual trespasses on the Word of God. Churches that are not properly aligned with this kind of authority are spiritually both impotent and deluded.\textsuperscript{400} Trans-regional authority seems only possible through cooperative church leadership that is consonant with the Holy Spirit and with one another.

5.4 The Importance of Compassion for the Administration of the Sacred Curse

Finally, any prayer that seeks the harm of someone or something should be examined from an ethical perspective that involves love. For any punishment or discipline to be exercised outside the restorative hope established by biblical teaching is wrong.\textsuperscript{401}

The sacred curse or killing prayer is a means to an end, not an end in and of validity of other Christian fellowships has been one of the more difficult points in finding any ground for faith-based dialogue.

\textsuperscript{398} This was the argument of Henry VIII as he broke from the authority of Rome. He did not believe that the Roman Pontiff had any legitimate spiritual reach into the affairs of England. Interestingly, the Protestants in England would take this notion of “spiritual authority” further and challenge the King; “The English Bible, so long prohibited, was not merely legalized but ordered to be placed in every parish church in the realm. Most dramatically of all, monasticism, a way of life which represented all that evangelicals most deplored in the old Church, was entirely exterminated, through an astonishing exercise of royal power. At the end of 1538, however, the first signs appeared that the king wished to apply the brakes. A proclamation reasserted that certain heretics were going to remain unacceptable: notably Anabaptists, who profaned baptism, and sacramentaries, who denied Christ's corporal presence in the Eucharist.” Cf. Alec Ryrie, \textit{The Gospel and Henry VIII: Evangelicals in the Early English Reformation} (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 15.

\textsuperscript{399} Paul’s references to churches he did not begin indicates some boundaries to his spiritual authority in relationship to those churches. Cf. Gal 1:22 where Paul infers the existence of churches that do not personally know him. Problems of authority apparently existed between leaders within the churches, cf. I Cor 1:12; 3:4-6; and I Cor 16:12.

\textsuperscript{400} This has been a national issue with a local church from Topeka, Kansas. The Westboro Baptist Church has aligned itself with a sense of national authority and responsibility to protest funerals, demonstrate and advocate killing prayers against persons perceived to be outside the “truth” of God. Cf. McLaughlin, Mike; Einhorn, Erin (September 27, 2009). “Kansas hate group Westboro Baptist Church protest Brooklyn synagogues.” \textit{Daily News} (New York).

\textsuperscript{401} Can there be any question that the killing prayer of Saint Paul against the incest of a Corinthian believer was not meant for restorative purposes in terms of individual and community? Cf. I Cor 5:1ff.
itself. In other words, the sacred curse is intended to bring wayward individuals and institutions to possible repentance and reconciliation with God and the society of faith. This seems to be the biblical model for the exercise of a sacred curse or killing prayer. Paul’s ethics are clearly reflected here;

“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. Therefore ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink. For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Rom 12:17-21 NKJ)

That this model can be followed today, however, is another issue entirely. With the divisiveness already present in Christianity comes much suspicion and hatred. While the noble ideas of the Church are based on the teachings of Jesus as the one sent by God on the basis of love, the idea of God differs within Christian denominations. This is itself a source of confusion and difficulty concerning the authority that can effectively deliver a sacred curse.

5.5 The Different Gods of Christianity

One of the assumptions of prayer is that there is an existing deity or power of some sort that might potentially answer prayer.402 Within the Christian tradition, that deity is the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition and doctrine. Within American culture, there exists differing ideas about the nature of this God.403

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402 Although, even within Christendom there are differences of opinion regarding “who” hears and answers prayer: “Another great error of the Church of Rome is the worship of saints and angels, and especially of the Virgin Mary. It is not merely that they are regarded as objects of reverence, but that the service rendered them involves the ascription of divine attributes. They are assumed to be everywhere present, able to hear and answer prayer, to help and to save. They become the ground of confidence to the people, and the objects of their religious affections.” Cf. Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology / (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1871) 149 who represents a classic approach to Protestantism.

403 These differences often coalesce into a brand of nationalism or civil religion, which is not consistently viewed as something necessarily bad: “Not all civil religion is a threat to civil society, nor should civil religion be discouraged in all circumstances. But when civil religion invites a sense of national
In a recent study concerning the American idea of God, authors Paul Froese and Christopher Bader have determined that at least four different pictures concerning the nature of God emerge in the general population.\footnote{Cf. Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, \textit{America's Four Gods: What We Say about God--and What That Says about Us} (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010)}

Their research indicates that American people usually describe God in terms of distance, compassion, criticism or authoritarianism. Twenty-two percent (22\%) of respondents of the study described God as compassionate, the one who is always there for people and is available to answer prayer. Women were more inclined to describe God in this manner.

Another 24\% characterized God as authoritative, which is in line with the majority of evangelical teachings in American society. The God of authority rules over the lives of people and is engaged in the world.

A smaller percentage people hold the concept of God as some distant and detached deity, in the manner of the Deism of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.\footnote{This Deism repudiated the idea of a transcendent Deity involved in the affairs of humanity. Thomas Jefferson edited his personal Bible by cutting out all the miracle stories, this action being consistent with his strong beliefs in European Deism; “He was sincerely, even profoundly, religious, and yet he also repudiated many of the doctrines, attitudes, and convictions of traditional Christianity. The Jefferson who read the New Testament (often in Greek or Latin) almost every day for the last fifty years of his life also prepared two different editions of the Gospels for his own use so that he could read about Jesus with the miraculous bits cut away. The Jefferson who cooperated with his friend James Madison in passing a landmark bill separating church and state in Virginia (thereby helping almost immediately Baptists, Presbyterians, and several feisty Protestant sects) also blithely predicted that most of the country would soon become Unitarian. The Jefferson who contributed money on at least one occasion to a Bible society also railed against the tyranny of New England-based religious voluntary societies.” Edwin S. Gaustad, \textit{Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) x.} This is the God who does not really involve himself in the affairs of humanity.

About the same number of people surveyed confessed to believing in a critical, judgmental God who brings justice into society through disasters such as Hurricane
Katrina.\textsuperscript{406} This critical picture of God tends to recognize the wrath of a vengeful deity over the forgiving nature of a compassionate and merciful God.\textsuperscript{407}

The reason this study is important to this thesis is because what a person believes about God will also influence the way he or she prays. If we perceive God to be compassionate we may be less reluctant to entrust petitions of retribution or sacred curses to divine attention. If we think of God as critical and wrathful, there may be more of an inclination to pray anathemas and killing prayers.

Besides affecting our prayers, our personal view of God will also affect our understanding of morality and the values we associate with faith.

5.5 Church Authority and Changing Perceptions of God

Obedience to our perceptions of ‘who’ and/or ‘what’ God is seems necessary for our understanding of how we obtain or dismiss divine blessing. Disobedience to these same perceptions can contribute to a belief that engenders divine cursing. As a consequence, believers will operate in faith in accordance with what they believe or disbelieve about the person and work of God. Similarly, religious authority often rests within the conviction of one’s faith and perception about who God is and whether or not God is good, kind, loving, critical, wrathful, jealous or vengeful.

However, problems exist regarding faith communities arriving to any consensus of what God is like and consequently, agreeing on what constitutes religious authority.

How is Church authority structured in a post-modern society and culture? Is it based on Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant polity and doctrine concerning God? Or do believers have subjective freedoms to decide for themselves what constitutes the person

\textsuperscript{406} ABC did a follow-up, unscientific poll to gauge the accuracy of these claims. They discovered that an overwhelming number of respondents believe in a God of compassion (85\%) and that the other categories are much less adhered to in American belief. From a total base of 3273 participants in the ABC poll: The benevolent god-2199; authoritative god-280; critical god-78 and a distant god-71.

\textsuperscript{407} This is not the first attempt to describe God with conceptual categories. Cf. J.B. Phillips, \textit{Your God is Too Small}, (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1997). This book was first published in 1953 and has continued in print since. Phillips provides two broad categories, (destructive and a constructive) in which he writes about God as the Cosmic Policeman, the Parental Hangover, the Grand Old Man among others. His intent is to dispel the misunderstandings many people are raised with concerning the nature of God and provide a biblical picture instead.
and character of God?

The obvious issue here regards the accepted teachings of any church to the community of faith they supposedly represent. Through approved catechisms and doctrines, the faithful are aligned within the greater community of faith regarding an understanding of theology proper and the ethics of faith.

The Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches have similar challenges in matters of authority as they endeavor to teach the ‘truth’ as understood within their own particular confessions of faith.408

Additionally, follow-on problems exists regarding the effective communication of a faith community’s ‘truths’ to a world that is increasingly globalized and connected to other, contrary claims to truth.409 With so many competing claims to truth, the world is fast becoming a mix of contradictions and debates. Even the most general interpretations of religious belief are very difficult to consolidate in today’s social and ecclesiastical environments.

It can be argued that the United States is one of the most religious countries on earth. Some pollsters show that nearly 85 % of Americans believe in the existence of God. However, their understanding of God is not a homogenous doctrinal concept that might find universal acceptance within the entire, universal Church. The historic

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408 One needs only to think of the Catholic decision to silence some of her more controversial theologians, such as Kung who has long argued for modernist changes to various Catholic doctrines; “But why should we, particularly as Christians--why should the Catholic Church particularly, which takes her stand on the gospel of Jesus Christ--be ashamed of having learned something more in the last hundred years, of having been changed for the better, of having finally done what far-seeing Catholic theologians and laymen had also already demanded at that time?” Cf. Hans Küng, Truthfulness; the Future of the Church (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) 129.

409 This is an age-old problem. Examples of controlling ‘truth’ are innumerable in every major branch of Christendom. One interesting example arises over the efforts to make the Pope infallible. In 1870, Pope Pius IX summoned a Vatican Council to promote the doctrine of Papal Infallibility. He had already denounced free thinking Catholics and the use of individual conscience apart from Church sanctioned teachings. Pius first attempt was defeated by a vote of 549 votes to 451 votes. But through authoritative force, all dissenters but two were made to leave Rome before a final vote was taken. That vote, on July 18, 1870 resulted in favor of Papal Infallibility by a margin of 535 to 2. The pope had acquired infallibility in matters of doctrines of faith and morals. For an excellent summary of Papal intrigue and moral failure cf. David Yallop, In God’s Name: An Investigation into the Murder of Pope John Paul I. (New York: Basic Books, 2007) 4-5.
Church has rightly resorted to the definition of herself by referring to the great Creeds and Councils that earmarked the emergence of the historic faith. But one is tempted to ask, “Which Creed?” or “Which Council?” represents the true God, and as a logical consequence, the plain “truth?” We might add, which “historic Church” are we referring to whenever the term “Church is utilized?

In fact, there is a move towards the subjectivization of God in American religion resulting in the creation of personal belief systems that have no rational basis, no history and few adherents beyond an individual’s personal choice and involvement. In other words, people are making up their own religions in this current age of globalization and connectivity.

As early as 1985, Robert Bellah made the prominent observation that “Americans…express a faith that is exclusive to themselves.”

This startling phenomenon is not limited to the USA. Indeed, in India some missionary organizations estimate that there are millions of different religious systems existing side by side in a population exceeding one billion people.

In Europe, religions in their historic and traditional forms are now supplanted by New Age philosophies and religious systems that are more meaningful to the adherents of such beliefs than the staid Anglicanism and Presbyterianism of their ancestors.

Recently, England and Scotland recognized their pagan roots by making

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410 The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a religious knowledge poll between May and June of 2010 to discover that of the more than 3400 Americans surveyed, the average “Christian” was less knowledgeable about the Bible, Church history, world religions and religion and public life than professing atheists and agnostics surveyed in the same poll. People who identified themselves as Protestant, fell behind Jews and Mormons concerning their religious knowledge. Persons between the ages of 18 and 29 are less likely to attend a religious service of any kind than those who are older. And the question of who and what God may be like is very diverse. This suggests that a shift has occurred in the USA regarding the importance of religious knowledge and doctrine. Cf. http://pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.


proclamations that Druidry and related religious systems of belief are now officially acknowledged within all of Great Britain.413

While the great cathedrals in Europe are scarcely attended in what was once recognized as a greater Christian culture, there is an ongoing move away from historic confessions of faith to religious expression that is increasingly difficult to define. Such expression reflects an abandonment of an objective, absolutist system of truth as defined by the Church and a subsequent celebration of subjective individualism and conscience.414 This move towards subjectivity is in tension with ecclesiastical and national institutional authorities.

Both Church and state are experiencing the difficult adjustments that come with such seismic shifts. Alongside the dismissal of these traditional structures of religious authority there is the introduction of what many believe to be spiritual anarchy. However, the general population does not seem too worried about such cultural changes. Kenneth Minoque writes; “One of the great divisions in the human world is between people who think they know the one right way of life and those (mostly in European states) whose moral responses take their beginnings from the recognition and acceptance of change as inevitable, indeed, inescapable.”415

The religious change in Western culture harbingers a coming tsunami in moral culture. Many values that were once traditional are fast becoming undesirable within these cultures of change, while values that were once considered peripheral to decency

413 England has granted ‘charitable’ status to officially recognized centers that practice Druidry, and with the Church of England, these centers will receive tax exemptions. Similar to Wiccan practice, Druid practice is highly individualistic. There is a dependency on nature and natural philosophy within these belief systems. Cf. “U.K. Law Recognizes Druidry,” Associated Press, 3 OCT 2010.
414 However, the growth of Islam in Europe is a phenomenon suggesting a hunger for authoritarian structures of faith. Such growth is tolerated by the liberal governments throughout Europe and facilitated by large numbers of immigrants into the better living conditions Europe affords. In 2007 an estimated 16 million Muslims claimed some residence in the European Union nations. Cf. Bruce Bawer, While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West From Within, (New York: Doubleday, 2006); John L. Esposito, The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality? (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
are moving towards the center of social acceptance.

Much of this shift has to do with the exchange of the greater community (as an objective standard for truth and conduct) with the individual who advances self belief and decision making as the principle guide for life. An inversion of the utilitarian principles undergirding socialism and democracy is taking place within American society whereby the prominence of individual rights overshadows traditional community rights.\footnote{Homosexuality may be the most visible example of this celebration of the self in the prioritization of post modern subjectivity. A world-wide movement is underway that advocates homosexual rights as something sacrosanct and demanding of acceptance. Both Church and state are wrestling with this movement as it continues to redefine the ‘new normal’ in society.}

Other cultural shifts in morality that parallel the subjectivization of individuals in society include an increasing acceptance of homosexual conduct, infidelity within marriage\footnote{One of the more brazen attempts at normalizing adultery can be seen by the plethora of websites devoted to “discrete affairs.” For a price, members can log on and find someone willing to meet their expectations of an affair. On one website there even exists a “money back guarantee” for those who subscribe and do not have success in the first 60 days of membership! This site, which has a motto, “Life is short, have an affair!” was denied a 2009 Super Bowl bid to advertise their services. Their outraged CEO (Biderman) comments are instructive to the visible shift in morality: "I find the rejection to be ridiculous given that a huge percentage of the NFL's marketing content is for products like alcohol, which they sell in their stadiums, promote on their air and clearly have in the magazine," Biderman said. "That's a product that literally kills tens of thousands of people each year. So if the NFL is worried about legislating behavior and regulating what their audience should be exposed to then it should start with a ban on all alcohol advertising and products being sold, not AshleyMadison.com." The normalization of pornography through the movie, magazine and television industries also indicates the social move from once believed systems of value and morality to depravity.} and the procreation of children without the existence of a traditional family or marriage covenant as the context for birth and child-raising.\footnote{Nearly two decades ago, Vice President Dan Quail raised a public debate over single parenting choices: “It doesn't help matters,” Quayle complained, when Brown, “a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid professional woman” is portrayed as “mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another ‘life-style choice.’” For a detailed article: http://www.time.com/time/magazine, Jun 1992. The ensuing debate did not slow the ongoing choices made to bear children out of wedlock by single parents. Statistics indicate an all time high in single parent choices in American culture. In 2004 nearly 34% of all births were to single women, and that figure has increased in the last 5 years. By 2007 nearly 4 in 10 children were born to an unmarried woman. Cf. Hamilton BE, Martin JA, Ventura SJ. Births: Preliminary data for 2007. National vital statistics reports; vol 57 no 12. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2009.}

Many other moral issues such as abortion, poverty, greed and injustice can be included to support the evidence that American civil culture seems to be radically
changing, if not in a full-blown decline. The demise in cultural norms that were once traditional and religiously generated is a consequence of effective and negative social engineering that minimizes the religious voice of authority while placing the importance of the individual’s own conscience and preferences above any God talk.

The trajectory of the self over and above traditional doctrines of authority can lead to the bastardization of truth whereby evil is rationalized and great social harm occurs. More will be said later in this chapter regarding the response of theology to such rationalization.

5.6 Challenges of Change
Whenever a sea-change in values occurs as described above, there is usually a precedent already in place for such change to occur in the culture. Such precedents for cultural change can come from the marginalization of traditional forms of authority, such as the authority exercised by the Church.

While not all change is bad, change that truncates the value systems established by a nation’s foundational philosophy is certain to be controversial, and sometimes dangerous. When such truncation occurs, a loss of identity becomes a possibility. People who are unable to trace their beliefs beyond themselves to something greater, such as the historic doctrines of the Church, or the preambles of national formation, are more subject to losing personal identity than those who can transcend the personal immediacy of time and space.

David Brog has detailed this loss and change in personal and national identity. Brog’s writings investigate the rise of Nazism during the early part of the 20th Century through the lens of the moral collapse of German society which permitted the extermination of the Jews to occur.

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419 These were arguments given by both Augustine and Gibbon. Both viewed the decline of any great civil order as due to the individualism that triumphs communal cooperation. However, Augustine blamed the “barbarians” for the collapse of Rome while Gibbon placed the blame on the Christian’s inflexibility to integrate into Rome.

In writing about the transition in the moral base of the German people, whereby Nazi doctrines overshadowed both nationalist and Church teachings, Brog establishes the dangers that can arise in a whole population of people who are unwilling, or unable, to define themselves. Using the story of Adolf Eichmann as an example, “the bureaucrat behind the death camps,” Brog sketches the demise of a proud people into something different than most could have possibly imagined.\footnote{Eichmann is sometimes referred to as the “architect of the holocaust.” Cf. Hannah Arendt, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil}, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).}

Noting that Eichmann renounced the Christian faith and replaced the tenets of Lutheranism with the moral philosophy of the great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, Eichmann was able to carry out the terrible details and duties of the holocaust. After escaping the Allied Army and fleeing to Argentina, Eichmann was finally caught and placed on trial for his crimes against humanity. Reportedly unrepentant about his role in the genocide of the Jews, Eichmann is said to have justified his involvement and support of the death camps because he “never encountered anyone who was actually opposed to the extermination of the Jews.”\footnote{Ibid. pg.28}

Brog writes that “it would be more difficult to find a more chilling testimony to the power of culture to overwhelm and transform our morality.”\footnote{Ibid. pg.27} Nazi ideology “swallowed Eichmann” and transformed his thinking. The values of traditional Christian teaching were replaced with the dreams of an Arian super-race that would live forever. The moral conscience of the German people was subtly silenced with the emergence of Nazi fascism. The suppression of truth as revealed in the teachings of the Church was replaced by the thesis of Hitler’s \textit{Mein Kampf}; “The [Nazi party] should not become a constable of public opinion, but must dominate it. It must not become a servant of the masses, but their master!”

This example establishes how closely intertwined culture and truth can become. When truth is suppressed, culture is negatively impacted. Eichmann and Hitler knew

\footnote{Brog writes about the moral consequences of Darwinian eugenics as a precursor to Nazi ideology. p.348.}
this; “The great masses of the people will more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a small one.”

The role of culture to “forge morality” is the point Brog especially makes with this story. This is the point that Christianity makes as well. Through Christian conviction and action, culture is impacted. What people believe in will surface in their daily habits of life and behavior. Concerning the positive role of the Christian faith in culture, Brog writes:

“People of deep Christian faith have emerged as the most important constituency for human rights in our time. They have protested totalitarian tyranny in North Korea and religious persecution in China. They have fought genocide in Sudan and the spread of AIDS throughout Africa. They have led the effort to relieve the third world of its crushing debt burden…”

Because the Church can influence the State via those legitimate means of ministry that create a positive cultural difference and witness, the Church is morally obligated to pursue such cultural engagement. This is a leading motif of the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus. The establishment of a moral order that guards against the disintegration of culture and the subsequent horrors like those realized in Nazi Germany is a double mandate and warning that the Church must observe and be diligent to support. Those who would minimize the involvement of the Church in society subject the social order to something less than the absolute good.

5.7 The Collapse of Christian Culture in America and the Loss of a Moral Voice
The collapse of Christian culture in America is also a collapse of theological truth in the public square. The acknowledgement that America was long identified as a Judeo-Christian nation is now changing. As a Nation, the American Christian witness to truth has been turned upside down. The social disintegration exemplified by the

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424 *Adolf Hitler*, Mein Kampf, *vol. I, ch. X*
425 Ibid. pg. 335
troubling moral issues of our day testifies to this collapse, which is a silencing of a moral voice. This silencing can be demonstrated by examining the slow and steady marginalization of the Catholic Church in Boston.

Throughout its history, the Catholic community has played an important role in the defense of civil culture, and this was no exception in the Boston community. Religion was partnered with the political endeavors of the State and served as a conscience and as a voice of truth. Early Boston citizens were actively involved with their Church and the emergence of great educational and technological advancements were enhanced by the recognition of the role of faith in all of life, something that is reflected by the cultural superiority of the Boston community.

As early as the 1920s the political machinery in Boston attempted to introduce a lottery. The Bishop of the diocese instructed the Catholic community against gambling and the vices that gambling brings into a community. Within a day of the Bishop’s involvement, the lottery initiative was defeated due to the Church’s moral stance in that culture. The voice of truth was acknowledged by the greater Boston community and obeyed.

Politicians had a relationship with the faith community that indicated reverence and godly fear. To cross the moral boundaries of the Church was not only political suicide, but invited the remote possibility of encountering the Church’s discipline. The Boston community of the early twentieth century was harmonious in keeping a religious conscience alive in the public square.

Following WWII the dissipation of Church influence steadily increased. Boston began to witness the marginalization of Catholic leadership in both secular and social matters. From 1935-48 the growth of the Catholic Community in Boston had been significant. There were in excess of 360 parishes. But in the sixty years that followed, the community of faith began to lose her prominent standing.

By 2006, the Catholic proportion of the population within the geographical area covered by the Boston Archdiocese had shrunk by 50%. More than 60 parishes have
closed since 2002 as a result of lessening Catholic involvement by people in the Boston community. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first of the fifty states to recognize same sex marriage with legal status. In 2006, only five men were ordained to the priesthood from a diocese that once ordained hundreds into ministry.\footnote{Most of this information is derived from the excellent study of Lawler. Cf. Philip F Lawler, The Faithful Departed: The Collapse of Boston’s Catholic Culture, (New York: Encounter Books, 2008).}

The diminishment of the Church as a moral voice in the Boston community is reflective of the greater demise of a traditional religious conscience in the USA.\footnote{This can be discerned by looking at the great Ivy League Universities. Harvard, Yale and Princeton are among three of these great institutions of higher learning that began with solid Christian convictions. Each school was intended to produce ministers of the Gospel. However, as time passed, these institutions increasingly adopted positions of moral equivalence and eventually lost their Christian voice. Today, each of these universities supports doctrines that are anathema by the historic professions of the Christian faith.}

The marginalization of a religious voice was not the intent or foundation upon which the United States society was first fashioned. The move of the Plymouth Brethren from Holland to the New World was a move, necessitated more by a desire to escape a corrupt society than an escape from religious persecution.\footnote{Roger Scruten, ed., Liberty and Civilization: The Western Heritage (New York: Encounter Books, 2010). 3-5. Scruten writes: ‘William Bradford wrote in his journal: ‘Owing to a great licentiousness of the youth in that country’ and ‘to the manifold temptations of the place,’ their children were being corrupted. In deciding to leave Holland for the American wilderness, they were not fleeing persecution at all, but permissiveness.”}

Their move from a society they perceived to be deaf to the voice of God was itself a judgment against Holland. The voice of religious conviction motivated their visible move away from Dutch society while simultaneously speaking condemnation to the perceived social evils of that day. In Puritan thinking there was no room for a silent Christian witness.

The creation of a “city on a hill” that could light the way for all human civilization was the hope of the first American Puritan colonists. Their vision was to transform the American wilderness into the Kingdom of God. Through a strict work ethic and strong moral convictions, the Puritans contributed to the building of the greatest nation in the history of the world.
Their voice of conviction was itself the proclamation of Gospel truth. But as three centuries of American history has rolled along, the achievements of the Puritans have been dismissed and instead, they are often re-cast as gloomy witch-burning fanatics.\footnote{Because community misfortunes in this life were attributable to the everlasting wrath of God, the Puritans had ample reason for believing after 1660 that they were doing something horrendous to incur even greater divine wrath than they had suffered earlier. Misfortunes of great magnitude seemed to be visited on them daily. The witchcraft trials, which form the subject matter of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, have to be studied in the light of this context: the punishments leveled against the community, the community’s habit of constant self-scrutiny, and the leaders’ insistence that behavior had to change to lessen God’s displeasure. The presence of witches in Salem was seen as just one in a sequence of God’s punishments. Community leaders’ reaction to what seemed to be witchcraft was a characteristic and, to them, rationally justifiable way of quelling God’s anger against them by diligently ridding the community of the Devil’s agents.” Claudia Durst Johnson, and Vernon E. Johnson, \textit{Understanding The Crucible: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998) 34.}

The assassination of Christian character is but one of the strategies that secularist engineers employ for the change of culture that publicly excommunicates the witness of faith. By rewriting history to reflect the current agenda of the state, the voice of truth can be modified by either a sense of social irrelevance or quarantined through individual subjectivity.\footnote{It would be a mistake to assume that the general erasure of religion form the apparatus of the State is complete. The bible is still used in the administration of oaths of office. Recently, a Red Mass was performed for the annual seating of the US Supreme Court. The motto, “In God We Trust” remains in effect on the coinage of America. While there are numerous groups of American citizens arguing for the removal of every vestige and reference to God, there remains a strong ‘civil religion’ in place that promises to remind people that America is still a religious society.}

\section*{5.8 The Failure of Modern Theology and Spiritual Warfare in American Society}

The Church often identifies herself as an entity comprised of people who are identified with God, commissioned with a divine purpose to serve, and uniquely equipped with spiritual weaponry designed to bring victory in the extension of God’s Kingdom.

The Christian Church also has a responsibility to resist evil.\footnote{Mt 5:39 refers to an individual ethic that promotes the witness of God. Cf. Hebrews 5:14 as a sign of Christian maturity where one can “discern the difference between good and evil.”} The militancy of the Church in combating human misery consists of attacking and destroying the outposts of evil already present in the world.\footnote{The Lord’s Prayer is perhaps the Manifesto of the Church Militant.} Through aggressive campaigns of love and grace, the Church is commissioned to witness about the Gospel of Christ while
setting the captives of sin and death free from their imprisonment.\footnote{Luke 4:18-19}

However, there has been a collapse of theological importance within American culture which has contributed to the collapse of traditional morality within the culture.\footnote{Cf. Thabiti Anyabwile, “The Decline of African-American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity” (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), p. 160. Other communities of faith are experiencing similar problems as that documented in African-American theology.} There is a failure of modern theology to address the most important issues of our time with any meaningful response, especially when that theology has been co-opted by the culture in terms that are not traditional to defining Christianity.\footnote{D. A. Carson, The Gagging of God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1996. This is brilliantly described in the rise of pluralism within the United States.}

Perhaps this is best understood by acknowledging that the little known doctrines of harmartiology, anthropology and theology proper are losing their way in public discourse and understanding.\footnote{“That the language of ‘sin’ has fallen largely into disuse in general public (but also in much Christian and theological) discourse as a language for talking about the pathological in human affairs.” Cf. Alistair McFadyen, Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian Doctrine of Sin (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 3.} That the average American cannot rightly discuss the nature of God, man or sin should not be surprising. The expulsion of biblical teaching from the public square has flowered with a biblical illiteracy unparalleled in the Nation’s history. While these issues have already been briefly discussed in this thesis, it is important to detail the social consequences that follow theological failings.

The extremities of evil have become central within much of Western culture and society. What was once viewed as immoral is often now accepted as moral, such as the rise of homosexuality as a lifestyle or choice, or adultery as a viable option to a mediocre marriage. Many voices within the theological world now proudly proclaim the ‘rightness’ of homosexuality while overturning much in Church history regarding this sin.\footnote{Patrick Miller, writes; “The testing place of theology is in its dealing with difficult issues.” Cf. Patrick Miller, The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 193. While this is a commendable truism, Miller seems to collapse both his theology and traditional Presbyterian convictions by supporting homosexuality in the Church. Cf. pp. 289-292 where Miller admits the biblical condemnation of homosexuality then attempts to minimize that condemnation by pointing to the Laws}
AIDS has infected a great number of people and condemned entire families to death and theology has too often looked at the results of such illness without adequately addressing the cause. Instead of a theology of accommodation to the sexual promiscuity of the early AIDS epidemic, justification of homosexual behaviors have trumped traditional teachings of abstinence and truth. As a consequence of AIDS, blood supplies have been compromised thereby infecting many innocent people who were inadvertently exposed to the disease while undergoing blood transfusions.

Many heterosexuals have been infected due to the licentiousness of those who have had numerous sexual encounters, whether heterosexual or homosexual, and have transmitted the disease as a consequence. Had truth been spoken *with* love, we might imagine a different outcome of this pernicious disease in society today. Modern theology failed, due to her frequent silence, and subsequently, has failed in her message of love.

Divorce and the destruction of the family have resulted in millions of single-parent homes where children are at risk and socially disadvantaged. Family structures that were once the bedrock of society are now dismissed as unimportant by many who hold to a liberal theology of marriage. The move away from traditional interpretations of the Bible regarding the issue of divorce and the adoption of situational ethics has proved to be disastrous in assisting people through the very hard work of marriage.

While there are biblical and theological grounds for divorce, the idea that convenience is one of them plainly contradicts the teaching of the Bible. As a consequence, marriage has shifted from the sacred sphere of the Church and is often

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439 There are numerous studies and histories that trace the HIV epidemic to the sexual promiscuity of homosexuals; Cf. K.B Hymes, J.B. Greene, and A. Marcus, et al. 'Kaposi's sarcoma in homosexual men: A report of eight cases', Lancet(1981) 2:598-600 and MMWR Weekly (1981) 1 'Kaposi's Sarcoma and Pneumocystis Pneumonia among Homosexual Men- New York City and California', July 4, 30 (4); 305-308.
guided by the statutes of the state.440

People who have been married under the ecclesiastical authority of the Church are turning to the authority of the state to dissolve ‘holy matrimony.’ In some instances, churches have protested, but in most cases, the state still exercises its authority over the Church and absolves the union.441

A result of this lack of a moral voice is the increasing number of children being raised in single parent households.442 The ensuing delinquency problems are well documented. The role of the Church has been severely minimized when it comes to the issue of divorce. Theology needs to respond with appropriate models of social and divine consequence.

Educational systems in America are also failing.443 Children are being raised in a religiously sterile environment. That which was once considered truth has been dismissed as a lie, such as the existence of a Creator who rules over all creation, and the preference for humanist explanations for existence that displace any idea of God.

Secularist doctrines espousing evolution are diligently taught in public classrooms. Even though advances for intelligent design disprove, or at least scientifically challenge evolutionary dogmas, litigation is barring the door to open debate in public schools and universities.444

440 This move from the Church, a community of faith to the state, which is a nationalist concept, reflects on the fragmentation of communities and the alienation of individuals.
441 The Catholic doctrine espouses that “Divorce is a reflection of original sin, ‘which disrupted the original communion of man and woman.’” The Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church writes; “Since genuine sorrow over one’s sin against God and faith in the forgiveness of Christ belong to the essence of repentance, it goes without saying that to proceed premeditatively in doing that which one knows to be contrary to God’s will, with the intention of becoming contrite later, makes it impossible for faith and the Holy Spirit to remain in the heart (2 Sam. 11; 1 John 1:8; 3:9; 5:18). To proceed in securing a divorce with the full knowledge that such an action is contrary to God’s will with the intention of becoming repentant at some point in the future is, therefore, to enter into great spiritual peril.” Cf. The LCM web-site: www.iclnet.org “Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective,” A Report of the CTCR, 1981, p. 28.
The failure of theology to communicate a reasonable faith in this argument can be traced to the infamous Scopes ‘Monkey’ Trial in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925. The caricatures of the Bible believing creationist were devastating, especially with the continuous dogmatic reference to the Bible teachings, such as the six day creation, and references to Bishop Ussher’s faulty chronologies.

With such dogmatism, the argument was lost to the skeptical enquiries of the defense, led by Clarence Darrow, the famous American agnostic, against the nationally known William Jennings Bryan who served as the prosecutor of educator John Scopes.

Even though Scopes was found guilty of teaching evolution in an otherwise ‘creationist’ climate, the damage done was irreparable as Bible believing Christians were saddled with the nomenclature of scientific ignorance.

Such debates had been ongoing from previous decades following the Darwinian revolution.\(^\text{445}\) The theological fallout has had an increasing tendency over the past one hundred years to diminish the creation account due to overly literalistic interpretations of the Bible. As a consequence, the authority of the scripture has been put into question alongside its usefulness as a voice of truth. This in turn, has forced adherents of a more liberal theology to look elsewhere for ecclesiastical authority outside the traditions of the Church. What has resulted is a new hermeneutic whereby a literal, grammatical and historical exegesis is replaced by variant forms of higher criticism and subjectivism.

The failure of modern theology is perhaps most easily recognized in this ‘turn to the self’ for interpreting objective revelation. ‘Eisegesis’ instead of exegesis rules many theological discussions in US seminary classrooms today.

Theological questions pertaining to the issues of eugenics, natural selection, bigotry and the ascension of the creature into a ‘super creature’ (superman or god)\(^\text{446}\) continues to need vigorous debate in the public square. The introduction of intelligent


\(^\text{446}\) Friedrich Nietzsche’s terminology of the ‘superman’ has become common parlance in the public square.
design should not be forbidden in the public classroom, where, alongside the theories of evolution, this important alternative can also be taught.

Today, there are people of faith and conviction who are answering the dogmatic assertions of evolution from scientific perspectives. But a cogent theological response is still required in this age-old debate.

Moral darkness seems to revel in the past victories of the ‘enlightenment’ that dismissed the idea of God. With the removal of the Ten Commandments from public classrooms and other public spaces, a neutralizing of legal distinctions between right and wrong are confusing the children who sit in those rooms where the Decalogue once hung.447

Children today know more about cartoon characters on television than the Law of Moses or the Sermon on the Mount. Most young adults have difficulty naming the Four Gospels, but little trouble reciting the names of their favorite movie actors. The theological underpinnings of truth point people to a nobler way of life and decency. With the loss of truth, especially the truth contained in the Ten Commandments, confusion and degenerate behaviors have surfaced.

There is some social reawakening concerning this issue, especially in the wake of tragic killings which have occurred on public school grounds throughout the USA. The Columbine killings in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999, have spawned renewed attempts to introduce the Ten Commandments into educational places as a means of reminding children of what is right and what is wrong. Modern theology has not aggressively assisted in this effort with much notice.448

447 The first case to go to the Supreme Court regarding the removal or the display of the Ten Commandments in the public classroom was that of Stone v. Graham in 1980. Subsequent court rulings have both stripped the Commandments from the public square and reintroduced the Commandments into public spaces. This will continue to be a legal battle for the unforeseeable future.
448 Miller diplomatically writes with insightfulness on the need to process our cultural discomfort with the posting (or lack of posting) of the Ten Commandments, but he then concludes; “Affirm the symbolic power of the Commandments and learn how to "post" them afresh. We may, in fact, need to post the Commandments and erect stone monuments with the Commandments inscribed on them, in order to have them visible and continuously before us. The best place for doing that, however, is where Christians and Jews receive and learn these directives in the broader context of a life of faith-in the sacred spaces of
Monstrous ideas have replaced the beauty of the Judeo-Christian revelation to include a return to superstition and the base worship of nature and idolatry. People are desperately looking for God in all of the wrong places. There is an attraction at Stonehenge that cannot be found at Calvary. That attraction is the realization and affirmation of the individual in the universe.

Witchcraft and sorcery have broadened their appeals in many ways, to include the celebration of Halloween as one of the most financially successful holidays on the American calendar. Theology in the traditional sense of the word decried such activities. But there is too much silence in the Church today regarding this annual activity.

Financial greed has overtaken a sense of civic responsibility in many corporate structures. Corporations selling their products emphasize the right of people to be happy, a right that can be purchased for a price. These corporations employ people in sweat shops found throughout third world communities where sixteen hour work days and child labor drives the production lines. Dishonest gain promotes a culture of suspicion to that of cynicism, and finally estrangement. Hope in goodness is lost with the social loss of God.

Madison Avenue has targeted youth with slick media campaigns that promote a false sense of the self. Self has been elevated above society as a necessary right that must be constantly advocated. As a consequence, selfishness rules much in American society.

The consumerism of our age is constantly seeking to find satisfaction in the

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450 Halloween sales in the USA reached $4.75 billion in 2009, down from the $5.77 billion spent in 2008 according to the National Retail Federation's 2009 Halloween Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey.

451 Many Churches offer an alternative to Halloween by hosting “Fall Festivals” on the evening of 31 October.
acquisition of things, of stuff, that somehow affirms the buyer’s identity. But the failure of things to answer the deepest spiritual hunger is rarely addressed.

Depression and anxiety box people into suicidal ideation, an ideation caused by financial distress and a lack of spiritual hope.\textsuperscript{452}

There are more abortions than births in the USA on any given day. The use of abortion as a form of birth control is not reconciled with the factual murder of a baby made in the imago Dei, as social engineering has removed the initial barriers of religious conscience to advance the pro-choice agenda.

Mothers who have discovered the horrible truth of what abortion really is have often slipped into depression and hopelessness. Realizing that they have contributed to the killing of their own children, many women have opted to self-medicate through the abuse of prescription drugs and alcohol.\textsuperscript{453}

Gambling, once recognized as a vulgar sin and a social crime due to the games of chance being fixed in favor of the proprietors of gambling, has become a source of income for most states looking for additional revenue. State sponsored ‘numbers’ games rob many simple people of their weekly wages with the hope that they might also “strike it rich” through some lucky number. Chance, not faith, is pursued by millions who are looking for a financial windfall.

Impoverished people become even poorer as they attempt to be that ‘one in ten

\textsuperscript{452} The aged idea of a ‘Protestant work ethic’ is faded in current discussions regarding the economy and economic gain. The doctrines of tithing, charity and welfare are also lacking in many of the American churches. While America is still the most generous nation on earth in terms of giving aid and assistance to the poor, there has been an ethic of greed developing for decades that speaks of a consumerist base for identity and purpose in life. People who are often depressed sense that they are powerless. One of the means of dealing with such powerlessness is through purchasing things, which in turn, gives momentary relief to powerlessness. But the addicted spender spirals into greater debt and depression as a result of overspending. The theology of “enough,” i.e. “contentment with Godliness” is seldom heard from the pulpit in America.

\textsuperscript{453} The abortion industry in America began in 1973 and there have since been an estimated 60 million abortions since. This holocaust is sometimes compared to child sacrifice and is perhaps the one area where theologians and churchmen are actively engaged in the public debate over the tragedy of abortion.
million’ that wins the lottery.454

The overwhelming majority of churches in the USA do not have a single outreach of significance to educate and assist the poor. This ethical failure of the modern US church is itself a failure in modern theology. Instead, “prosperity teachings” seem to suggest that those who are poor are themselves somehow to blame, and that the rich are rightly blessed. Such failures in modern theology invite the judgment of God.455

Pornography has crept into otherwise decent homes through television and the movie industry. What was once considered taboo by most American households is now hardly noticed when playing at prime time on any given evening. Standards of decency have increasingly been modified and lowered allowing pornography a firm footing in film.

The pornography industry has become a multi-billion dollar industry that fronts its stars as respectable artists in their field.456 Prostitution and the other spin-offs of pornography include drugs and violence against women. This is the ugly side of this social evil that too often is ignored or dismissed by the Hollywood industry. But what is worse, much in modern theology has been desensitized to the media’s forms of entertainment.457

454 Churches rarely speak out on the problems associated with gambling. However, there exist studies that associate the legalization of gambling with the rise in crime. “Nearly one-third of arrestees identified as pathological gamblers admitted having committed robbery in the previous year. Approximately 13 percent had assaulted someone for money. Pathological gamblers were much more likely to have sold drugs than other arrestees.” Cf. Richard C. McCorkle. Gambling and Crime Among Arrestees: Exploring the Link (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs; National Institute of Justice July 2004) 4

455 Lev 19:10-15 admonishes care for the poor.

456 Cf. the article by Jerry Ropelato, http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/statistics; “According to compiled numbers from respected news and research organizations, every second $3,075.64 is being spent on pornography. Every second 28,258 internet users are viewing pornography. In that same second 372 internet users are typing adult search terms into search engines. Every 39 minutes a new pornographic video is being created in the U.S. It’s big business. The pornography industry has larger revenues than Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple and Netflix combined. 2006 Worldwide Pornography Revenues ballooned to $97.06 billion.”

457 There are evangelical responses to the problems associated with pornography, prostitution and the role of the media. Donald Wildman began American Family Radio as an alternative to such
This is but a sampling of the social problems the Church faces today. These problems have entered American society because religious authority and the voice of the Church have been marginalized to the fringes of social interaction. Theology has a role and responsibility to examine truth in the context of culture and scripture, and to combat the power of the lie which can bring only misery, estrangement and death.

There needs to be an ethical approach to living out a theology of truth. People in the Church need something more than a Sunday sermon to guide their lives. They need a holistic view of life that is consistent with truth and love anchored by an everlasting hope in Christ. People need to understand that they have the tools to war in this present world, and that their warfare has a spiritual component that interfaces with the fallen conditions of this world.

Such warfare must be motivated by a concern for the lost. The scriptures indicate that spiritual warfare will frame the existence of the Church in the last days. Describing the conditions of the last times, the Bible notes that social repentance from evil will not easily occur;

“But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.”
(Rev 9:20-1 NKJ)

The answer of the Church to confronting these social evils and causing repentance to occur may be in the utilization of the sacred curse or killing prayer.458

Through the sacred curse a community can potentially be turned around. Instead of declining as a civil society due to the outbreak of evil, the Church can administer a sacred curse that will begin to impact individuals and institutions through the punitive touch of God. People who are unaware of the power of God can be drawn to divine

458 We might ask whether or not repentance is a gift from God-Cf. II Tim 2:25

entertainment and has functioned as a media watchdog since 1991. The Salvation Army is also actively engaged in rescuing prostitutes and disrupting the trafficking of people.
truth through revelation, and repent from their sinful ways with a call upon the mercy of God’s restoration and love.

Revelation can arrive in many ways, to include the possibility of harm befalling the wicked as the vehicle for such revelation to occur. The sacred curse or killing prayer will cause the fear of God to seize any society that really experiences it.

When the proclamation of the Gospel is made in power, it is not just the love of God that is preached and believed in, but also the coming judgment that awaits those who reject Gospel truth.

Under the circumstances of such warfare, warfare that has a spiritual root but manifests itself publicly, the curse of Jesus might become an option that can avert the coming judgment sin invites. When a society is awakened to the possibility of a just and righteous God, there is the possibility of a move away from social evil to righteousness.\footnote{Was this not the story of Nineveh when they repented in response to the message of Jonah?}

A strategy that encompasses prayer as a weapon, to include the utilization of the sacred curse or killing prayer, allows the Church to stand in the world as a testimony to truth while facilitating ministry to the repentant and the broken. This \textit{ideal} can meet the \textit{real} once a community of faith is willing to unify under the authority of proper ecclesiastical leadership, obey the dictates of God’s Word, and strive in that unity to bring the message of the Gospel of love to all who will hear.

\textbf{5.9 Moral Authority: Church or State? The Choice is Ours}

If a society will hear the message of God it can avoid the secularizing mandates of the state. When social chaos ensues due to the power of the lie displacing the beauty of truth, the state may have recourse to exercising punitive action of its own.

The need for a society to regain her moral composure can hardly be disagreed with, but the destructive downside of this effort is the potential of the state to legislate morality from the Congressional and Judicial seats of power. What we do not want is a nationalization of the moral life where the possible specter of totalitarianism looms.
This is an additional reason to involve the Church as a moral voice and conscience in the public square. It is the voice of truth that keeps people free from the bondage of the lie.

The moral balance of Church and state is better accomplished when each institution is allowed to properly function within their own defined boundaries, boundaries that reflect the tradition of America’s founding. The difficulty of maintaining that balance is the stuff of courtroom drama and is presently ongoing today. 460 This tension between the sacred and the secular is also the essence of the spiritual warfare that is presently ongoing in the world.

5.10 The Testimony of a Sacred Curse and Killing Prayer
Since the very beginning, the Christian faith has been confronted with two important dilemmas. The first regarded the acceptance of her witness and testimony within the society of man. The second concerned her unity within the fellowship of God. On both counts, the place of Christianity in the public square and at the table of faith have been challenged, questioned, debated and denied.

True testimony concerning the Kingdom of God is never easy. Were it without challenge and trial, it would not be true testimony. This is because the Kingdom of God is a foreign and adverse element that undoes the world. The light of God dismantles the power structures of darkness. Truth sets people free from the toxicity of the lie, and the

460 Significant court cases that have reached the Supreme Court to include Pleasant Grove City vs. Summum (2007); “In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court of the United States issued a landmark First Amendment ruling on February 25, 2009 clearing the way for governments to accept permanent monuments of their choosing in public parks. The decision comes in the case of Pleasant Grove City v. Summum, a critical First Amendment case in which the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) represented the Utah city in a challenge to a display of the Ten Commandments in a city park. ACLJ Chief Counsel Jay Sekulow presented oral arguments to the high court on November 12, 2008. The ACLJ asked the high court to overturn a decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit that ordered Pleasant Grove City, UT to accept and display a monument from a self-described church called Summum because the city displays a Ten Commandments monument donated by the Fraternal Order of Eagles. The ACLJ successfully argued that the lower court ruling was flawed - a ruling that said private parties have a First Amendment right to put up the monuments of their choosing in a city park, unless the city takes away all other donated monuments - a ruling that runs counter to well-established precedent that the government has to be neutral toward private speech, but it does not have to be neutral in its own speech. The case is Pleasant Grove City v. Summum (No. 07-665).” Cf. http://www.aclj.org/Cases/
Cross answers the curse of human death through the life-giving promise of God in Jesus Christ, who is “the way, the truth and the life.”

Testimony is a confession of light in the arena of darkness. It is the answer of God to unbelieving powers. How the Church witnesses may not be simplified in some methodical sense of the word, but true testimony will be accompanied by spiritual power and conviction when such testimony occurs. The witness of the Church may happen along the lines of a social justice outreach, feeding the hungry, comforting the broken hearted, helping the infirm, loving a neighbor through kind words and deeds, housing the homeless, providing financial assistance to the poor, binding the wounds of the injured and many, many other ways.

Along with such ministries of compassionate outreach and testimony, there may be a need for a sacred curse or killing prayer that defends the righteous from the attacks of darkness. Such prayers might be along the lines of authority and truth as advocated in this thesis. If such prayer must occur, it is a potent means of bringing the lost and unrepentant to a place of repentance and possible salvation.

5.11 Conclusion
Within the history of the Church there have always been people who imagined themselves to somehow be the incarnation of God’s conscience. These are people who seem most happy when they are correcting the mistakes of others. One such person who made an impact in the history of the Church as both a person of great eccentricity and as a scholar was Alexander Cruden.

Alexander Cruden was born in the Scottish vale of Aberdeen in 1699 and was reportedly to have died some seventy years later while praying in his Islington residence at Camden Passage. A man of faith throughout his lifetime, Cruden was also a man of academic insight. Realizing the need for researching the Bible, Cruden created the first English concordance of Holy Scripture. A Complete Concordance to the Holy Scriptures, generally known as “Cruden’s Concordance” was organized and published in 1737.
Cruden’s singlehanded effort was amazingly accomplished in under one year. Biographer Edith Oliver writes, “Was there ever, before or since the year 1737 another enthusiast for whom it was no drudgery, but a sustained passion of delight, to creep conscientiously word by word through every chapter of the Bible, and that not once only, but again and again?” This amazing literary tool has not been out of print since its initial publication some three hundred years ago!

Cruden’s life as an editor and proof-reader began to affect his outlook on morals. Apparently, around 1754, after a failed attempt at entering Parliament, Cruden adopted the title of “Corrector” and applied himself to rewriting misspelled signs and washing away graffiti from London’s stone walls. Cruden used a sponge that he carried at all times to erase signage that was misspelled or grammatically incorrect, or morally offensive.

His mission did not stop with language. He also began to preach sermons of repentance to any he believed had violated God’s Law, especially the Sabbath Commandment. His intent was to safeguard the moral health of the Empire which he imagined was in constant jeopardy as displayed through the signs of illiteracy.

Cruden was institutionalized for psychiatric abnormalities throughout the later years of his life. He was a man both revered and rejected. His story is a fitting parable to any who might think themselves morally or spiritually above the society they inhabit.

This story makes the point that any pretentions to ‘correcting’ society should be quickly checked by those who imagine themselves as God’s messengers to a fallen world order. The problem with many self-proclaimed ‘correctors’ who would issue a sacred curse or administer a killing prayer is that they almost always fall outside the boundaries of proper ecclesiastical authority and usually have their own brand of ‘truth,’ whatever that might be.

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462 This can be illustrated through the much publicized “curse” levied by Southern Baptist pastor Wiley Drake. Last year, Drake pronounced a killing prayer upon President Obama in 2009 and encouraged
Such people also have difficulty with the mandate to ‘love enemies’ and they can seem gleeful at the downfall of others. This ought to be a very important consideration, because a sacred curse from God can follow on the heels of any such foolish action herein described. The Lord instructed his disciples regarding this possibility;

“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. (Mt 5:22 NKJ)

These were terms used in a ‘curse’ that were common to the times of Christ.463 Those who shamed others or marginalized the vulnerable with hatred were themselves subject to the curse of hell-fire. Ancient Middle Eastern formulas for cursing often included reference to fire and burning.464 This is reflected throughout the New

463 Some take the Greek word (μωρος) as a Hebrew term (מור, rebel) used in the time of Christ and expressive of condemnation; cf. Num. 20:10; Ps. 68:8 Cf. Thayer Greek Lexicon, entry 3562. We get our English word equivalent ‘moron’ from the Greek.
464 “The curse formula typically contained two elements: A description of an act displeasing to the author of the curse, and the consequences to one performing this act (often in both this lifetime and beyond) through some agency (god, king, private person, animal, etc.).” Cf. Katarina Nordth, Aspects of Ancient Egyptian Curses and Blessings: Conceptual Background and Transmission, Uppsala Studies in Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Civilizations (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1996) who list the following curse descriptions taken from sites throughout various Egyptian Dynasties;
I shall seize his neck like that of a goose (Inscription of Hermeru, Dynasty 6)
He shall die from hunger and thirst (on a statue of Herihor, High Priest of Amun, Dyn. 20-21)
He shall have no heir (inscription of Tuthmosis I, Dyn. 18)
His years shall be diminished (on a statue of Monthuemhat, Dyn. 25-26)
His lifetime shall not exist on earth (tomb of Senmut, Dyn. 18)
He shall not exist (tomb of Khnumhotep, Dyn. 12)
Testament, especially as a final judgment upon those under the wrath of God.\textsuperscript{465}

While a sacred curse and killing prayer can be made available to a community of faith that is aligned with proper authority, motive and unity of purpose, i.e. the defense of the truth concerning God’s Kingdom and his Christ, there are many considerations present that make such severe action either unwise or ineffective if a curse is presumptuously made. These considerations include God’s own judgment upon any who presume to speak on behalf of the divine while factually speaking from their own hatred or discontent. Balaam is a prime example of such presumption.

Balaam’s three-fold attempt to curse the people of God (Num 22-24)\textsuperscript{466} remains illustrative of the dangers individuals encounter when presuming upon divine authority. According to the Talmud and various traditions, Balaam was gifted with the knowledge of precisely knowing when YHWH was angry, and therefore, he could direct the wrath of God upon any who displeased him.\textsuperscript{467}

The rabbis used the Hebrew epithet “rasha” when describing Balaam. In so doing, they recognized that the one who would bring a curse from God is himself “accursed” by God who can also see the wickedness of the prophet’s actions.\textsuperscript{468}

It would behoove any who might imagine using the power of a sacred curse to also pause, and consider whether or not such prayer is truly mandated in any given

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\textsuperscript{465} Cf. Mt 3:10-12; 13:40-42 & 50; 18:8-9; 25:41 etc.

\textsuperscript{466} There are seven prophecies in this narrative; Num 23:7-10; 18-24; 24:3-9; 14-19; 20; 21-22; 23-24. Five different nations are destined to destruction while Israel, is inadvertently blessed.

\textsuperscript{467} Cf. Talmud, Berachot 7a

\textsuperscript{468} Talmud Berachot l.c.; Taanit 20a; Midrash Numbers Rabbah 20:14. The Sanhedrin Talmud describes Balaam as crippled and missing an eye. This is an allegory of those who unjustly seek the destruction of others as being themselves blind to the truth and walking upon the broad road of destruction.
circumstance. To pray amiss could invite God’s own sacred curse on the very people who petition for the harm of others.
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Sir;

Attached to this message is the electronic version of my completed DTh thesis in THEOLOGICAL –ETHICS;

AN EXAMINATION OF THE THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL ISSUES RELATING TO 'SACRED CURSES' WITH REFERENCE TO CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES

My Supervisor is Dr. R.S. Tshaka and my student number is 4480-022-3.

The two printed spine-glued hard cover copies of this thesis will be mailed to your office on 21 February, 2012 and you should receive them prior to 1 March 2012.

Please CONFIRM receipt of this message, and let me know if more information is needed to meet the necessary requirements for graduation.

Thank you for your assistance!

Mark Raeburn Johnston