Jesus, Compassion, and Politics

Two key words enable us to glimpse what was most central to Jesus: Spirit and compassion. As two focal points around which an image of Jesus may be constellated, they disclose what was most important to him. In the previous chapter, we treated the role of the Spirit in his life. In this chapter, we shall look at the centrality of compassion for him, as well as the significant ways in which Spirit and compassion are related to each other. Jesus’ advocacy of compassion continues to be an invitation and a challenge to the church in our day.

Compassion is a particularly important word in the gospels. The stories told about Jesus speak of him as having compassion and of his being moved with compassion. The word also represents the summation of his teaching about both God and ethics. For Jesus, compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered in God. These two aspects of compassion are combined most clearly and compactly in a single verse, to which we will return several times in this chapter:

Be compassionate as God is compassionate.¹

This crystallization of Jesus’ message speaks of a way of life grounded in an imitatio dei—an imitation of God. Image of God and ethos—what God is like and how we are to live—are brought together. Moreover, for Jesus compassion was not simply an individual virtue, but a sociopolitical paradigm expressing his alternative vision of human life in community, a vision of life embodied in the movement that came into existence around him.

THE MEANING OF COMPASSION

In the Hebrew Bible, which Christians typically call the Old Testament and which was sacred Scripture for Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, the word compassion has rich semantic associations. In Hebrew (as well as in Aramaic), the word usually translated as “compassion” is the plural of a noun that in its singular form means “womb.”² In the Hebrew Bible, compassion is both a feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling. Sometimes it is very specifically linked to its association with womb: a woman feels compassion for the child of her own womb; a man feels compassion for his brother, who comes from the same womb.³ As a feeling, compassion is located in a certain part of the body—namely, in the loins. In women, as one would expect, this means in the womb;⁴ in men, in the bowels.⁵ Thus we have that somewhat odd biblical expression “his bowels were moved with compassion.” But obviously it is the same part of the body.

In terms of feeling, compassion means “to feel with,” as even the etymology of the English word suggests: -passion comes from the Latin word that means “to feel,” and the prefix com- means “with.” Compassion thus means feeling the feelings of somebody else in a visceral way, at a level somewhere below the level of the head; most commonly compassion is associated with feeling the suffering of somebody else and being moved by that suffering to do something. That is, the feeling of compassion leads to being compassionate.

Quite often the Hebrew words for compassion and compassion-ate are translated into English as mercy and merciful. But compassion is quite different from mercy, and being compassionate quite different from being merciful. In English mercy and merciful most commonly imply a superior in relationship to a subordinate, and also a situation of wrongdoing: one is merciful toward somebody
to whom one has the right (or power) to act otherwise. Compassion suggests something else. To paraphrase William Blake, mercy wears a human face, and compassion a human heart.

**COMPASSION, GOD, AND ETHICS**

The Hebrew word for “compassion” whose singular form means “womb” is often used of God in the Old Testament. It is translated as “merciful” in the characterization of God as “gracious and merciful.”

It is present in that quite wonderful expression from the King James Bible the “tender mercies” of God. It is found in a passage in Jeremiah that has been translated as follows:

Thus says Yahweh:
Is Ephraim [Israel] my dear son? my darling child?
For the more I speak of him,
the more I do remember him.
Therefore my womb trembles for him;
I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him.

Thus the Hebrew Bible speaks frequently of God as compassionate, with resonances of “womb” close at hand.

And so Jesus’ statement “Be compassionate as God is compassionate” is rooted in the Jewish tradition. As an image for the central quality of God, it is striking. To say that God is compassionate is to say that God is “like a womb;” is “womblike,” or, to coin a word that captures the flavor of the original Hebrew, “wombish.” What does it suggest to say that God is like a womb? Metaphoric and evocative, the phrase and its associated image provocatively suggest a number of connotations. Like a womb, God is the one who gives birth to us—the mother who gives birth to us. As a mother loves the children of her womb and feels for the children of her womb, so God loves us and feels for us, for all of her children. In its sense of “like a womb,” compassionate has nuances of giving life, nourishing, caring, perhaps embracing and encompassing. For Jesus, this is what God is like.

And, to complete the *imitatio dei*, to “be compassionate as God is compassionate” is to be like a womb as God is like a

womb. It is to feel as God feels and to act as God acts: in a life-giving and nourishing way. “To be compassionate” is what is meant elsewhere in the New Testament by the somewhat more abstract command “to love.” According to Jesus, compassion is to be the central quality of a life faithful to God the compassionate one.

**COMPASSION, SOCIAL WORLD, AND POLITICS**

Though compassion as the content of Jesus’ *imitatio dei* was rooted in the Jewish tradition, it was not the dominant *imitatio dei* of the first-century Jewish social world. Instead, a different *imitatio dei*, also grounded in the Hebrew Bible, had become the primary paradigm shaping the Jewish social world: “Be holy as God is holy.”

It is in the conflict between these two *imitatio dei*—between holiness and compassion as qualities of God to be embodied in community—that we see the central conflict in the ministry of Jesus: between two different social visions. The dominant social vision was centered in holiness; the alternative social vision of Jesus was centered in compassion.

Indeed, it is only when we appreciate this dimension of Jesus’ emphasis upon compassion that we realize how radical his message and vision were. For Jesus, compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue: it was a social paradigm, the core value for life in community. To put it boldly: compassion for Jesus was political. He directly and repeatedly challenged the dominant sociopolitical paradigm of his social world and advocated instead what might be called a *politics of compassion*. This conflict and this social vision continue to have striking implications for the life of the church today.

To see this, we need to look at the role that purity played in Jesus’ social world. He was often in conflict with his critics about purity laws and issues. Within the modern church, we tend to view such disputes as trivial, seeing purity laws as part of the ritual or ceremonial law of ancient Judaism, and of little importance compared with the moral law. We wonder how any reasonably thoughtful person could be concerned about such
matters, which strike us as rather silly. Moreover, we tend to think of purity in individualistic terms, as if it were something that an overly pious individual might become m$e$iculous about. But in first-century Jewish Palestine, this was not the case. Purity was neither trivial nor individualistic. Rather, to put it concisely, purity was political.

The Purity System of the Jewish Social World

Purity was political because it structured society into a purity system. It took as its starting point the verse briefly mentioned earlier:

Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them:
You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.\textsuperscript{13}

As an imitatio dei, the passage joins together an image of God and an ethos for the community: God is holy; therefore Israel is to be holy. Moreover, holiness was understood to mean “separation from everything unclean.” Holiness thus meant the same as purity, and the passage was thus understood as, “You [Israel] shall be pure as God is pure.” The ethos of purity produced a politics of purity—that is, a society structured around a purity system. Purity systems are found in many cultures. At a high level of abstraction, they are systems of classifications, lines and boundaries. A purity system “is a cultural map which indicates a place for everything and everything in its place.”\textsuperscript{13} Things that are okay in one place are impure or dirty in another, where they are out of place. Slightly more narrowly, and yet very simply, a purity system is a social system organized around the contrasts or polarities of pure and impure, clean and unclean.\textsuperscript{14} The polarities of pure and impure establish a spectrum or “purity map” ranging from pure on one end through varying degrees of purity to impure (or “off the purity map”) at the other. These polarities apply to persons, places, things, times, and social groups.

Most important for our purposes is the way “pure” and “impure” applied to persons and social groups in the first-century Jewish social world. The purity system established a spectrum of people ranging from the pure through varying degrees of purity to people on the margin to the radically impure.

One’s purity status depended to some extent on birth. According to one purity map of the time, priests and Levites (both hereditary classes) come first, followed by “Israelites,” followed by “converts” (Jewish persons who were not Jewish by birth). Further down the list are “bastards,” followed by those with damaged testicles and those without a penis.\textsuperscript{13}

But one’s degree of purity or impurity also depended on behavior.\textsuperscript{16} Those who were carefully observant of the purity codes were “the pure,” of course. The worst of the nonobservant were “outcasts.” They included occupational groups such as tax collectors and perhaps shepherds (which provides a fresh perspective on the shepherds in Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth: the news of the birth comes to outcasts).\textsuperscript{17} “The righteous” were those who followed the purity system, and “sinners” were those who did not. Though the word sinners had a range of meanings in first-century Palestine, it was not understood to include everybody (as it does in the mainstream Christian theological tradition),\textsuperscript{18} but rather referred to particular groups of people, the worst of whom were “untouchables.”\textsuperscript{19} Parenthetically, it is interesting to note what happens to the notion of sin within a purity system. Sin becomes a matter of being impure or “dirty” and renders one “untouchable.” This connection between sin and impurity is preserved in some Christian confessions of sin that speak of being “sinful and unclean.” So it was in first-century Judaism: sinners often meant “the impure.”

The polarities of the purity system got attached to other contrasts as well. Physical wholeness was associated with purity, and lack of wholeness with impurity. People who were not “whole”—the maimed, the chronically ill, lepers, eunuchs, and so forth—were on the impure side of the spectrum. The purity contrast also was associated with economic class. To be sure, being rich did not automatically put one on the pure side (and first-century Judaism could speak of rich people who were wicked), but being abjectly poor almost certainly made one impure. To some extent, this association resulted from popular wisdom, which saw wealth as a blessing from God (“The righteous will prosper”) and poverty as an indication that one had not lived right. And to some extent, it arose because the abject poor could not in practice observe the purity laws.\textsuperscript{20}
Purity and impurity also were associated with the contrast between male and female. As with the wealthy, there was nothing about being a male that made one automatically pure; clearly, there were men who were outcasts. And there was nothing about being a woman that automatically made one impure. But generally speaking, men in their natural state were thought to be more pure than women. The natural bodily processes of childbirth and menstruation were considered sources of impurity, and these led to a more generalized sense of the impurity of women. This is consistent with the status of women in that culture as distinctly second-class people, a point to which we shall return later in this chapter.

Finally, the polarity of pure and impure also was attached to whether one was a Jew or a Gentile. Being Jewish did not guarantee one’s purity, of course. But by definition, all Gentiles were impure and unclean. Indeed, the ideology of purity contributed to the fact that Jesus lived in a generation headed toward war. Palestine was occupied territory, a colony of the Roman Empire, controlled by an impure and unclean Gentile oppressor; the purity system was one of the causes of the heroic but catastrophic Jewish revolt of A.D. 66, which ended in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

To sum up, the effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. There is one more point to be made before turning to Jesus’ response to the purity system: the extent to which the system was dominant in the Jewish social world.

At the center of the purity system were the temple and the priesthood. The temple was the geographic and cultic center of Israel’s purity map. Its priests were therefore bound by the more stringent purity rules, which applied to those nearest the center of purity. Moreover, the income of both temple and priests (and Levites) depended upon the observance of purity laws by others. That income flowed largely from “tithes”—in effect, taxes on agricultural produce. Tithing was closely linked to purity; untithed produce was thus impure and would not be purchased by the observant. So temple and priesthood had economic as well as religious interests in the purity system.

It should be added that the temple was also the center of the ruling elites among the Jewish people. Not only were the high priestly families the religious elite, but they overlapped the economic and political elites, being linked with them by frequent intermarriage and other associations. Thus the politics of purity was to some extent the ideology of the dominant elites—religious, political, and economic.

Purity was also central to two Jewish renewal groups in first-century Palestine. The Pharisees sought the extension of the more stringent priestly rules of purity into everyday life; and the Essenes (probably still to be identified with the people of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls, though this is not completely certain) withdrew to the desert wilderness along the Dead Sea, believing that purity could be attained only in isolation from the impure world of culture.

We do not know the extent to which ordinary Jews were concerned about observing purity laws. No doubt some did, while others ignored them; still others may have felt victimized by them (and therefore resentful toward the purity system and those who benefited from it). But we can say that both “temple Judaism” and the leading renewal movements were committed to the paradigm of purity. It was both a hermeneutic and social system: it formed the lens through which they saw sacred tradition and provided a map for ordering their world.

Jesus’ Attack upon the Purity System

It is in the context of a purity system that created a world with sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, that we can see the sociopolitical significance of compassion. In the message and activity of Jesus, we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion.

The challenge is signaled at the outset by the imitatio dei of which Jesus speaks. It is striking that “Be compassionate as God is compassionate” so closely echoes “Be holy as God is holy,” even as it makes a radical substitution. The close parallel suggests that Jesus deliberately replaced the core value of purity with
compassion. Compassion, not holiness, is the dominant quality of God, and is therefore to be the ethos of the community that mirrors God.

Many of Jesus’ sayings indicted the purity system. He criticized a system that emphasized tithing and neglected justice: “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God.” Tithes on produce amounted to taxes paid to the priests and temple, and untithed produce was impure. Thus, in the name of purity, the meticulous payment of tithes was insisted upon, to the neglect of justice.

He called the Pharisees “unmarked graves which people walk over without knowing it,” a criticism that might seem obscure to us. The key is that corpses (and therefore burial places) were a source of severe impurity. To call the Pharisees “unmarked graves” is stunningly ironic: they were a movement seeking the extension of purity laws, and Jesus declared them to be instead a source of impurity.

Jesus spoke of purity as on the inside and not on the outside: “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” To say that purity is a matter of what is inside is radically to subvert a purity system constituted by external boundaries.

The same point is made by another saying: “Blessed are the pure in heart.” When I was growing up, I heard this saying as an impossible demand, thinking, “Oh my God, I’m supposed to be pure in heart! If I just had to be pure on the outside, I could maybe handle it, but I have to be pure in heart too!” However, the internalization of purity in the message of Jesus did not involve the imposition of an even heavier demand but a radical subversion of the existing social system. True purity is a matter not of external boundaries and observance but of the heart.

The critique of the purity system is the theme of one of Jesus’ most familiar parables, the story of the Good Samaritan. Most often interpreted as a message about being a helpful neighbor, it in fact had a much more pointed meaning in the first-century Jewish social world. It was a critique of a way of life ordered around purity. The key to seeing this is to recognize the purity issues in the story: the priest and Levite were obligated to maintain a certain level of purity; contact with death was a source of major impurity; and the wounded man is described as “half-dead,” suggesting that one couldn’t tell whether he was dead without coming close enough to incur impurity if he was. Thus the priest and Levite passed by out of observance of the purity laws. The Samaritan (who, not incidentally, was radically impure according to the purity system), on the other hand, is described as the one who acted “compassionately.” Thus this beloved and often domesticated parable was originally a pointed attack on the purity system and an advocacy of another way: compassion.

We see the challenge to the purity system not only in Jesus’ teaching but in many of his activities. The stories of his healings shatter the purity boundaries of his social world. He touched lepers and hemmorhaging women. He entered a graveyard inhabited by a man with a “legion” of unclean spirits who lived in the vicinity of pigs, which were of course unclean animals. In the last week of his life, according to the synoptic gospels, he brought his challenge to the center of the purity system—the temple—with his action of driving out the money changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals. His charge that the temple authorities had turned the temple into a “den of robbers” may very well refer to the economic interest that the temple elites had in the purity system.

One of his most characteristic activities was an open and inclusive table. “Table fellowship”—sharing a meal with somebody—had a significance in Jesus’ social world that is difficult for us to imagine. It was not a casual act, as it can be in the modern world. In a general way, sharing a meal represented mutual acceptance. More specifically, rules surrounding meals were deeply embedded in the purity system. Those rules governed not only what might be eaten and how it should be prepared, but also with whom one might eat. Refusing to share a meal was a form of social ostracism. Pharisees (and others) would not eat with somebody who was impure, and no decent person would share a meal with an outcast. The meal was a microcosm of the social system, table fellowship an embodiment of social vision.
The meal practice of Jesus thus had sociopolitical significance. He frequently ate with outcasts, as well as with others. Moreover, it appears that these were often festive meals, as is indicated by a small detail in the gospel accounts: the participants “reclined” at table. Ordinary meals were eaten sitting; at festive meals, one reclined. Reclining turns a meal into a banquet, a celebration.

His practice of “open commensality” incited criticism from the advocates of the purity system; this criticism has been preserved in the gospels in a number of places. Jesus is accused of “eating with tax collectors and sinners” and is charged with being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” As already noted, tax collectors were among the worst of the untouchables, and sinners should be given the meaning it had within a purity system: impure people, “dirty” people.

The open table fellowship of Jesus was thus perceived as a challenge to the purity system. And it was: the meals of Jesus embodied his alternative vision of an inclusive community. The ethos of compassion led to an inclusive table fellowship, just as the ethos of purity led to a closed table fellowship.

Ultimately, the meals of Jesus are the ancestor of the Christian eucharist. The centrality of meals in the early Christian movement and throughout Christian history goes back to the table fellowship of Jesus. In the Christian tradition, of course, the meal has become a ritualized sacred meal, no longer a real meal. But for Jesus, these were real meals with real outcasts. Recognizing this adds a fresh nuance to the eucharist.

The inclusive vision incarnated in Jesus’ table fellowship is reflected in the shape of the Jesus movement itself. It was an inclusive movement, negating the boundaries of the purity system. It included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized, as well as some people of stature who found his vision attractive. It is difficult for us who live in a world in which we take for granted an attitude (at least as an ideal) of nondiscrimination to appreciate the radical character of this inclusiveness. It is only what we would expect from a reasonably decent person. But in a society ordered by a purity system, the inclusiveness of Jesus’ movement embodied a radically alternative social vision.

We can see this by looking at one example: the role of women in the movement. Both official and folk Judaism were deeply androcentric and patriarchal, as were other cultures of the first-century Mediterranean world. Within the Jewish social world, women were nobodies. Though there were alternative voices within Judaism, the dominant voice disenfranchised women. They had few of the rights of men. They could not, for example, be witnesses in a court of law or initiate a divorce. They were not to be taught the Torah (perhaps because the ability to interpret Torah was considered a form of power). They were radically separated from men in public life, almost invisible, as they are still in some traditional parts of the Middle East. Respectable women did not go out of the house unescorted by a family member; adult women were to be veiled in public. Meals outside of the family were always male-only affairs (and if women were present at such meals, they were perceived as courtesans.) A woman’s identity was in her father or husband. Women were the victims of male projections; their association with impurity has already been noted.

In this setting, the role of women in the Jesus movement is striking. The stories of Jesus’ interactions with women are remarkable. They range from his defense of the woman who outraged an all-male banquet not only by entering it but also by (unveiled and with hair unbraided) washing his feet with her hair, to his being hosted by Mary and Martha and affirming Mary’s role as disciple, to his learning from a Syro-Phoenician Gentile woman. Women were apparently part of the itinerant group traveling with Jesus. Indeed, they were apparently among his most devoted followers, as the stories of their presence at his death suggest. The movement itself was financially supported by some wealthy women. Moreover, the evidence is compelling that women played leadership roles in the post-Easter community.

This is not to make the case that Jesus was a feminist; that would be an anachronism. But it does point to the radical social reality constituted by the Jesus movement in first-century Palestine. Within the movement itself, the sharp boundaries of the social world were subverted and an alternative vision affirmed and embodied. It was a “discipleship of equals” embodying “the egalitarian praxis” of Jesus’ vision.
The inclusiveness of the Jesus movement continued into the early Christian movement as we hear it described in other parts of the New Testament. It was one of the most striking qualities of the movement. We see it in the book of Acts in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, which revolves around the issue of purity boundaries. Eunuchs were sexually defective, and hence were near the bottom of the purity system. They were excluded from full participation in the religious life of Israel. The eunuch's question to Philip, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” is really a question about whether the new community he has just heard about will exclude or include him. He is, of course, included. The famous words of Paul also negate the world of purity and cultural boundaries and express the same inclusiveness: “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female”. Paul is not here announcing an abstract ideal; rather, this verse reflects the new social reality of the movement itself.

In short, there is something boundary-shattering about the imitatio dei that stood at the center of Jesus’ message and activity: “Be compassionate as God is compassionate.” Whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes. For Jesus, compassion had a radical sociopolitical meaning. In his teaching and table fellowship, and in the shape of his movement, the purity system was subverted and an alternative social vision affirmed. The politics of purity was replaced by a politics of compassion.

SPIRIT, COMPASSION, AND US

The intra-Jewish battle between Jesus and the advocates of the purity system can be seen as a battle over two different ways to interpret Scripture. Both he and his critics stood in the tradition of Israel and sought to be faithful to it. The elites of his day read Scripture in accordance with the paradigm of holiness as purity. Jesus read it in accordance with the paradigm of compassion. Each provided a lens through which the tradition was seen. It was thus a hermeneutical battle, a conflict between two very different ways of interpreting the sacred traditions of Judaism. It was not, of course, the kind of academic hermeneutical argument that occurs today in scholarly circles. Rather, it was a hermeneutical battle about the shape of a world, and the stakes were high.

The same hermeneutical struggle goes on in the church today. In parts of the church there are groups that emphasize holiness and purity as the Christian way of life, and they draw their own sharp social boundaries between the righteous and sinners. It is a sad irony that these groups, many of which are seeking very earnestly to be faithful to Scripture, end up emphasizing those parts of Scripture that Jesus himself challenged and opposed. An interpretation of Scripture faithful to Jesus and the early Christian movement sees the Bible through the lens of compassion, not purity.

To use a specific example, I am convinced that much of the strongly negative attitude toward homosexuality on the part of some Christians has arisen because, in addition to whatever nonreligious homophobic reasons may be involved, homosexuality is seen (often unconsciously) as a purity issue. For these Christians, there’s something “dirty” about it, boundaries are being crossed, things are being put together that do not belong together, and so forth. Indeed, homosexuality was a purity issue in ancient Judaism. The prohibition against it is found in the purity laws of the book of Leviticus.

It seems to me that the shattering of purity boundaries by both Jesus and Paul should also apply to the purity code’s perception of homosexuality. Homosexual behavior should therefore be evaluated by the same criteria as heterosexual behavior. It also seems to me that the passage in which Paul negates the other central polarities of his world also means, “In Christ, there is neither straight nor gay.” Granted, Paul didn’t say that, but the logic of “life in the Spirit” and the ethos of compassion imply it.

It is not only in the church that the politics of purity remains alive, but also in our culture as a whole. One could make a very good case that we have a secularized version of the politics of purity. Our culture has increasingly maximized the rewards for culturally valued forms of achievement and maximized the penalties for failing to live up to those same standards, thereby generating increasingly sharp social boundaries. Moreover, the
The most persuasive answer locates that conviction in Jesus’ own experience of God. It is implausible to see his perception of God as compassionate and the passionate courage with which he held to it as simply a result of the intellectual activity of studying the tradition, or to assume that based on some other grounds he decided it was a good idea. Rather, it is reasonable to surmise that he spoke of God as compassionate—as “like a womb”—because of his own experience of the Spirit.

Such experiences radically subvert social boundaries and culturally generated distinctions by exposing their artificiality and disclosing the “is-ness” that lies beneath the socially constructed maps of reality we erect. The same connection is implicit in the life of the early Christian movement in the decades after Jesus’ death. They were, according to the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, communities in which the Spirit was active and present, and they were egalitarian. In short, there is an intrinsic connection between the boundary-shattering experience of Spirit and the boundary-shattering ethos of compassion. Spirit and compassion go together.

The relationship between Spirit and compassion has one further significance. The spiritual life and the world of the everyday are not split apart in the message and activity of Jesus, as they sometimes have been in the history of the church and the lives of Christians. Rather, for Jesus, the relationship with the Spirit led to compassion in the world of the everyday. So also for his most influential follower, Paul. Paul uses the word love where Jesus used the word compassion. Thus when Paul, in the great “love chapter” in 1 Corinthians 13, speaks of the greatest of the spiritual gifts as love, he is essentially saying that compassion is the primary fruit of the Spirit.

An image of the Christian life shaped by this image of Jesus would have the same two focal points: a relationship to the Spirit of God, and the embodiment of compassion in the world of the everyday. It is an image of the Christian life that provides both direction and growth. For Jesus and Paul, life in the Spirit begins a deepening process of internal transformation whose central quality is compassion. Indeed, growth in compassion is the sign of growth in the life of the Spirit.
NOTES

1. Luke 6:36. I have three brief comments about this verse. First, it is early tradition; its close parallel in Matthew 5:48 indicates that it was part of Q. Second, Luke’s wording (“compassionate”) is to be preferred to Matthew (“perfect”); the use of the word perfect is a demonstrable characteristic of Matthew’s redaction. Finally, along with the New English Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, and the Scholar’s Version, I prefer the translation “compassionate” to “merciful” (King James, RSV, and NRSV). Merciful in English has connotations quite different from compassionate, about which I will say more slightly later in this chapter.

2. I owe this insight and the train of thought that flows from it to the work of Phyllis Trible in her book God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), especially chaps. 2 and 3.


4. See, for example, 1 Kings 3:26, where Solomon has to decide between the claims of two women to being the mother of the same baby. When Solomon proposes to settle the case by cutting the infant in two, the real mother, we are told, was moved in her womb. Interestingly, though the Hebrew word for “womb” is used, the King James Version reads, “. . . her bowels yearned upon her son.”

5. One text, though, does speak of a man’s “womb” being moved: Genesis 43:30.

6. See, for example, Exodus 34:6; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17, 31; Psalms 103:8; Joel 2:13; John 4:2.


9. In my quotation of Luke 6:36 in the second paragraph of this chapter, I have used the gender-inclusive word God instead of Father, which is used in the Greek text: “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” The juxtaposition of “Father” and “like a womb” is interesting, and provides material for speculation. One might imagine Jesus saying, “You want to know what your heavenly Father is like? Your heavenly Father is like a womb.” We perhaps should imagine him saying it with a wink. Such playful yet serious use of language is characteristic of the Jesus tradition.

10. Leviticus 19.2.

11. I am using politics here in a broad sense to mean (as its Greek root suggests) concern with the shape and shaping of “the city” (Greek polis means “city”) and, by extension, concern with the shape and shaping of any human community.

12. Leviticus 19.2. The “holiness code,” which defines holiness as purity, is found in Leviticus 17–26. The purity laws collected in Leviticus 11–16 were also important, as are other purity laws scattered throughout the Pentateuch.


14. There are both broad and somewhat narrower definitions of what constitutes a purity system. Mary Douglas, an anthropologist whose work has been influential in New Testament scholarship, defines a purity system very broadly as an orderly cultural system of classification, lines and boundaries, which makes the terms purity system and culture virtually synonymous. See her Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). Somewhat more narrowly, a purity system may be understood as a cultural system of classification that makes explicit use of the language of purity. The social world of Jesus was a purity system not just in the broad sense, but also in this narrower sense.


16. The way in which the purity system worked is quite complex, and a detailed description is beyond the scope of this book. It should be noted, however, that some violations of the purity laws were routine and their consequences short-lived and thus, in a sense, not serious; that is, such violations were taken care of by the passage of time and/or simple rituals. For example, an emission of semen rendered a man unclean until the next day. But regular nonobservance of the purity laws rendered one chronically unclean.

17. I say “perhaps” because the lists that mention shepherds as belonging to the “most despised” category by virtue of their occupations
are found in Jewish sources written down after the time of Jesus. For the lists, see Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (London: SCM, 1969), p. 304. For a balanced treatment of whether shepherds were outcasts in the first century, see Richard A. Horsley, The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 102–6; Horsley concludes that shepherds were in any case from the peasant class and thus marginals.

18. I believe it was Krister Stendahl, a New Testament scholar who was dean of Harvard Divinity School before becoming a bishop of the Church of Sweden, who said, in a talk I heard some twenty-five years ago about the theological belief that Christians are all sinners, "Of course, we are only honorary sinners."

19. As E. P. Sanders argues in Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), p. 210, sinners could refer to the notoriously wicked. But it was also used by various groups within Judaism to refer to other Jews who were not observant according to the standards of that group. See the very helpful essay by James D. G. Dunn, "Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus," in The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 264–89 (especially pp. 276–80).

20. An important clarification: so far as I know, there are no purity sayings that explicitly associate wealth with purity and poverty with impurity. But a purity system is more than the sum of a culture's explicit purity laws. Purity systems have a logic and structure that cause notions of pure and impure to become associated with other central contrasts in the society.

21. See, for example, Countrman, Dirt, Greed, and Sex, pp. 28–30; after examining texts from the Pentateuch, he concludes, "It is not too much to suggest that the texts demonstrate a general anxiety about the polluting potential of women."

22. See the purity map in Neyrey, The Social World of Luke-Acts, pp. 278–79, which consists of ten concentric circles of decreasing degrees of holiness/purity radiating out from the temple in Jerusalem. At its center is the most sacred part of the temple, the holy of holies; the outermost circle is the land of Israel itself, which is "holy" (and this is one of the meanings of the holy land: it is pure and is to be kept pure). Beyond Israel all is "impure"—that is, "off the purity map."

23. In addition to the tithes paid to the temple and priesthood, Jewish farmers were also subject to taxes by Herodian (in Galilee) and Roman (in Judea) authority. We do not know if the payment of tithes consistently involved the threat of physical coercion, though it sometimes did. There were, in any case, forms of social and economic coercion. Nonobservant Jews (including non–tithe payers) were socially ostracized by those committed to purity; and the classification of untithed produce as impure, and therefore not to be bought by the observant, amounted to an economic boycott. It is hard to know how effective this boycott was. But it could have been significant. If we assume that most of the wealthy aristocracy—generally large landowners—were committed to purity (as they probably would have been, given that the high priestly families were at the center of the aristocracy), it is possible to imagine them refusing to buy produce from their sharecroppers unless the tithe were first paid.

24. The quest for the historical Pharisees has yielded almost as much diversity as the quest for the historical Jesus. The common negative portrait of them in many Christian circles, and their image in popular language as "hypocrites" (and worse), are certainly wrong. They were in fact devout. However, there is considerable scholarly disagreement about who they were in the time of Jesus, the extent of their influence and activity, and so forth. For what seems to me to be a balanced, compact sorting through of the scholarly debate, see Dunn, "Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus."


26. Two prominent contemporary scholars disagree about the extent to which Jews observed the purity laws. Jacob Neusner, the most important Jewish scholar of this period, thinks that "ordinary Jews" did not observe them; E. P. Sanders, who has written extensively about Judaism in this period, thinks they did. See Sanders, Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 B.C.E.–66 C.E. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), p. 229.

27. Luke 11.42 = Matthew 23.23, and therefore Q material (and thus quite early tradition). The passage ends with "these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." The concluding phrase may indicate that Jesus approved of tithing and simply lamented the
neglect of weightier matters such as justice; or the phrase could conceivably be understood ironically.

29. Mark 7.15.

30. Matthew 5.8. See also Matthew 23.25-26 = Luke 11.39-41. About Matthew 5.8, we cannot be confident that Jesus said this. The words are found only in Matthew, and in a setting where it looks like they might have been “constructed” to fit the context (the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount). Yet it so clearly coheres with authentic sayings of Jesus that one can say that it expresses the gist of what he said about purity, even if he didn’t say those exact words.

32. Mark 5.1-20. In its present form, the story contains many symbolic elements, so it is difficult to discern the extent to which a historical event lies behind it. The point, however, is that the story in its present form shatters the symbolic universe of the purity system.

33. The phrase is from John Dominic Crossan’s recent and very important scholarly book on Jesus, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). Crossan finds “open commensality” to be one of the two most radical aspects of Jesus’ activity; the other is “free healing,” which provided access to divine power outside of established religious authority.

34. The use of “dirty” here should not, of course, be understood in the sense of physical dirtiness (though some of Jesus’ table companions were in all likelihood physically dirty). Rather, it has the meaning it has within a purity system.

35. And Jesus’ table fellowship does not simply go back to “the last supper.” We do not know if Jesus in fact held a “last supper” with his disciples at which elements of the meal (bread and wine) were invested with special significance. The stories of a last supper in the gospels may be the product of the early community’s embryonic ritualization of the meal tradition rather than a historical recollection of the last night of Jesus’ life. There seems, in this instance, no way of moving beyond “not knowing.”

37. See the comment in Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 129: “In every single encounter with women in the four Gospels, Jesus violated the mores of his time”; for Wink’s extended treatment of the point, see pp. 129-34. The whole of his chapter on “the domination system” of first-century Jewish Palestine and Jesus’ response to it (pp. 109-37) is consistent with the claims I develop in this chapter.

39. The quoted phrases are used frequently in Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*.
41. See, for example, Deuteronomy 23.1. The eunuch in the story in Acts is also a Gentile, and thus outside of the Jewish purity system. But the point remains: as a eunuch, he could not become a convert to Judaism.
42. Galatians 3.28.
43. It is important to note that, in the judgment of most scholars, Paul did not write the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus), which reflect a much different attitude toward women, especially in the classic “proof text” cited by people opposed to the ordination of women: 1 Timothy 2.8-15. By the time the pastoral letters were written (early second century), conventional patriarchal attitudes toward women were coming back into the movement. Though the author of the pastoral letters is often spoken of as a second- or third-generation follower of Paul, he may in fact have been seeking to subvert Paul’s radicalism. And when the subversive is subverted, we are back to the conventional.

44. It often surprises people to learn how little the laws of the Old Testament say about homosexuality. The prohibition is stated in Leviticus 18.22, and the penalty specified in Leviticus 20.13.
45. See especially *Countryman*, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*. *Countryman* argues that homosexuality was a purity issue within Judaism, and that the New Testament’s internalization of purity negates what the purity code says about homosexuality. I find the logic of this argument persuasive.
46. The reference is to Galatians 3.28, cited earlier.
47. In addition to *Countryman*, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*, see Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Two “evangelical” books with an understanding of scriptural authority that is close to fundamentalist, but which nevertheless make a case for the compatibility of homosexuality and Christianity,

48. See especially Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985). Based on an extensive study of middle-class Americans, it argues that the dominant element in the American ethos is individualism, affecting everything from love and marriage to work, from politics and justice to religion. See also the sequel by Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

49. See Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society.*

50. By “is-ness,” I seek to express a difficult but obvious notion: namely, that which “is” independently of the maps that we create with language and systems of ordering. Chief among these creations are social maps based on culturally generated distinctions. These maps become the source of identity, creating social differentiation and social boundaries. But all of these maps are artificial constructions imposed upon what “is” and what we “are.” Beneath the world we construct with language is is-ness.