

Sacredness of Life and the Ethics of Justice: An Appreciative Evangelical Response to David Gushee's Post-Evangelical Approach

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Abstract

In his new book, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today*, Gushee revisits theological positions he and Glen H. Stassen originally articulated in *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. Correlated with Gushee's move toward a post-evangelical perspective, the new publication reframes his earlier evangelical positions and proposes post-evangelical positions for conversation by the church. This article offers an appreciative yet critical response to Gushee's evolving understanding of sacredness of life and justice ethics, in light of selected traditional evangelical and Baptist core convictions and justice concerns. Three specific areas of conversational concern are highlighted. First, the implications of Gushee's rejection of *capacity* to frame a definition of the image of God in human beings and replacement of it with an allegiance to God's command. Second, the article considers Gushee's concept of the moral status of human worth and introduces the theme of *personality* into the discussion of *imago Dei*. Third, that sacredness of life convictions inevitably influence justice ethics. Gushee's earlier work centred on Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust. The article considers how *personality* as an integral aspect of *imago Dei* impacts the ethical discussion of Christian justice concerns in relation to the Holocaust and racism.

Keywords

Ethics; justice; *imago Dei*; personality; personhood; sacredness of life

Dialogue between Evangelical and Post-Evangelical Perspectives

In his recently published book, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today* (2022), distinguished Christian ethicist David P. Gushee reconsiders key theological perspectives and ethical stances that he and Glen H. Stassen originally articulated in *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (2003).¹ In recent years, Gushee has

¹ David P. Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today* (Canton, MI:

transitioned toward a post-evangelical perspective, and *Introducing Christian Ethics* reframes his earlier evangelical positions and proposes post-evangelical arguments for conversation. This article offers an appreciative yet critical response to Gushee's evolving understanding of sacredness of life and justice ethics, in light of selected traditional evangelical and Baptist core convictions and justice concerns.

Three specific areas of conversational concern will be discussed. First, this article will reflect on the implications of Gushee's rejection of *capacity* to frame a definition of the image of God in human beings and its replacement with an allegiance to God's command (chapter 9 of *Introducing Christian Ethics*). Second, this paper will consider Gushee's concept of the moral status of human worth and introduces the theme of *personality* into the discussion of *imago Dei*. Third, that sacredness of life convictions inevitably influence justice ethics (chapter 10 of *Introducing Christian Ethics*). Gushee's earlier work centred on Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust. This article will consider how personality as an integral aspect of *imago Dei* impacts the ethical discussion of Christian justice concerns in relation to the Holocaust and racism.

Although Gushee presently self-identifies as a post-evangelical Baptist and I speak from an evangelical Baptist perspective, there remains much we share in common regarding ethics. Like Gushee, I would assert that Christians must not forget that Christian ethics has been 'transformed from a prophetic-populist Jewish resistance ethic to the moral code of the dominant, and dominating, European gentile civilizations'. The diminishment of the Jewish influence on the church across the centuries has been a great loss, and so contemporary Christian ethicists should 'retrieve the very Jewish-prophetic-populist resistance ethic that Jesus himself embraced and that imperial churches had obscured or reversed'.²

Furthermore, as an evangelical I believe, as Gushee does, that 'Christian ethics is ultimately the effort to know and do God's will as we have met God in Jesus Christ'.³ Accordingly, with Gushee I find much

Front Edge, 2022); David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2003).

² Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 2.

³ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 11.

wisdom in the *teleological ethics* approach to addressing moral concerns, recognising that Jesus was a ‘deeply goal-driven person’ who ‘offered a laser-focus on doing God’s will as his stated goal’.⁴

Nevertheless, Gushee and I find ourselves in different theological homes. As a post-evangelical, he ‘can no longer claim that just reading the Bible resolves all questions related to the Christian moral life’.⁵ As a non-fundamentalist evangelical, I have never felt limited to consulting only biblical texts while seeking wisdom on contemporary ethical, political, scientific, or social issues.

In his introduction to the theme of *sacredness* (chapter 9), Gushee distances himself from ‘sacredness-of-life language’ that has been ‘discredited by conservative hypocrisy’. He condemns ‘American Christian conservatives’ who ‘express opposition to abortion but in relation to no other issue in which human life is at stake’.⁶ I read these charges and agree in part with Gushee, but he does not seem to leave room for evangelical Baptists, conservative (but not fundamentalist) in theology and doctrine, who do not recognise themselves in his broad and negative characterisation of evangelicalism. My evangelical compatriots and I have consistently, and for decades, articulated an ethically consistent *whole life* approach to the sacredness of human life, covering the entire life cycle.⁷ We apply a comprehensive pro-life ethic to the panoply of life: affirming the sacredness of humans in the womb, honouring the life of mothers, seeking the welfare and growth of all children, opposing social injustice and inequality, racism and poverty, promoting the participation of marginalised people in society (including people with disabilities, immigrants, and refugees), opposing unjust warfare (though not all of us are pacifists), and protecting people at the conclusion of their lives. We extend this pro-life ethic to the environment, advocating for ecological care and justice.

⁴ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, pp. 17, 26. My application of teleology is spiritual journey based. See Lee. B. Spitzer, *Endless Possibilities* ([n.p.]: Spiritual Journey Press, 1997).

⁵ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 32.

⁶ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, pp. 32, 107.

⁷ Tish Harrison Warren, ‘How the “Whole Life” Movement Challenges the Politics of Left vs. Right’, *New York Times*, 20 March 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/opinion/whole-life-movement-charlie-camosy.html>> [accessed 30 April 2022].

As far as I know, most of my circle of evangelical colleagues were opposed to white Christian nationalism and the January 6 2021 attempted takeover of American democracy. In agreement with Baptist historian Thomas S. Kidd, ‘I am a Never-Trump evangelical’ who will continue to be as ‘committed as ever to historic evangelical beliefs and practices’ while rejecting unbiblical and idolatrous errors promoted by other American evangelicals.⁸ Gushee would surely stand with us on many of these ethical and justice issues.

Sacredness of Life and Moral Status by Command

The soul can split the sky in two,

*And let the face of God shine through.*⁹

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

‘Sacredness’ of human life is a ‘critically important ethical norm’¹⁰ in Gushee’s ethical system. As in all Christian ethical systems, the sacred nature of human life rests upon the doctrine of ‘*imago Dei*, the image of God (Gen 1:27-28)’.¹¹ Gushee points out that *imago Dei* is often interpreted as a set of *capacities* humans possess.¹² In an earlier chapter, capacity is described in terms of ‘components of character’ such as attitudes, dispositions, emotions, conscience, habits, and practices.¹³ Gushee expresses reservations about this way of describing the *imago Dei* because some capacities ‘are not present in utero, they develop slowly during childhood, they never fully develop for some, and they often erode to near nonexistence at the end of life’.¹⁴

⁸ Thomas S. Kidd, *Who is an Evangelical?: The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 3. In 2019, as General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA, I published a pastoral letter condemning Christian nationalism, antisemitism, and other forms of intolerance; see Lee Spitzer, ‘The Collective Conscience of Our Country’, American Baptist Churches USA, <<https://www.abc-usa.org/2019/08/the-collective-conscience-of-our-country-a-pastoral-letter-from-abcusa-general-secretary-lee-spitzer/>> [accessed 22 August 2022].

⁹ ‘Renaissance,’ in *Edna St. Vincent Millay: Selected Poems*, ed. by Colin Falck (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 10.

¹⁰ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 108.

¹¹ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 109.

¹² Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*.

¹³ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 85.

¹⁴ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 109.

The philosophical problems associated with defining the sacred image of God within human beings in terms of character capacities are noted by utilitarian ethical systems that devalue human life based on the lack of such capabilities. For example, Peter Singer rejects John Rawls's justice model 'that equality can be founded on the natural characteristics of human beings' because there is no way to prove that all human beings possess the capacity to be 'moral persons, even in the most minimal sense'. He cites the cases of those who lack such a key ability, which undergirds equality — 'infants and small children, along with the mentally defective, lack the required sense of justice' that a 'moral person' should possess. Singer concludes, "So the possession of "moral personality" [defined as the ability to enter into mutually beneficial agreements] does not provide a satisfactory basis for the principle that all humans are equal. I doubt that any natural characteristic (...) can fulfill this function, for I doubt there is any morally significant property which all humans possess equally."¹⁵ The only philosophically secure basis for justice and human equality, from a utilitarian point of view, is 'the principle of equal consideration of interests'.¹⁶ Furthermore, Singer rejects the Christian core conviction that human life is uniquely sacred because we are made in the divine image, or that human life has more intrinsic value than that of other species, some of which may be considered 'persons'.¹⁷

Perhaps in response to this objection by Singer and others, Gushee makes a significant tactical shift — he redefines the sacredness of human life as having 'moral status' because 'God has ascribed such sacred worth to life'. Accordingly, we are called to 'treat all persons with reverence, respect, and responsibility because God has revealed that this is what we must do'. God's *command* confers moral status that must be respected and observed if one wishes to be ethical and just:

In Christian terms, human life is sacred not merely on its own, because of something intrinsic to it, but because of its connection with the God who created it and who values it as such. We love human beings, we reverence and respect and seek to care for each person, not because of who they are but because of who

¹⁵ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 16–17.

¹⁶ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 48.

¹⁷ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, pp. 48–105. See Gushee and Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics*, pp. 221–23.

God is and what God has commanded. This is by far the surest basis for a sacredness-of-life ethic.¹⁸

This raises two key questions for conversation. First, has Gushee worked out the inherent tensions concerning how command theology creates philosophical and practical problems for Christian, and specifically Baptist, conceptions of conscience? Jewish philosopher Michael Wyschogrod explores these issues in a provocative essay published in 1981. Succinctly stated, he argues that Judaism is founded on ‘obedience to God’, whereas ‘in conscience it is not after all God who is being heard but man. The Jew, however, is required to listen to God and not to man.’¹⁹ Accordingly, although the rabbinic tradition knew of the concept of conscience, ‘they did not develop conscience into a doctrine’.²⁰ Yet, for Baptists, conscience is an ethical cornerstone. Gushee does agree with Wyschogrod on at least one major point — Wyschogrod warns that ‘it is our responsibility to have a conscience in good working order’,²¹ and Gushee states that ‘even moral conscience can go wrong because it can be damaged, suppressed, or malformed’.²²

Second, does Gushee intend to assert that the sacredness of life and *imago Dei* is an *ideological argument*, in which God’s command should be honoured and obeyed merely because it has been proclaimed? Is a divine conferral of status a sufficient basis upon which to protect life and proclaim justice in a world where many deny God’s existence or the Christian understanding of Jesus’s authority?

Submission to divine command may satisfy some believers (if we could only agree on what has been commanded!), but the divine voice may not necessarily be recognised or observed by others. This is the argument presented by Anat Biletzki, professor of philosophy at

¹⁸ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 109. For a more detailed statement of this conviction, see Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision Is Key to the World’s Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 33.

¹⁹ Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. by R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 81–82. The original chapter was published as ‘Judaism and Conscience’, in *Standing Before God: Studies on Prayer in Scripture and in Tradition with Essays in Honor of John M. Oesterreicher*, ed. by Asher Finked and Lawrence Frizzell (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1981), pp. 313–28.

²⁰ Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, p. 76.

²¹ Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, p. 90.

²² Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 21; see also p. 86.

Quinnipiac and Tel Aviv Universities, in a 2011 essay. She rejects all religiously-based human rights defences that focus on the sacredness of human life as inadequate when faced with secular political and ethical challenges — ‘dignity and inviolability certainly do not need to be tied down to the sacred’. In particular, she rejects ‘command’ theology: ‘Who commands us? The question boils down to who or what is the source of moral authority — God or the human being, religion or ethics?’ Biletzki rejects command ethics because it is not grounded in human rights per se but rather in ‘the human status of sacredness’ based on humanity’s having ‘been created in God’s image’ — which has ‘nothing to do with human rights’.²³

Other philosophers take a different tack. Writing from a phenomenological perspective, French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas posits the primacy of ethics over being. Since ethics serve as ‘the spiritual optic’, there ‘can be no knowledge of God separated from the relationship with men’ (humanity), for the ‘face’ of the ‘Other’ is the ‘very locus of metaphysical truths and is indispensable for my relation with God’.²⁴ Ethical relations are conducted through language — conversation — that seeks justice.²⁵ Accordingly, ‘truth is founded on my relationship with the other, or justice’.²⁶ For Levinas, the discourse flowing from ‘face to face’ discourse necessarily embodies moral and ethical ‘responsibility’ and ‘obligation’ that flow from ‘command’.²⁷ This is not the Biblical ‘command’ Gushee describes from a singular God relating to a particular people, but rather a universalised call to ethical responsibility imposed by human interaction and relationship, ‘the presence of the third party, the whole of humanity, in the eyes that look at me’.²⁸ As Levinas states, ‘The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated’.²⁹

²³ Anat Biletzki, ‘The Sacred and the Humane’, in *Modern Ethics in 77 Arguments*, ed. by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), pp. 162–67.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 78.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 88.

²⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 99.

²⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 200–01.

²⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 213.

²⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 215.

In contrast to Levinas, Wyschogrod is unimpressed with the results of ethics as a foundation for Jewish existence and life, preferring instead an emphasis on Jews' identification as the chosen people through covenant. Rejecting Gushee's dependence on command as primary, Wyschogrod asks, 'Why does God relate to Israel in covenant with its implication of equality rather than in a relationship of command with the expectation of obedience?' His answer is revealing:

A community of faith can be commanded because it consists exclusively of persons who stand in a relationship of faith to the source of the commands. But it is otherwise with a natural family [...] The covenant cannot be shed as easily as a faith can [...] By relating to the Jewish people in the context of covenant, the human integrity of the Jewish people is recognized and it is not turned into a community of faith alone.³⁰

Of course, Gushee is well aware that the Christian community's relationship with God is centred around a covenant that provides the theological context for commands, but Wyschogrod is correct in noting that it is not biologically but rather faith based. He relativises the scope, power, and authority of commands, and it remains for Gushee, I believe, to reflect on how this impacts his reliance on commands as an ethical focus for disciples of Jesus in particular, and humanity in general.

Personhood and Personality

Furthermore, I would add a third question: Is there a corresponding act of creation that provides a more *existential* or *ontological* basis for the image of God and the resulting sacredness human beings might enjoy? How does Gushee's understanding of the sacredness of life as a moral status declared by God relate to the *imago Dei*? I am not clear as to exactly what the *imago Dei* means in Gushee's argument. He admits that 'theologians have often disagreed about the precise meaning of the *imago Dei*'.³¹ In what way are humans made in the very image of God? Gushee provides a Christo-centric answer:

³⁰ Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise*, pp. 50–51. I am indebted to Wyschogrod's editor Soulen for his reference to Levinas in his introduction, which alerted me to the link between Levinas and Wyschogrod (see pp. 3–4).

³¹ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 111.

The concept of the image of God takes on profound new possibilities when it is reframed as the *imago Christi*, the image of Christ. Christ embodied what it means to be fully human. We are invited to participate in his life and come into conformity with it (Rom 12:1-2). Here sacredness becomes *moral sanctity*, or *holiness*, as a human life begins to show forth the moral goodness that God intended for all of us.³²

But what about God’s children who do not choose the way of Jesus Christ? Gushee states, “To take the God-given sacredness of human life seriously is to learn to see each human being as a kind of royalty, a person of high dignity and ineffable worth. It demands a spirit of reverence toward all persons, respecting each in the uniqueness of their own personality and life story.”³³ This last phrase — ‘uniqueness of their own personality and life story’ — is most interesting and not to be overlooked. Does Gushee understand ‘personality’ in a psychological sense (as in the psychological characteristics of a person), or in a spiritual sense (referring to the *imago Dei*, human soul, or spirit)?³⁴

‘Personality’ in relation to *imago Dei* is used once by Gushee in his earlier work, *The Sacredness of Human Life*. It is Gushee’s aim to affirm ‘the sacred worth of each and every human person’.³⁵ He approvingly quotes Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who ties the ethical understanding of the sacredness of the person to social justice:

The person is the clearest reflection of the presence of God among us. To lay violent hands on the person is to come as close as we can to laying violent hands on God. To diminish the human person is to come as close as we can to diminishing God [...] From our recognition of the worth of all people under God flow the responsibilities of a social morality.³⁶

Gushee then offers a set of questions designed to further explore this line of reasoning which reintroduces ‘personality’ into the discussion:

(Puzzle #2) Is the focus of ‘the sacredness of human life’ on the human individual, the human community, or the human species? Or is it perhaps even some aspect of the individual, such as the human body, the human spirit, or even the human

³² Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 113.

³³ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 115.

³⁴ In chapter 7 of *Introducing Christian Ethics*, Gushee refers to ‘inherent personality traits’ in the context of a child’s maturation; see p. 80.

³⁵ Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life*, p. 2; see also pp. 5, 9, 92, 229.

³⁶ Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life*, pp. 16, 31.

‘personality’ or human ‘potential’? Might there ever be conflicts of interest and vision between those seeking to defend human worth and well-being at these various levels?³⁷

Gushee’s puzzle does not present a precise definition of personality, and it may be simply a synonym for person or personhood, the two terms used extensively throughout both the original *Kingdom Ethics* and especially in *The Sacredness of Human Life*. In the former, Gushee embraced a ‘full-personhood’ view of human beings, from conception.³⁸ In the latter, person and personhood may be interpreted to incorporate both ontological and status meanings.³⁹

In contemporary culture, the very definition of personhood has been at issue in American courts. The overturning of *Roe versus Wade* in the recent *Dobbs versus Jackson Women’s Health Organization* by the United States Supreme Court⁴⁰ provided an occasion for conservative legal scholar Erika Bachiochi to inquire, ‘What makes a Fetus a Person?’ in a piece for the *New York Times*. Her main concern is whether there is an ‘equivalence between a *human being* and a *human person*’.⁴¹ The goal of establishing that a foetus enjoys full personhood is a significant feature of the anti-abortion, pro-life movement.⁴² Although this present article does not provide a critique of Gushee’s chapter on abortion, it is worth noting that he omits a discussion of the personhood of the foetus in this most recent argument, preferring instead to focus on technology (birth control), patriarchy, and the rights of women in modern culture.⁴³ The difference of approach to abortion as a moral

³⁷ Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life*, pp. 34, 460.

³⁸ Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, pp. 222–24.

³⁹ See, for example, Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life*, pp. 219, 222, 224, 229.

⁴⁰ For the case that led to the decision of the Supreme Court in the US to overturn the constitutional right to abortion won in the *Roe versus Wade* case in 1973, see Supreme Court of the United States, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, No. 19-1392. Decided June 24, 2022, <https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf> [accessed 10 October 2022].

⁴¹ Erika Bachiochi, ‘What Makes a Fetus a Person?’, *New York Times*, 2 June 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/01/opinion/fetal-personhood-constitution.html>> [accessed 22 August 2022], Section A, p. 23.

⁴² ‘Is the Fetus a Person? An Anti-Abortion Strategy Says Yes’, *New York Times*, 22 August 2002, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/21/us/abortion-anti-fetus-person.html>> [accessed 22 August 2022], Section A, 1.

⁴³ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, chapter 17, pp. 213–24.

challenge for Christians represents an important dividing line between evangelical and post-evangelical ethics.

Another interesting case has received less public exposure. The New York State Court of Appeals ruled in June 2022 that an elephant at the Bronx Zoo could not ‘be considered a person who was being confined illegally’.⁴⁴ Legal rights accorded to humans do not necessarily apply to animals, the court held.

In her recent book, *The Person in Psychology and Christianity*, developmental psychologist Marjorie Lindner Gunnoe offers summaries of five paradigms or descriptions of ‘personhood’,⁴⁵ and scrutinises them according to the biblical worldview she outlines. The theories of development (Erikson’s lifespan, Bowlby’s attachment theory, Skinner’s behaviourism, Bandura’s social cognitive model, and evolutionary psychology) are not necessarily religious, but are relevant to the concerns Gushee raises in the ethical sphere. Likewise, Gunnoe’s spiritual perspective expresses itself by paying homage to the importance of *imago Dei*, which leads her to present ‘a working model of personhood’ based on human essence, purpose, moral-ethical tendencies, agency, and accountability.⁴⁶ There would be profit in creating a conversation space between Gushee’s ethical position and Gunnoe’s psychological perspective on personhood.

A Case in Point: The Holocaust

As a Jewish disciple of Jesus, I deeply appreciate David Gushee’s concern for the Jewish people, as expressed in his research on Christian rescuers during the Holocaust. As a Christian ethicist, he reveals that his goal is to ‘challenge’ readers to encourage ‘moral change through encounter’ with the stories of Christians who assisted Jewish people during the Holocaust, to ‘help Christians conduct themselves better

⁴⁴ ‘Happy the elephant is not a person, a court rules’, NPR/WHYY, 14 June 2022, <<https://www.npr.org/2022/06/14/1105031075/bronx-zoo-elephant-not-person-court-rules>> [accessed 22 August 2022].

⁴⁵ Marjorie Lindner Gunnoe, *The Person in Psychology and Christianity: A Faith-Based critique of Five Theories of Social Development* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2022), pp. 4–5.

⁴⁶ Gunnoe, *The Person in Psychology and Christianity*, pp. 3–39.

today and in the future than most of our forebears did during that terrible European tragedy'.⁴⁷

In the first half of the twentieth century, Baptists and other Christians regularly and with deep conviction employed *personality* as a key term to affirm the sacred worth of all human beings because they were created in the image of God, as manifested in their having a soul or spirit that was intended to relate to God. Since all human beings possessed this spiritual core of being, freedom of conscience and religion, human rights and dignity, and social justice were outstanding among the ethical imperatives that were to guide Christians and be expressed in the socio-political order. This understanding of *personality* was shared by both evangelical and modernists/liberals, and constituted the major ethical weapon employed by Christians against the rise of totalitarianism (in both its communistic and fascist forms) and the antisemitic agenda of Hitler and German Nazism.⁴⁸

Embedded within the Holocaust-era narratives are manifold stories of how Baptists (and evangelicals) responded to the challenges posed by Nazi antisemitism and their attempt to exterminate the Jewish people of Europe.⁴⁹ Gushee's work ably explores why individual Christians became rescuers, even at the risk of their own lives.⁵⁰ My purpose here is to briefly note that the ethical application of the conviction of *personality* played a significant role in how Baptists (and others) responded to Hitler, antisemitism, and the persecution of the Jewish people. Due to space considerations, representative examples will have to suffice.

At its World Congress in Berlin in 1934, the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) passed an historic and prophetic resolution on racialism.⁵¹ Under the watchful eyes of the Nazi authorities, Baptists went beyond the

⁴⁷ David P. Gushee, *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust: A Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1994), p. xiii. See also Gushee and Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics*, pp. 72, 77.

⁴⁸ See Lee B. Spitzer, *Baptists, Jews, and the Holocaust: The Hand of Sincere Friendship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2017), for an exploration of this thesis for Northern, Southern, and National Baptists in America, as well as for the Baptist World Alliance.

⁴⁹ I share several of these stories in my new book, *Sympathy, Solidarity, and Silence: Three European Baptist Responses to the Holocaust* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2022).

⁵⁰ See Gushee, *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, pp. 91–148.

⁵¹ See Spitzer, *Baptists, Jews, and the Holocaust*, pp. 400–08.

Barmen Declaration in condemning racial discrimination against the Jews, as well as Blacks and Asians. It was the only international public protest against Nazi antisemitism lodged in Germany during the Nazi period, and its ethical foundation rested on the universality of ‘human personality’ — that people of all races and nations equally possessed personality, were of infinite worth to the Creator God, and thus were deserving of life and political justice. It declared,

This Congress representing the world-wide, inter-racial fellowship of Baptists, rejoices to know that despite all differences of race, there is in Christ an all-embracing unity, so that in Him it can be claimed with deepest truth there is ‘neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all in all.’

This Congress deplotes and condemns as a violation of the law of God the Heavenly Father, all racial animosity, and every form of oppression or unfair discrimination toward the Jews, toward coloured people, or toward subject races in any part of the world.

This Congress urges the promotion of Christian teaching concerning respect for human personality regardless of race, and as the surest means of advancing the true brotherhood of all people, urges the active propagation of the Gospel of Christ throughout the World.⁵²

Personality was such a common term that it was usually employed without a clarifying definition, but my research indicates it was normatively understood as an ontological assertion, often serving as a substitute for soul or spirit. In a philosophical argument, F. Townley Lord affirms that the Christian understanding of personality comes from Hebraic thought, which sees a vital connection between soul and body, and so Baptists ‘correctly apprehend the main teaching of the New Testament when we regard the personality of man as a unity of soul-body. The whole man is to be consecrated to the service of God.’⁵³

John Cournos was a Jewish writer who endeavoured to convince Jews to ally with Christians against Hitlerism. In 1938, he asserted, ‘Hitler’s rejection of Christ can therefore be easily understood: Christ,

⁵² Baptist World Alliance World Congress Resolution 1934.7 ‘Racialism’, in *Fifth Baptist World Congress: Berlin, August 4–10, 1934*, ed. by J. H. Rushbrooke (London: Baptist World Alliance, 1934), p. 17.

⁵³ F. Townley Lord, ‘The Achievement of Personality in a Material World’, *Baptist Quarterly* 8, no. 5 (1937), 227–35 (p. 231). See also F. Townley Lord, ‘Some Modern Views of the Soul’, *Baptist Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1930), 66–73.

whose appeal is to personality and for the creation of personality, is the only stumbling-block in the way of his acquisition of totalitarian power.⁵⁴ For Cournos, personality was not a status, but rather an existential entity with attributes that could mature through time. Likewise, it was common for the maturation of personality to be expressed by Baptists of the era in Christian education or in spiritual formation terms.

For Baptists during the mid-twentieth century, personality called forth ethical responsibility, especially in regards to racism. At the Seventh Baptist World Congress in Copenhagen in 1947, the BWA condemned the Holocaust in specific terms,⁵⁵ and also applied its understanding of personality to race relations in general. The Congress's second resolution made the following declaration:

Race relations is one of the perplexing problems which the Christian Church must face in the world today. There are many conditions and attitudes which strain and impair human relations and cause great concern; but we cannot solve the problem unless we face it forthrightly as Christians. We have tried to ignore, evade, and attempt by platitudes to solve this most grave problem. It cannot be solved in this way. We must insist in human relations and intercourse of all people that the Christian approach be made in the matter of race relations. Appreciation for the ideals, aspirations, and personalities of all races must be insisted upon by Christians.⁵⁶

Howard Thurman and Personality

One of the gifts I have received from reading David Gushee's newest work is his recommendation of Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Writing in 1949, just after the Holocaust had ended, Thurman often spoke of personality in a manner consistent with other twentieth-century Black Baptist clergy; they elucidated an understanding of personality that was informed by the experience of slavery and racial oppression.

⁵⁴ John Cournos, *An Open Letter to Jews and Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 11.

⁵⁵ BWA World Congress Resolution 1947.3 'Resolution concerning the Jews', in *Seventh Baptist World Congress, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 29–August 3, 1947*, ed. by Walter O. Lewis (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1948), p. 99.

⁵⁶ BWA World Congress Resolution 1947.2 'Resolution on Race Relations', in *Seventh Baptist World Congress*, ed. by Lewis, pp. 98–99.

For Thurman, ‘personal worth’ and ‘personal dignity’ are grounded in ‘one’s own integrity of personality’⁵⁷ as a child of God in response to unjust suffering. Dignity is gained when humans treat one another as equals, but when the strong oppress the weak, there can be no ‘healing and reinforcement of personality’.⁵⁸ Thurman is well aware that personality (of an individual or a group of people) can be manipulated by hatred, causing ‘something radical to happen to their personality and their over-all outlook to render them more effective tools of destruction’.⁵⁹ Hatred brings ‘death to the spirit and disintegration of ethical and moral values’, and the ‘urgent needs of the personality for creative expression are starved to death’.⁶⁰ In contrast, Thurman notes that when we see one another, across racial divides, as equals, ‘the attitude of respect for personality’⁶¹ (i.e. the personality possessed by each other) may serve as a technique to bring about reconciliation and possibly even friendship.

Accordingly, Thurman asserts that the ‘attitude of respect for personality presupposes that all the individuals are within what may be called the ethical field’.⁶² This corresponds to Jesus’s attitude toward all people, based on his fundamental ‘reverence for personality’.⁶³ In Jesus, we encounter ‘a personality whose story is available and whose reach extends far’⁶⁴ and who serves as the guide humanity needs to negotiate all the ethical challenges of this life.

Echoing Thurman, during both his previous evangelical and current post-evangelical vantage points, David Gushee’s kingdom-centred ethical outlook has consistently encouraged disciples of Jesus Christ to appreciate the sacredness of life and its impact on justice issues, such as the Holocaust and racism. Ethical thinkers from both movements owe him a debt of gratitude for honestly and clearly raising issues and concerns, even when we may disagree on the applications or

⁵⁷ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 40–41, 43.

⁵⁸ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, pp. 63, 66–67.

⁵⁹ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, pp. 71–73.

⁶⁰ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 77.

⁶¹ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 91.

⁶² Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 92.

⁶³ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, pp. 94–96.

⁶⁴ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 101.

conclusions he draws from the ethical controversies he explores. As Gushee states, ‘It is far past time for Christians to care as much about justice as did Jesus, the prophets, and Jewish Law — and many of our most civic-minded neighbors, who do not call on the name of Jesus but do fight hard for justice.’