

The Moral Vision of Proverbs

Andrew E. Steinmann

**19th Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology
Concordia Theological Seminary
Fort Wayne, Indiana
January 21, 2004**

Of all of the books of Scripture, Proverbs more than any other is viewed as a book of practical advice for making life's decisions within a moral and ethical framework that is acceptable to God. It is not unusual for Christians to turn to it for advice on particular matters, appropriating what is seen as a particularly relevant verse to speak to a pressing moral, ethical or spiritual challenge.

Because of this emphasis on making the proverbs immediately and imminently relevant in the lives of Christians, the book itself is often viewed as simply a book of Law—primarily or exclusively used in its Third Use, but Law nonetheless. This unfortunate view of Proverbs leads to an atomization of the text of this book into small snippets of aphorisms unconnected to their scriptural context and devoid of any great thematic or theological unity.

This shredding of the fabric of Proverbs is less than helpful in understanding the dynamic advice of this book and its greater vision that employs both Law and Gospel to lead God's people to true wisdom.

Law and Gospel in Proverbs¹

God's Law is the subject of much of Proverbs. For this reason, Proverbs is often seen as a book with little or no Gospel. It is true that Proverbs has few passages that are nothing but Gospel, but it is not true that Proverbs is without the Gospel. In fact, all of Proverbs presupposes

¹ This section is excerpted from Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, and is property of Concordia Publishing House. It is used here by permission of CPH.

the Gospel. This can be seen by its use of the Law. Of the three uses of the Law,² the first and third uses predominate. The predominance of these two uses of the Law match Proverbs' view of humans as wise or foolish, righteous or wicked. Fools can be restrained from their sinful ways only through the first use of the Law. The Law guides righteous people. This application is its third use. The second use of the Law is seldom explicitly employed in Proverbs. (Though it is always present since *lex semper accusat.*) This relative lack of the second use of the Law also points us to the primary intended audience of Proverbs: it is written to speak to God's people, those who have a relationship with him through his promise. In OT terms, it was intended for the instruction of young men who had been incorporated into God's people through the promise connected with their circumcision. It is not intended for the unregenerate, and therefore, does not often explicitly seek to move readers to repentance by condemning their sins. In NT terms, it speaks to the baptized people of God who have been brought into God's kingdom through this sacrament and who have been brought to repentance and faith. Thus, few passages in Proverbs speak the Law and seek to apply it in its theological use (i.e., the second use). However, since human nature is fallen and even in the regenerate people of God sin persists in this life, the law in Proverbs will always remind them of their sin and drive them to daily repentance.

The First Use of the Law

The civil use of the Law to restrain sin is especially employed to combat the foolish behavior toward which sinful human nature inclines. This is often found in threats of punishment and suffering:

² The Law's three uses are "first, that through it external discipline may be maintained against the unruly and the disobedient; second, that people may be led through it to a recognition of their sins; third, after they have been reborn...they may have a sure guide, according to which they can orient and conduct their entire life." FC Ep VI,1; *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000, p. 502.

They would not accept my advice,
and they despised all my warning.

They will eat the fruit of their way,
and their appetite will be satisfied with their own advice.

Gullible people kill themselves because of their own turning away,
and by complacency fools destroy themselves. (1:30–32)

A little sleep,
a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to lie down
and your poverty will come like a drifter
and your need like a bandit. (6:10–11)

At the death of a wicked person hope will vanish,
and confidence in strength vanishes (11:7)

The person who repays evil for good—
evil will never leave his house. (17:13)

The first use of the Law is also evident in promised benefits to those who follow the Law (SA III, 2,1):

Like the coldness of snow on a harvest day is a trustworthy messenger to one who sends him.
He revives his masters' soul. (25:13)

Without wood a fire goes out,
and without gossip a quarrel dies down. (26:20)

Some proverbs use both threat of punishment and promised benefits:

A kind man benefits himself,
but a cruel man brings trouble on himself (11:17)

A person who is greedy for ill-gotten gain troubles his own household,
but the person who hates bribes will live (15:27)

This use of the law to discourage sin and encourage civil righteousness is needed even by the regenerate people of God, since they remain in their sinful flesh as long as they are in this life.

For this reason, the proverbs contain some of the Scripture's sharpest images of the punishment that God can meet out to those who fail to keep his Law.

The Third Use of the Law

The use of the Law as a guide for the person who by faith knows God and wants to please him is found throughout Proverbs. For instance, those who have been made Yahweh's children are encouraged to keep the Third Commandment by praying to him:

Yahweh is far away from wicked people,
but he hears the prayer of righteous people. (15:29)

Often Proverbs assumes that readers are among God's people when it presents the Law's precepts:

Honor Yahweh with your wealth and the first part of your harvest. (3:9)
Do not despise Yahweh's discipline, my son,
and do not resent his warning,
because Yahweh warns the one he loves,
and is like a father who is pleased with a son. (3:11–12)

In many cases God's promises are used to encourage of his people to do good:

The person who spreads blessing will prosper,
and the person who refreshes others will be refreshed. (11:25)

Proverbs, therefore, often assumes that its readers are children of God, presupposing the Gospel has brought them into his kingdom and that they understand their adoption into the family of Yahweh. Its sayings are intended to encourage them to good works even though the sinful world may weigh heavily upon them. It seeks to provide guidance in the way of God's holy Law as they live their lives.

The Gospel in Proverbs

While Proverbs does not have a large number of well-known Gospel passages, nevertheless, it is animated by the Gospel. The forgiveness of God and the righteousness he

credits to his people form the basis for many of the proverbs that assume readers have a positive relationship with him. Most notable of the passages with much Gospel content are the three discourses of Solomon about Wisdom (1:20–33; 8:1–36; 9:1–18) as well as Solomon’s second address to his son (2:1–22). In addition, scattered throughout Proverbs are a number Gospel proverbs that point to God’s work in the lives of his people:

Whoever places his trust in his wealth will fall,

but righteous people will sprout like foliage. (11:28)

In the path of righteousness [there is] life,

and the way of that pathway is not death. (12:28)

In Proverbs sayings that apply the Law are far more frequent than sayings that bring the comfort of the Gospel. Yet the Gospel predominates in this book, because it alone brings comfort for those who have fallen short of God’s expectations. It empowers them to live as God’s forgiven and reconciled people and, therefore, grow in wisdom and righteous living.

Wisdom in Proverbs³

Wisdom in the Ancient Near East

When Solomon first began to record his wisdom, he was heir to a centuries-old tradition of wisdom writings. Though scholars have pointed out that a precise definition of what constituted the genre of wisdom writings in the Ancient Near East cannot be formulated, a number of works that can be classified as wisdom literature survive from Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia. In these works we find a number of motifs that are shared by Proverbs:

1. Wisdom is divine. It is revealed by the gods (in Israel’s case, God) through authorities such as the head of the family or the king.

³ This section is excerpted from Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, and is property of Concordia Publishing House. It is used here by permission of CPH.

2. Wisdom does not address society as a whole in order to transform it (as Israel's prophets often did), but it addresses individuals, who will then have an effect on society.
3. Wisdom most often addresses practical knowledge instead of theoretical knowledge. It emphasizes what to do and how to do it and what the consequences will be. This takes precedence over the greater principles reflected in living wisely. (In Proverbs this is clearly the case, though it does contain a few passages that set the forth the principles of wisdom.)

The oldest wisdom literature in Egypt stems from the Old Kingdom (twenty-seventh through twenty-second centuries BC). Already at this early period Egyptians produced instructional literature, words of wisdom from a father to a son. This type of literature proved to have a long life, and instructional literature also survives from the First Intermediate Period (twenty-second and twenty-first centuries), the Middle Kingdom (twenty-first through sixteenth centuries), the New Kingdom (sixteenth through eleventh centuries) and even into Hellenistic rule as late as the fourth century. The parallel to the book of Proverbs is obvious, as 1—9 is exactly this type of literature, as is the Words of the Wise that begin at 22:17. Solomon probably used this form of this type of literature as a model for 1—9, and it is likely that he borrowed and adapted some sayings from Egyptian wisdom to include in the Words of the Wise. However, it would be going too far to say that Solomon's proverbs reflect Egyptian thought. Instead, while Solomon's wisdom and Egyptian wisdom have certain points of contact, especially when speaking of practical matters, the theology of Solomon's proverbs is thoroughly Israelite and demonstrates a continuity with the earlier revelation of God. In turn, later prophets reveal a familiarity with Solomon's wisdom. In addition, Clifford notes:⁴

⁴ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 18.

Taken as a whole, the instructions in Proverbs 1—9 are distinctive...they are less specific than their Egyptian and Mesopotamian prototypes. They urge readers to seek wisdom rather than to do or not do particular actions. To put it another way, Proverbs emphasizes character rather than acts.

Mesopotamian and Syrian wisdom instruction often take the form of shorter sayings, similar to the ones found in 10:1—22:16 and 25—29. These also have a long history, from early Sumerian wisdom through the sixth century Aramaic work *The Words of Ahiqar*.⁵ Scholars have noted some parallels between the short sayings of this work and certain proverbs of Solomon. However, the parallels are slight and the influence doubtful. Instead, they demonstrate that Solomon also adapted this type of wisdom for the purpose of relaying the truths revealed to him by Israel's God, Yahweh. Again, Clifford has noted the differences:⁶

...the concise saying, has been distinctively reshaped. Akkadian and Syro-Palestinian sayings were extremely diverse and included witty sayings, observations on life, jokes, wordplays, humorous or ironic maxims, and proverbs. Proverbs 10—31 is less inclusive, and more important, has made all the sayings bicolon in form. Though some earlier sayings were already in parallel lines, many of them were not. Israelite authors created a subgenre, the bicolon proverb, which attained definitive shape well before the late eighth century, when Hezekiah's clerks added their collection to an already existing one.

Wisdom As an Attribute of God

In Proverbs wisdom is first and foremost an attribute of God. All true wisdom is godly wisdom, and any wisdom that people possess is a result of his gift of wisdom. This, however, often can only be perceived by understanding that it is the assumption lying behind Proverbs' teaching on wisdom. Rarely does the book make explicit statements about God's wisdom.

⁵ *ANET*, 427–30; *ANE* 425–29.

⁶ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 18–19.

Instead, it assumes that God is all-wise and that the person who wants wisdom needs to receive it from him.

Perhaps the clearest statement on wisdom as God's possession is found at 3:19:

Yahweh founded the earth by wisdom. He established the heavens by understanding.

Wisdom here is not a human attribute, because it predates humans. Wisdom is Yahweh's to use and to grant. This is stated at 2:6:

...because Yahweh gives wisdom. From his mouth [come] knowledge and understanding.

Only when the reader can understand that wisdom is God's alone and that real human wisdom is a gift of God, do the instructions of this book begin to make sense. This explains why "the fear of Yahweh" is the source and wellspring of wisdom:

The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge. (1:7)

The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom.

The knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (9:10)

The fear of Yahweh is discipline that leads to wisdom... (15:33)

That a relationship with Yahweh leads to wisdom emphasizes that wisdom is God's.

Proverbs also emphasizes that what humans consider wisdom is not true wisdom, for it cannot stand against God and his wisdom:

Do not consider yourself wise.

Fear Yahweh, and turn away from evil. (3:7)

There is no wisdom, plan or advice [that can stand up] against Yahweh. (21:30)

Thus, essential for understanding the wisdom of Proverbs is the understanding that wisdom is God's. This is the key to understanding the Gospel in Proverbs also. Wisdom is God's great gift to his people throughout the book. Wisdom is what God does for humans. It is God's gift that enlightens humans, and, ultimately it is God as he comes to humans in his Son.

Wisdom Personified

Wisdom is more than an attribute that describes God. In Proverbs wisdom is personified as a woman who invites those who hear her to partake of God's gift of wisdom. This choice of a woman to portray wisdom is partly based on the grammatical gender of the Hebrew word חכמה. Because it is feminine, Wisdom is a woman. Yet the choice of a woman is more than simply adopting grammar as a guide. Since Prov 1—9 is addressed to Solomon's son, the woman Wisdom is intended to present an image of wisdom that is attractive to the son and that counters the attraction of the foolish world and its sinful ways. This is accomplished by contrasting the offer that Wisdom makes to the doom of those who reject her (1:20–33). It is also portrayed again in 9:1–18 where Wisdom is contrasted to another woman, Foolishness. This contrast is the final section of the opening chapters of Proverbs and is designed to leave a lasting impression on the son of the value of divine wisdom that God freely offers to all.

Another implicit contrast to personified Wisdom in 1—9 is the adulteress. Solomon pursues a strategy of commending Wisdom by a positive link between Wisdom and wife and a negative link between the adulteress and Foolishness. He uses Law to condemn the foolish son who strays from God's ways into adultery and foolishness. At the same time, he uses the Gospel in the form of Wisdom to proclaim God's benefits, bring God's favor and bestow life.

Wisdom As Christ

As the reader of Proverbs encounters the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs two passages in particular stand out and seem to go beyond a mere personification of God's divine attribute. At 3:13 Wisdom is introduced and her value is extolled. At 3:19 Wisdom is explicitly connected to God's creative acts, making Wisdom an active participant in Creation. In this passage Solomon first portrays the Second Person of the Trinity, by whom all things were made (Jn 1:3). This identification of Wisdom as the Creator serves to draw the son who listens to his father's instructions closer to Yahweh. Wisdom is valuable because Wisdom is God, who offers his

gracious blessings to the son listening to the father's word. Therefore, Wisdom in this passage is not merely personified, but is a hypostasis. That is, we are shown the unique essence of the Son who with the Father was Creator of all things and is the bestower of all good gifts through his Gospel.

The reader meets hypostasized Wisdom again in Prov 8. Wisdom is the one by whom rulers rule, who grants riches and honor, and who grants inheritances (8:12–21). Here, once again, Wisdom is connected with God's creation of all things (8:22–31). In this depiction Wisdom's eternal generation from the Father is emphasized (8:22–26). The Christian will recognize this as Solomon's description of the Second person of the Trinity. Indeed, this is the NT's understanding. Christ is clearly identified as the Wisdom of God in the NT. Paul clearly identifies Christ this way in 1 Cor 1:24,30. Furthermore, in stating that "Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Co 1:24), Paul plainly shows that he has Proverbs 8 in mind (see 8:14; Job 12:13).⁷ Yet, Paul's references to Christ as God's Wisdom do not consist only of these two verses in 1 Corinthians. At Col 2:2–3 he states "...so that they may know the mystery of God, [that is] Christ, in whom are hidden all of the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God" (see also 1 Cor 2:7–8). Paul evidently has in mind Prov 8:9–10, 21. In addition, Paul is not

⁷ Garrett's argument that Paul did not have Prov 8 in mind because he was addressing the scandal of the cross misses the point. The scandal of the cross is precisely that the eternal God, the Wisdom who existed before time, through whom the world was created, and by whose power it is governed, humbled himself to die on the cross for sinful humanity. This scandal is what makes God's foolishness wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness stronger than human strength (1 Co 1:25). Nor is the argument of Fee that Paul was "demythologizing" the Corinthians' concept of wisdom and not actually connecting Wisdom with Christ convincing (Fee, "Wisdom Christology in Paul," 255–27). He maintains that Paul was only anchoring Christ in history by calling him "God's Wisdom." However, that is the point: Christ is the Wisdom that was pre-existent and was active at the beginning of history. He is anchored in history from its very beginning; he is the goal of history; he entered history in his incarnation.

the only one in the NT to point to Christ as Wisdom. At Mt 12:42 (and its parallel Lk 11:31) Jesus said that the Queen of Sheba would judge his generation because she came to hear Solomon's wisdom, but they did not understand that one greater than Solomon was there among them. The reference to one greater than Solomon is intended to point to Wisdom that is greater than Solomon's wisdom. Wisdom in Proverbs 1—9, and especially Proverbs 8, is, by Solomon's own admission, greater than he. It is by Wisdom that he reigned. In addition, at Luke 11:49 Jesus says, "The Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, and they will kill some of them and persecute others.'" This Wisdom of God is Jesus himself, who also said "Therefore, I am sending you prophets, wise men and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify and others you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from city to city..." (Mt 23:34). Finally, Jesus once again identified himself as Wisdom when he was accused of being a drunk and glutton (Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34–35).

Therefore, in Proverbs the concept of wisdom is completely theocentric and Christocentric. Without this understanding of wisdom one cannot fully understand the role of the Gospel throughout Proverbs. Wisdom is to be understood as God's gift to his people. By it they are able to follow his Law and obey his commands. The Gospel grants the power to implement the agenda for one's life that is set forth in this book. That agenda depends solely on God's love in Christ that empowers and motivates his people to obtain wisdom and live wisely.

The Moral Vision of Proverbs: General Principles

With this understanding of wisdom we can now turn to Proverbs to see its moral vision in the light of the Gospel. The morality this book begins with God's love and compassion for fallen humans. The people of God understand this love and compassion of their Creator and Redeemer and come to know that true wisdom guides them to reflect that love and compassion in their lives of service to God and their neighbor.

Throughout Proverbs one finds this reflection of God's concern for humans in the wise behavior of God's people.

A righteous person knows the needs of his livestock,

but the compassion of wicked people is cruelty. (12:10)

The person who hates his neighbor sins,

but the one who is kind to oppressed people—he is blessed. (14:21)

The person who oppresses the poor insults his Maker,

but the person who is kind to the needy honors him.(14:31)

Doing righteousness and justice is more acceptable to Yahweh than a sacrifice. (21:3)

She opens the palm of her hand to the oppressed,

and stretches out her hands to the needy. (31:20)

This reflection of God's love through the keeping of this Law is not simply expressed by individual acts of kindness, but by a life that characterized as a reflection of the Gospel. This joining of the Gospel to the third use of the Law is most evident in Proverb's most common metaphor.

The Metaphor of the Path in Solomon's Wisdom⁸

Perhaps the most common metaphor employed in Proverbs is the metaphor of the path. This metaphor uses a path or road to describe the conduct of one's life. The nouns for "way, path, road" occur in 82 of Proverbs' 915 verses (8.9%). Nearly all of the occurrences of these words are employed in this metaphor.⁹ The nouns and their distribution in Proverbs are:

⁸ This section is excerpted from Andrew E. Steinmann, *Proverbs*, and is property of Concordia Publishing House. It is used here by permission of CPH.

⁹ Only a few occurrences, such as 7:8,19; 17:23, could arguably be excluded since they do not directly use these words to describe the conduct of one's life.

Occurrences:				
Noun	Translation	Proverbs	OT	% in Proverbs
אֶרֶץ	path, course	19	62	31%
דֶּרֶךְ	way, road, street, trip	75	706	11%
מִסְלָה	highway	1	27	3%
מַעְגַּל	pathway	7	16	44%
נְתִיבָה	path, pathway, road	6	21	29%

All of these nouns occur more often in Proverbs than in the OT as a whole.¹⁰ The most common noun used in the metaphor of the path, דֶּרֶךְ, is more frequently used in Proverbs than any other book of the OT.¹¹ Clearly, the metaphor of the path is an important figure of speech in Proverbs. This is especially true of the Solomonic sections of the book. The five nouns used in the metaphor are used in only five verses outside the sections attributed to Solomon (22:25; 23:19, 26; 30:19 (4 times), 30:20; 31:3), but in 78 verses in the sections attributed to Solomon.¹² Therefore, this metaphor is especially important to Solomon's wisdom, and most prominent in

¹⁰ Proverbs contains 6967 Hebrew words (separately written vocables). The OT contains 308,678 Hebrew words. Thus, Proverbs is 2.25% of the OT by word count. The one occurrence of מִסְלָה is not statistically significant.

¹¹ דֶּרֶךְ is used 107 times in Ezekiel, the only book where it is used more often than in Proverbs. However, since Ezekiel (18912 words) is a much longer book than Proverbs (6967 words), דֶּרֶךְ is used with almost twice the frequency in Proverbs (1.08% of all words) than in Ezekiel (0.57% of all words).

¹² These five nouns are used eight times in the non-Solomonic sections of Proverbs or in 0.67% of the 1183 words in those sections. These same nouns are used 100 times in the portions of the book attributed to Solomon or in 1.73% of the 5784 words in these sections.

Proverbs 1:1—22:16, the first two Solomonic portions of Proverbs.¹³ By means of this metaphor Solomon was able to balance Law and Gospel in his sayings.

When treating the Law, Solomon shows the negative implications of sinful paths. This path is characterized as evil (2:12; 8:13), crooked, devious and wandering (2:15; 5:6; 10:9; 14:2), dark (2:13; 4:19), leading to death and Sheol (2:18; 7:27; 14:12; 16:25), disgusting to Yahweh (15:9), and full of thorns and snares (15:19; 22:5). Those who frequent these paths are described as wicked and evil (4:14, 19; 12:26; 15:9), arrogant (8:13), crooked (2:15), greedy (1:19), lazy (15:19), stupid (19:3), treacherous (13:15), violent (3:31; 16:29), stubborn fools (12:15), those who speak perverse things (2:12; 8:19), those who despise God (14:2), and those who abandon upright paths (2:13). This use of the metaphor of the path allows Solomon to use the Law as a deterrent to sin, as when he speaks of the evil path as harmful, causing people to stumble (4:19), presenting danger (15:19; 22:5) or leading them to death (1:19; 2:18; 7:27; 16:25; 21:16). This also allows Solomon to use the Law to help others recognize their sin, subtly depicting one's own sinful urges. Thus, 3:31 reminds readers of their own envy when it admonishes:

Do not envy a violent person, and do not choose any of his ways.

And 10:9 moves those who consider it to look at their own secret sins when it says:

Whoever walks with integrity walks securely, but whoever is crooked in his ways will be found out.

In addition, the adulteress is characterized as being on the evil path in 5:6:

She does not consider the path of life. Her pathways wander. She doesn't realize it.

Those who think about these statements are led to consider times when they were like the adulteress. They, too, recall times when they did not consider the path of life when they acted out of their sinful impulses. They also wandered and did not realize it at the time. In this way the

¹³ The word דרך is used five times in 25—29 and the other nouns are not used at all. Unlike Solomon himself, the Hezekian editors of this section of Solomon's proverbs did not often include proverbs that used the metaphor of the way.

warning about the adulteress is more than a warning about breaking the Sixth Commandment, but is also a warning about the insidious nature of sin and the foolishness that the adulteress represents.

At times this accusing feature of the Law is made explicit by contrasting sinful behavior to a better way or to God's way:

Go to the ant, lazybones. Observe its ways and become wise. (6:6)

Whoever walks with integrity walks securely, but whoever is crooked in his ways will be found out (10:9)

The way of a wicked person is a disgusting thing to Yahweh, but he loves those who pursue righteousness. (15:9)

A person considers his way pure, but Yahweh weighs motives. (16:2)

There is a way that appears to be correct to a person, but its end is the way of death. (16:25)

Occasionally the metaphor of the path is used to depict the Law as a guide for those whom God grants life in the Gospel:

Then you will understand righteousness, justice and uprightness: every good pathway. (2:9)

...because command is a lamp, and teaching is a light, and warnings coming from discipline are a road of life. (6:23)

In contrast to the evil path, the righteous path of the Gospel does not originate from human impulses, but belongs to God, since his way is from eternity past (8:22; 10:29). The ability to walk on this path is a gift from God (3:6; 10:29). This path is the path of Christ, the Wisdom of God (3:17; 8:20). This godly path is characterized as straight and level (3:6; 4:26; 9:15; 11:5), upright (4:11), having justice (2:8), possessing and leading to life (2:19; 5:6; 6:23; 10:17; 12:28; 15:24), having righteousness (8:20; 12:28; 16:31), bringing peace (3:17), creating understanding (9:6), enabling wise judgment (21:16) and having wisdom (4:11). Since this path originates from God and is purely a gift of God, it is not a product of the human will (16:9; 20:24). Note the

picturesque way in which the path of righteous people is depicted as coming to them without their aid and independent of their will, just like the rising of the sun:

But the path of righteous people is like the coming of the light of dawn and [like] light until day is established. (4:18)

However, humans can exercise the option to leave this path and are urged not to abandon it (2:13, 20; 10:17; 15:10).

Those who are on the godly path are accounted righteous (2:20; 4:18; 12:26), upright (14:2; 15:19; 16:17; 21:29) or good (2:20). Since they are empowered by the Gospel, they practice discipline (10:17), are given insight (15:24), have integrity (11:5, 20; 13:6), are prudent (14:8), please God (16:7), and make their paths level (4:26).

Solomon often uses the metaphor of the path as a means to make the promises of the Gospel (both temporal and eternal) more vivid:

[Yahweh] is a shield for those who walk in integrity to protect the paths of justice. He guards the ways of his godly ones. (2:7–8)

Then you will go safely on your way, and you will not stub your toe. (3:23)

The way of Yahweh is a fortress for the person of integrity... (10:29)

In the path of righteousness [there is] life, and the way of that pathway is not death. (12:28)

Righteousness guards a person of integrity's way... (13:6)

A path of life leads upward for those with insight, so that he may turn away from Sheol below. (15:24)

[When] a man's ways are pleasing things to Yahweh, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. (16:7)

Gray hair is a beautiful crown. It is found in the way of righteousness. (16:31)

Other times the metaphor of the path is used as the invitation of the Gospel to repentance, faith and trust:

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. (3:6)

Make level pathways for your feet, and all your ways will be secure. (4:26)

Abandon gullibility, and live. Travel the road to understanding (9:6)

Thus, the metaphor of the path is a constant and vivid figure of speech throughout Solomon's proverbs. It is Solomon's way of applying both Law and Gospel to bring others to the Wisdom of God: Christ, who leads them on the path of righteousness (Ps 23:3).

The Integrity of Proverb's Moral Vision

Thus, Proverb's moral vision is one animated and energized by the Gospel. It is not simply moralistic, but, instead, it is thoroughly evangelical. It sees the truly wise person living under the Gospel, daily repenting of sin and relying on God's grace. In turn, this vision leads the person of God to good works that imitate the one who created and redeemed all humans.

The vision of morality in this book is far different from the popular view of Proverbs as a handbook of individual ethical sayings strung together, as if they formed a string of pearls united only by the slender thread of their arrangement in the text in a serial, but random order. Instead, the sayings in Proverbs are part of a larger fabric whose warp and woof is the dynamic of Law and Gospel. It is this dynamic which leads the wise person to the moral guidance of the book as integrated into God's entire revelation of himself. While this moral guidance is Law, and distinct from the Gospel, it nevertheless cannot be separated from the Gospel. Such separation of Law from Gospel when reading Proverbs risks deforming the wisdom of this book into mere moralizing. Instead, a correct and holistic reading of Proverbs provides a rich tapestry that reveals to the child of God what true life under the Gospel can be, and how the Law, in its third use is the delight of God's people who have the privilege of serving him through moral living that reflects both God's love and his righteousness simultaneously.

The Moral Vision of Proverbs: Specific Issues

Before concluding our look at Proverb's moral vision for God's people, let us examine a few issues in particular. Proverbs does not clearly address many moral issues in their

contemporary forms. However, as we will see, it is possible to discern the principles that lie behind many of the sayings of this book and then apply them to issues ranging from abortion to social justice as a guide for Christian responses to these issues.

Life Issues

Proverbs contains a large number of passages that discuss human life and its value. The majority of these are aimed at impressing upon the reader the value of one's own life, both temporal and eternal, as a gift from God to be treasured and guarded (e.g., 10:27; 12:28; 13:3).

However there are a good number of passages that speak about others' life. For instance, the wise person can bring others life through sharing his God-given wisdom by instruction, helpful words or actions.

The fruit of a righteous person is a tree of life,
and one who harvests souls is wise. (11:30)

She brings him good and not evil all the days of her life. (31:12)

(See also 10:11, 17; 15:4; 18:21). Some of these contrast this behavior of the wise with that of the ungodly.

The mouth of a righteous person is a fountain of life,
but the mouth of wicked people covers violence. (10:11)

A tongue that brings healing is a tree of life,
but a crooked one produces a shattered spirit. (15:4)

Clearly, these proverbs commend actions that bring life and its benefits to others and condemn those who harm others. Moreover, Proverbs twice warns against benefiting oneself at the expense of an innocent person. One of these warnings explicitly connects God's condemnation of the person who puts his own interests ahead of his neighbor.

Six things Yahweh hates,
and seven are disgusting things to him:
an arrogant pair eyes,

a lying tongue,
a pair of hands that sheds innocent blood,
 a heart devising wicked plans
 a pair of feet quickly rushing to do evil,
 a false witness who breathes lies,
 a person who spreads conflict among brothers. (6:16–19)

The other is a warning from Solomon to his son not to get caught up with those who plot the death of someone else for their own profit.

My son, if sinners entice you, do not go along [with them].

If they say, “Come with us,”

Let’s ambush them to [shed their] blood.

Let’s hide [to ambush] an unsuspecting person just for fun.

We’ll swallow them alive like Sheol does,

like those in good health who go down to the Pit.

We’ll find all kinds of valuable things.

We’ll fill our homes with stolen goods.

Join us.

We’ll divide the wealth equally. (1:10–14)

The principle is clear: God expects his people not to take the life of another, especially a person who is innocent. Moreover, the taking of a life to enrich one’s own existence is a heinous offense to the Creator. But more importantly, these principles’ application reflect the Gospel, since God himself put the lives of not-so-innocent humans above the life of his only Son. Far from elevating himself at the expense of others’ lives, the Son of God gave up his life to elevate fallen and sinful humans by winning for them eternal life.

Certainly, this principle condemns the modern practice of abortion on demand, a practice that enables many to improve their own perceived quality of life at the expense of an innocent unborn child. It also calls into question the motives of those who advocate euthanasia or practice

it. As even many secular ethicists have noted, others may stand to gain from the death of a euthanized person, from physicians who could profit for their services in assisting in the procedure, to the heirs of the deceased's estate, and perhaps even the loved ones of the candidate for euthanasia who may seek not only to relieve the pain of their relative or friend, but also to relieve themselves as much of the pain of watching the decline or suffering of someone close to them.

While Proverbs cannot be used as a guide to answer all of the questions raised concerning life issues such as abortion or euthanasia, it does give us grounds to pause, think, and carefully consider all of the dimensions these life issues from the viewpoint of the redeemed people of God who seek to reflect his love and compassion toward even the least of his creatures.

Social Justice

Social justice issues confront Christians as well as non-Christians in ways unimagined or unheard of only a few years ago. Do American or European agricultural subsidies serve to impoverish the peoples of many Third World countries? Does the search by globalized corporations for the cheapest labor pool constitute a betrayal of workers in developed countries who helped those very corporations achieve their success while also taking advantage of the poorest of the world's poor people? Are the spiraling salaries for top corporate executives rapacious and, therefore, immoral, since they enrich a few powerful employees while ignoring the payment of just wages for most workers? Is the American criminal justice system biased against the poor, but easily manipulated by those with the financial resources to hire the best attorneys? Is capital punishment administered fairly and justly, or is there too great of a potential that an innocent person could be executed? These questions are just a few that confront us in the media, and should rightly be troubling questions for Christian citizens of democracies who need to cast their votes wisely for their leaders and who should remonstrate with their governments on behalf of those who are powerless and oppressed.

I do not pretend that I have answers, simple or complex, to these questions, or that Proverbs will definitively answer them for us. However, Proverbs once again provides us with some principles to apply when analyzing these questions. Concern for the weak and powerless in this world is a constant and important theme in Proverbs. Consider these passages.

The person who oppresses the poor to enrich himself
or the person who gives to the rich: surely both end up broke. (22:16)

Do not rob a poor person because he is poor,
and do not crush an oppressed person in the [city] gate,
because Yahweh will defend their cause
and deprive those who deprive them of life. (22:22–23)

A poor man who oppresses needy people is like a driving rain that leaves no food. (28:3)

[Note that poverty is no excuse for oppressing others any more than affluence or power are!]

A righteous person knows the just cause of the poor.

A wicked person does not possess [this] knowledge. (29:7)

A king who judges poor people with truth establishes his throne permanently. (29:14)

Yahweh tears down the house of evil people,
but he protects a widow's property. (15:25)

Do not move an ancient boundary marker,
and do not enter the field of orphans,
because their protector is strong.

He will defend their cause against you. (23:10–11)

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all those who are without a defense.

Speak out, judge fairly,
and defend the oppressed and needy. (31:8–9)

She opens the palm of her hand to the oppressed,
and stretches out her hands to the needy. (31:20)

We could add many other verses in Proverbs to these.¹⁴ I do not wish to imply that Proverbs here favors the agenda of the political left or the political right in the matter of social justice. Such secular political categories flow from primarily secular motives that have nothing to do with the Gospel and oftentimes display little respect for God's Law. The concerns of Christians for social justice and similar issues are not tied to any secular political view. Instead, we understand our mission to be one of spreading the Gospel and reflecting the Gospel in our lives as individuals, as the church and as citizens of governments whose authority is established by God. Christian principles concerning compassion toward the impoverished, downtrodden, disenfranchised and powerless flow not from a political mindset but from the Gospel. When we were poor, Christ became poor for our sake, so that we might share in his riches. When we were powerless in the face of sin, death and Satan, he used his might to deliver us from their clutches. Proverbs urges us to do the same for those who are poor and powerless in this world so that we reflect the love of Christ in what we do as well as what we say.

I do not pretend that Proverbs offers us ready, quick and simple answers to the life issues or social justice issues I raised earlier. Far from it. Nevertheless, Proverbs does remind us that as Christians we dare not ignore such issues or be indifferent to them, for God's Law demands that we love our neighbor and provide for his worldly needs, and the Gospel shows us that very type of love in the actions of God toward us in Christ. The broad view of Christian history demonstrates that our predecessors in the faith took such issues seriously and over the centuries found many ways to respond to them from the founding of hospitals to the abolition of slavery. We can do no less, and the moral vision of Proverbs raises our eyes to see the path so that we might follow in the footsteps of the saints who have gone before us.

¹⁴ Including 13:24; 14:21,31; 16:19; 17:5; 19:17; 21:13; 22:2, 9, 28; 28:27; 30:14.