

The Flow of Life and Its Disruption¹

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John W. Kleinig

1 Tim 6:6-19 St. Paul speaks about the danger of loving and pursuing wealth. In 6:13 he mentions “God who gives life to all things.” But he does not, actually, say that God gives life. At least not in the original Greek! Instead, he uses a rare verb to say that he ‘generates’ life. God alone is the generator of life. He is the living God.² We do not generate the life that we have. God generates it for us and for all living creatures. And that not once at the beginning of the world or at the moment of our conception, but continuously!³ We human beings and all living creatures constantly receive life from him. Moment by moment, day by day, life flows from him to us, like an electric current to an electric light. The moment that flow ceases we die (Ps 104:29). Without him we have no life (Acts 17:28). He is the fountain of life (Ps 36:5). As our creator he keeps giving us life so that we can remain alive.

Take a branch from a tree! It remains alive only as long as it is attached to the tree. It dies if it is cut off from the tree. Through the sap in the tree, life flows around

¹ This is a reworked version of the Hermann Sasse Memorial Lecture given at the Lutherans for Life Conference in Mannum South Australia on 7 October 2002.

² See Matt 16:16; 26:63; Acts 14:15; Rom 9:26; 2 Cor 3:3; 6:16; 1 Thess 1:9; 1 Tim 3:15; 4:10; Heb 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22; Rev 7:2.

³ See Apol XXIII. 8 where Melancthon argues in this way: ‘The Word of God did not just form the nature of men to be fruitful only at the beginning of creation, but still does as long as this physical nature of ours exists. Just so this Word makes the earth fruitful (Gen 1:11), “Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding

the tree in a kind of circuit that links the rootstock and the leaves to the whole tree which in turn provide food for the tree. But no tree exists by itself apart from other trees and its habitat. A tree receives its life from the seed of another tree. It is part of the whole web of life that interconnects all the species in the botanical realm. By becoming part of that tree, unliving things, such as carbon dioxide, water and minerals, too become part of something that lives. Each tree has its own niche among the all the plants and its unique habitat in the whole order of nature. It, in turn, sustains other living things. Like every other plant, it is sustained by the flow of life through the ecological order in its environment.

We wrongly restrict the notion of ecology to the natural world, the realm of plants and animals. People in the ancient world quite rightly held that the natural world was part of a comprehensive ecological order, a system of five interlocking and interacting realms: the mineral realm, the vegetable realm, the animal realm, the human realm, and the spiritual realm. Thus in medieval times, and right up to Shakespeare, people spoke about the great chain of being that meshed the whole of the natural world with the supernatural world.⁴ They envisaged the world as a hierarchically ordered pyramid, with the higher orders dependent on the lower orders, yet at the same time ruling over them. In this chain of being disorder spread from the top downward. Disorder, in turn, interrupted the flow of life from the physical realm upwards through the biological realm to the human realm. We, however, tend to separate all these realms and keep them apart from each other. And so we hold that the working of society has little or nothing to do with the natural world or the spiritual

seed.” Because of this ordinance, the earth did not begin to bring forth plants only at the beginning, but yearly the fields are clothed as long as this universe exists.’

⁴ See [wikipedia.org/wiki/Great chain of being](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_chain_of_being).

world. And vice versa! We believe that we, in fact, can generate new forms of life at all levels from plants to human beings, without upsetting the whole order of our world and disrupting its delicate balances.

It is true that many people are most uneasy about this divorce of the human realm from the natural and the supernatural realms. They reject the mechanistic, atomistic world view that it presupposes. Instead, they embrace various kinds of new age philosophies. They vary greatly from the scientific to the occult, but they all presuppose that we are part of a great cosmic order that creates and sustains us. If we disrupt that order, we damage ourselves. We may even destroy ourselves by upsetting our life support system. We must then live in harmony with our natural and cosmic environment, well-adjusted to it and synchronized with its operation. I do not know what you think of this. It is all too easy to dismiss these ideas as light headed and kooky. We should rather listen to them and learn what we can from them, for they can help us regain a cosmic understanding of Christianity, something that we have largely lost since the Enlightenment.

That view of the world is presupposed by Leviticus.⁵ While much of that book, with its interest in sacrifice, ritual and holiness, is rather alien to modern readers, chapters 18 and 20, with their laws about human sexuality, child sacrifice and spiritism, seem utterly alien to us. What a strange, barbaric combination! What's more, we are put off by the harsh penalties that are prescribed for the violation of these prohibitions: the death penalty, extirpation from kinsfolk and land, and the curse of childlessness. Yet the more I have studied the contents of these two chapters, the more I have become fascinated by them and their 'primitive' ideas. They seem to

⁵ For much of what follows see John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus* (Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 374-92, 423-42.

presuppose and promote a kind of natural, social, spiritual ecology, an order that sustained the life of Israel with God in his land as well as every nation in its homeland. I want to share some of the insights from my research with you. The paradox is that the same chapters that so vehemently threaten death also vigorously affirm life.

B. The Disruption of Life

The book of Leviticus was addressed to people who held an animist world-view. They believed that the cosmic life force, with its supernatural life power, flowed through the whole of the world, energizing every creature and animating it from top to bottom. Everything had its spirit, its life force. That life-power, they held, could be tapped at particular points, and with the help of certain powerful substances, such as blood, semen, fire, and meat. These were powerful life-giving agents that acted like drugs. Anyone could most obviously draw on this power through sexual intercourse, sacrifice, and spiritism. Like impotent men who take Viagra, they held that they thereby increased their virility and fertility, their energy and longevity, their vitality and health. They received supernatural life power and were rejuvenated by it. Like some new age practitioners, they wanted to become part of the cosmic flow of life in and through the universe.

In stark contrast to this, God did not teach his people how to tap this life power, for if they tried to generate life for themselves, they would, eventually, diminish and perhaps even their lives. He did not give them any instructions on how to increase their virility and vitality. He had no need to do so, because that life power was already openly and freely available to them in their station and vocation. The cosmic order was not the source of life; it did not generate life; he, the living God, was the one and only fountain of life. And he gave it freely to all people in and

through their natural and social habitat. So, instead of giving them advice on how to gain vitality and health for themselves, like a new age guru, he gave them a series of prohibitions that protected the flow of life from him to them through their families and their land in Lev 18:2-23 and a list of penalties for their violation in 20:2-21, 27. These prohibitions forbade them, under any circumstances and often at the pain of death, to seize supernatural life power illegitimately apart from God and retain it for their own use apart from his provision for them. If they tried to gain life power for themselves in this way, they short-circuited the natural flow of energy and life. God warned them that such acts were suicidal, like playing around with high voltage electricity or using radioactive substances. They did not enhance life; they cut people off from their life support system and so from life itself. The list of prohibitions and penalties therefore identify the kinds of behavior that damage the life-sustaining ecological order and so disrupt the natural flow of life from God to his people. They single out three classes of acts that disrupt the flow of life from God.

1. Child Sacrifice

As far as we know, the Canaanites did not practise birth control and abortion. They used to sacrifice unwanted children to Molech.⁶ This terrible god was closely associated with the ancestral spirits of the dead who lived with him in the underworld. By sacrificing their children to him, the Israelites believed that they would gain good harvests and fertility for their flocks and herds.⁷ If they gave them the life of a child as a sacrifice, they would prosper agriculturally and economically. They gave him

⁶ For a discussion on the nature and identity of this deity see John Day, *Molech: God of Human Sacrifice* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1989), and Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22* (The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1551-65, 17772-85.

some of their life to receive supernatural life-power from him. And all for economic prosperity!

Many of our contemporaries avoid having children and abort their children for similar reasons. They sacrifice them because they diminish their prosperity and interfere with their personal fulfilment. Sterility is prized, while fertility is subject to our control. They thereby embrace and promote a culture of death.

2. Spiritism and Necromancy

The Canaanites believed that their dead ancestors were the source of life and blessing for them. The land belonged to them. They influenced its fertility and prosperity. They had the power to hurt or harm those who farmed their land. It was therefore wise to stay in touch with them, for they granted blessing to those whom they favoured, or else they withheld it, if they were displeased with its inhabitants. And so the Canaanites conjured up the spirits of their ancestors. They sought life from the dead rather than from the living God. So too the Israelites conjured up the spirits of their ancestors, the living dead who had been buried in their land, the ghosts of the people who lived on their land before them.⁸ They could foretell the future and so help people to plan accordingly. They could help those people prosper who respected them.

This does not differ all that much from the fashionable interest in spiritism. It is ironical that the same people who treat the Triune God with contempt, dabble in the occult and magic. They regard these things as energizing and life-empowering.

⁷ See Lev 18:21; 20:2, 3, 4, 5; cf. 1 Ki 11:7; 2 Ki 23:120; Jer 32:35.

⁸ See Lev 20:6, 27; cf. Deut 18:11; 1 Sam 28:3, 9; 2 Ki 21:6; 23:24; 2 Chr 33:6; Is 8:19; 19:3.

3. Illicit Sexual intercourse

Sexual intercourse was the most obvious method of tapping into the life power of the cosmos, then and now. But many Israelites held that this was not just available in the normal sexual intercourse of husband and wife in marriage. It had to happen outside the order of marriage to be most effective and productive.

This happened in a number of different ways. By intercourse with a menstruating woman a man tried to gain the life power from her blood (Lev 18:19; 20:18). Menstrual blood was a powerful substance, used in spells and magic, healing and sorcery. Intercourse by a dominant male with other women in his own extended family besides his wife conserved the life power of the family and increased his own virility (18:6-18; 20:11-12, 14, 17, 19-21). Intercourse with a married woman from another family gained life power from it, weakening its vitality; so too a woman engaged in adulterous intercourse with a virile man from another family in order to become pregnant by him (18:20; 20:10). Homosexual intercourse with another man was held to enhance male virility and energy (18:22; 20:13). Intercourse with an animal was held to gain some of its virility and life power (18:21; 20:15-16). The irony was that, instead of enhancing virility and fertility in a family, these sexual acts diminished and destroyed it. So all these prohibitions served to contain sexual intercourse and the flow of life through it within the marriage and the family. Outside of that environment, sex produced frustration and death rather than life and fulfilment.

This view of sex does not differ much from our modern view of sex as the source of health and happiness and wellbeing. In fact, many people only feel alive when they are engaged in exciting, abnormal sexual activity.

Cursing of Parents

We all receive life from our parents. They are agents of God in the act of procreation. They conceive us, give birth to us, nourish us, and provide for us in so many different ways. But we do not just receive life from God through them. Our lives can be damaged, warped, and diminished by them. We are bound to them for better or worse. All human beings, from the ancient world to modern times, have therefore had an ambiguous relationship to their parents. All too often they have held that they would only really gain a life for themselves if they got rid of their parents. What better way of doing that than by cursing them (Lev 20:9). Yet no matter how restricting and damaging parents may be, you can't have life by damning your parents, for if you damn your parents you damn yourself; you commit social and emotional suicide. Those who damn their parents not only destroy their own family; they have difficulty in making their own marriage work properly and in creating a new family that is not itself dysfunctional. The crime of cursing one's own parents is just as evil and destructive as the sacrifice of children to Molech. God therefore forbade it and attached the death penalty to its violation (Lev 20:9).

Now that might strike us as rather harsh, even if we realize that the penalty was seldom exacted. But it does indicate the importance of our relationship to our parents. The flow of life comes to us from God through them. That is just as true for us as it was for the Israelites. We need to remember that the fourth commandment is the only commandment that has two promises attached to it: the promise of well being and the promise of longevity. No matter how unfashionable that may be it is still true for us in our nuclear families. It is perhaps even more vital just because we no longer live in extended families and close communities

C. The Channels of Life

God made it quite clear that the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and penalties in Leviticus 20 were not meant to diminish the enjoyment of life. On the contrary, they promoted and protected the flow of life from him. In Leviticus 18:5 he says: "You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; the man⁹ who does them will have life by them". That life came to God's people in three ways.

1. Life came through the land. God gave his land to them. It was a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Through the land he provided the necessities of life for them. They therefore were not to pollute the land by their behaviour, as the Canaanites had once done. In Lev 18:24-30 God says: "Do not pollute yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have polluted themselves. Thus the land became unclean; and I visited its iniquity upon it so that the land spewed out its inhabitants... So do not let the land spew you out as it spewed out the nation that was before you. For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their kinsfolk. So keep my watch... and do not pollute yourselves by them." Since the Canaanites had poisoned the land by their sexual immorality, their practice of child sacrifice, and their involvement in spiritism, the land turned against its inhabitants who had violated its ecology. The level of pollution was so high that the land vomited out the people who had polluted it. In sheer disgust the land got rid of its pollutants. This is, I think, also true for us. The promotion of deviant sexuality, abortion, and spiritism pollute our land and its inhabitants.

2. The flow of life came to God's people through their families. This happened through sexual intercourse within the bounds of marriage. The life-giving seed passed

⁹ The use of the term '*adam*', a human being, shows that this applies to everybody, not just the Israelites.

from the father to the mother and through her to the sons in the family. That seed was to remain in the family; it was not to be passed on through the family except through marriage. The violation of this order resulted in death rather than life. Sexual disorder led to the loss of life in the family and the eventual destruction of family. Those who violated the sexual order of the family not only disturbed the life of the family but ended up cut off from the family as a living organism. Something like that is happening in our society. It may well be one of the reasons why so many people feel that they are missing out on life.

3. The flow of life was not generated by the land or the family, but by God himself. He gave it to the Israelites through their land and their families. Since God lived with his people in the land, the Israelites could not have life apart from him. They could not gain supernatural life power and energy and vitality from other gods, let alone from the spirits of their ancestors. They committed suicide if they cut themselves from him, like the branch from a tree. All life came from him. He gave it to them through the land and their life as families in the land that he had given them. He kept on generating life for them and every other living creature. So the worst sin of all was the worship of some other god than the Lord. These pagan gods promised life, but they delivered death to their devotees. That, too, is the story of our generation.

D. Guardians of life

Well, what does all this have to do with us in this new millennium of human history? We live in a world and a country that is hungry for life. Ordinary life does not really satisfy. The people round us know that there is more to life than merely existing. Some are bored and tired, unfulfilled and depressed. Others have lost their zest for living and the capacity to enjoy what they have. They dabble in bizarre brands of spirituality, because they feel that they are somehow less than fully alive. They

fear that they are actually missing out on life. And rightly so! They tell each other: “Get a life!” And so they chase after those things that promise to give them a fuller, better life. But sadly, the more they pursue life, the more they seem to cut themselves off from the flow of life. They attempt to recreate their lives to fulfil their desires. But that kind of and artificial life does not last or satisfy in any real way.

At the same time, they treat the church and the word of God with contempt. They want to have life. Yet they avoid getting married and having children because they believe that children rob them of life; they suck them dry and diminish their enjoyment of life. So sex is disconnected from the flow of life, and it loses its ever surprising liveliness. Christians, they say, are killjoys who don’t enjoy life. The Christian faith stifles and denies life. Yet little do they suspect that devotion to the living God brings with it vitality, a zest for living, and the capacity for simple, never-ending enjoyment. And so they miss out on life. They don’t realize that human life, in all its amazing goodness, is readily available and accessible to all of them in their family, their marriage, and the land that sustains them.

All this is most unfashionable teaching for our contemporaries who seem to listen only to people disdain God’s created order and his life-giving ordinances. But their contempt for the God’s good creation and empty rhetoric about self-fulfilment must not silence us. Life is not to be found where they say you can be in it and have it. You don’t have to go somewhere else or do anything extraordinary to enjoy it. It flows through marriage and the family from generation to generation. If we disturb the family, we disrupt and corrupt its flow. We cannot destroy it, or manipulate it, without damaging ourselves.

Life cannot be had on our own terms; it always comes to us on God’s terms. People cannot change this reality, even if they misapply and deny it. Our society may

promise life apart from the order of conjugal marriage and the family that based on it. But its rhetoric actually promotes the culture of death. God, however, still gives life each day, life that is new and fresh and wonderful, whether people acknowledge it or not. By his law he creates life and protects the culture of life on earth. He repairs the damage that we do to our life support systems. He alone generates life for us and regenerates it, for he is the living God.