

**Institute for Christian Teaching**

**AUTHORITY, BIBLE, AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS**

**Miroslav M. Kis**

**413-00 Institute for Christian Teaching  
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Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA**

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## AUTHORITY, BIBLE, AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

by

Miroslav M. Kiš

When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place *and follow*, that you may know the way you shall go, *for you have not passed this way before*. Joshua 3:3, 4 (italics mine)

Ethics is the science of morality. Its task is to examine the moral aspect of human nature and behavior, to clarify issues in moral decision making and moral dilemmas, and to facilitate formation of moral character.

In Micah 6:8 we find a helpful definition of morality. It can be argued on the information found in that passage that morality asks four questions.

1. What is *good*? Not what is normal, legal or acceptable in a given culture, but rather, what is good.

2. What is *just*? Human beings are born with rights, to which they have God-given right. Immoral conduct consists in denying these rights to our fellow human beings.

3. What is *kind*? Our relationships and our inter-human conduct must be kind and compassionate.

4. The means we use to reach the above moral qualities must be carefully scrutinized. God calls us to walk humbly with Him.

In its task to examine our morality, ethics asks the question "why?" Why is a given action good rather than evil? On what basis, or on whose authority can we rely to make sure that a certain decision does not create injustice in its wake? Hence the fundamental importance of

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authority in ethics. In reality, life without authority (anarchy) is a utopia<sup>1</sup> and personal autonomy is a nightmare. We need authority and rely on it daily. *First*, we need someone in authority to maintain order. I am reminded of this whenever the first snow covers the lines on our parking lots. We do not park anymore, we abandon our vehicles and the holding capacity of the place is always diminished. *Second*, we depend on authority for knowledge. A ten-year-old local girl who knows the way commands greater authority for at least a moment, than a country president who is lost. *Third*, our lives and our property rely on the authority of the law. Our freedoms, and our rights lay vulnerable, open to abuse and theft if unprotected. *Finally*, the very next second, and as much as the eons of eternity in the future hide from us, shrouded in the veil of the unknown. Human beings keep facing the fact that we "have not passed this way before," and yet, homeless people that we are, we must press on. So, again we need an authoritative guide.

This essay attempts to show what happens when Scripture is invested with trustworthiness as an infallible authority in the realm of moral life and ethical reflection and discourse. How much can we trust the Bible to be our Guide? Why should we do so? How do we discern the Word as authority?

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<sup>1</sup>Austin Fagothey, *Right and Reason* (St. Louis: The C. V. Mosbey Co., 1972), 248-49.

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I

AUTHORITY AND ETHICS

**Working Definitions**

**Authority** is conceived as an influence exerted on the mind and the will of others, compelling them to respond in harmony or out of harmony with the commanding will. The claim offers no neutral alternative. Indifference is a rejection of authority.

It is helpful to recognize that authority is a synthesis of right to exert influence and power to make that influence effective. Neither right nor power alone generates authority. A right to govern without power to do so degenerates into a figurehead of authority. So a government in exile may be legitimately elected, holding all rights, but having the powers to realize its will taken away by the hostile force. In some of the modern monarchies the royalty holds legitimacy, but their constitutions relegate the power into the hands of an elected government.

The same holds for the power alone. The ruling junta may wield its power over the population enforcing submission by coercion and force, but that should never be mistaken for authority.<sup>2</sup> Police, parent, or teacher will easily gain submission, but only the leader who holds legitimate power can receive cooperation of willing obedience. Consequently, authority means a "right and power to command action or compliance, or to determine belief or custom, expecting

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<sup>2</sup>Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 68-69.

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obedience from those under authority, and in turn giving responsible account for the claim to right or power."<sup>3</sup>

Authority can be **direct** and **underived** or it can be **delegated**. God is supreme Sovereign whose authority is underived, while His spokespersons, the prophets or apostles held delegated authority. A president is empowered by voters to have direct executive authority, while an ambassador holds legitimate powers delegated to him/her by the president.

Finally it is useful to note that legitimacy to hold power needs constant authentication. No authority can take for granted the trust which the willing subjects chose to confer upon it. With a speed of lightening the authority of Rehoboam plummeted (see 1 Kings 12), in spite of the legendary popularity of David, his grandfather and the glory of Solomon, his father. He did not nurture his own credibility with an accountable exercise of his kingly authority.

### **Problems and Challenges with Authority in Ethics**

Moral behavior is rational and purposeful. Unlike animals, which follow their instincts, humans are created so that they yearn for a more coherent and orderly conduct. Behind the overt actions and words stand a deliberate structure, a philosophy of life, an ordering will, which directs and oversees the way we do our business of living. Every individual is endowed by God at creation with freedom of choice and freedom of will, thus making us responsible and accountable moral agents. Down in the depths of our soul we know that "we must all appear

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<sup>3</sup>Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 10.

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before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

### 1. Problem of Sin

But this is the very place where we encounter our first problem of authority in ethics: the problem of sin. Human reason as well as human will are neither reliable nor coherent enough to autonomously generate responsible and accountable conduct. We are hopelessly corrupted at the very heart of our being (Jeremiah 17:9). On our own we can only wander and err without purpose. Our appetites clamor for attention and lead us in unpredictable directions. In addition, as creatures we are limited in time and space. We cannot see beyond the present where the consequences for our actions will meet us. So we must concur that "the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). It appears then that we need an external help, an ordering will which we can invest with authority to direct our life for us.

### 2. Is There an Apparent Contradiction Between Obedience and Responsibility?

But here we face the second major problem of authority in ethics. If we are to be responsible for our decisions and accountable for our actions, and if every one of us will have to appear individually before Christ to give an answer, then how can we relegate that responsibility to someone else? Is not acceptance of someone's authority over our moral conduct tantamount to resignation of our human dignity? Obedience to an authority requires me to give up my opinion, my wishes, my freedom, and to give priority to opinions, wishes, and freedom of someone else. If I am created so that I must obey, then the authority which assumes the command should be required to stand in for me at the time of judgement.

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The seventeenth century ferments revolved precisely around this question of human autonomy. Authorities, such as Scripture, church, tradition, or culture ceased to hold unquestioned control. What is true or what is right could no longer be established by arguing from authority, because a concept of authority as such became subject to critical scrutiny. Soon authority became the conclusion, rather than the premise of argument.

In the moral sphere, this means that authority may not be appealed to as a basis for action; rather authority has to be validated by a judgement of rightness on the part of one to whom an appeal for obedience is made. To be a free moral agent is thus to act in accordance to norms which are contingent upon my 'authorization.'<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the problem still remains, except now in a more intense form. All the valiant flights from authority before and since the 17<sup>th</sup> century proved to be a miserable failure. The traditional loci were dethroned to be sure, but they only gave way to human reason and individual conscience to assume control, bringing us back to where we started. Back to that same corrupted human reason and unreliable foresight of the limited and sinful human heart which set us on our journey to search for help. Back to the erratic meandering on the way to nowhere. A. H. J. Gunneweg and W. Schmithals concur that no one is ever completely released from some form of authority.<sup>5</sup> In fact, in a certain sense we always obey. The question is whom, and how reliable are our authorities to whom we yield ourselves as obedient slaves (Romans 6:16)?

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<sup>4</sup>J. B. Webster "Authority" in D. J. Atkinson et al, eds., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 179.

<sup>5</sup>A. H. J. Gunneweg and W. Schmithals, *Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 18.

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### 3. Is the Bible is Outdated?

We are confronted with the historic claim that the Bible is authoritative, and yet when we read it, we find ourselves in an unbelievable world. We read about bodies being levitated up into heaven—and we know that heaven, wherever it may be, is not located 50,000 feet or so above Palestine...We discover that the whole Biblical framework seems to presuppose a "three-story universe" with heaven up in the air, hell beneath the earth, and earth a fixed point in-between—and we know that this view was exploded at least as long ago as the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Then Brown asks a very serious question: "Can we retain a Protestant emphasis on the centrality of Scripture, and still do justice to the fact that we live in the twentieth century?"<sup>7</sup> As solutions to this dilemma, Brown suggests: 1) that we distinguish between the Word of God and the words of Scripture, so that authority rests in the former and not in the latter, 2) that we place our trust in the message about Jesus and not in the letter itself, 3) that we take very serious consideration to the work of the Holy Spirit who can, and must inspire us just as He did the Biblical writers, and 4) that we recognize Biblical authority wherever, by listening, we find the meaning of life.<sup>8</sup>

For the task of ethics as well as for the moral life, this implies a limited usefulness of the Biblical message. As a consequence, we must hear what is said in the Biblical cultural context and attempt to adapt the meaning individually for us today. The claim is that the Holy Spirit will lead us in that journey; that we must face the fact courageously that we cannot find one universally-sanctioned will of God for today. The Bible is not able to sustain such a burden. Scripture, apparently, must remain central if we want to remain Protestants, but it must not be

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<sup>6</sup>Robert McEfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 73.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 79.

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taken at face value. It holds priority over other loci, personal experience, church, and reason, but this is only because it contains what other authorities could not discover without its help: the revelation of Jesus, the Savior of the human race.

#### 4. Is Scripture Relevant for Today's Generation?

The fourth challenge to Scripture's authority in ethics is the claim that most of the present-day moral issues are not even mentioned, and much less given some guidance. Where do we go for help with AIDS, abortion, genetic engineering, euthanasia, in-vitro fertilization? How much help is there in Scripture for the present-day social problems like labor exploitation, marketing practices, international terrorism, nuclear threats, and the like? Scripture is not only outdated, it is silent on such burning moral dilemmas. Already Marx recognized the otherworldliness of the Bible. He vehemently criticized religion and the church for begrudging the real solution for the social ills and instead of a cure, handing the oppressed masses a minimal dosage of opium. Herbert Marcuse deplores the civilization we have inherited from centuries of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Bloch calls for rejection of all ideologies as untrue concepts of reality.<sup>10</sup>

For the task of Christian ethics, this challenge strikes at the very foundation. If the Bible is not only outdated, but also misleading and harmful, then the ethical mandate is not only to reject Biblical authority, but to sound an alarm and to provide alternative models of reality. And if such models do not exist, or if there is no one, fool-proof solution, then the moral virtue of integrity insists that we say so.

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<sup>9</sup>H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

<sup>10</sup>Ernst Bloch, *Philosophische Grundfragen I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1961), 61.

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### 5. Is the Biblical Message Other Worldly?

Idealism is the fifth challenge hurled against the Bible as moral authority. Scripture simply asks too much of the fallible, finite human beings, we are told. Such assignments as, "You shall be holy." (Leviticus 20:26), or "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God.." (Deuteronomy 30:16), or "You therefore must be perfect." (Matthew 5:48), are clearly out of human reach. Who has ever seen anytime, anywhere, anyone who has attained any of these expectations? ! Scripture suffers from an acute lack of realism. Faced with this fact, Albert Schweitzer argued resolutely that the Biblical injunctions are not meant for the real, present life. This belongs to what he calls an "interim ethics," formulated for the mistaken expectation of an imminent realization of the Kingdom. Jesus and his disciples miscalculated their timing and we must not make the same mistake.<sup>11</sup>

How does such view of Biblical authority affect the task of ethics and the task of moral life? First, it splits the sense of moral duty into two levels. On the one side we preach and teach what the Bible teaches but when the Sabbath is over, we face the real world and conduct our life according to a very different set of rules. We also try to speak about divine accommodation<sup>12</sup> about God's ideal will, versus His permissive will, and the like.

### 6. Are there Contradictions?

Finally, we are told that Biblical authority in ethics is greatly weakened because we find in the Word of God contradictory moral expectations. How, for example, can we reconcile the

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<sup>11</sup>A. Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (London: 1914).

<sup>12</sup>For a good discussion of this subject, see J.D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 19-30.

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unequivocal command not to bear false witness (Exodus 20:16), reinforced with the statement in Revelation 21, that the lot of liars will be the lake of fire, with Rahab, who bore a false witness, and yet found herself in the faith hall of fame (Hebrews 11:31)? In the sixth Commandment, God says not to kill, yet in several other places, He Himself orders human beings to kill even, for example, the innocent women and children of the Amalekites. Such references could be multiplied.

For the task of ethics and for moral life in general, that means that the Bible is just an ancient piece of literature, highly unfit for a coherent moral guidance.

So, how can we still speak of Scripture as an infallible moral guide?<sup>13</sup> In what follows, we do not intend to respond to challenges in the order they have been presented above. Instead, we will look at Scripture so as to identify evidences of legitimacy of Biblical authority in the present-day context. In using this approach we will find that one evidence may contain arguments against several charges of Biblical skeptics.

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<sup>13</sup>Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1958), 416; Ellen G. White, *My Life Today* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1952), 25.

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## II

### THE BIBLE AS MORAL AUTHORITY

We must address several questions at this point. First, *what* is it about the Bible that recommends it as ultimate authority in ethics? Second, *why* is Scripture an authentic authority? Third, *how* should Scripture function as authority? We begin with the first question.

#### **Bible as Moral Authority**

Unlike the Code of Hammurabi or the American Constitution, the Bible is neither a code book for human conduct nor a case book of previous legislations. No, not primarily. The first and most important and the most relevant characteristic of Scripture for moral concerns is the fact that it is the supreme instrument of God's self-revelation to humanity. Without any doubt, Jesus of Nazareth is the supreme revelation of God, but Scripture is the vehicle which communicates this to us.<sup>15</sup> The Gospel is the best news ever communicated to the lost humanity, yet the Bible is the voice which heralds that news.<sup>16</sup> "No matter how hard we try to transform its message, the message will try harder to transform us."<sup>17</sup> There is a certain givenness about it, an invaluable and crucial link between God and humanity, a fundamental presupposition of both faith and doubt, theism and atheism, a voice that cries in the wilderness, out of tune with other

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<sup>15</sup>Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Assoc., 1923), 415; Francis D. Nichol, Ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol. 6* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1957), 1079.

<sup>16</sup>Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Assoc., 1963), 91.

<sup>17</sup>Brown, 183.

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voices. All through the ages, the oral tradition, the emergence of a new light, the impact of other religious teachings and heresies could not have a free flow through the ranks of God's people. Scripture's abiding presence "altered the character of post-scriptural tradition."<sup>18</sup> *Scripture is the pivotal epistemological connection between human beings and the universe beyond.*

*Ontological revelation.* The second essential attribute which qualifies Scripture for moral authority is the fact that God reveals *Himself* through its pages.<sup>19</sup> Much has been written and commented about words, and sources, about redaction, and the supposed levels of authoritativeness of different books of the Bible, depending on whether God, or Jesus directly spoke, whether the genre is more factual or more poetic, or whether an editor added some information to prophetic utterances.<sup>20</sup> As important as these discussions may be, it is the Subject of the Bible that gives it its moral standing. *The Bible reveals God*, it does not simply *speak about Him*. The Pentateuch experiences Him in action, historical books narrate Him, Psalms sing Him, prophets and apostles proclaim Him, while in the Gospels we meet Him.

This is of capital importance for Christian ethics. If actions, decisions and difficult dilemmas were the primary, or the sole concern of Christian ethics, then sayings and commands would rise to higher prominence. Then learning what is good, and what is right, skillfulness in the proper decision making process, and training in proper moral form and content would suffice.

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<sup>18</sup>J. Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 59.

<sup>19</sup>Ramm, 18-20.

<sup>20</sup>See for example D.L. Bartlett, *The Shape of Scriptural Authority* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

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But because the ultimate goal of the moral task is a Christ-like character, a transformed moral being, revelation of an infallible ethical theory will not do. The sinful human will tends to rebel against sheer power. Instead, God presents Himself as someone who wants our good, someone who loves us. He is the Potentate of the universe, but His power is legitimate. The moral message of the Bible is not only “I told you so”( Deuteronomy 30: 8. 10), but also “I showed you so” (Micah 6:8), not simply “go, and do not sin again” ( John 8:11), but also “Follow me”( John 21:19). *Because Scripture reveals God as both the loving, and the commanding Sovereign its role as authority in ethics is assured.*

*Homologous Revelation.* Another important factor which commends the Bible as eminent authority in ethics is that the Biblical revelation is homologous with the original human moral nature. The revelation of God’s Being, while primary, is clearly presented through His “doing”--His works, and through His speaking--His words. One senses a strong harmony and interconnectedness between God’s Being, His actions, and His speech. It is presented to us in the Bible as one unified whole. He leads us (action) on the paths of righteousness, because He is (being) righteous -“for His name’s sake” (Psalms 23:3); His name (being) and His word (speaking) are exalted because they are both faithful (Psalms 138:2; see also Psalms 89:35). God is the supreme manifestation of moral integrity.

It is not so with human moral nature. The human soul is in a state of internal disharmony, says Plato. My actions are damaging to my self, my being, and my words defile my soul, just as it is my heart that produces filthy speech (Genesis 4:7, Matthew 15:18,19). The human will is at

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war with the mind and this chaotic state of being creates the moral chaos in the interpersonal and social realm.

Then comes the Word of God. With unimposing strokes it paints before our longing eyes, articulates to our eager ears, and discloses to our restless and confused mind the peaceful harmony of the Divine Being -- in perfect consonance with His works and His words. Like Isaiah, we feel lost and unclean (Isaiah 6:5), and like Paul, we entreat..”What shall I do, Lord” (Acts 22:10)? In Jesus we see both at once, the Son of God and the son of man. The two at peace. And we see both who we are and who we are called to be. Called back to be like Adam and Eve before sin, the kind of being that reflects the Creator’s image. We see our nature restored into harmony with the will of God, our mind capable of comprehending divine things, our affections pure and our appetites and passions under the control of reason. We long to be holy and happy in bearing the image of God and in perfect obedience to His will.<sup>21</sup> *No one other thing under the sun can bring us so close to our God and generate in us such yearning for holiness of life. No other thing but the Holy Bible.*

*Remedial Revelation.* (Psalm 139:23,24). This brings us to recognize Scripture’s authority by its role in bringing the supreme solution to human moral impotence and predicament. Like a caring physician, it speaks boldly about our true condition and sets exacting standards for our healing.

The Christian must obey Christ with all that he is and has. What he demands of his followers is not the observance of some manageable code of behaviour but the complete

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<sup>21</sup>Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Assn.,1958).

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surrender of their wills to him in obedience and love; and this they acknowledge even when they know that what he requires overwhelmingly exceeds anything that they have yet given, any degree of single-minded obedience they have yet achieved.<sup>22</sup>

If the message seems out of step with the surrounding mores, or if the expectations challenge our comfort and habits, it is because the Bible presents us with the Therapeutic Will of God, not only with His Diagnostic Will. It is as if God were saying through Christ:

Let Me have your tools, the little stage of your workshop, surround Me with your identical temptations, add the malice and suspicion of men, narrow the stage to the dimensions of a dirty Eastern village, handicap Me with poverty, weigh the scale, crib and cabin Me in a little Eastern land, and there, at the point where you have failed in the flesh, I will produce the fairest thing earth has seen; I will give the world the dream come true.<sup>23</sup>

*So, hands down, we want to invite God to rule over us through His Word. We want to be that dream come true (Psalm 119:11).*

This is what we mean when we say that Scripture is the ultimate authority in ethics. But why Scripture? What evidence do we have that it will do its work in us, and for us today? How is Biblical authority legitimized in our context?

### **Responses to Challenges**

**1. Teleological Order.** Oliver O'Donovan defines authority as "the objective correlate of freedom. It is what we encounter in the world which makes it meaningful for us to act."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>N.H.G. Robinson, *The Groundwork of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 109.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 111.

<sup>24</sup>O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Leicester: IVP 1986), 122.

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Authority signals a larger picture where my actions will fit. Human life in general, and its moral aspect in particular, is neither chaotic nor absurd. In spite of the ravages of sin and the unpredictability of the future events, it is possible to perceive a structure, a system of coherence. Our actions and our decisions have consequences. "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" God asks Cain (Genesis 4:7). And Paul reminds us that "Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7-9). Human experience corroborates these claims, with an important exception. Not *all* wrongs have been thus righted, and not all good deeds and self-sacrificial services rewarded (Psalms 73). Not yet, says the overwhelming message of Scripture. The Biblical doctrine of the final judgement affirms the system of moral order with the promise that the final, complete harvest will certainly come. That ultimate and eternal consequences will make sense out of the present nonsense.

No human existence could last for long without this order. A road where everyone drives whichever way he pleases, a marketplace where she can decide not to pay for merchandise if she so pleases, a marriage that has no respect for promises and covenants. . . .such situations are suicidal. Whenever we meet with results for our actions the authority of Scripture is confirmed. And even when such consequences linger and atrocities last for decades, as they have under some communist regimes, the human being cannot accept moral disorder as a normal state of affairs. Even then the Word speaks with authority. And because the law of consequences still functions in human affairs, the authority of Scripture is still in force.

**2. Truth.** (John 8:32) The highest authority to which any form of critical reflection turns is the authority of truth. Reflection in obedience to truth is reflection about the relations of things. This relation must correspond to the true nature of things. If someone tells me that

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cyanide is a dangerous poison, there is a better way of testing the safest relation with the chemical than to consume it. I will be able to test its truth by grasping the true nature of the human body, as well as the true nature of cyanide. If the two natures can mix without serious harm, then I will know how properly to relate the two.

The authority of truth receives moral dimension whenever it claims that certain ways of being, acting or speaking correspond exactly with what is good and right for a human being as a member of the Kingdom of God...This means that any absolute authority must command us as supreme reality.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus tells us that God's Word is truth (John 17:17). The correspondence between truth and the Bible is that of identity (expressed with the verb to be, "is"). The Bible is not only a witness to truth, proffering true statements. It is truth. This has several implications for testing the authenticity of the Bible's authority in ethics.

First, the truthfulness of this Word must be able to stand the test of time and circumstance or else it is only a word. What was true about the essential nature of human beings in the time of Moses, must be true in the days of Marx. No amount of intellectual energy spent in formulating different doctrine of human nature and destiny, no intensity of social, military, psychological, or economic pressure can change truth into a lie, nor a lie into truth. An official lie is sooner or later officially false. Goulags and long decades of oppression worked only to confirm the truth of the Biblical claims about moral depravity of all humans—communists included. Truth is "obstinate" and resilient.

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<sup>25</sup>See O'Donovan, 125.

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Second, truth is bold. It tells it the way it is. And so does the Bible.

When God appears stern in his action and causes his wrath to fall upon man, it is a wrath based on the veracity of the facts and governed by impeccable justice. Without the sterner voice of God in Scripture, the Scripture would contain less of God, not more of God. The Scripture never sentimentalizes God.<sup>26</sup>

It is because the Witness is faithful and true that the words are open and severe: "I will spew you out of my mouth . . . not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:16,17). This is enough to cause depression, to crush any sense of self-respect, if it were not for the fact that deep down in our soul we do not rebel, we are not offended, because what the true witness says is the truth. True today. True of me and true of you. And whenever our teaching or our preaching wanders away from the whole truth of the Bible, it tends to sentimentalize God and spoil His children. And by the same token, we mislead and are misled about our true condition.

**3. Redemption.** Authenticity and legitimacy of Scripture's authority in ethics is evidenced by its redemptive power. "It is the rootage of special revelation in redemption which makes Scripture a word of life, and not a collection of divine fiats as in Koran. Scripture is the co-agent in divine redemption and therefore not a mere listing of official opinions."<sup>27</sup> We are reminded of the time of the young king Josiah. A chance discovery of the book of the law by Hilkiah the priest, and the subsequent public reading, triggered an incredible reform of lifestyle and revival of commitment to God (2 Kings 22 and 23). This salvific efficacy endures until the

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<sup>26</sup>Ramm, 22.

<sup>27</sup>B. Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 75.

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present days without abating. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). The hundreds and thousands of changed lives, changed as beings and changed in their conduct, stand as living credentials of the divinely delegated authority of Scripture.

**4. Enduring Relevance.** (Isaiah 40:8) To base our judgement of Scripture's relevance on the fact that Biblical writers used outdated cosmology, overlooks several important factors.

First, even today in the everyday parlance we use some very strange and unscientific categories. Is the sun really "rising" or "setting?" Does time actually "fly?" Do we really "grow" old? What will generations after us tell about our scientific knowledge and literacy?

Second, when we focus our reading on the major themes of the Bible, among which, moral concerns occupy a very high place, one must wonder whether the moral nature of human life has changed at all since Biblical times. Don't we witness the same temptations as Joseph and Samson did? Are we today inoculated against Jacob or Laban's cheating? Has all treachery stopped with Judas? Is our modern technologically advanced civilization more safe for our children, our marriages, or our property? If the present trends of moral development continues on its downward spiral, the relevance of Biblical moral authority can only grow.

Third, the emergence of new, more complex, moral dilemmas, while confirming the above point, do not push Biblical pertinence into oblivion. On the contrary. The new problems of AIDS and abortion are not so new at their base, when examined from a moral perspective. The Biblical teaching about the ethics of sexual behavior hold an effective answer for preventing such tragedies. It is when our conduct takes us beyond the "point of no return" that we face a

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dilemma. But there again, Scripture brings healing to those caught in the impasse of unwanted pregnancies or AIDS. There is no limit beyond which God's grace cannot reach down to rescue and restore a sincere, repentant soul. The new labor and marketing exploitations have the millennia-old sin of greed as their moral base. International terrorism, nuclear threats, and other new forms of violence and coercion are not new at all. It is true that the Bible is not a recipe book containing an exact prescription for all our moral ailments.<sup>28</sup> Yet, Carl F. H. Henry asserts boldly that "There is actually no ethical decision in life which the Biblical revelation leaves wholly untouched and for which, if carefully interpreted and applied, it cannot afford some concrete guidance."<sup>29</sup>

**5. Inspiration.** The work of the Holy Spirit through the reading of Scripture is another enduring mark of its authenticity as moral authority. No human power can penetrate the inner chambers of the human soul bringing conviction and awareness of the real human need for renewal and victory over sin. These miracles corroborate the claims which Scripture makes as to its origin in inspiration. The influence is by no means superficial. It is not a patch-work. Jesus calls it a new birth (John 3:8), a new creation, a renewal of the mind. New kinds of actions and decisions emerge gradually. Paul calls them "fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22, 23). The new being produces the new "doings" and the "workings."

**6. The New Reality.** The unrealistic expectations found in Scripture contribute, rather than detracting from its legitimacy as moral authority. There is no need to shrink back in despair

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<sup>28</sup>Freeman C. Sleeper, *The Bible and the Moral Life* (Louisville: Westminster, 1992), 16-18.

<sup>29</sup>C.F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 339.

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when we read "you shall be holy," or "you must be perfect," or turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), or "be faithful unto death" (Revelation 2:10), thinking, "who can come even close to such an ideal." The moral requirements are not written for some extraterrestrial beings. If they are far from our present stage, it is for several reasons. First, we must never forget that God's will for His children is His therapeutic will. To expect status quo of a sinner is equivalent to abandoning a sick person to the ravages of the sickness. Additionally, we are told that behind every commandment there is a promise.<sup>30</sup> It is God's work to reach His moral goal in our lives (Philippians 1:6). Finally, to consider the Biblical moral vision as illegitimate may mean that we are tempted to accept our sinful condition and our hurtful ways as legitimate. No. The conditions for salvation are reasonable, plain, and positive.<sup>31</sup> This is the message we read in Deuteronomy 30:11-14,

For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven [not otherworldly], that you should say "Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear and do it?" But the word is *very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.* [italics mine]

What an encouragement! The Christian life is a life of ever new adventures. Every new weakness that comes up, every old habit that re-emerges, are but calls to daring trust in the One who can save us completely (Hebrews 7:25).

**7. Contradictions.** Then what about the passages in Scripture where it is easy to see contradictions in moral requirements? The present essay cannot begin to do justice to this

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<sup>30</sup>Ellen G. White, *Education* (MountainView: Pacific Press Publishing Assn.,1952), 126.

<sup>31</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* vol I, (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), 440.-

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important issue. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. treats those passages with uncommon expertise.<sup>32</sup> Several important principles of interpretation are very useful as we search for moral guidance.

a) Most of the Biblical characters were morally offensive. They are not our example in everything they did.<sup>33</sup>

b) God's approbation of an individual must be strictly limited to certain *textually specified* characteristics. Rahab is our example in courage and faith for sparing the spies, but certainly not for her harlotry or lying.<sup>34</sup>

c) God is sovereign. Human life belongs to Him. It is He who gives life and He who takes His property back. The case of Uza, where destruction of life happens by a direct act of God, is not essentially different than the destruction of Amalekites at the hand of Israel, because the Sovereign over all life has spoken.<sup>35</sup>

**8. The Evidence of Faith.** "Now faith is the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 NKJV). For Paul faith is not the wishful thinking of emotionally disturbed religious fanatics, nor a fanciful dream of the weak and intellectually challenged. It is substance and evidence. It is one, perhaps the supreme, epistemological venue in his estimation, because two verses later he asserts: "By faith we *know*" (Vs.3). But what *can* we know by faith that we cannot know by the means of reason, intuition, or our senses? In moral terms, we can know God in His being, His actions, and His speech. Reason, intuition, and the

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<sup>32</sup>See W.C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 266, 269.

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senses engaged in searching the Bible can only tell us *about* God. When the scholars claim that the Bible is not the Word of God, but rather a word *about* God, should we read in this confession that faith has not influenced their knowing, because they have not yet read the Scripture with the eyes of faith? Faith makes us know God in the Hebrew sense of knowing. But there are two conditions.

When I asked my sons, some twenty years ago, to jump into my arms, the first condition before jumping was for them to exercise their faith by trusting me, by believing me. To know about me, or to believe in me would not do. They must trust me. Other less risky experiences prepared them to stand there and think very hard. Should they do it or not? How could they be sure I could and would catch them in time? Trust can still be passive.

Hence the need for the second condition: *obedience*. They must feel so secure in their knowledge of me and so convinced that I will be stronger than the pull of gravity, that they will decide to move their will in the direction of their trust: right into my arms. Faith that is trusting, yet without the engagement of the will in an act of obedience, does not lead to a true knowledge of a being. And Satan knows that. He knows that if he can make us involved in intellectual study of the Bible, his purposes will be reached. He does not want us to actually taste and see that God is good. He wants us to discuss the probability or the possibility of such an assertion. He wants us to learn as much as possible about God, as long as we do not begin to obey His Word. Once we start saying such things as "It is written," and for that reason I will not do this, eat this, say this, or be a jerk; once the Word becomes active in us, Satan will have to flee into deserted places. The Devil knows very well that when we trust God so much that we will obey

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Him, God will prove Himself true when the consequences begin coming our way. Obedience to His Word pays too well, so well that the just can live by faith without any "help" from Satan.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Bible is our authority. It is our final and ultimate authority in ethics. We can make these statements in spite of the unpopularity of such stance because of the kind of authority that Scripture is. Human freedom of choice, freedom of the will, and human dignity all remain intact under the tutelage of the Word of God, except for the false needs of our sinfulness. Here are some reasons for that:

1. Authority and authoritarianism are not the same. God is our Lord, but He does not lord over us. Smedes suggests that,

Authoritarianism and authority are related as sickness and health. Authoritarianism is a pathological caricature of authority. Authoritarianism is sick compensation for weakness; authority is a healthy experience of strength. Authoritarianism works only when people surrender their own wills; authority works only when people give free and critical consent<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, our experiences of human authority tend to color all, even God's authority.

2. The Bible presents to us God as a Father who *calls* us to act and speak in harmony with our original nature. He does not force, nor does He allow all the consequences of disobedience to fall on us (Ecclesiastes 8:11). He calls, and He knocks. It is thus that our freedom to choose to hear and return and our freedom to will to open the door, enters into cooperation with Him for our eternal good.

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<sup>36</sup>L. Smedes, *Mere Morality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 73, 74.

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3. As free moral agents, we all must appear before the judgement seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9). We, and we alone, are responsible for our actions. If we accept a will of another, how will we then face the Judge if our actions are really not completely ours? Can we still be accountable for them?

What appears at first as a serious moral dilemma is, in fact, wonderful news. With the Bible as our guide, with decisions made in harmony with its teachings, with words spoken in tune with its vocabulary, I am assured that in the day of judgement I will not have to stand alone. No, it will not be the Bible which will defend me. In fact, I will have no accusations charged against me, because even when my being, my acting, and my speaking, do not always match the Biblical standard, against my best intentions and commitments, I am assured that an Advocate will stand in my place. Then Christ, The Advocate, will face Himself, The Judge, for me. This is the hope and the goal of Christian Biblical ethics.

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