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**BIBLICAL AUTHORITY & BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS
FOR ETHICS**

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Biblical Authority & Biblical Foundations for Ethics

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Introduction¹

In their 2003 book on ethics,² Glen Stassen and David Gushee note that “the issue of authority, in particular *biblical authority*, is a *recurring question* in church life and in *Christian ethics*.”³ Reflecting on how Christians actually make decisions, Stassen and Gushee indicate that during the Holocaust some Christians went primarily to the *Bible* for direction as to how to treat Jews in need; frequently, such persons also prayed for direct *divine guidance*; others turned inward to a religiously informed *conscience*; many looked to the *moral tradition* of their churches; while others turned to current *church leaders* for counsel. “These five sources of authority, in some mix . . . can be seen as the most distinctively Christian sources of authority.”⁴

In line with the above observation, Old Testament theologian Walter Kaiser recognized that the “traditional link between the *Bible* and *Christian ethics* has been seriously challenged”

¹This article assumes the practice of reliable, general hermeneutical principles, procedures, and practices that are applicable to every portion of Scripture, such as utilizing an accurate translation, understanding the context, appropriate application, etc., such as in Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 58-104; cf. Lee J. Gugliotto, *Handbook for Bible Study: A Guide to Understanding, Teaching, and Preaching the Word of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995).

²Ethics deals “with what is good and bad or right and wrong or with moral duty and obligation;” *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Unabridged, 1986. Specifically, *Christian ethics*, primarily through an examination of the Bible, explores the kind of moral character that Christians need to develop, the nature of the moral agents, the moral behavior expected, the purposes for which ethical action is required, and the means available for its performance; Elton M. Eenigenburg, *Biblical Foundations and a Method for Doing Christian Ethics*, ed. Susan E. Eenigenburg (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 14.

³Glen H. Stassen, and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 81 (emphasis added).

⁴*Ibid.*, 82.

and even flatly repudiated during the 20th century.⁵ For example, Reinhold Niebuhr alleged that any use of the Bible as an *authority in ethics* was to make the Scriptures “a vehicle of sinful sanctification of relative standards of knowledge.”⁶ About three decades later, in a so-called “magisterial article on Scripture and ethics,”⁷ James Gustafson proposed a “looser use of Scripture,” and categorically claimed that “Scripture *alone* is *never* the final court of appeal for Christian ethics.”⁸ Taking that notion a bit further, Lisa Cahill suggested “that *Scripture* and other sources, such as *tradition, experience, the empirical sciences, and philosophy*, are not even fully distinguishable from one another.”⁹ Christopher Marshall concurred that, “while the five components may be conceptually distinguished, they are in practice inseparable,” and are “intertwined.”¹⁰ Indeed, Richard Jones concluded that “in practice nobody actually uses the Bible alone as the *sole authority*, even if they claim that they are relying upon scripture alone.”¹¹

Other scholars, like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, allege that the Bible’s message has “multivalent and often *contradictory meanings*.”¹² Similarly, Philip Wogaman maintained that the biblical legacy contains a “variety of ethical perspectives” which stand in tension with one

⁵Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 39 (emphasis added).

⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1947), 2:152 (emphasis added).

⁷Lisa Sowle Cahill, “The New Testament and Ethics: Communities of Social Change,” in David K. Clark, and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds., *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 1: *Theory and Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 101.

⁸See James M. Gustafson, *Theology and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974), 145 (emphasis original for “alone;” emphasis added for “never”).

⁹Cahill, 101 (emphasis added).

¹⁰Christopher Marshall, “The Use of Scripture in Ethics,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (July 1994): 225. The “five components” of Marshall are essentially the same as those of Cahill, the only subtle shift being the emphasis of Marshall on that of the “Spirit-in-community,” so as to avoid one’s experience being too subjective.

¹¹Richard G. Jones, *Groundwork of Christian Ethics* (London, England: Epworth, 1984), 61 (emphasis added).

¹²Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*

another, such as “grace versus law,” and “love versus force.”¹³ Thus, charging that there is no consistent ethical message to be found in the Bible,¹⁴ it is deduced that the Scriptures “can *never* function as the *final authority* for today’s ethical issues.”¹⁵

This allegation of the so-called “moral diversity” of the Bible,¹⁶ is often coupled with the argument about the supposed unbridgeable gap between the biblical world and our postmodern society. As Jack Sanders concluded:

The ethical positions of the New Testament are the children of their own times and places, alien and foreign to this day and age. Amidst the ethical dilemmas which confront us, we are now at least relieved of the need or temptation to begin with Jesus, or the early church, or the New Testament, if we wish to develop coherent ethical positions. We are freed from bondage to that tradition.¹⁷

In view of challenges such as these, it is hardly surprising that voices are being raised “questioning whether the Bible can be regarded as a meaningful *authority* for the *moral life*.”¹⁸ This minimizing of the relevance of the message of Scripture can be observed from the very manner in which various respected scholars have related to the Bible. In a recent book, *Scripture and Ethics*, Jeffrey Siker sought to analyze how the Bible has actually been used for ethics by eight selected Christian thinkers: Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Bernard Haring, Paul Ramsey, Stanley Hauerwas, Gustavo Gutierrez, James Cone, and Rosemary Radford Ruether.¹⁹

(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 42 (emphasis added).

¹³J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 2-15.

¹⁴See Paul Jersild, *Spirit Ethics: Scripture and the Moral Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

¹⁵See Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 151 (emphasis added).

¹⁶See *ibid.*, 151.

¹⁷Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament: Change and Development* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 130.

¹⁸Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 75 (emphasis added).

¹⁹Jeffrey S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

According to one reviewer, Siker's study suggests that, "for *none* of the writers did the *Bible* have *any* effective 'authority'."²⁰

Interestingly, it was another Old Testament theologian, Gerhard Hasel, who sketched out "the roots of the eclipse of authority" of Scripture. He noted that three revolutions in western thought have left an indelible mark on culture, society, and theology. First, in the field of natural science, the Copernican revolution "made a lasting impact not only on science but also on the understanding and *authority* of the *Bible*."²¹ This new view contended that "science is no longer informed by Scripture, but Scripture is now to be interpreted by means of the conclusions of science."²² This meant that, as Edgar Krentz put it, "the Bible's authority was diminished."²³ A second revolution was in the field of history. A new procedure for the study of history was formulated, which understands history as a closed continuum of an unbroken series of causes and effects. This historical critical method purports, as Rudolph Bultmann noted, "that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers."²⁴ In short, the Bible must be seen simply as any other ancient literature, and cannot be regarded as supernaturally inspired, an aspect fundamental to the question of its nature and its authority.²⁵ The third major movement involved in the crisis of the authority of Scripture is the revolution in philosophy, centering largely in Immanuel Kant. His critique led to the collapse of

²⁰C. S. Rodd, "Talking Points from Books," *The Expository Times* 109 (October 1997): 2 (emphasis added). Furthermore, from a practical perspective, Siker's "study fails almost entirely to address the question how the Bible might relate to specific ethical dilemmas;" 3.

²¹Gerhard F. Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1980), 23 (emphasis added).

²²Ibid.

²³Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 11.

²⁴R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith*, S. M. Ogden, ed. (Cleveland/New York: World Publishing, 1960), 291-292, [quoted in Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God*, 24].

the traditional arguments for the existence of God, which precipitated the developments of arguments for God's existence on the basis of practical reason.²⁶ As a consequence, from this time on, "theology has become anthropology."²⁷ Acknowledging this "demise of authority," J. I. Packer suggests the need for a "strategy for restoring the *authority* of Christian faith and *morals*,"²⁸ a task we will now set out to consider.

The Issue of Biblical Authority

The new *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines *authority* as "a power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior."²⁹ However, since the term *authority* is related to the word *author*, "one that originates or creates," it also suggests a personal relationship.³⁰ Thus, the one who *creates* has the right to *command* proper *conduct*, as much as an automobile manufacturer has the right to make a manual for correct car maintenance.

Though made in the context of a discussion of the role of governing powers, Paul's divinely-inspired statement has crucial implications, when considered from a broad, principled perspective: "For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God" (Rom 13:1 NKJV).³¹

²⁵See Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God*, 26, 23.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 27.

²⁷O. McDonald, "Immanuel Kant," *New Dictionary of the Christian Faith*, 561, [quoted in Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God*, 28].

²⁸J. I. Packer, "The Reconstitution of Authority," in David K. Clark, and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds., *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 1: *Theory and Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 96 (emphasis added).

²⁹*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, eleventh edition (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003).

³⁰See Esther D. Reed, *The Genesis of Ethics: On the Authority of God as the Origin of Christian Ethics* (London, England: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2000), 2-3.

³¹Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the New International Version (NIV). Other versions used are the Contemporary English Version (CEV); Contemporary Jewish Bible (CJB); English Standard Version (ESV); Jerusalem Bible (JB); New American Bible (NAB); New

The Divine Inspiration of Scripture

Based on key passages, such as 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:19-21, the Judeo-Christian heritage has consistently affirmed that Yahweh, the Creator, has disclosed Himself in revelation.³² “This revelation is inscribed by inspiration in the Bible,”³³ where God has revealed Himself in the propositions of Scripture. The term “inspiration” means that in both its *conception* and its *content* the Bible is recognized as coming from God. As such, the authority of Scripture for ethics is “rooted in its being divinely inspired.”³⁴ Talking about “God’s *inspired* word,” Ellen White notes that, “here is *divine authority*.”³⁵ It is the “word of the living God that is to decide all controversies.”³⁶ “This sacred book, *inspired by God*, and written by holy men, is a perfect guide under all circumstances of life.”³⁷

In practical terms, God’s Word provides guidance for life’s decisions, as a “lamp on my path” (Ps 119:105 CJB). Or, as Paul noted to Timothy: “All Scripture is given by God and is useful” for “showing people what is *wrong* in their lives,” and “for teaching how to live *right*” (2 Tim 3:16, 17 NCV). Ellen White concurred: “The Bible presents a perfect standard of character.”³⁸ It is “the *great standard of right and wrong*, clearly defining sin and holiness,”³⁹ the

American Standard Bible (NASB); New Century Version (NCV); New English Bible (NEB); New English Translation (NET); New Living Translation (NLT); New International Reader’s Version (NIRV); New King James Version (NKJV); New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); Revised Standard Version (RSV); and Today’s English Version (TEV).

³²Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God*, 22.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴See Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 56, where he notes that this is the traditional view.

³⁵Ellen G. White, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: The Ellen G. White Estate, 1987) 1:201 (emphasis added).

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1923), 100 (emphasis added).

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific

“*standard of every practice,*”⁴⁰ that is, “the correct *standard of right and wrong and of moral practice.*”⁴¹

Jesus and the Sources of Authority

The New Testament reveals that though Jesus made use of various sources, He accepted the Bible of His day, the Old Testament, as an undisputed authority (see Matt 5:17-19; Luke 10:25-28; 16:19-31).⁴² In His lifestyle, His teaching and His preaching, He repeatedly appealed to the Scriptures, quoting, alluding to, or showing the impact of every aspect of His Bible. Jesus immersed Himself in the Word, knew it well, and lived what it taught.⁴³ He stated that, “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped” (Luke 16:17 NRSV). For Jesus, “the Scriptures are thoroughly *authoritative for our ethics.*”⁴⁴

The discussions that Jesus had with thought leaders of His day, regarding certain religious traditions, make the centrality and authority of the Scriptures even more strikingly clear. In an incident recorded in Mark 7:1-23, He juxtaposed “human tradition” – the carefully developed “tradition of the elders” – over against the Scriptures, rejecting the former in favor of the later when they conflict. He referred to Scripture as the “commandment of God” (Mark 7:8 NKJV), and the “word of God” (Mark 7:13), and their practices as the “traditions of men” (Mark 7:8). On scriptural authority Jesus rejected their anti-biblical tradition.

Clearly, Jesus did utilize other “general” sources. For example, the Sermon on the Mount,

Press, 1943), 422 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰Ellen G. White, *My Life Today* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1980), 25 (emphasis added).

⁴¹Ellen G. White, “Science and the Bible in Education,” *Signs of the Times*, 20 March 1884 (emphasis added).

⁴²See Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God*, 31; Stassen, and Gushee, 84.

⁴³See Stassen, and Gushee, 84.

⁴⁴*Ibid.* (emphasis added).

as well as numerous parables, show His generous use of *reasoning from human experience*, and *observed facts of nature* (see Matt 6:26, 28; etc.). He was deeply moved by the evidences of God's providential design and care. But, His life shows that He was focused on the centrality of Scripture. Therefore, "if Christian ethics is following Jesus, we have little choice but to follow his lead on this point, to affirm along with him the supremacy of *Scripture* as the *central authoritative source for Christian ethics*."⁴⁵

Issues in the Interpretation of Scripture for Ethics

Even when the above concept – that Scripture is a God-inspired guide – is embraced, the matter of biblical authority is still an issue. Put simply, the problem is as follows: "If the Bible when interpreted in one way gave a quite different impression from the Bible when interpreted in another way, then the Bible in itself could hardly be taken as a *decisive authority*."⁴⁶ Paul Jersild notes that "there is in fact no reference to the message of Scripture, whether theological or ethical, that does not involve *interpretation*."⁴⁷ As Hasel astutely observes: "The crisis of the *authority of the Bible* is thus very much a matter of *how it is interpreted*."⁴⁸

From his analysis of the various writers who have grappled "with how and in just what way the Bible is normative for Christians," Walter Kaiser has identified the following six hermeneutical stances:⁴⁹

1. *The Bible Used as a General Orientation to Ethical Issues*. Scripture alone is not sufficient, and can supply only a basic orientation towards particular decisions, made mainly by the community (especially the church).⁵⁰

⁴⁵Ibid., 85 (emphasis added).

⁴⁶James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London, England: SCM Press, 1973), 8 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 64 (emphasis added).

⁴⁸Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God*, 17 (emphasis added).

⁴⁹Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 48-55.

⁵⁰See for example Gustafson, 309-316.

2. *The Bible Used in Multiple Variations.* Pluralism is the preferred approach here. There is no *one* right way – that is the only “right” conclusion.⁵¹
3. *The Bible Used as a Source of Images.* Put simply, one cannot expect to find biblical solutions to contemporary problems. However, one can see how Bible writers approached the problems of their day.⁵²
4. *The Bible Used as a Witness to God’s Will.* But how does one know what God’s will is? This method suggests that we are presented with a wide range of alternatives from the text, and many approaches to an issue, resulting in considerable pluralism.⁵³
5. *The Bible Used as One Source Among Many.* Since the Bible writers were not confronted with many of the current moral problems, the Scriptures are not the sole source of ethical wisdom. Guidance may come from other human sources.⁵⁴
6. *The Bible Used as a Shaper of Moral Identity.* Here the Bible’s use in decision-making and action is not as significant or helpful as it is in character formation; however, it can and ought to be a major force in molding dispositions and intentions.⁵⁵

In summary, Kaiser concludes that for all of these hermeneutical stances, “Scripture is *not* viewed as supplying the *content* (whether propositional or conceptual) for ethical character or decision making.”⁵⁶ While “each of the solutions contains some aspects of the truth,” none of them will work!⁵⁷ Instead, Kaiser lays down the challenge, that, “somehow and in some way Christian ethicists are going to need to grapple with the ethical and moral materials of the Bible

⁵¹See for example Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., “The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics: A Look at Basic Options,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 19 (1965): 149-162.

⁵²See for example C. Freeman Sleeper, “Ethics as a Context for Biblical Interpretation,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 22 (1968): 443-460.

⁵³See for example Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 124-138.

⁵⁴See for example Charles E. Curran, “Dialogue with the Scriptures: The Role and Function of the Scriptures in Moral Theology,” in *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 24-64.

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Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 107-121.

⁵⁶Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 56 (emphasis added).

(in all their genre) seriously and exegetically in detail,” in order to discover the connection between the Bible and ethics.⁵⁸

Biblical Foundations⁵⁹ for Ethics

There is no way to minimize the reality that, as Christopher Marshall notes, “every claim to understand the Bible presupposes finite human interpretation, and every interpretation is invariably conditioned by a wide range of (extra-biblical) personal and contextual factors.”⁶⁰ As Paul Jersild notes:

As Christians we bring our moral and social issues to Scripture, together with deeply held convictions about them that have been shaped by a variety of influences from within the culture, including the ethos of our churches. From within this context we then draw our conclusions as to how the message of Scripture should be understood and applied. . . . What we receive from it [i.e., the Bible] reflects the cultural orientation and the questions and concerns – the particular agenda – that we bring to it.⁶¹

Increasingly, modern scholars acknowledge that all approach the Bible with certain preunderstandings, presuppositions, and biases.⁶² Nevertheless, every interpreter must seek to be as objective as possible, to “make a conscious effort in the study of any passage to become more and more aware of his own pre-understanding and presuppositions and seek to control as much as possible his own biases.”⁶³ Furthermore, as Richard Davidson notes, “Interpreters must make a decision that their preunderstandings will derive from and be under the control of the Bible, constantly open to modification and enlargement of their ideas on the basis of Scripture.”⁶⁴

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹The basic understanding of the term “foundation” is as in the dictionary: A principle upon which something stands or is supported.

⁶⁰Marshall, 226.

⁶¹Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 64.

⁶²See Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 67.

⁶³Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God*, 77.

⁶⁴Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 67.

Christians who believe the promises of the Bible can ask and trust that God will transform their minds so that they increasingly adopt and incorporate the presuppositions of Scripture rather than depending on their own biases (see Rom 12:1-2).⁶⁵ Jesus Christ personally promised the Spirit of Truth to His disciples as well as to all His followers: “When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13 NKJV). Through the study of the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God Himself “creates in the interpreter the necessary presuppositions and the essential perspective for the understanding of Scripture.”⁶⁶ In brief, through the power of the Spirit (John 16:7-9, 13-16), and the sanctifying of the written word (John 17:17), we can overcome relativistic subjectivism, and discern the objective truths of Scripture, as God intended for us His children.

Proposals for the Use of Scripture for Ethics

Even a cursory perusal of the Bible will show that “God did not send us a theology or ethics text but a compendium of letters, poetry, visions, discourses, prayers, and laments.”⁶⁷ While ethics “is the central theme or dominant interest of a number of the books,”⁶⁸ there is an “*immense variety* of biblical literature which might be pertinent to ethical concerns.”⁶⁹ These include commands, laws, warnings, exhortations, prohibitions, vice and virtue lists, wisdom sayings, proverbs, allegories, narratives, living examples, dialogues,⁷⁰ prophetic oracles, historical events, eschatological information, liturgical material,⁷¹ counsel, pastoral admonitions,

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God*, 77-78.

⁶⁷Hollinger, 151.

⁶⁸T. B. Matson, *Biblical Ethics: A Guide to the Ethical Message of the Scriptures from Genesis Through Revelation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 281.

⁶⁹Birch, and Rasmussen, 161 (emphasis original).

⁷⁰See Marshall, 229.

⁷¹Birch and Rasmussen, 161.

prescriptions, and the call to imitate Christ.⁷²

Paul Jersild has suggested that, while not exhaustive, most of the Bible's ethical message can be classified under the following four basic concepts: (1) Laws or Commandments; (2) Paradigms or Models of conduct; (3) Principles or Ideals; and (4) Exhortations and Imperatives.⁷³ Recognizing these essential types of ethical material, and in an effort to provide an overall structure for factors such as ethical reflection, moral behavior, and character formation, scholars have proposed various models for as to how to actually engage in biblical ethics.⁷⁴

1. *A Reference-Manual View*⁷⁵

First, the Bible has been viewed as a direct guide to moral living – a book of rules, an instruction manual, or a reference book. Here, the Bible is sometimes seen as not merely providing principles, but rather as a work that embraces the particularities of life, furnishing

⁷²See Ron du Preez, "Interpreting and Applying Biblical Ethics," forthcoming, in a volume on biblical hermeneutics, to be published by the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, MD.

⁷³Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 65-66. See also, Paul Jersild, *Making Moral Decisions: A Christian Approach to Personal and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 23-25. Also, note the various "forms of ethical guidance in the Bible" listed by Hollinger, 162-173, which include casuistic law, apodictic law, principles, biblical paradigms, and moral examples and narratives.

⁷⁴I am indebted to the following writers for models, summaries, outlines, and critiques of approaches for the use of Scripture in ethics: Miroslav M. Kis, "Biblical Narratives and Christian Decision," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9/1-2 (1998): 26-28; Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 14-19; Richard N. Longenecker, "Four Ways of Using the New Testament," in David K. Clark, and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds., *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 1: *Theory and Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 185-190; John C. Brunt, "Making the Bible Relevant for the Moral Life," *Journal of Adventist Education* 56:5 (Summer 1994): 14-16; John Brunt and Gerald Winslow, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20:1 (Spring 1982): 4-15; William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 12-17; Larry Lichtenwalter, "Living Under the Word: The Pragmatic Task of Moral Vision, Formation, and Action," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9/1-2 (1998): 99; Barnabas Lindars, "The Bible and Christian Ethics," *Theology* 76 (1973): 180-188; and Long, 149-159.

⁷⁵Two other approaches have been more popular among Roman Catholics than Protestants: (1) That of seeing Scripture as merely a reminder of the supposed natural law already in the human agent; and (2) The belief that Scripture calls on Christians to join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation, including even armed revolution if necessary. In the first case the fact of sinful human nature is

specific guidelines for ethical decisions.⁷⁶ Over time, some scholars, adopting a more carefully crafted view, have concluded that these rules “belong to one or more moral principles from which they are derived and to which they apply.”⁷⁷ This nuanced approach accords well with the properly-prioritized perspective of Jesus, when He said: “You should have practiced the latter [justice, mercy, and faithfulness], without neglecting the former [returning a tithe on the mint, dill and cummin]” (Matt 23:23).

2. *A Principles-Only Approach*

A second model places *all* the emphasis on the universal principles which can be found in Scripture. The interpreter must look beneath the regulations in order to discern the universal principles which presumably gave rise to such legislation, and after discovering them, apply those same principles to present-day issues. While of value, this approach stakes too much on the skill of individual interpreters, without adequately identifying the essential intra-scriptural hermeneutical guidelines needed to safeguard the process of discerning universal principles. Unless done aright, the interpreter may be misled by relying on the “basic principles of this world

overlooked (see Jer 17:9), while in the second, only specific texts are utilized without seriously taking into account the broader context of Scripture.

⁷⁶This “reference-manual” view is not to be confused with the “theonomy” of scholars such as Greg Bahnsen. For example, Bahnsen claims that “*All* men [Christian and non-Christian alike] are held responsible by God to obey *all* of His law in every area of their lives” including the charge that all magistrates in any age or culture or society must obey, “God’s penal demands, even that of capital punishment;” Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, expanded edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1984), 493 (emphasis original). See also, Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel,” (pp. 93-143) in *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 142, where he notes that, “the civil precepts of the Old Testament (standing ‘judicial’ laws) are a model of perfect social justice for all cultures even in the punishment of criminals.”

⁷⁷Kis, “Biblical Narratives and Christian Decision,” 26-27; see also, Miroslav M. Kis, “Christian Lifestyle and Behavior,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 675-723; Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 43. Also, note the major section below, titled “Intra-Scriptural Guidelines to Differentiate Laws.”

rather than on Christ” (Col 2:8).

3. *A Personal-Encounter Emphasis*

A third approach places *all* the stress on God’s free encounter through His Spirit with a person as that individual reads Scripture. In other words, the Bible does not present general moral principles or even rules of action; but, the Christian is to act in response to the personal command of God. While it is vital for the believer to remain open to the voice of God, especially as He speaks through His Spirit (see Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; etc.), the question arises: How is one to specifically hear the “command of God,” and how does one know that it is God’s command and not that of another voice?

4. *A Contextual-Love Model*

A fourth method, rejecting the so-called “legalism” of those who utilize rules and/or principles, and the “subjectivism” of the encounter approach, maintains that “whatever is the most loving thing in the situation is the right and good thing” to do.⁷⁸ No action is morally wrong: Adultery, blasphemy, even prostitution are right and good,⁷⁹ as long as it is the “most loving” thing in that particular context or situation. While serving as a helpful reminder of the importance of showing genuine love for people (see John 13:34; 15:13; etc.), this method should be avoided due to its distortion of Scripture. “Love is the fulfilment of the law” (Rom 13:10), and not the denial or rejection of it.⁸⁰

⁷⁸Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 65.

⁷⁹See, for example, *ibid.*, 74, 104, 146, 163-165; see also, Lewis B. Smedes, *Mere Morality: What God Expects of Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 17-18, 177. For instance, referring specifically to the Ten Commandments, Fletcher asserts: “Situation ethics has good reason to hold it as a *duty* in some situations to break them, *any or all of them*,” Joseph Fletcher, 74 (emphasis original). Smedes concurs, saying: “Situations in which doing what love commands requires us to do what a commandment forbids are familiar,” Smedes, 17.

⁸⁰Some have suggested that Christian living should be governed by the principle of *agape* love, a

5. *A Response-Imitation Method*

Fifth, the Christian moral life should be understood as one of response and imitation; not an imitation of the externals of Jesus' ministry, but rather a transformation of the heart (see 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 2:5; 2 Pet 3:18, etc.). This process requires daily communion with God through prayer and a regular Spirit-directed study of Scripture to lead one in the contemplation of God and His goodness. Thus, when confronted with difficult issues, the Christian response comes "super"-naturally (as a "fruit of the Spirit"), because quality time has been spent with God, learning what He values and what pleases Him, and what compassionate action would be morally appropriate in any given situation.

In short, to varying degrees, each of the above models provides valuable insights or perspectives into how to approach the study of ethics in Scripture.⁸¹ Now that we have surveyed basic approaches proposed for the use of Scripture for ethics some indispensable factors for reliably interpreting the moral material of the Bible need to be considered.

The Sevenfold Task of Interpreting Biblical Ethics⁸²

To explore and understand the moral themes of the Bible the interpreter must engage in

more principled "love" than the flexible view of situationism. However, this approach is also problematic. For example, it actually reduces the moral authority of Christ when it is used as a pretext to set aside His specific commands. Also, if *agape* love "requires" the setting aside of one of the Ten Commandments, it would suggest that the human agent is wiser and more loving than the Creator God.

⁸¹One additional caution is in order: The "problems" in interpretation often lay not in the Bible only, but they are also part of the interpreter. Psychological analysis has made it clear that, though done unconsciously, everyone reads and interprets selectively. Interpreters choose the things that tend to favor the outcome hoped for, blanking out the elements their fears and anxieties prefer not to see; Eenigenburg, 8.

⁸²While there are obvious similarities between the sevenfold task outlined above and the four proposed by Richard Hays (see *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 3-7, and also the helpful summary in Lichtenwaller, "Living Under the Word," 99-100), it must be noted that Hays does not discuss prayer as one of the critical aspects of interpretation, nor does he discuss a "christological" focus, or a *sola scriptura emphasis*; and, neither does he attempt to ground his four tasks in the very methods

various overlapping and integrated critical operations. These undertakings can be identified through an examination of the life and teachings of Jesus. In addition to His personal example and His explicit exhortations regarding prayer, practical guidance for extracting ethics from Scripture can be learned from various encounters Jesus had, one of which specifically dealt with matters of morality (see Luke 10:25-37; 24:25-47). An integration of the essential methods used by Jesus on these occasions brings to light a vital sevenfold task incumbent on every interpreter of the Word.⁸³

1. *Supplication – The Submissive Task*

Jesus' words and works show the indispensability of prayer (see Mark 6:46; 14:38; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:28; 18:1; etc.). As Ellen White cautioned: "Never should the Bible be studied without prayer . . . for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit"⁸⁴ (see also Matt 7:7; John 16:13; James 1:5; etc.); for, "without the guidance of the Holy Spirit we shall be continually liable to wrest the Scriptures or to misinterpret them."⁸⁵ Interpreters must thus be submissive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in order to have their thoughts and lives shaped by the Word.⁸⁶ This is Stage One – *supplication*, where the interpreter humbly seeks for divine guidance in the study of the Bible. This submissive task responds to the vital question: "*What does the Holy Spirit desire to teach us?*"

2. *Revelation – The Foundational Task*

observed in the ministry of Jesus, as indicated above.

⁸³Obviously, this approach is applicable not only for understanding the ethical materials of Scripture, but can be used more broadly as well.

⁸⁴Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1908), 91.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 110.

⁸⁶For more on the prayer life of Jesus, see Charles E. Hoekstra, "An Examination of the Prayer Life of Jesus to Ascertain the Relation of Prayer to the Pastor's Work" (D.Min. dissertation, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1987).

As Jesus walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, He could simply have revealed His wounds in order to convince them as to who He really was. “But Jesus determined that their faith not be based primarily upon physical phenomena but rather on the testimony of the Scriptures.”⁸⁷ Thus, only after they were convinced by the written Word concerning the mission of the Messiah, did Jesus disclose His identity by revealing His wounds, in the breaking of the bread (see Luke 24:25-31). In a similar manner, during His earlier ministry Jesus repeatedly referred to the written word of God as the basis for life, and the foundation of His work (see Matt 4:4, 7, 10; 12:1-7; etc.). This emphasis on the Scriptures as the fundamental authority in the life of the believer, forms Stage Two – *revelation*. Thus, the foundational task of the Bible student is to inquire: “*What does the written Word of God say?*”

3. *Observation – The Exegetical Task*

When Jesus was first approached by “an expert in the [biblical] Law” with a question, He responded with a counter-question, “What is written in the Law?” (Luke 10:26). Beyond simply referring to the Old Testament writings, Jesus at times put emphasis upon the meaning of a single word (e.g., John 10:34),⁸⁸ and thus took great care to faithfully represent the meaning of crucial terms found in these sacred writings. Since biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek are no longer living languages, it is vital for the modern interpreter to “engage in careful study of crucial words in the passage under consideration.”⁸⁹ Thus, Stage Three, *observation*, calls for reading the text carefully. This exegetical task answers the query: “*What does the specific passage actually*

⁸⁷Richard M. Davidson, “Walking With Jesus on a Sunday Afternoon,” *Perspective Digest* 3:2 (1998): 11.

⁸⁸See also Ron du Preez, *Polygamy in the Bible*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series, vol. 3 (Berrien Spring, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1993), 248-250, where Jesus (in Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:8) uses the Septuagint version in order to bring out the sense of the original statement in Genesis 2:24 more clearly.

say?”

4. *Identification – The Christological Task*

On the way to Emmaus, Jesus “explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures *concerning himself*” (Luke 24:27). Later, in speaking with the eleven disciples, Jesus essentially repeated this point about the focus of Scripture, by saying, ““When I was with you before, I told you that everything written *about me* by Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must all come true”” (Luke 24:44 NLT). Or as He stated so unequivocally: “These are the Scriptures that testify *about me*” (John 5:39). In other words, “The Bible is not flat; Christ is its peak and its center. No moral issue should be addressed apart from consideration of the meaning of Jesus Christ for reflection on that issue.”⁹⁰ This attention to Jesus Christ forms Stage Four – *identification*. This christological task asks the vital query: “*What does this text teach about Jesus?*”

5. *Synthesization – The Integrative Task*

This reading of the text, however, must not be done in isolation from the rest of Holy Writ. In fact, the importance of seeing passages within their larger canonical context is emphasized by Jesus on His trip to Emmaus. Here Jesus “explained to them what was said *in all the Scriptures concerning himself*” (Luke 24:27; cf. 24:44). This expanded reflection upon Scripture forms Stage Five – *synthesization*. By placing individual texts within their broader canonical context, the interpreter can find coherence in the moral vision of Scripture. This integrative task answers the query: “*What do the Scriptures as a whole say?*”

6. *Interpretation – The Theological Task*

Returning to Jesus’ encounter with the expert in the law, we find Him asking, “How do

⁸⁹Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 78.

⁹⁰Stassen, and Gushee, 97.

you read it [i.e., the Law]?” (Luke 10:26). A careful reading of this interview indicates that this second question of Jesus was not merely a restatement of His first query, “What is written in the Law?” In the immediate and broader usage of the phrase “have you not read?” (see Matt 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16, 42; etc.), it becomes apparent that this question deals with more than simply enunciating words – it deals with meaning. As the New English Translation puts it: “How do you understand it?”⁹¹ This need for proper understanding of Scripture is what Jesus sought to provide His disciples on His resurrection day, when “He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45 NKJV). Stage Six – *interpretation* – thus has to do with understanding the passage for personal reflection.⁹² This theological task answers the basic question: “*What does this text mean for us?*”

7. *Application – The Pragmatic Task*

Finally, after the expert in the Law had appropriately responded by quoting two pivotal passages, Jesus challenged him, “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28). After telling the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus essentially repeated this charge, saying, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). Stage seven, and most vital for morality, thus deals with *application*. This pragmatic task, that has to do with living out the Word in concrete everyday life, responds to the essential question: “*What then shall we do?*”

Naturally then, the ultimate concern of the faithful, committed Bible-believer would be: How is one to determine what the divinely-directed universal absolute moral requirements are? To this matter we will now turn our attention.

⁹¹See also, the essentially identical rendering in the NIV and the TEV.

⁹²This is similar to Calvin’s “third use of the law,” which relates to how it restrains the believer “from the slippery path of transgression;” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter VII.

Intra-Scriptural Guidelines to Differentiate Laws

Since the Bible is crucial for Christian ethics, scholars have examined the use of Scripture in ethics.⁹³ Yet, David Clark and Robert Rakestraw note a disturbing trend:

The emerging consensus among many scholars gives decreasing legitimacy to the prescriptive uses of Scripture and places increasing emphasis on the descriptive nature of biblical ethics. . . . Most devalue prescriptive portions of Scripture such as specific moral rules and commands. Many refuse even to use the Bible as a source of general moral principles.

Most contemporary ethicists outside the conservative Christian tradition propose an illustrative rather than a normative use of Scripture. In this view, the *Bible does not prescribe moral absolutes for godly conduct*.⁹⁴

The newer narrative/virtue-oriented ethics is usually presented as an alternative to the conventional duty-based or results-focused ethical approaches.⁹⁵

While a few conservative scholars have produced ethics texts showing that the Bible does communicate prescriptive absolute moral laws,⁹⁶ “talk about divine moral commands is extremely unpopular,”⁹⁷ as Richard Mouw observes. There could be many reasons for this, besides the fact that many do not accept the Bible as authoritative for their lives. For one, humans do not like being told what to do, by anyone including God.⁹⁸ Also, some avoid absolutes for fear of “legalism,”⁹⁹ or due to the alleged conflict between the “spirit” and the “letter” of the law.¹⁰⁰

⁹³David K. Clark, and Robert V. Rakestraw, “The Use of the Bible in Ethical Judgments,” in David K. Clark, and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds., *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 1: *Theory and Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 180.

⁹⁴*Ibid.* (emphasis added).

⁹⁵Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 5.

⁹⁶See, for example, Erwin Lutzer, *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes*, Christian Free University Curriculum Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981); Robertson McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989); Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*.

⁹⁷Quoted in Terrance Tiessen, “Toward a Hermeneutic for Discerning Universal Moral Absolutes,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36/2 (June 1993): 189.

⁹⁸Tiessen, 189-190.

⁹⁹This is often an unfortunate misunderstanding of legalism. See, for example, the excellent

Then, even some theologians do not feel “that it is possible or legitimate to identify universal moral absolutes in Scripture.”¹⁰¹

For the sincere Bible-believer, however, there are sufficient reasons for which to continue to believe in universal moral absolutes. One reason is that Christian morality is based on the unchanging nature of God (e.g., Mal 3:6; 1 Pet 1:15, 16). Moreover, since humankind is sinful by nature, there is a need for absolutes in order to live together in some sort of harmony; for without any absolutes, there would eventually be anarchy.¹⁰²

Yet, the astute Bible reader will soon see that there are many biblical regulations which different Christian communities, to varying degrees, no longer keep. In fact, sincere believers have at times become confused when reading the specific commands of Scripture. For example, on reading his Bible a new believer came across the matter of circumcision (see Gen 17:10; Exod 12:48; Lev 12:3; etc.), and was wondering whether this practice was still mandatory. Then, there was the church board that voted to purchase hats for women who showed up at church without any head-coverings (see 1 Cor 11:5-7). And what about the regulation that states: “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (Lev 19:19)?¹⁰³ While one of the most common ways of dealing with this problem “was to make a distinction between the civil, ceremonial, and moral

analysis of the topic of legalism from a biblical perspective, in McQuilkin, 67-74.

¹⁰⁰This false dichotomy is based on a misreading of Romans 7:6. The broader context shows that while Paul is rejecting mere external obedience, he is calling for a spirit-empowered allegiance to God’s eternal law. Paul affirms that “the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Rom 7:12 NKJV), and calls for “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6 NLT).

¹⁰¹Tiessen, 190.

¹⁰²Ibid., 191-192. The shared human nature also “makes all people alike in fundamental ways that are more significant than the cultural variations that differentiate them;” *ibid.*, 192.

¹⁰³See further examples of such laws in William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 14-15; see also, Verne H. Fletcher, “How Shall We Use the Bible in Christian Ethics?” *Theological Review* XIII/2 (1992): 109.

law of God in the Old Testament,”¹⁰⁴ this method is not adequate for the plethora of regulations in both Old and New Testaments. The question thus arises: Are there any intra-scriptural guidelines to aid the interpreter in the task of discerning which regulations are cultural practices, and thus no longer binding, and which are clearly transcultural absolute norms, that are still required of all believers? Several proposals will now be outlined to facilitate this process of interpretation.¹⁰⁵

Proposals for Discerning Transcultural Absolutes

1. *Reflection of the Moral Nature of God*

Universal moral absolutes can be identified by their basis in the moral nature of the Creator. For example, the Ten Commandments have an obvious connection with God’s own nature. Since He is the only true and living God, who created humanity, He alone is to be worshiped, His name revered, and His day of rest hallowed (Exod 20:1-11). Because He is the Giver of human life, humans are forbidden to take it (vs. 13).¹⁰⁶ God is truth; therefore His

¹⁰⁴Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 44.

¹⁰⁵Incidentally, a recent trend in ethics is to suggest different connotations for critically important words in the Decalogue. For example, the ninth commandment is seen as legal language, primarily forbidding malicious perjury. Thus, at times any type of deception has been promoted to preserve human life. However, contrary to this restricted view, careful study of multiple passages (especially in the original languages) conclusively shows that Bible writers of the Old and New Testaments understood this moral law to include all types of deceit (see, for example, Gen 18:15; Lev 19:11; Josh 7:11; 1 Kings 13:18; Jer 5:12; Hos 4:2; Matt 15:19, cf. Mark 7:22; Rom 1:28-32, cf. Rom 13:9). Similar word studies are needed on other laws. For example, it is suggested that “adultery” in the seventh commandment is restricted to a man having sex with the wife of another. Others maintain that the sixth commandment forbids only “murder,” but permits some kinds of killing. Linguistic study by some calls into question such conclusions; yet, more needs to be done on the intra-scriptural meaning of terms such as these.

¹⁰⁶Some have inverted the proscriptions of the Decalogue into positive commands; e.g., “You shall not kill” (NET), has thus been restated: “You shall protect human life at all costs.” This speculative inversion of the sixth commandment falsely elevates the preservation of physical life, and can result in so-called moral conflicts. However, when read as stated in the Decalogue, such a “conflict” cannot arise. As Ellen White challenges: “Death before dishonor or the transgression of God’s law, should be the motto of every Christian;” Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA:

image-bearers must emulate this character trait (vs. 16); and so forth. Since the Decalogue is so fundamentally part of God's nature it is not surprising to find it repeated so often throughout Scripture. Because God does not change, the universal moral norms that are grounded in His nature will transcend time and culture.¹⁰⁷

2. *Grounded in an Overarching Biblical Theology*

The interpreter must observe the morality and theology that undergirds each law,¹⁰⁸ as a means of determining its permanence. This would include noting the immediate and larger contexts, the explicit reasons given for the legislation, the direct or indirect references to earlier teaching, comparisons with similar legislation, as well as the principle of legitimate inference. Take for example, the issue of the intentional abortion of a human fetus, which is never explicitly addressed in Scripture. Moral perspectives, however, can be extracted from the study of civil laws given to the Israelite theocracy, in which the unborn was accorded the status of a living person (see Exod 21:22-25).¹⁰⁹ Legitimate inferences can also be drawn from the interchangeable terms used for pre- and post-natal human life (e.g., Luke 1:41; cf. 2:12),¹¹⁰ from the concern

Pacific Press, 1948), 5:147. Indeed, Ellen White states that, "Even life itself should not be purchased with the price of falsehood;" *ibid.*, 4:336.

¹⁰⁷ See Tiessen, 193-194.

¹⁰⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "How Can Christians Derive Principles from the Specific Commands of the Law?" in David K. Clark, and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds., *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 1: *Theory and Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 195-196.

¹⁰⁹ Admittedly, many English Bibles render this a "miscarriage," which calls for only a fine if the fetus dies, while the death of the guilty is required if the mother dies (e.g., NAB, RSV, NEB, JB). However, the Hebrew text shows that a "premature birth" is in view here in Exodus 21:22 (for which the fine is levied), while the death of *either* fetus or mother calls for the death of the offender, thus placing the fetus on par with the mother (for example, see the new NASB, NIV, ESV, NET). For more on this see, Ron du Preez, "The Status of the Fetus in Mosaic Law," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 1 (Autumn 1990): 5-21.

¹¹⁰ In accordance with its contextual biblical usage, the Greek term *brepheos* is defined as "new born, or unborn," or even "babe" (see Acts 7:19), by Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, newly revised and corrected (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), (emphasis added). A similar interchangeability is obvious from the use of the Hebrew word *yeled* (rendered "child" or "lad, boy") in

shown for the vulnerable (e.g., Deut 24:17; Ps 10:14-18; Isa 1:17), and from a comparative study of the overall sanctity-of-life theme in Scripture (e.g., Gen 9:6; Deut 19:4-13; Rev 21:8).

3. *Based in the Ethical Patterns of the Creation Order*

Universal moral norms are identifiable by their basis in the creation order. While some practices in Eden were obviously culturally relative, such as farming or the apparel of the first family, the moral practices established there have transcultural application. For example, regarding marriage, we find Jesus taking his questioners back to the created order (Mark 10:6, 9).¹¹¹ Similarly, as confirmed in the Decalogue, the seventh-day Sabbath is rooted in the creation order, and therefore has enduring moral significance. Likewise, as demonstrated from a careful intertextual investigation, the issue of clean and unclean meats also has its basis in creation, and is thus a moral issue.¹¹²

4. *Opposition to the Immoral Practices of Surrounding Cultures*¹¹³

When practices, intrinsic to pagan culture, are forbidden in Scripture, they are forbidden to all believers as well.¹¹⁴ For example, the Bible openly condemns bestiality, which to varying degrees was part of some ancient pagan cultures (see Lev 18:3, 23-28). Thus, when Scripture speaks directly against an ancient cultural practice, this serves to indicate a transcultural norm. In

many Old Testament texts (e.g., Exod 21:22; cf. 2:6).

¹¹¹See Tiessen, 194-195; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy*, Norman L. Geisler, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 143. This obviously has implications for the practice of polygamy and homosexuality.

¹¹²See Jifí Moskala, *The Laws of Clean & Unclean Animals in Leviticus 11*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series, vol. 4 (Berrien Springs, MI: ATS Publications, 2000).

¹¹³Webb proposes what he calls a "redemptive-hermeneutic movement" of ethics in Scripture, which is crucial for his study of the issues related to slaves, women, and homosexuals. As becomes obvious in this book (and as clearly stated in chapter 2), he does rely somewhat on data from the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman social contexts in order to develop this hermeneutic. Though his work evidences this reliance on extra-biblical materials, much value can still be gained from the manner in which he has dealt with the biblical materials in their own right. It is these intra-scriptural interpretations which are utilized in the text of this essay.

a similar vein, though many may consider ornamental jewelry as merely a cultural matter, closer examination of the biblical materials reveals that the call to avoid the use of such jewelry has transcultural moral implications.¹¹⁵

5. *Behavioral Expectations for Foreigners Living Among Israel*

When specific activities are mentioned as being required of both Israelite and the stranger that sojourns among them, such laws have a universal import.¹¹⁶ For example, Leviticus 17 and 18 forbid certain practices to both Israelite and foreigner: eating food offered to idols, eating blood or strangled animals, and sexually immoral activities (including incest, adultery, polygamy,¹¹⁷ homosexuality, and bestiality). The early church saw these same practices as absolute norms, and thus outlawed them (Acts 15:29).¹¹⁸

6. *Severity of the Penal Code for Infractions of Certain Laws*

Comparison of various laws in Scripture demonstrates that the more severe the penalty for the infraction of a regulation, the more likely it is that that practice will be transcultural.¹¹⁹ In Israel, approximately twenty-five cases carried the death penalty. For example, striking (Exod 21:15) or cursing (Lev 20:9) or disobeying (Deut 21:18-21) a parent, sacrificing children (Lev

¹¹⁴Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics," 143 (emphasis original).

¹¹⁵See Angel Manuel Rodriguez, *Jewelry in the Bible: What You Always Wanted to Know but Were Afraid to Ask* (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1999).

¹¹⁶See Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Distinction Between Clean and Unclean Animals in Lev 11: Is It Still Relevant?" *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 2/2 (1991): 103-104.

¹¹⁷See du Preez, *Polygamy in the Bible*, 70-81, where after an in-depth examination of both the literal and idiomatic interpretations of the passage, the following conclusion is drawn: "Lev 18:18 distinctly prohibits polygamy;" 80.

¹¹⁸See Richard M. Davidson, "Revelation/Inspiration in the Old Testament: A Critique of Alden Thompson's 'Incarnational' Model," in Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, Adventist Theological Society Occasional Papers, vol. 1 (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992), 123.

¹¹⁹Webb, 172.

20:1-5), kidnaping (Exod 21:16), witchcraft (Lev 20:27), rape (Deut 22:25), all called for capital punishment. Furthermore, all of these regulations are related in some way to the Decalogue, which is universal in application.

7. *Comparison of the Immediate Contextual Groupings*

A text or something within it may be transcultural to the degree that other aspects in a specialized context are transcultural. For instance, Scripture has many “vice and virtue lists” which usually represent a listing of core values, practices, attitudes, and character traits that the author wants the reader either to avoid or embrace (e.g., Prov 6:16-19; Jer 7:9; Mark 7:21-23; 1 Tim 1:9-10).¹²⁰ In fact, regarding Paul’s sin lists, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart maintain that they “never contain cultural items.”¹²¹ Out of the hundreds of items in these vice and virtue lists, basically all reflect transcultural values.

8. *Foundation in Careful Theological Analogy*

An aspect of a text will be transcultural if its basis is rooted in the character of the Godhead through theological analogy.¹²² For example, the Bible instructs believers to love others as God has loved them (1 John 4:11), to be holy, as God is holy (1 Pet 1:16), and to forgive “just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph 4:32). Since these attributes of God’s character are transcultural, they are to be exhibited in the lives of believers.

¹²⁰Ibid., 192. See also, Ezek 18:5-9; 18:10-13; 18:15-17; 22:6-12; Hos 4:2; Matt 5:3-10; Rom 1:24-32; 13:13-14; 1 Cor 5:9-11; 6:9-10; 12:20-21; Gal 5:19-20; 5:22-23; Eph 4:31-32; 5:3-4; Phil 4:8; Col 3:5-9; 3:12-14; 2 Tim 3:2-5; James 3:17; 1 Pet 4:3; Rev 9:20-21; 21:8; 21:15.

¹²¹Gordon D. Fee, and Douglas Stuart, “Distinguishing Culturally Relative from Normative Teachings,” in David K. Clark, and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds., *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 1: *Theory and Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 202.

¹²²Webb, 185.

9. *Expectations of a New Creation Community*

A passage may be transcultural if it is rooted in new-creation material.¹²³ For example, the various statements relating to “Jew” and “Greek” (see 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11), provided profound sociological implications of relational equality for the early church – implications that must continue to affect the conduct of believers. Likewise, as Webb notes, though foot-washing was a practice of the culture, “it was unthinkable for a master to wash a slave’s feet. Thus the reversal of roles, modeling a servant spirit for leaders, is a major transcultural component to the text. What gives us a credible read on the transcultural application of the passage is not where it has the support of former tradition, but where it breaks with the Old Testament and with the surrounding cultures.”¹²⁴ Thus, even the practice of foot-washing can be included here as a transcultural norm. Also, texts such as the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, are likewise transcultural.

10. *Consistency Throughout the Revelation of Scripture*

Universal norms can also be identified by their consistency throughout the progressive revelation of the divine will. This consistency is based on the fact that these laws are a transcript of God’s consistent and flawless character.¹²⁵ Thus, as Walter Kaiser perceptively observes, those who believe that divine moral absolutes conflict would in reality be pitting “part of God’s nature against other parts of his nature.”¹²⁶ If we encounter an apparent conflict, it is because “we

¹²³Ibid., 145.

¹²⁴Ibid., 204.

¹²⁵Compare for example texts dealing with the character of God (e.g., Lev 19:9; Deut 32:4), and those dealing with the character of the moral law (Rom 7:12; Ps 19:7).

¹²⁶Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 97.

have not properly defined one or both of the norms.”¹²⁷ Moreover, these universal laws will not only be consistent with one another, but also they will be consistent through all periods of human history.¹²⁸ they will be consistent through all periods of human history.¹²⁸

Proposals for Determining Culturally Relative Regulations

1. *Directly Expressed or Clearly Implied Statements in Scripture Itself*

The most obvious culturally-restricted practices are those which are specifically referred to as such, or which become evident in view of the context. For instance, in reporting the complaint of the Pharisees and scribes regarding the manner in which Jesus’ disciples were eating bread (Mark 7:1-23), the author includes a parenthetical statement (vss. 3-4) to indicate that such things were according to the “traditions of the elders.” Similarly, regarding hair-length, Paul talks about the common “practice” in the churches at that time (1 Cor 11:16), implying that the issue is culturally relative.

2. *Acknowledgement of the Temporal Nature of Ceremonial Regulations*

Much of the book of Leviticus, as well as considerable portions of some other Old Testament books deals with the cultic regulations given by God to Israel. The very order and context in which the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws were first given in Exodus 20-40 implies that only the moral laws are transcultural absolutes.¹²⁹ Moreover, Scripture itself indicates that

¹²⁷Tiessen, 200. Also, “in looking for consistency we should apply the general principle concerning the use of ‘clear’ passages (i.e., passages where the principles are more overt) to help in the understanding of passages that are more difficult to understand;” *ibid.*, 202.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 201. See also Ron du Preez, “A Holocaust of Deception: Lying to Save Life and Biblical Morality,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9/1-2 (1998): 210-216.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 201. See also Ron du Preez, “A Holocaust of Deception: Lying to Save Life and Biblical Morality,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9/1-2 (1998): 210-216.

¹²⁹Davidson, “Revelation/Inspiration in the Old Testament: A Critique of Alden Thompson’s ‘Incarnational’ Model,” 123-124.

the ceremonial practices foreshadowed the great acts of salvation history, as climaxed in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.¹³⁰ Many New Testament passages recognize this, thus indicating that these cultic stipulations were temporal in nature (e.g., John 1:29; 1 Cor 5:7; Col 2:14-17; Heb 10:1-10).

3. *Modification of the Original Cultural Norm by Scripture*

A text may be culturally bound if the Bible modifies the cultural norms. Consider, for example, inheritance rights. Only males had this right, until the daughters of Zelophehad bravely requested the inheritance of their family land in view of their father dying without any sons (Num 27:1-11; 36:1-13). In essence, as William Webb states, “they pushed the boundaries of patriarchy as it related to land inheritance.”¹³¹

4. *Incorporation of a Redemptive “Seed-bed” in the Text*

A practice may be seen as cultural if “seed ideas” are present within the rest of the Bible to encourage further movement on a particular issue. The seed idea describes something at an early stage, though not fully developed, but which is merely suggestive of what could be.¹³² For example, on the surface certain texts in Scripture appear to support slavery. Yet texts such as the following actually incorporate a “seed-bed” which undermines the practice, thus suggesting its cultural relativity: “We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks,

¹³⁰For a scholarly analysis of typological structures in Scripture, see Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical *tipos* Structures*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981).

¹³¹Webb, 77. See also the matter of who could initiate a divorce. Webb notes: “In something of an assumed fashion, the Old Testament limits the initiation of divorce proceedings to men (e.g., Deut 20:10-14; 22:19, 29; 24:1-4). The New Testament, however, extends the right of initiating divorce to women” (see Mark 10:12; 1 Cor 7:10-16); *ibid.*, 78.

¹³²*Ibid.*, 83.

slave or free” (1 Cor 12:13).¹³³

5. *A Break Away from Other Biblical Regulations*

Scripture may at times reveal some variance in the treatment of a subject, which on the surface may appear as even a contradiction. However, this radical breakout shows that the practice is merely cultural. For instance, the privileges and rights of the firstborn are so frequently theologized in Old Testament redemptive patterns (e.g., Exod 13:1-10; Num 3:11-13) and in New Testament christology (e.g., Rom 8:29; Col 1:15), that one might think that this is a transcultural value. However, several passages related to birth order, which consciously abandon the norm, suggest that firstborn prominence is merely a culture-bound custom (e.g., Gen 25:23; 48:12-20; 1 Sam 16:6-17:14).¹³⁴

6. *Recognition of Purpose/Intent Statements in the Legislation*

Sometimes the original purpose or intent of legislation is related to a cultural practice. Then, even though the intent may continue and the purpose be fulfilled in a different context, the original cultural practice appears to be time-bound. Consider, for example, the New Testament statement that Christians are to “submit” to the king (1 Pet 2:13). Does this mean that the Bible requires a monarchical system of government? This passage immediately provides the purpose for the admonition, “that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men” (1 Pet 2:15). In other words, while the underlying principle of respect toward political leaders and submission to the law still applies, the aspect of monarchy-type submission itself should be classified as a culture-bound element of the text.¹³⁵

¹³³See also, 1 Cor 7:21; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11; Phm 15-16.

¹³⁴Webb, 94. Similarly, while long hair served as part of the Nazirite vow, showing commitment to God (Num 6:1-21), Paul speaks of long hair as a disgrace to men (1 Cor 11:14).

¹³⁵

7. *Specificity of a Limited Recipient or Cultural Situation*

Specific commands to individuals in Scripture are more culturally confined than general statements. For instance, Jesus' commanded the rich young ruler, to "go, sell everything you have and give to the poor" (Mark 10:21).¹³⁶ Similarly, "gleaning" laws of an agricultural society (e.g., Lev 19:9-10), are time-bound, even though the principle of concern for the poor, as seen in both examples noted, is a transcultural obligation.¹³⁷

In brief, when one takes into account all the guidelines for determining whether a command has cultural or transcultural significance, the absolute norms of the Bible can be appropriately delineated. Since God's absolute moral "commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3 NASB), and since we know that we "can do all things through Christ" (Phil 4:13 NKJV), the challenge is "to live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world" (Titus 2:12 KJV). And when God's moral laws are written in our inmost being (Ps 119:11), with the Psalmist we will be able to say "I delight to do Your will, O my God" (Ps 40:8 NKJV).

Methodology for Discovering Moral Norms in Bible Stories¹³⁸

Cautions About the Interpretation of Scripture Narratives

What shall we do with Bible stories in which believers broke God's law? Some have referred to 1 Corinthians 10:11: "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition" (NKJV). Then, they have claimed that the manner in which Old Testament people lived provides us with "God-approved examples of how He wants us to behave

Ibid., 105-107; see also Christopher J. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 114-115.

¹³⁶See Tiessen, 199.

¹³⁷See God's concern and care for the poor: Exod 22:25; 23:6; Lev 19:10; 23:22; etc.

¹³⁸See Ron du Preez, "Epics & Ethics: Vital Biblical Principles for Interpreting Scripture Stories," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10/1-2 (1999): 107-140.

in similar moral conflicts.”¹³⁹ This verse, however, is a summary of the preceding passage, where Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians, “Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after *evil things* as they also lusted” (1 Cor 10:6 NKJV). Then Paul enumerates some of these evils, such as idolatry and sexual immorality (vss. 7, 8), together with some of God’s judgments (vss. 8-10). Thus, instead of merely mimicking Scripture stories, the immediate and broader contexts must be considered in order to distinguish between what the Bible actually teaches and what it simply reports to show how far believers drifted from God and His holy law.¹⁴⁰

In other words, there are examples in the Bible that we should *not* follow. Therefore, 1 Corinthians 10:11 is a summons to all believers, as Ellen White noted, to “avoid the evils recorded and imitate only the righteousness of those who served the Lord.”¹⁴¹ Bruce Birch, similarly aware that the “Bible story captures the sin and grace, the evil and the good,”¹⁴² concludes that “it is important to note that Israel’s story is *not* intended to model *normative moral behavior* in all its particulars.”¹⁴³ Thus, he cautions against glibly using Scripture chronicles for “moral prescription or principle.”¹⁴⁴

When it comes to using Bible narratives to instruct others we face a great danger – that of wrenching a “line from its scriptural context as a ‘proof-text’ for a moral stance that was actually

¹³⁹Norman L. Geisler & Paul D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 417.

¹⁴⁰Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 283.

¹⁴¹White, *Testimonies*, 4:12; see Miroslav M. Kis, “The Word of God in Christian Ethics,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4/2 (1993): 206-207.

¹⁴²Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 55.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 56.

formed on different grounds.”¹⁴⁵ This penchant for moralization can turn Bible stories into instruments of condemnation, that cause despair without hope, thus degrading Scripture to the level of an instrument of social control.¹⁴⁶ Moralization also can “keep us from getting all that the Biblical passage might have to say to us.”¹⁴⁷

An equally grave danger faces interpreters, when for personal use we select only “safe stories that make no demands and expect nothing in return, that fit comfortably with the stories we have already chosen for ourselves.”¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, there is the distinct danger “that we may use stories and incidents in Scripture to justify almost any action.”¹⁴⁹ For example, some may argue that, since David who was a “man after God’s own heart” had many wives, the practice of polygamy should not be condemned.¹⁵⁰

Recognizing the dangers of simplistically imitating Scripture stories, the following two biblically-sound cautions have been suggested:

- (1) Commendation of a person or notable action need not imply commendation of every element of the men and women cited.
- (2) Reporting or narrating an event in Scripture is not to be equated with approving, recommending, or making that action or characteristic normative for emulation by all subsequent readers.¹⁵¹

Hence, each story must be analyzed with regard to literary progression, dramatic structure, and stylistic features. “Though their communication is indirect, narratives nevertheless

¹⁴⁵Spohn, 5.

¹⁴⁶John Brunt, *Decisions: How to Use Biblical Guidelines When Making Decisions* (Nashville: Southern Publishing), 72.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸Birch, 63.

¹⁴⁹Brunt, 67.

¹⁵⁰See, for example, A. O. Nkwoka, “The Church and Polygamy in Africa: The 1988 Lambeth Conference Resolution,” *Africa Theological Journal* 19 (1990): 147; Douglas E. Welch, “A Biblical Perspective on Polygamy” (M.A. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1970), 60.

speak God's truth powerfully when they are *properly interpreted*.¹⁵² In brief then, a contextual reading of Scripture shows that "the NT writers saw in the OT a precious storehouse for moral instruction in Christian living."¹⁵³

One more aspect of these chronicles must be highlighted: that is, that "biblical narrative is replete with realistic figures seen in all their human frailty."¹⁵⁴ For example:

Literary scholars have long noted the amazing transparency of biblical portraits. Samson's carnality, David's lust, Solomon's political and religious compromise or Elijah's cowardice in running from Jezebel are all presented. . . . There was no attempt to hide the human frailty of biblical heroes.¹⁵⁵

True, characters such as Elisha and Daniel model perseverance and faithfulness in the face of pressure; yet "God, not the biblical heroes, is magnified throughout."¹⁵⁶ This adoration is nowhere better seen than in the book of Judges. "Every victory wrought is a triumph of God and of the faith of those who place their trust in Him."¹⁵⁷ Thus, rightly understood, Bible stories bring praise and honor to the God of the universe.¹⁵⁸

Proposals for Reliably Interpreting Scripture Chronicles

Bible narratives are crucial in that they cause us to reflect on ourselves and ask deeper

¹⁵¹Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 283.

¹⁵²William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., with Kermit A. Eckleberger, consulting editor, *Introduction to Biblical Literature* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 261 (emphasis added). These authors say that narratives are the most common literature; *ibid.*, 261-271.

¹⁵³Frank B. Holbrook, "Inspired Writers' Interpretation of Inspired Writings," in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, Gordon M. Hyde, ed. (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute Committee, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974), 139.

¹⁵⁴Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 159.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸Contrast this concept of God as the hero of Bible stories with the interpretation of the Joseph story noted below, in "Consideration of the Complete Narrative."

questions about ourselves.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, “stories are a key means by which scripture communicates.”¹⁶⁰ As Frank Holbrook noted: “No serious interpreter of the Bible can fail to recognize the significance of the principles by which the NT writers interpreted the OT. Although the principles are seldom explicitly stated, they can be derived by careful analysis.”¹⁶¹ Admittedly, even though one may do one’s best to “safeguard the importance of objectivity in interpretation,”¹⁶² there is no doubt that “different people can come to different legitimate interpretations of a story.”¹⁶³ Nevertheless, as will be shown below, “there are *limits* to what can [authentically] be read out of a story.”¹⁶⁴

1. *Consideration of the Complete Narrative*

Take for example, a recently published book on the life of Joseph. The story of Joseph is interpreted as one of “moral excellence, unswerving obedience, and relentless faithfulness to the living God.”¹⁶⁵ Painting a “perfect” portrait of Joseph, the author says:

In the preceding stories of Genesis, the focus has been on God’s faithfulness. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob repeatedly fell short of His expectations, though of course they continued to have faith in him. But in the Joseph story, we do *not see him fail in any area*. The biblical record presents *not a single instance of moral or spiritual compromise*. On the contrary, Joseph *always* responds in *total trust and obedience to God’s will*. . . . Joseph is a model of both the ideal person and the ideal people, accomplishing what Adam failed to do. His life looked forward to the Messiah yet to come. He casts *a vision of what God’s final generation of people can experience and must be*.¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁹Spohn, 5.

¹⁶⁰John Goldingay, *Models for Interpreting Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 71.

¹⁶¹Holbrook, 128. Several times in the New Testament, narratives from the Old are told; e.g., Acts 7; 13; Heb 11-13; 2 Pet 2; Jude. Also, the proper way of interpreting inspired stories was already evident in Old Testament times; see for example, Deut 9; 10; Neh 9; Isa 7; Hos 12.

¹⁶²Goldingay, 51.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴*Ibid.* (emphasis added).

¹⁶⁵Larry L. Lichtenwalter, *Out of the Pit: Joseph’s Story and Yours* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 10.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 10-11 (emphasis added). See also, Carlyle B. Haynes, *God Sent a Man: Joseph, Dreamer, Servant, Leader* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1962), 187, 188, 192, that conveys a

Ultimately, the question is whether or not the above conclusions concur with the scriptural account. For example, Ellen White correctly observes that Jacob’s “partiality and indulgence” of Joseph had actually facilitated certain “faults” in him as a lad, and “he was becoming self-sufficient and exacting.”¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, what about Joseph’s numerous deceptive actions toward his brothers over an extended period of time?¹⁶⁸

Admittedly, some have glossed over these deceptive actions, saying Joseph was merely “faking it,” or using a “circuitous” route. Others, apparently still attempting to uphold a morally flawless image of Joseph, refer to his actions as a “smokescreen,”¹⁶⁹ or a “facade.”¹⁷⁰ Moreover, these actions are considered appropriate since his “motive” was presumably noble – he wanted to know whether his father was still alive, whether his brother Benjamin had succumbed to a similar fate as he, and whether these men had been truly converted.¹⁷¹ But such thinking contradicts Romans 3:8, which “warns us not to say ‘Let us do evil that good may result.’”¹⁷²

True, there is no direct statement in the narrative specifically condemning Joseph for these misleading actions. However, careful examination of Scripture reveals that a lack of direct condemnation of conduct in a chronicle is no indication of the rightness of the deeds performed. Rather, the moral acceptability of the actions of Bible characters needs to be assessed on the

similar view of a morally faultless man.

¹⁶⁷Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 213.

¹⁶⁸See, for example; Gen 42:7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 20, 23; 43:29; 44:4, 5, 15, 17, 19.

¹⁶⁹Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 522.

¹⁷⁰Terrence E. Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis*, The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 630.

¹⁷¹See, for example, Haynes, 138-139; Lichtenwalter, *Out of the Pit*, 110-112.

¹⁷²Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 96.

basis of whether or not their conduct “violates a clear commandment of God.”¹⁷³ In his commentary on Genesis, John Calvin states that Joseph’s dissimulation when he met his brothers on their first trip to Egypt, “was joined with a falsehood.”¹⁷⁴ Calvin concludes that the Scripture chronicle reveals that Joseph suffered “from human infirmity,”¹⁷⁵ “was not without fault,”¹⁷⁶ told “many falsehoods,”¹⁷⁷ and “sinned grievously.”¹⁷⁸

Though specifically referring to the life of Jacob, these comments of Ellen White can fittingly apply to many Bible characters, including Joseph:

Inspiration faithfully records the faults of good men, those who were distinguished by the favor of God; indeed, their *faults* are more fully presented than their *virtues*. . . . It is one of the strongest evidences of the truth of Scripture, that *facts are not glossed over, nor the sins of its chief characters suppressed*.¹⁷⁹

Indeed, Ellen White appropriately notes that there is no evidence in Scripture that Joseph “ever claimed to be sinless.”¹⁸⁰ She indicates that Joseph as well as early Christian church leaders “felt their weaknesses, and, *sorrowful for their sins*, have tried to copy the pattern Jesus Christ.”¹⁸¹

Thus, in the case of Joseph, the *complete* narrative as recorded in the Bible leads to at least the following conclusions: That Joseph is an example of one who stood firmly against

¹⁷³Ibid., 97. See Ron du Preez, “A Holocaust of Deception: Lying to Save Life and Biblical Morality,” White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 309; White, *Testimonies*, 4:336; Ellen G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), 68.

¹⁷⁴John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 2:339.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 340.

¹⁷⁶Ibid.

¹⁷⁷Ibid., 369.

¹⁷⁸Ibid.

¹⁷⁹White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 238 (emphasis added); cf. *ibid.*, 717-718.

¹⁸⁰Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 3 books (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 3:352.

¹⁸¹Ellen G. White, “The True Standard of Righteousness,” *Review and Herald*, 31 July 1885

temptation, because of the relationship he had with God (Gen 39:8-10); that he displayed a forgiving spirit towards his brothers (Gen 50:15-21); and that, despite the evidences of Joseph's moral lapses, such as repeated deception, a gracious God was still willing to work in and through him to accomplish His will for His people. Seen this way, God is the hero of the story, and no one is placed on a pedestal as the paragon of perfection. As Scripture declares, Jesus alone is our perfect ethical example, the sinless model of morality (1 Pet 2:21-22; Heb 4:15; 2 Cor 5:21).

2. *Consistency with Available Information*

In an attempt to prove that it is right to ignore a moral law, as long as in so doing one keeps the "higher law,"¹⁸³ "David and his men who *broke* into the temple and *stole* the consecrated bread were declared guiltless by Christ (Matt. 12:3-4)." Then, based on this assertion, the following idea is promulgated: "Perhaps 'stealing' bread from the temple (that is taking it without permission of the proper authority) is not morally wrong when starvation of God's servant is the other alternative."¹⁸⁴ A meticulous reading of the original story, as found in 1 Samuel 21, sheds valuable light on the brief comment by Jesus, in Matthew 12. Fleeing from Saul, David and his men arrived at Nob where he *requested* food from the *priest*, Ahimelech. Since the only available food was the consecrated bread, for priests exclusively, Ahimelech, after receiving *guidance from God* (1 Sam 22:10), gave them the bread.¹⁸⁵ Thus, when this chronicle of the consecrated bread is interpreted in a manner *consistent* with the scriptural account, it

(emphasis added).

¹⁸³Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 120 (emphasis added). For a comprehensive response to these hierarchical ethical theories, see Ronald A. G. du Preez, "A Critical study of Norman L. Geisler's Ethical Hierarchicalism" (Th.D. dissertation, University of South Africa, 1997), available at the James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA.

¹⁸⁴Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 107.

¹⁸⁵Moreover, the restriction of the temple bread was a ceremonial and not a moral law; see, O. Palmer Robertson, "Reflections on the New Testament Testimony Concerning Civil Disobedience,"

becomes clear that “this incident cannot be used to show that Christ approved of breaking Old Testament [moral] laws because of expediency.”¹⁸⁶

3. *Clear Contextual Implications*

On occasion, when Bible accounts omit some details,¹⁸⁷ one might be lured into conjectural interpretation. For example, it has been asserted: “No doubt Obadiah the prophet engaged in some *deceptive activity* to save the lives of one hundred prophets of God (1 Kings 18:13).”¹⁸⁸ Thorough investigation of the biblical record indicates that there is no evidence that Obadiah engaged in “deceptive activity.”¹⁸⁹ The passage simply records that while Jezebel was murdering the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah hid one hundred of them, “and supplied them with food and water” (1 Kings 18:13).¹⁹⁰ If one is to surmise, as alleged, that Obadiah doubtless engaged in some type of deception in order to protect the lives of these men, then one could also assume that he probably stole the food and water for those men, since commodities were certainly in short supply during the famine. But this speculation beyond the *context*¹⁹¹ is unacceptable; it is far wiser to simply accept the text as it reads – as a story of a fearless, faith-

Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 33 (September 1990): 334.

¹⁸⁶Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics* (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible House, 1972), 77.

¹⁸⁷Note that in all stories there “are gaps, the things left unsaid,” for “one never receives a step by step, sequential presentation of everything;” Terrence O. Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 102-103.

¹⁸⁸Norman L. Geisler, *The Christian Ethic of Love* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 79 (emphasis added).

¹⁸⁹Furthermore, there is no evidence that Obadiah was a “prophet,” as also alleged.

¹⁹⁰While the issue considered above is whether or not it is ever right to use deception, it must be noted that Obadiah’s action can be seen as a courageous and selfless, biblically-justifiable act of civil disobedience (see, for example, Dan 1; 3; 6; Acts 5:29).

¹⁹¹The context of 1 Kings 18 is one in which God miraculously provided sustenance for His prophet Elijah (see 1 Kings 17:6-16; 19:5-8); thus, if one were to “speculate” within the context, might it not be wiser to assume that, in a similarly miraculous manner, God may have provided the bread and water to Obadiah, who then fed this to the 100 prophets of the Lord?

filled believer.¹⁹²

4. *Chronological Readings of the Text*

In the Bible we obviously do not have complete stories, recording every detail. Rather, we find “selected, emphasized, and interpreted accounts of historical events.”¹⁹³ For instance, John explicitly admits that his gospel does not include “many things that Jesus did” (John 21:25 NKJV). Nevertheless, he “indicates that the selective nature of his account did not impinge on its truthfulness.”¹⁹⁴ Unfortunately, some have conflated various Scripture stories so that crucial information is distorted. Take the case history of David. Frequently, in the discussion on polygamy one hears the argument: “David had many wives; yet, the Bible records that he was ‘a man after God’s own heart’.”

A chronological interpretation of the David chronicle reveals the following: It was right after Saul had presumptuously officiated as priest that Samuel informed him that he would lose his kingdom (1 Sam 13:8-14). In this context Samuel stated: “The Lord has sought for Himself a man after His own heart” (1 Sam 13:14 NKJV). The young David, selected by God to replace Saul, was handsome, healthy, and harmoniously living according to God’s will (1 Sam 16:7, 12). When read *chronologically*, the narrative shows that it was while David was unmarried, and before he became embroiled in polygamy, that God called him as “a man after His own heart.” In accord, Ellen White notes:

Skeptics have assailed [C]hristianity, and ridiculed the Bible, because David gave them

¹⁹²Incidentally, there is nothing innately immoral in the simple act of hiding. This can be observed by comparing God’s truthfulness (e.g., Num 23:19) with God’s hiding of people (e.g., Jer 36:26), as well as a consideration of the times when Jesus Christ, our sinless Savior, and one in whom there is no “deceit” (1 Pet 2:22), concealed Himself (Mark 6:30-7:24; John 8:59).

¹⁹³V. Philips Long, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 149.

¹⁹⁴*Ibid.* See John 21:24.

occasion. They bring up to Christians the case of David, his sin in the case of Uriah and Bathsheba, his *polygamy*, and then assert that David is called a man after God's own heart, and if the Bible record is correct, God justified David in his crimes.

I was shown that it was *when David was pure*, and walking in the counsel of God, that *God called him a man after his own heart*. When David departed from God, and stained his virtuous character by his crimes, he was no longer a man after God's own heart.¹⁹⁵

5. *Compatibility with the Decalogue*

When discussing moral matters, the issue of consequences often arises. For example, it is often claimed that if Rahab had not lied when hiding the Israelite spies, they *would* have been captured, and executed. Reasoning thus, that negative results must be rigorously avoided, Rahab has been applauded for her daring deception. Does this "silence" of direct condemnation of Rahab in Scripture mean that such action is morally acceptable? For example, nowhere is there any condemnation of the incest of Lot's daughters with their father (Gen 19:30-38). Since the oldest daughter had a son named Moab, who became the ancestor of Ruth, and ultimately of Jesus,¹⁹⁶ should one conclude that this case of incest was morally right because of its ultimate consequence – the birth of Jesus through this lineage centuries later? Obviously, in this case, just as in Rahab's, one must determine whether such behavior is *compatible* with God's eternal moral law, the standard in the judgment (James 2:12; Eccl 12:13, 14). As Jesus put it: "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. . . . But be faithful, even if you have to die" (Rev 2:10 NCV). Put

¹⁹⁵Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 4 vols. (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1864; reprint, Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1945), 4a:87. Admittedly, some texts are difficult. For example, 1 Kings 11:4-6 and 15:5 seem to say David was "always" a man after God's heart (except as regards his adultery). However, in addition to overlooking the chronological setting of that early commendation of David, such a conclusion ignores the immediate and broader contexts of the frequently made comparison between the kings of Israel or Judah, and David or Jeroboam. In brief, it appears that the only issue was that David did not worship idols or promote idolatry, whereas Jeroboam did (see, for example, 1 Kings 11:2-8, 33; 12:25-33; 14:7-16; 15:11-13; 16:25-26, 31; 2 Kings 14:3-4).

¹⁹⁶Compare Gen 19:37, Ruth 1:4, 4:13-22, and Matt 1:5, 16.

simply: “In deciding upon any course of action we are not to ask whether we can see that harm will result from it, but whether it is in keeping with the will of God.”¹⁹⁷

6. *Comparison with God’s Character*

A perplexing story is found in 1 Samuel 16:1-4. On the surface, it seems that God tells Samuel to deceive Saul. This is labeled, “clearly an authorized deception,”¹⁹⁸ or “at best a half-truth” which had “divine authorization.”¹⁹⁹ What are we to make of this story?

The passage immediately preceding 1 Samuel 16 has the account of Saul’s rejection of God, and then of God’s removal of the kingdom from him (1 Sam 15:26-28). Describing God as consistent and trustworthy, Samuel then says: “And also the Glory of Israel *will not lie*” (1 Sam 15:29 NASB). It appears significant that this affirmation of the truthfulness of God comes a mere seven verses before the problematic passage under consideration here. As such, it forms the correct contextual background for comprehending this confusing chronicle. Furthermore, the broader testimony of the biblical canon, that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; cf. Heb 6:18) and does not deceive (Num 23:19) must be taken into account when dealing with the unchanging character (Mal 3:6) of the God whose “words are truth” (2 Sam 7:28 NASB). Since the “deceitful deity” interpretation of 1 Samuel 16:1-4 contradicts the clear biblical pronouncements that it is impossible for God to deceive, it becomes clear that the story is incorrectly understood.

A satisfactory solution appears if the first part of verse 2 is seen as an interruption by Samuel in the middle of God’s instructions. Evidently, Samuel was not averse to interrupting someone (see 1 Sam 15:15-17); thus, when one removes this interjection, the directions form a

¹⁹⁷Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1939), 609-610.

¹⁹⁸Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 121.

¹⁹⁹Richard Higginson, *Dilemmas: A Christian Approach to Moral Decision Making* (Louisville:

cohesive unit. Under divine inspiration, Ellen White has done this:

“And the Lord said unto Samuel, How long wilt thou mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? fill thine horn with oil, and go, I will send thee to Jesse the Bethlehemite: for I have provided Me a king among his sons. . . . Take an heifer with thee, and say, I am come to sacrifice to the Lord. And call Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show thee what thou shalt do: and thou shalt anoint unto Me him whom I name unto thee. And Samuel did that which the Lord spake.”²⁰⁰

When one takes account of the *character* of God, as indicated in the immediate and larger contexts, then it is possible to contextually understand this story as one that upholds the standard of truth of a God “who cannot lie” (Titus 1:2 NASB), and of One who requires His people to emulate His character of veracity by similarly conducting themselves truthfully (see Exod 20:16; Lev 19:11; Prov 12:22; Eph 4:25; Col 3:9-10, etc.).

7. *Conformity to the Example of Christ*²⁰¹

There are people who have justified the use of deception by saying something like: “But Abraham and David used deception, and they were God-fearing men.” This, however, ignores the fact that the call in 1 Peter 2:21-22, to “follow in his steps,” identifies Jesus as the only moral standard for all. Concurring, Paul, in Colossians 2:8 cautions: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” In brief, the conduct of every Bible character must be measured according to this: Does it *conform* to the example of Christ? Does it reflect Jesus?

The polygamy of Gideon and Joash, the prostitution practiced by Samson and Judah, the prevarication by Abraham and Rahab, the murders by Moses and David, the deceptions by Jacob

Westminster/John Knox, 1988), 64.

²⁰⁰White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 637. The ellipsis noted “. . . .” is just as stated in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 637, the only place Ellen White deals in depth with this story.

and Joseph, are not models to emulate, even though these records were preserved for our instruction. Furthermore, Bible stories also show us how people lived faithfully. Miroslav Kis aptly concludes: “They set a norm for obedience. After enumerating a gallery of normative models in Hebrews chapter 11, Paul challenges us, his readers, to run the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the supreme normative model.”²⁰²

Application of Scripture to Issues Not Addressed in the Bible

A pastor once shared the following concern: One of the unmarried women in his congregation had come to him for counsel. She felt a strong urge to fulfill her mothering instincts; but, she was still single, her healthy child-bearing years were ticking away, and there were no unmarried Adventist men available. Since she did not want to adopt nor commit adultery to have a child, would it be ethically appropriate to conceive a child by means of artificial insemination? What a question!²⁰³

Though not “of the world” (John 17:16), Christians still live in the world (John 17:18). As a result, many are faced with an astounding array of relatively new ethical quandaries ranging from abortifacient drugs to zygote manipulation – including genetic engineering, cloning, gender selective abortions, surrogacy, organ transplantation, female circumcision, child pornography, homosexual marriage, physician-assisted suicide, suicidal terrorism, urban terrorism, ethnic cleansing (genocide), overpopulation, world hunger and widespread starvation, nuclear weapons, biological and chemical warfare, the depletion of natural resources, species extinction and animal rights. How is the Christian to respond to such new ethical quandaries not directly addressed in

²⁰¹For more on this issue for ethics in general, see below “Concluding Remarks.”

²⁰²Kis, “Biblical Narratives and Christian Decision,” 29.

²⁰³See D. Robert and Seslie Kennedy, “The Single Christian and Artificial Insemination,” *Ministry*, July, 1989, 6-7, for some implications for the child and the church in such a case.

Scripture? Various approaches have been suggested, one of which will be outlined below.

Divine Design for Human Dilemmas: A Corporate Approach²⁰⁴

When the early Christian believers were first confronted with a major ethical problem, a special church council was called (see Acts 15). Insights from this session provide procedures that the church can use as it seeks to assist believers in addressing the ever-increasing moral concerns of contemporary life. Recognizing the seriousness of the issue, these first-century Christians based their deliberations on scriptural principles, under the Holy Spirit's guidance. It seems John Calvin was right when he stated: "Here is prescribed by God a form and an order in assembling synods, when there ariseth any controversy which cannot otherwise be decided."²⁰⁵ Analysis of Acts 15 shows the various steps taken as these believers wrestled with the practical issue of circumcision.

1. *The Debate*

To begin with, there was serious discussion, indeed a "sharp dispute and debate" (vs. 2), among those affected. When the initial disagreement produced no conclusion, it was decided to seek for greater input from leaders and others at the headquarters of the church. Thus, "Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question" (vs. 2).

2. *The Delegation*

²⁰⁴For a more comprehensive study, see Ron du Preez, "Divine Designs for Dealing with Ethical Issues," *Ministry*, September 1996, 18-20.

²⁰⁵John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 reprint), 44.

A representative group was assembled to address the issue, including front-line *missionaries* (e.g., Paul and Barnabas), who had firsthand experience of the problems in the field; regular *members*, some of whom were affected by this issue (vs. 2; Gal 2:1-5); *those who had raised the issue* and were insisting on its continuance (Acts 15:5); *pastoral leaders* (e.g., Peter and John), who were providing guidance and nurture; *administrators* who were directing church affairs from Jerusalem (vss. 2, 4, 6, 22, 23); and *theologians* (e.g., James and Paul) whose biblical approach was needed for an acceptable resolution.

3. *The Deliberation*

This delegation became immersed in a wide-ranging open discussion. First, Paul and Barnabas began with personal testimonies, reporting “everything God had done through them” (vs. 4), and thus setting a proper spiritual tone for the conference. With fairness and open-mindedness, all sides were given the opportunity to present their perspectives. The sustained discussions that followed (vss. 6, 7) included well-reasoned theological reflections on God’s gracious gift of salvation, the universal availability of the Holy Spirit, and the Lordship of Christ (vss. 7-11). Then once again, Paul and Barnabas shared the providential way that God had been working “among the Gentiles” (vs. 12).

4. *The Dependence*

James, apparently the leader, then spoke up. Based on Scripture, he validated Peter’s experience, noting that this was a fulfillment of prophecy (vs. 15; cf. Amos 9:11, 12). Thus, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (vs. 28), and clearly based on concepts from the “law of Moses” (vs. 21 CEV), he recommended that the council make certain stipulations. Further proof of this reliance on the Bible is evident from the council’s rearranging of the sequence of the

prohibitions.²⁰⁶ As Hans Conzelmann put it: “These are the prohibitions of Leviticus 17-18 (in vs 29 they are even in the same order).”²⁰⁷

5. *The Decision*

Thus, through the Holy Spirit’s guidance and through dependence on the Scriptures, the final decision was carefully crafted. By its glaring omission, the council inferred that circumcision was no longer required.²⁰⁸ However, the same standards of moral conduct, required of both Israelite and foreigner,²⁰⁹ were expected – lifestyle issues relating specifically to God (i.e., idolatry), to others (i.e., sexual immorality), and to oneself (i.e., food). Therefore, it is plain that while new converts were welcomed into Christian communion, they had to keep certain biblical moral standards.

6. *The Delivery*

Once the Spirit-directed, Scripture-dependent conclusion had been finalized and recorded, “the apostles and elders, with the whole church” (vs. 22), decided to send Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Judas Barsabbas to Antioch to deliver the council’s decision. While the circumcision issue had apparently been a major concern in Antioch, the Jerusalem Council wanted their decision to have a larger circulation, “to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia” (vs. 23). Later,

²⁰⁶See the following that have shown the dependence of the Acts 15 requirements on the levitical regulations: F. D. Nichol, ed. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., 7 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976-1980), 6:312; F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 185; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 88.

²⁰⁷Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 118.

²⁰⁸The context shows that the issue at stake here was not the keeping of the Decalogue, but rather a lifestyle matter heretofore required of all faithful male Jews. There was clearly no debate concerning the immutability of the Decalogue; hence, the lack of reference to them.

²⁰⁹See the above section, “Behavioral Expectations for Foreigners Living Among Israel.”

Paul continued to disseminate these ethical standards as he “traveled from town to town” (Acts 16:4) on his journeys.

7. *The Development*

After delivering the council’s decisions to Antioch, Silas and Judas Barsabbas remained, “spending some time there” (Acts 15:33), saying “much to encourage and strengthen the believers” (vs. 32 NRSV). Also, Paul and Barnabas did similarly (vs. 35). Later, as Paul continued to share the lifestyle norms, he “urged them to follow these instructions” (Acts 16:4 CEV). As a result, “the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers” (vs. 5). In other words, not only did these leaders deliver the council’s decisions, but they were also involved in developing the faith of the members.

Though the Jerusalem Council met about 2000 years ago, this corporate approach to resolving a major moral matter is still relevant today. The manner in which this Christian community cooperated in their decision-making process provides a strong argument against the rampant individualism of the twenty-first century. The Bible-based, Spirit-guided paradigm of Acts 15 is worthy of emulating for the divisive issues of our time.

Clearly, as Richard Longenecker observes, “The Church of the first century and the writers of the New Testament did not settle every ethical issue in advance, simply because they were not omniscient and could not see every situation in advance. Nor did God by his Spirit so illuminate them that they could.”²¹⁰ Thus, the task falls to all subsequent believers, “to follow the path that they marked out for the application of those gospel principles.”²¹¹ This is what this essay has been attempting to do.

²¹⁰Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 27.

However, in doing this type of ethical reflection, believers need to be cautious. Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen warn: “The church must constantly guard against those who would declare moral imperatives in areas where the biblical witness does not warrant this.”²¹² Only the concerns clearly identified throughout the Word of God as ethical imperatives for God’s people “can be claimed as necessary marks of faith on biblical grounds.”²¹³ Indeed, “we are safe only if we base our decisions on principles found in Scripture,”²¹⁴ and, “we are assured of the help of the Spirit in our weakness. We walk by faith.”²¹⁵

Concluding Remarks

For the Bible-believing Christian, Scripture is the central source, the ultimate authority for Christian ethics. Indeed, as Carl Henry boldly asserts: “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.”²¹⁶

Scripture’s central purpose is to point to Jesus (John 5:39; 2 Tim 3:15-17), the Savior of the world, and Lord of all life; One who reforms and transforms the sinner (2 Cor 5:17). It is thus “the person of Jesus Christ who is normative for Christian ethics.”²¹⁷ True, some challenge this “imitation of Christ” concept.²¹⁸ Since “imitation” can appear as a mere external conformity, it

²¹¹Ibid., 28.

²¹²Birch and Rasmussen, 184.

²¹³Ibid.

²¹⁴Miroslav M. Kis, “The Word of God in Christian Ethics,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4/2 (1993): 208.

²¹⁵Robert B. Hannen, “Ethical Decisions and Biblical Precepts,” *Foundations: A Baptist Journal of History and Theology* 5:2 (April 1962): 124.

²¹⁶Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 339.

²¹⁷Verne Fletcher, “How Shall We Use the Bible in Christian Ethics?” *Theological Review* XIII/2 (1992): 125.

²¹⁸See, for example, Brunt, *Decisions*, 79; Alister E. McGrath, “In What Way Can Jesus Be a Moral Example for Christians?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34/2 (September 1991):

has been suggested that the phrase “being conformed to Christ” be used, since it speaks of an internal process of transformation by which the real presence of Christ gradually changes the individual.²¹⁹

What does it mean to be “conformed to Christ”? It is an accent on humility (Matt 11:29), love (John 13:34), and forgiveness (Col 3:13). It includes always doing “those things that please him [i.e., God]” (John 8:29 NET), and being “obedient to the point of death,” as Jesus was (Phil 2:8 NKJV); indeed, the believer is to “think and act like Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5 NCV), fearless of the future, but “faithful, even to the point of death” (Rev 2:10 CJB).²²⁰ In “crucial ways Jesus does model moral behavior for Christians.”²²¹

In his focus on Jesus Christ, as the core of Christian ethics, R. E. O. White says:²²²

*This is Christianity's unique contribution to ethics: the identification of the moral ideal with a historical person; the translation of ethical theory into concrete terms in a real human life; the expression of moral obligation in the language of personal loyalty; and the linking of the highest moral aspiration with the most powerful motives of personal admiration, devotion, gratitude, and love.*²²³

In brief, “the ultimate goal of the moral task is a Christ-like character.”²²⁴

We would do well to accept the following challenge from J. I. Packer: “We must all . . . once more *embrace the whole Bible* as the written word of God, to be interpreted on the assumption that it neither misinforms nor misleads. Only so, in my view, can our testimony carry

297.

²¹⁹McGrath, 29.

²²⁰On Jesus' death on the cross being “the paradigm for faithfulness to God in this world,” see, Richard B. Hays, “The Church as a Scripture-Shaped Community: The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18:3 (July 1994): 239.

²²¹Birch, 53.

²²²For a more in-depth treatment of this topic, see chapter 6, “The Son of God and the Life of Imitation,” in R. E. O. White, *Biblical Ethics, The Changing Continuity of Christian Ethics*, vol. 1 (Exeter, NY: Paternoster Press, 1979).

²²³*Ibid.*, 231 (emphasis original).

the *full authority of God*, and gain full authority with men [and women].”²²⁵

²²⁴Kis, “Authority, Bible, and Christian Ethics,” 440.

²²⁵Packer, 100 (emphasis added).