

TOWARD A HERMENEUTIC FOR DISCERNING UNIVERSAL MORAL ABSOLUTES

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There is a common recognition that God revealed himself in a form that was meaningful to the original recipients in their particular context in order to communicate his truth effectively. Biblical interpreters are not all agreed, however, concerning the method for discerning the timeless, supracultural truth in Scripture in order to obey God in our own time. This becomes particularly obvious when one attempts to discern God's will concerning the place of women in church leadership. In defining principles for discerning universal moral absolutes, this issue will therefore be a frequent point of reference.

It would be nice to think that if we could simply agree on the hermeneutical principles we would all arrive at the same conclusions. Unfortunately that is not the case, for reasons that are probably found primarily in the preconceptions of the interpreter. In this regard one might consider, for instance, the stated preunderstanding of feminist interpreters enunciated by Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza¹ and the comments on that stance by Kenneth Himes.² Also of interest are the warnings of William Larkin,³ J. I. Packer⁴ and David Scholer,⁵ all of whom perceive a dangerous subjectivity at work in the interpretation of Scripture relative to the role of women, though they differ in their assessment of how subjectivity is incorrectly influencing interpretations of the Biblical passages.

I. THE POSSIBILITY OF IDENTIFYING UNIVERSAL MORAL ABSOLUTES

Richard J. Mouw has observed that "talk about divine moral commands is extremely unpopular."⁶ Fallen humans do not like to be told what to do,

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¹ E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," *Readings in Moral Theology IV: The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology* (ed. C. E. Curran and R. A. McCormick; New York: Paulist, 1984) 376.

² K. R. Himes, "Scripture and Ethics: A Review Essay," *BTB* 15/2 (1985) 69.

³ W. J. Larkin Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 108.

⁴ J. I. Packer, "In Quest of Canonical Interpretation," *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (ed. R. K. Johnston; Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 53-54.

⁵ D. Scholer, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Biblical Interpretation," *JETS* 30/4 (1987) 412.

⁶ R. J. Mouw, "Commands for Grownups," *Readings* (ed. Curran and McCormick) 67.

by God or by anyone else. Furthermore, at the theological level not all Christian theologians are convinced that it is possible or legitimate to identify universal moral absolutes in Scripture. In a recent survey of literature dealing with Scripture and ethics one scholar has concluded that "most of those who write on the topic of the Bible and ethics see the Scriptures as illumination, not prescription."⁷

Donald Bloesch contends that "the divine commandment can not be reduced to rules or principles, for it signifies the act of God speaking and people hearing in the divine-human encounter."⁸ As Bloesch understands our situation,

we have a reliable road map that gives us some idea of the path we are to follow in our cultural and temporal situation. This road map is the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, the Pauline injunctions, and similar commands in both the Old and New Testaments. These criteria provide an ethical parameter for the people of God, but they do not tell us precisely what God is now requiring of us. They point the way God would have us walk, but they do not reveal the concrete steps we must take here and now. This is provided only by God's commandment, which we hear in conjunction with the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount as well as with the kerygmatic proclamation.⁹

Bloesch contends that "there is no eternal moral law in the sense of unchanging principles," but there is "a consistent moral teaching associated with God's revelation in that what God commands at one time in history will be in harmony with what he commands on another occasion."¹⁰ What we do not have, in Bloesch's view, is moral law "in the sense of a propositional formula that is in and of itself absolute and eternal, that is there waiting to be discovered."¹¹

Bloesch differentiates his position from that of Karl Barth, whose work naturally comes to mind. Barth contended that we cannot decide in advance what God's commandment is. Bloesch proposes that "while we cannot presume to know God's command before he gives it, we can have some intimation of what he might command because of the biblical revelation, which his Spirit illuminates but never contradicts."¹² Rather than the existentialist or dialectical approach of Barth and Brunner or the "general principle" approach that Bloesch identifies with people like Carl F. H. Henry and Lewis Smedes, Bloesch calls for "prophetic casuistry."¹³ In this approach we begin with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, not with abstract norms. The spirit of Bloesch's call for obedience to Christ is refreshing. He demonstrates a desire to know God's will and to do it, and he believes that the Spirit of God will instruct us today, giving us God's com-

⁷ Himes, "Scripture" 70.

⁸ D. G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987).

⁹ *Ibid.* 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.* 9.

¹³ *Ibid.* 55.

mand in our situation. In the final analysis, however, it is difficult to discern a substantive difference between the application of Bloesch's position and that of Barth. Smedes' observation concerning the ethical theory of Barth and Brunner seems equally applicable: "If we had to wait for God to speak afresh at every new moment of decision, the moral life would be awesomely exciting. . . . But the ticket to such an adventure with God is too expensive if it means we must trade abiding moral law for an ethic of personal command."¹⁴

Our quest for a hermeneutic to discern God's will for our situation will be based on the assumption that Scripture is revelation in propositional form that communicated the abiding moral will of God to people in very specific contexts. The contexts were often different from our own, but we are able to distinguish the supracultural prescription of God's moral law from the particular form in which it was applied. Indeed, the more clearly we understand the particularities of the situation to which God spoke the better we will understand the intent of his moral revelation as it applies to us in our situation. This thesis will produce a different hermeneutic than does that of Bloesch, although our conclusions may be similar because of his own insistence that God's command today will be consistent with his commands in Scripture.

At many points in Scripture it is assumed that God has made his will clear in its essentials (cf. Deut 30:11, 14; Mic 6:8; Mark 10:19), with frequent reference to the decalogue as the place where that will is stated. Accepting this fact, Brevard Childs considers it of "fundamental importance," however, that we "recognize that at no point within the Bible is there ever spelled out a system or a technique by which one could move from the general imperatives of the law of God, such as found in the Decalogue, to the specific application within the concrete situation."¹⁵ For Childs the problem is compounded by the fact that, although God's will is unchanging, the Bible "describes in an inexhaustible variety of examples the unexpected and radical application of God's will to particular persons in definite situations."¹⁶

We dare not underestimate the complexity of discerning, in the multitude of specific commands of God addressed to diverse situations, the underlying moral intent that must be translated into active obedience in our own situation. We believe, however, that universal moral absolutes do exist, that God has revealed them to us, and that with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the use of good hermeneutical and exegetical procedures we can discern them.

The possibility of finding universal and supratemporal moral norms is assured by a number of constants. First, morality is based on the unchanging nature of God (Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17). Were it based simply on his will, as posited by nominalism, our task would be more difficult if not impossible.

¹⁴ L. B. Smedes, *Mere Morality: What God Expects from Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 9.

¹⁵ B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 126-128.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 129.

God demands that people be holy because he is holy (Lev 11:44–45; 1 Pet 1:15–16). He prioritizes love for himself as the supreme being and love for our neighbors who share in God's image (Matt 22:37–40), because he himself is love (1 John 4:7–8).

Second, universality is possible because of the shared human nature, created in God's image, that makes all people alike in fundamental ways that are more significant than the cultural variations that differentiate them. The fact that language can be translated is an indication that thought forms transcend cultural bounds.¹⁷

The third constant is the common experience of sinfulness. God's moral imperatives were addressed to people whose natural inclination was rebellion against God in an irrational self-destructiveness, and that continues to be true of all human beings in whatever culture. Universal moral norms do not derive from human fallenness, but they are addressed to people in their common experience of sin.

In setting out to discern universal moral principles we do not want to devalue the significance of the form in which those principles were originally revealed by God. This is presumably the intent of McQuilkin's insistence that "both the form and meaning of Scripture are permanent revelation and normative,"¹⁸ which is reaffirmed by Larkin in his thesis that "form and meaning are to be taken as norms unless Scripture itself indicates otherwise."¹⁹ We would not want to state the principle in those terms, but we can appreciate their desire to take seriously the fullness of divine inspiration, which extended to the limited cultural specifics as well as the universalizable principles. It is in and through cultural specifics that God has chosen to reveal himself and his will to us. As Harvie Conn rightly warns, we ought not to draw the distinction between universal norms and culturally conditioned commands in such a way that we devalue a "canon within the canon."²⁰

II. PRINCIPLES FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF UNIVERSAL MORAL ABSOLUTES

Given that God has revealed universal moral norms in a thoroughly inculturated written revelation, how can we distinguish the universally normative principles from their situationally limited applications? How do we determine whether we may eat pork, which God specifically forbade to Israel (Lev 7:7–8), or whether we must observe the Sabbath? How do we determine whether women ought to cover their heads in worship (1 Cor 11:5–6), whether members of the church ought perpetually to wash one another's feet (John 13:14), or whether women ought always to keep silent

¹⁷ Larkin, *Culture* 101–102.

¹⁸ J. R. McQuilkin, "Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent," *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible* (ed. E. Radmacher and R. D. Preus; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 222.

¹⁹ Larkin, *Culture* 314.

²⁰ H. M. Conn, "Normativity, Relevance and Relativism," *Inerrancy and Hermeneutics: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 196–197.

in the churches (1 Cor 14:34) and refrain from teaching (1 Tim 2:12)? These are the kinds of questions our hermeneutical principles must enable us to answer.

1. *Universal norms are identifiable by their basis in the moral nature of God.* Human morality has its basis in God's moral nature. This has been recognized in traditional attempts to distinguish between moral and ceremonial law.²¹ The distinction of categories of Biblical laws, however, such as moral, civil and ceremonial, has more recently been recognized as "not a very fruitful way into discovering the ethical relevance of the law as a whole."²² This is true for a number of reasons. It fails to give sufficient attention to the social background in ancient Israel. A study of the laws against that background better enables us to "discuss what significant moral features or principles emerge from *each* category so identified."²³ It reorients our purpose from simply trying to identify which laws are relevant to us to discerning first the moral relevance of the whole law within its original context.²⁴

As Christopher Wright has so helpfully demonstrated, there is too much overlap between the categories for us to isolate a separate category of "moral" law. Some laws are a combination of categories, such as cultic and criminal, civil and charitable, and "there are moral principles to be found in all the categories."²⁵ From within this perspective it is to be recognized that not even the decalogue is pure and simple "moral law." The first four commandments have cultic significance, the fifth is a family law, and the sixth and ninth are civil in their legislative outworking, but they all retain a character as criminal law in the sense of their being subject to penalty under the judicial system of Israel.²⁶ An analysis of the way in which each law found in Scripture functioned in its own context is thus essential to our distinguishing the moral principles that underlay those laws. It is these underlying principles, which might be considered "middle axioms," that form the basis of our own moral action in our particular situations.²⁷

The decalogue does, however, have an obvious relationship to God's own moral nature. It is his existence as the only true and living God, who created humanity, that makes it necessary that he alone be worshiped and that his name be revered. It is his relationship to Israel as their Creator and Redeemer that provides the rationale for the hallowing of a Sabbath day. The prohibition of improper taking of human life rests in the fact that human beings are themselves created in the image of God, who gives them life and whose prerogative it is to take away that life. Since God is truth,

²¹ Cf. e.g. G. L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley: Craig, 1977) 214.

²² C. Wright, *An Eye for An Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 152.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* 158.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

his image-bearers must speak truthfully. Since covenant faithfulness is an essential characteristic of God's immutability, human beings must keep covenant with one another, beginning with that most basic form of human covenant that is constituted by marriage.

Given the intrinsic relationship between the demands of the decalogue and the moral character of God himself, it is not surprising that "all the offenses for which there was a statutory *death penalty* in OT law can be related, directly or indirectly, to certain of the Ten Commandments."²⁸ The reverse, however, is not true, since the prohibition of coveting was not judicially penalizable and no property offense was capital in Israel's law. This itself was an important indication of the difference between God's value system and that of contemporary humanly formulated law codes that made property matters a capital offense but were more lenient in regard to the violation of human life.

The "ten words" are principles whose basis is so fundamentally in God's own moral nature that their repetition throughout the canon is not surprising. Whether Christians obey these laws as OT law or not may depend on the degree of their dispensationalism. But, with the possible exception of the fourth commandment, few would deny that the ten commandments make a universal moral claim on people of all ages. That it is precisely such law that is written on the consciences of even the unregenerate (Rom 2:15) is evident in the extent to which these basic proscriptions are found in cultures all over the world, albeit distorted in their particular applications by the effects of sin.

Universal moral norms that are grounded in the nature of God thus transcend time and culture. Because God does not change, the norms will not change. It is on this moral principle that Paul establishes norms for the conduct of husbands and wives. The moral model is found in Christ's love for the Church, and the moral imperative is based on the thesis that a relationship exists between husband and wife that is analogous to the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph 5:23-33).

2. *Universal norms are identifiable by their basis in the creation order.* Protestant ethics is much less likely to base its understanding of morality on the order of nature than is Roman Catholic ethics. This is generally not because Protestants deny that there is a natural moral order created by God. The problem is epistemological rather than ontic. There is, indeed, a natural moral order that one violates at one's own peril. The difficulty is that without special revelation we are not able accurately to reconstruct moral norms simply from our observation of nature. Our consciences are unreliable though guilt-producing witnesses to the law of God, and our intellects are not reliable either. Left to an unguided observation of nature we would neither know God nor ourselves with an acceptable degree of accuracy. Each of us would define God through our own fallen rational and moral considerations and would infer an ethic based on those perceptions. This is clearly not fruitful.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 153.

To deny that we can do natural moral theology in an adequate way, however, is not to deny that the natural moral order exists. What God has created is in varying degrees revelatory of his own nature and therefore consistent with it. Precisely because humans are created in the image of God the behavior that reflects God's nature is healthy for human nature. It would be foolish and self-destructive to behave in a way that violates our own nature. Precisely because that nature is created as it is by God it becomes immoral as well as unnatural to go against it.

We thus find Jesus taking his questioners back to the created order when asked about divorce. Covenant faithfulness within a monogamous relationship was God's intention "at the beginning of creation" (Mark 10:6, 9). Moses made provisions to protect women from the fickleness of sinful men, but the basis of morality is the created order, not the fallen order. Paul likewise takes men and women back to creation in instructing them concerning their relationship to one another (Eph 5:31). It is because a man and a woman become one flesh, in the leaving and uniting of the marriage covenant, that an analogy exists to Christ's relationship with his body, the Church.

In the same way Paul describes homosexuality as a behavior to which God judicially abandoned sinful people because it violated the natural order (Rom 1:26–28). God had created humans in his image, as male and female. There is a heterosexual morality that lies intrinsically within this created reality. In this instance to do what is unnatural is immoral. On the other hand the apostles do not use the creation-order appeal in talking about slavery. Unlike Aristotle (*Politics* 1.3–7) they did not believe it to be "natural."²⁹

In regard to the role of women in church ministry, the application of this principle to an understanding of Paul's instructions to the churches in Corinth and Ephesus has produced differing conclusions. B. B. Warfield viewed the grounds upon which Paul prohibited women at Corinth from speaking (1 Cor 14:34) as universal, based "on the difference in sex and particularly on the relative places given to the sexes in creation and in the fundamental history of the race (the fall)."³⁰ Likewise, in regard to 1 Tim 2:11–14, George Knight argues that this is an appeal to the creation order, and hence the prohibition of women teaching or having "authority over a man" is a universal prohibition. It disturbs Knight that other interpreters have set aside Paul's creation-order appeal through the argument that factors in the situation in Ephesus, in particular the lack of opportunity for the education of women, keep Paul's instruction from being normative for the twentieth-century American Church.³¹

Bloesch, on the other hand, finds no ground in this passage to formulate a universal injunction against women taking leadership roles in

²⁹ D. Clowney, "The Use of the Bible in Ethics," *Inerrancy* (ed. Conn) 228.

³⁰ B. B. Warfield, "Paul on Women Speaking in Church," *Outlook* (March 1981) 23–24, cited by Conn, "Normativity" 198.

³¹ G. W. Knight III, "A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Vs. Permanent," *Hermeneutics* (ed. Radmacher and Preus) 245. M. Van Leeuwen ("The Recertification of Women," *Reformed Journal* 36/8 [August 1986] 20) dubs the suggestion that the issue was lack of training a possible "example of feminist overkill."

church ministry. In his view there were particular cultural and historical factors in the context that led to the prohibition Paul directed to the women of Ephesus. He does not, however, rule out role differences between men and women as established in the creation order. "The duties of women are to be focused on child-rearing and household care (cf. 1 Tim 2:15; Titus 2:5)."³² Because of the undue influence of prophetesses connected with heretical movements, Paul "may be reminding the women in the churches under his jurisdiction not to neglect child-rearing and household duties, so that 'no one will malign the word of God' (Titus 2:5) or 'give the enemy . . . opportunity for slander' (1 Tim 5:14)."³³ From this perspective the creation order gives us the principle regarding the primary duties of married women in the home. It is this that is being violated by the women who were disrupting the church in Ephesus. Provided women are not neglecting their home duties, therefore, there would be nothing in Paul's prohibition to continually exclude women from teaching the Word of God in church.

J. I. Packer reckons that Paul "justifies the silence rule as appropriate because of the order of creation and the sequence of events in the fall," but he is unsure whether Paul was "imposing this rule to be law forever, or simply as a rule of prudence which experience had shown to be expedient *pro tempore* in the churches for which he was caring." Packer considers us lacking the pieces of information needed to achieve certainty on this matter and contends that "only certainties can command universal assent and obedience."³⁴

John Stott's tentative conclusion on this matter is that the "demand for female silence was not a prohibition of women teaching men, but rather a prohibition of any kind of teaching which infringes the principle of male headship."³⁵ He reaches this conclusion from the observation that there are two antitheses in Paul's instructions. On the one hand there is the matter of "learning in quietness," "being silent" and "not teaching." On the other hand there is the matter of "full submission" and "authority." It is the latter that appears to Stott to be the substantial point, because it "confirms Paul's constant teaching about female submission to male headship, and is firmly rooted in the biblical account of creation."³⁶ The requirement of silence and the prohibition of teaching, on the other hand, appear to be an expression of the authority-submission syndrome rather than an addition to it. This follows from the observation that "there does not appear to be anything inherent in our distinctive sexualities which makes it universally inappropriate for women to teach men."³⁷

³² D. G. Bloesch, *Is the Bible Sexist? Beyond Feminism and Patriarchalism* (Westchester: Crossway, 1982) 45.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Packer, "Quest" 51-52.

³⁵ J. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1984) 252.

³⁶ *Ibid.* Cf. p. 245.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

It is from the perspective of Biblical morality as corresponding to human nature that Packer calls for consistency in regard to the roles given to women in various human social institutions. He argues that it is a mistake for people to go halfway

when they approve women ruling men in secular affairs (because Scripture nowhere forbids it and sometimes exemplifies it) but not in the church or home (because Scripture requires male leadership in both), or when they approve women ruling in today's church (because Paul's restriction on this seems to be culturally determined) but not in the family (because biblical teaching on this seems to be transcultural and timeless). . . . These views overlook the fact that in his enactments about role relationship, whatever they are, God is legislating for the fulfillment of human nature as it was created in its two forms, male-masculine and female-feminine. . . . Human nature is either one thing or the other, and only across-the-board arguments are in place here.³⁸

An important distinction is here made by Packer between what is explicitly forbidden and "what, though unfitting, is not forbidden." The facts of creation "do not of themselves constitute a command, only an indication of what is fitting, and the various forms of ethical un wisdom and indignity which do not transgress explicit command cannot be categorized as sin."³⁹ Hence if Scripture indicated that women are not fitted to fulfill leadership roles in relation to men, that would not make it sin for a woman to be president, or prime minister, or a missionary church planter, or a bishop—unless, of course, Paul's rule concerning silence forbids the latter two possibilities.⁴⁰ This distinction is important. While universal norms frequently have the ground of their universality in the creation order, it does not follow that everything that is unnatural is immoral.

So, then, in seeking the universal moral norm we do well to begin with what derives from God's nature and then proceed to what derives from our human nature. In considering the relationships between men and women it is this creational focus that grounds our perspective in our mutual participation as God's image-bearers, which indicates our equality but also points to our distinctness. Though equally created in the image of God, we are yet different as male and female. It is precisely in discerning the nature and significance of that differentiation that evangelical interpreters have not reached agreement.⁴¹ In particular there is lack of consensus concerning the effect of the fall upon the relationship. Whether hierarchy within the marital relationship is of the created order and hence universal, or whether it was the result of the curse and hence removed in the order of redemption, is still a matter of contention. Certainly it is clear that sin warps the way in which male headship is exercised and that redemption

³⁸ Packer, "Quest" 49–50.

³⁹ Ibid. 52.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 53.

⁴¹ Cf. Van Leeuwen's argument that hierarchy cannot be read into Genesis 1 and 2 ("Recertification" 19).

must significantly define that headship within Christian families so that it is viewed as loving service rather than as domination.

3. *Universal norms are identifiable by transcendent factors in the situation of their promulgation and by the lack of situational limitation in their formulation.* Evangelical interpreters differ regarding the relationship of the OT to the NT. At one end of the spectrum are those who emphasize strong continuity and believe that the commands of the OT have a continuing validity for Christians. This is because "the law which God reveals in Scripture reflects His unchangeable holiness; consequently, unless *He* places limitations upon its application (e.g. telling *these* Israelites to execute *those* Canaanites at *this* time) the commands of Scripture reveal abidingly proper ethical relationships."⁴² At the other end of the spectrum are interpreters who consider only those commands that are repeated in the NT to be binding on Christians. Between these views are mediating positions that emphasize varying degrees of continuity but recognize a "development within the redemptive plan of God over time" so that significant differences are seen between the particular historical circumstances of the theocratic structure within which God related covenantally to Israel and the manner of God's dealing with the Church under the new covenant.⁴³ The position one reaches in regard to this question will significantly determine the extent to which OT laws are considered to be obligations only during a particular period in the redemptive program or, alternately, the extent to which they can be universalized.

Clearly, then, a decision regarding the relationship of the Testaments, and regarding the respective moral claim made by the Testaments upon post-Pentecost believers, must be made prior to the application of this principle. The manner in which Jesus and the apostles made use of the ethics of the OT and felt obligated to its moral prescriptions and proscriptions must serve as our guide in this matter.

Working within a position that grants significant continuity between the two Testaments, I assert that the decalogue has a unique position as moral norm both because of the circumstances of its giving and because of its obvious lack of limiting specifics. That it was a unique revelation of God's moral will in its context in the history of Israel is evident in the manner in which it was given and with which it was treated. Spoken by God with an audible voice, it was also written by his finger. It was placed in the ark of the covenant and set within the holy of holies (Exod 20:1, 19, 22; 25:16, 21; 31:18; 34:1; 40:20; Deut 5:4, 22-26; 9:10; 10:1-5).⁴⁴ It was continually the reference point of Israel's prophets, who condemned God's people for their breaking of the terms of their covenant with God.⁴⁵

⁴² Bahnsen, *Theonomy* 581.

⁴³ J. J. Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 268-269.

⁴⁴ R. T. Beckwith and W. Stott, *The Christian Sunday: A Biblical and Historical Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 14.

⁴⁵ Childs, *Biblical* 128.

An analysis of the commands themselves indicates a peculiarly timeless manner of statement.⁴⁶ The context of God's covenant with Israel is clear in the preamble, but the actual proscriptions are of a very general nature appropriate to fundamental moral principles that could be applied in detail in a great variety of situations. In fact there is nothing new about the decalogue. "All Ten Commandments had been part of the law of God previously written on hearts instead of stone, for all ten appear, in one way or another, in Genesis."⁴⁷

Universal norms will generally be stated with this absence of specific limitation. In other words their universality is "indicated by content that is not dependent for its meaning on its application within the first specific cultural context."⁴⁸

Larkin has chosen to work from the assumption of normativity of both form and meaning "unless Scripture itself indicates otherwise."⁴⁹ He therefore focuses on criteria for nonnormativeness rather than for normativeness. His discussion of the limitations that indicate such nonnormativeness is helpful in defining and applying this principle.⁵⁰ Types of limitation that indicate that we do not have universal norms are as follows: (1) A limited recipient. An example would be the ruler whom Jesus addressed very specifically in Matt 19:21.⁵¹ Limitations on the recipient might be set not just in the immediate context but also by subsequent revelation. (2) Limited cultural conditions for fulfillment as, for instance, in Peter's injunction concerning obedience to "kings."⁵² Clearly this does not apply in its exact form to people who do not have a king. (3) Limited cultural rationale. Here Larkin refers to 1 Cor 11:2-16 as a text that others have discerned to be limited in this way, but he does not agree that this is such an instance.⁵³ This point is obviously very much at issue in attempts to discern the relevance of Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church and to Timothy for establishing roles for women within the Church today. (4) A limiting larger context, such as would be indicated by the stage in the progress of revelation at which the command is found. This we have mentioned previously as the fundamental question of the relationship between the Testaments.

In focusing our attention on the moral norms of Scripture that have universal applicability we do not want to underestimate the significance of the culturally specific elements in divine revelation. The universalism of

⁴⁶ Cf. O. O'Donovan, "Towards an Interpretation of Biblical Ethics," *TynBul* 27 (1976) 67.

⁴⁷ W. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 82. Commandment one in Gen 35:2; two in 31:39; three in 24:3; four in 2:3; five in 27:41; six in 4:9; seven in 39:9; eight in 44:4-7; nine in 39:17; ten in 12:18; 20:3.

⁴⁸ Larkin, *Culture* 149.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 314.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 316.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 354. Childs (*Biblical* 129) cites this as an example of "the unexpected and radical application of God's will to particular persons in different situations."

⁵² Larkin, *Culture* 355.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 355-356.

God's command "is not lost in the text's cultural setting." Culture, rather, "becomes the providentially controlled matrix" out of which God's revelation comes to us.⁵⁴ While not wanting to speak in the same terms as McQuilkin and Larkin about the normativity of both form and meaning, I would not want to deny the revelatory significance of the form. It is in this way that so many of the specific prescriptions of the Pentateuchal law serve us. They are primarily case law that expresses the universally normative moral law by application in the details of life. The characteristic linguistic form of many of these laws indicates their limited and conditional demand.⁵⁵ Yet their inclusion in the revelation that the Spirit of God chose to inscripturate indicates that they have continuing value for us. Through them we gain a clearer understanding of the meaning of the universal moral norms that constitute God's continuing demand upon us.

4. *Universal norms are identifiable by their consistency throughout the progressive revelation of the divine will.* Among our evangelical presuppositions as interpreters of an inerrant Bible is the knowledge that God will not contradict himself. It follows, then, that in the identification of universal moral norms a norm that has been identified through application of the principles hitherto defined will not conflict with another norm that has elsewhere been clearly established. Should we encounter an apparent conflict it is obvious that we have not properly defined one or both of the norms. Further exegesis relative to both of them will have to be vigorously pursued. The other principles defined here should be useful criteria for checking the relative probability of each of the supposed norms.

We need to be aware that commands may be given that have the appearance of universal statements but that are not necessarily universal. The language may be universal in form and there may be nothing in the immediate context to limit the obligation, but a comparison with other portions of the canon may indicate that the statement cannot be universalized. A case in point would be Jesus' command to his disciples that they must not "swear at all" (Matt 5:34). Taken in isolation the command would appear to be an unrestricted prohibition of oath taking, and there are churches that have incorporated such a prohibition in their standards on this basis. It is clear from 26:63-64, however, that Jesus himself was under oath as he was examined by the Sanhedrin.⁵⁶

As Walter Kaiser demonstrates, Biblical commands must sometimes be "understood *comparatively* even though they are not cast in that form. From Hos 6:6 (cf. Matt 9:13; 12:7), it would appear that mercy is God's moral requirement, whereas sacrifices are not his desire. Yet, it was he who established the sacrificial system. As other passages indicate, the statement of Hosea is an indication of God's priorities rather than an absolute either or (cf. 1 Sam 15:22; Ps 51:17; Jer 7:22-23)."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Conn, "Normativity" 199-200.

⁵⁵ Namely, the use of the conditional particle "if" or "when" often followed by an additional subheading introduced by "if" and concluded with the apodosis. Kaiser, *Toward* 98.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 65.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Universal absolutes will not only be consistent with one another but also by definition will be obligatory at all periods of human history. This being the case we can expect that they will be repeated at different points in progressive divine revelation. It does not follow that a moral command making a universal claim is invalid if God made the clear unlimited command on only one occasion. This would, however, cause us to be more cautious in assuming its continuing relevance.

Once again the decalogue comes immediately to mind. Reference was made earlier to the presence of the proscriptions, in some form, in the Genesis period and in the later prophetic period. More significant for Christians today is the frequent citation of the commands in the NT either by direct quotation or allusion. Instances of this for the fifth through tenth commandments have been helpfully collected by Roger Beckwith and Wilfrid Stott.⁵⁸ Their own study was focused on the fourth commandment, the universality of which is most frequently questioned on the supposed grounds that it is not repeated in the NT. As they indicate, however, "none of the first four commandments, setting forth our duty to God, is quoted—only the last six, setting forth our duty to man."⁵⁹ In substance, however, reference is made to the first three,⁶⁰ and "the fourth comes nearer to being quoted than the first three. The statement in the latter part of it that 'the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them' (Exod 20:11) is echoed in the NT four times (Acts 4:24; 14:15; Rev 10:6; 14:7)."⁶¹ Clearly this is one of those cases in which the application of this fourth principle is highly significant.

This is an area of interpretation that might also be considered as part of the study of the "analogy of faith" or "canonical interpretation." It is in the latter terms that Childs discusses the subject. In his view this is different from either the traditional conservative method or the liberal method, "which seeks an immediate warrant for social action either from a verse of the Bible or from an action in the life of Jesus."⁶² What Childs is calling for is what is being urged here—namely, a study of the "full range of the biblical witnesses within the canonical context that have bearing on the subject at issue."⁶³ It is part of an attempt "to hear the complete scale of notes that are played, first in terms of their original setting, and secondly in relation to the whole canon."⁶⁴ Listening to the whole scale will include proper attention to the various genres of literature within the Bible. The narratives within which the laws are set help us to understand the principles on which they operate, "and we need the later narratives,

⁵⁸ Beckwith and Stott, *Christian* 14.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* First: Mark 12:29; Rom 3:30; 1 Cor 8:4, 6; Gal 3:10; Eph 4:6; 1 Tim 2:5; Jas 2:19; 4:12. Second: Acts 17:29; Rom 1:22–25; 1 Cor 5:10–11; 6:9; 10:7, 14; 2 Cor 6:16; Gal 5:19–21; 1 Thess 1:9; 1 Pet 4:3; 1 John 5:21; Rev 9:20; 21:8; 22:15. Third: Matt 6:9; Luke 1:49; Rom 2:24; 1 Tim 6:1; Rev 11:18; 15:4; 16:9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 147.

⁶² Childs, *Biblical* 131; cf. also Packer, "Quest" 35–55.

⁶³ Childs, *Biblical* 131.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 132.

prophets, psalms and wisdom literature to see how they were taken up into the life of the nation.⁶⁵

The significance of consistent repetition of moral commands at different points in divine revelation is evident in the difference between the Bible's attitude to homosexual behavior and to dietary restrictions. In Lev 20:13 homosexual behavior is forbidden, and in Rom 1:27 it is considered a sin that may be the consequence of God's judicial abandonment of the resolute sinner. By contrast, in Gen 9:3 God gave everything to humankind to eat. In Leviticus 11 God restricted the items that his covenant people should eat. But then Jesus allowed everything to be eaten as he broke down the walls between Jew and Gentile (Mark 7:19).⁶⁶

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 or where the principle is less obvious.⁶⁷ Yet this often-cited principle is not easily applied. As Scholer has indicated in his discussion of evangelical interpretation of the Biblical material with respect to issues of feminism, there is no canonical text that speaks clearly to the question of where to enter the discussion. From Scholer's perspective Gal 3:28 is less difficult and more clear than 1 Tim 2:11-12 but tends not to be given priority.⁶⁸ He views evangelicals as anxious to put all the texts together "when talking about Church polity, baptism, eternal security, or the nature of inspiration. But somehow, on the question of women in the Bible, so often in the history of the evangelical movement only 1 Timothy 2 has been discussed." In Scholer's reading he has found little reference to the material regarding Jesus' attitude and behavior toward women or to the very affirming references to women in Romans 16 and Philippians 4, and he considers the principles in Gal 3:28 to "have been dismissed or ignored." He urges that the instructions for care of widows in 1 Tim 5:3-16 be given as much attention as 2:11-12.⁶⁹

The assumption that inspired revelation will be consistent keeps us from accepting Paul Jewett's thesis of an incompatibility that cannot be harmonized between the female subordination of 1 Cor 11:3 and "(a) the biblical narratives of man's creation, (b) the revelation which is given us in the life of Jesus, and (c) Paul's fundamental statement of Christian liberty in Gal 3:28."⁷⁰ The problem exists only if submission implies inferiority and if distinct sexual identities and roles are not compatible with equality of worth.⁷¹ We must allow Scripture to define its own terms if we are to avoid the creation of false conflicts.

⁶⁵ Wright, *Eye* 31.

⁶⁶ Davis, *Foundations* 278.

⁶⁷ J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981) 54.

⁶⁸ Scholer, "Feminist" 417.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 418.

⁷⁰ P. K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 134, cited by Stott, *Issues* 244.

⁷¹ Stott, *Issues* 245.

5. *Universal norms are identifiable by their consistency with the progress of God's redemptive program.* Just as universal moral norms have a relationship to God's perfect moral nature, so also they bear a relationship to his redemptive work. Therefore in discerning God's will for us in contemporary situations it is helpful to have a clear vision of what God is doing in the world to accomplish his redemptive purposes. Universal moral commands will be harmonious with this general direction in God's program. John Goldingay thus suggests that we examine Biblical commands in the light of the overall Biblical message and "whatever we see as the key to that."⁷²

Oliver O'Donovan describes this aspect of our moral discernment as a "comprehension of how the bricks are meant to be put together," where the items in the code relate to the moral law as bricks do to a building.⁷³ In our study of Scripture, therefore, we look "not only for moral bricks, but for indications of the order in which the bricks belong together."⁷⁴ Matthew found such a principle of order in Hos 6:6, where God stated his preference for mercy and for the "acknowledgment of God" rather than for sacrifice and burnt offering (Matt 9:13; 12:1-8; 23:23). Elsewhere it is apparent that the supreme principle of order is love (Matt 22:37-40, citing Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18), which includes all the other commands within it (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14).⁷⁵ This is not to say, of course, that love is the only norm or that the other commandments can be reduced to this one norm, as some forms of situationalist ethics have done.

As O'Donovan indicates, these ordering principles are not simply "procedural rules-for-applying-rules." They teach us what the rules are really about. "When we learn, for example, that God requires 'mercy and not sacrifice' in relation to the sabbath, we are not merely learning when to apply the sabbath-rule and when not to. We are also learning something of what the sabbath, as a divinely-given institution, really is."⁷⁶

In Richard Longenecker's "developmental hermeneutic" he attempts to work out this principle in regard to social ethics.⁷⁷ Longenecker rejects the approach to the moral norms of Scripture that is being taken in this study and argues that NT ethics provides "prescriptive principles stemming from the heart of the gospel (usually embodied in the example and teachings of Jesus), which are meant to be applied to specific situations by the direction and enablement of the Holy Spirit, being always motivated and conditioned by love."⁷⁸ In his view "what we have in the NT is a *declaration* of the gospel and the ethical principles that derive from the gospel, and a *description* of how that proclamation and its principles were put

⁷² Goldingay, *Approaches* 54.

⁷³ O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 204.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Cf. also I. H. Marshall, "Using the Bible in Ethics," *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics* (ed. D. F. Wright; Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1979) 53.

⁷⁶ O'Donovan, *Resurrection* 203.

⁷⁷ R. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 15.

into practice in various situations during the apostolic period."⁷⁹ The proclamation and the principles are normative, but "the way that proclamation and its principles were put into practice in the first century . . . should be understood as signposts at the beginning of a journey which point out the path to be followed if we are to reapply the same gospel in our day."⁸⁰ Obviously, to work out this developmental hermeneutic one has to distinguish between the declared principles and the described practices. Though Longenecker does not address the means for making that distinction, the principles stated heretofore should help.

In my opinion Longenecker's project pays insufficient attention to the permanent validity of the specific moral commands in Scripture that meet the criteria for universals. It leaves us with too little specific direction and gives too large a role to the interpreter, who must discern God's redemptive purposes and build a trajectory that will serve as a criterion for moral decisions in the contemporary situation. On the other hand his work helpfully identifies an aspect of our understanding of God's moral will. There is a consistent pattern to God's redemptive work. We should be involved in that work as we pursue his kingdom and righteousness. Moral action will be consistent with God's redemptive purpose and will contribute to the achievement of that purpose. It will make us actively involved in the pursuit of that for which we pray: that God's will might be done and his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

It is in discerning the trajectory of the gospel program that a critical element of discernment enters the task. Where do we find the "heart of the gospel," from which prescriptive principles stem? For Longenecker it is located in Gal 3:28, which he takes to be part of a baptismal confession of early Christians. He suggests that the inclusion of the three specific non-differentiations (neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female) is "a conscious attempt to stand in opposition to the three *berakoth* ('blessings,' 'benedictions') which appear at the beginning of the Jewish cycle of morning prayers: 'Blessed be He [God] that He did not make me a Gentile; blessed be He that He did not make me a boor [i.e. an ignorant peasant or a slave]; blessed be He that He did not make me a woman.'" ⁸¹

Taking this as the focal point for understanding the gospel, Longenecker posits a development in the realization of this ethic in the life of the Church. The apostles addressed specifically the removal of the distinction between Jew and Gentile, who had been reconciled by Christ. The teaching of the apostles included an approach to slaves within the Church that ultimately undermined the system. In more recent times the impact of the gospel on the roles and relationships between men and women in the Church has been worked out. The goal, in harmony with the redemptive intention summed up in Gal 3:28, is a complete equality between men and women that allows of no differentiation of their roles within the Church.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 27.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid. 32-33.

With this developmental hermeneutic as his guiding principle, Longenecker approaches the texts to which appeal has often been made to restrict the ministry roles appropriate for women in the Church. In 1 Cor 11:2–16 he recognizes Paul's appeal to the order within the Godhead and within creation but notes that while Paul "argues for order and decorum in the congregation on the basis of the order within the Godhead and in creation, he also insists on the basis of eschatological redemption that 'in the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman,' and that both together find their source in God (vv 11–12)."⁸² The significance of this, from Longenecker's viewpoint, is that while Paul has "argued on the basis of creation for the subordination of women in worship, on the basis of redemption he must also assert their equality."⁸³ Paul is seen not to have rigidly held to functional distinctions. This is apparent, for instance, in the doxology of 2 Cor 13:14, where the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" is before the "love of God," "thereby tempering the seemingly rigid order of the Godhead set out in 1 Cor 11:3 ('the head of Christ is God') with the redemptive order of 2 Cor 13:14."⁸⁴

In approaching 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–15, Longenecker calls on us to "begin with the gospel as proclaimed by the apostles and the principles derived therefrom." In this particular case that means the confession of Gal 3:28. Paul and his colleagues are seen as working from two categories of thought: (1) an emphasis on creation, "wherein order, subordination, and submission are generally stressed," and (2) redemption, "wherein freedom, mutuality, and equality take prominence."⁸⁵ The mistake of those who restrict the roles of women in Church leadership or ministry, from Longenecker's perspective, is that they ignore the particular circumstances that led to Paul's restriction of certain aberrations in the worship at Corinth and Ephesus and formulate "a general ecclesiological principle that flies in the face of the confession of Gal 3:28 or the assumption underlying 1 Cor 11:5–16."⁸⁶

Longenecker rightly identifies the importance of discerning correctly the relationship between the theological categories of creation and redemption.⁸⁷ He grants that Paul accepts creation differences between the sexes and therefore condemns homosexuality. "Yet Paul also lays emphasis on redemption in such a way as to indicate that what God has done in Christ transcends what is true simply because of creation."⁸⁸ Longenecker's perspective easily leads to confusion, however. We can understand the argument of those who view the subordination of wives to husbands as a part of the curse resulting from the fall and who believe

⁸² Ibid. 80.

⁸³ Ibid. 80–81.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 81.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 84.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 86–87.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 87.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 92.

that redemption then restores fallen humanity to their prefallen, nonhierarchical condition. The suggestion that redemption goes further and improves on creation, however, leaves us unsure of where it is taking us. Thus Longenecker discerns a note of subordination and submission in the above-mentioned passages, as well as in Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9. This indicates to him that Paul did not always resolve “the theological tensions inherent in his message” or solve “the practical difficulties involved in its application. When circumstances within the churches urged on him a more moderate course, he seems at times to have argued more from the categories of creation and curse than from the categories of eschatological redemption in Christ.”⁸⁹ Longenecker applauds Paul, however, for beginning “to relate the theological categories of creation and redemption, most often emphasizing the latter,” and for beginning to “apply the gospel principles of freedom, mutuality, and equality to the situations of his day—including that of the place and status of women. In so doing, he set a pattern and marked out a path for Christian thought and action after him to follow.”⁹⁰

My major point of discomfort with Longenecker’s proposal is the disjunction it introduces between creation and redemption and the suggestion that there is an unresolved tension in Paul’s own ethical teaching that later Christians must resolve. David Clowney’s way of holding together the various aspects of Paul’s teaching is more satisfactory. He recognizes that, “on the one hand, redemption moves in the direction of equality, against the restrictions of the surrounding culture.”⁹¹ On the other hand he notes that in Ephesians 5 “the husband’s headship (a nurturing role, but apparently also one of primary accountability) is grounded by Paul simultaneously in creation and redemption, by his claim that the mystery of marriage, quoted from Genesis, means Christ and the Church.” Or again, when Paul forbids a woman to “teach or have authority over a man” (1 Tim 2:11–15), “his grounds are in the orders of creation and redemption. The same is true for 1 Cor 11:3–16.” Paul’s appeal, in other words, is “to the order of creation, transformed in Christ.” It is not possible therefore to view his prescriptions as simply expedient for the first century, in order to avoid offense. Nor “can he and the other apostles be read as pointing to a kind of development which is now in process from the order of creation (in which Adam was Eve’s head) to the situation in heaven (in which we neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels).”⁹²

It is right to expect that moral action will move the redemptive work of God forward. It is right that we should keep the broad principles and purposes of God’s redemptive program in mind as we seek to discern his moral will in the present situation. We are aided in this discernment by

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 87.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 88.

⁹¹ Clowney, “Use” 229.

⁹² *Ibid.* 230.

the knowledge that what God is doing in redemption is restorative of the good work that he did in creation. But we should not seek to go beyond it. The recognition of equality between slaves and masters before God is clearly restorative of the equality that existed in creation. Likewise any view of women that considers them less valuable or inferior in being to men is completely ruled out by creation. The redemptive activity of Jesus and the work and teaching of the apostles likewise underline this essential worth of women. If, however, there is a functional subordination within the creative order, which is not a result of the fall although sin radically distorts it, then it would be wrong to eliminate all such role differences on the grounds of further working out the redemptive program. There is then no tension between the redemptive action of God and a differentiation of male and female roles "with regard to authority and responsibility in family and church life."⁹³

In short, universals will be consistent with the redemptive program of God, but this will not generate conflict with their consistency with the creation order. Increased understanding of the effects of redemption will increase our understanding of the created order and will enable us to discern more clearly those moral norms that are consistent with both nature and redemption.

III. CONCLUSION

Although agreement concerning hermeneutical principles will not necessarily bring us to consensus on the meaning of ethical texts in Scripture, the five principles stated above should provide a process for common pursuit of an answer.

⁹³ Ibid. 231.