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Using the Bible in Christian Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis holds that ‘evangelization is the task of the Church’, by which he means that the Church ‘constantly seeks to communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel in a specific context’. ‘After calling on the Holy Spirit in prayer’, ‘the first step... is to give our entire attention to the biblical text’, in which ‘our most important goal is to discover its principal message’.¹ The argument of this paper is that these guidelines are not being followed in the works of contemporary Christian ethics. A disservice is thereby being committed toward religious and lay Christians. Most would probably believe that normative values and ethics can be derived from the Bible, to be transposed to, and practiced in, the modern world. This contention can be held despite all the difficulties of interpreting and relating biblical material to the present. Judging from contemporary Christian ethics’ writing, this view does not have wide or uniform currency. Christian and theological ethics nowadays relies far more on tradition, that is, theologians/philosophers past and present (including official church statements) than on contemporary biblical interpretation. Christian ethics currently does acknowledge its reliance on, and debt to, the Bible, but does not explore the biblical text to ascertain whether an ethics can be derived from it, or how these ethics might be connected to the modern world. A selection of present-day Christian ethicists (2001-2011), plus two influential works in the 1990s, Hays, and Peschke, is assessed to substantiate these judgements.² The focus on these works is to their methodological approaches, rather than to their ethical findings. Suggestions based on the Pontifical Biblical Commission are offered in the penultimate section on how these limitations might be addressed.

This tendency in Christian ethics has been observed in the past. Thus Kaiser quoted Childs (1970), that no outstanding English work dealt ‘adequately with the Biblical material as it relates to ethics’. On the other hand, Birch and Rasmussen

¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel) Apostolic Exhortation* (Rome: The Vatican, 2013), 111, 45, 146, 147.

² The books are: Edward Dowler, *Theological Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 2011); *Introducing Christian Ethics* Samuel Wells and Ben (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Malcom Brown, *Tensions in Christian Ethics: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2010); William Schweiker (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008); Richard Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski, (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004); Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Robin Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); Karl Peschke, *Christian Ethics* rev. ed. vols. 1 and 2 (Alcester, UK: C. Goodliffe Neale, 1993a and b).

thought that the gap between biblical studies and Christian ethics had been resolved by the end of the 1980s.³ Nevertheless, Peschke complained that Christians dealing with ethical issues ‘often suffer from a kind of identity-less drift, because they have lost touch with the Bible’. He asserted that ‘all the more it is important to give renewed attention to the Christian faith tradition, especially to the Bible’. Only a few Christian ethicists nowadays assert this paper’s case, with no uniform agreement about why it exists. Thus, Brock introduces his work by announcing ‘the problem of estrangement from Scripture in Christian ethics’, that ‘academic biblical scholars and Christian ethicists have been methodologically estranged for some decades’. In similar vein, Stassen and Gushee asserted that ‘*the teachings and practices of Jesus... are routinely ignored*’, that ‘the concrete teachings of Jesus’ are evaded in the academic discipline of Christian ethics.⁴

More common nowadays is the view that this disposition has been corrected. The belief is that Christian ethics and the Bible enjoy a symbiotic relationship. Thus Green, introducing the comprehensive *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, contended that ‘forty years ago’, Gustafson lamented the ‘paucity of material’ relating Christian ethics and biblical studies ‘in a scholarly way’. According to Green, ‘one can no longer lament a ‘paucity of material’’. Again, Cosgrove noted ‘important studies of the use of the Bible in Christian ethics’, in the 80s to mid 90s, inferring that the problem had been remedied. The contention here is that the situation has not been resolved.⁵

On the other hand, there is no shortage of Christian ethicists proclaiming the importance of the Bible to their task. Peschke argued that ‘a presentation of *Christian* ethics implies that the ideals and norms presented are inspired by the sacred books of the Old and New Testament ... Above all it implies a permanent inspiration by the ideas, values and concerns of Jesus Christ’. In Peschke’s view, this is the source of the identity of Christian ethics. The Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) holds that Christians are convinced that in the Bible they can find ‘norms of right behaviour to attain fullness of life’.⁶ However, the argument here is that once ethicists enter into the task of formulating their Christian ethics, and/or how it should be practiced, they do not hold the content of the Bible to the fore. A first chapter may proclaim the importance of the Bible, but subsequent

³ Walter Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), xi; Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* rev. and exp. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 7.

⁴ Peschke, vol 1, 12; Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), ix, xi; Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), xi; original emphasis.

⁵ Joel Green, Jacqueline Lapsley, Rebekah Miles, and Allen Verhey (eds.), *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 1; Charles Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 1.

⁶ Peschke, vol. 1, 3; Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) (Rome: The Vatican, 2008), 5.

chapters allow its importance to dissipate through lack of reference and discussion of biblical content.

This paper is not concerned with *how* biblical interpretation might be made, only that the Bible needs to be cited and discussed in attempts to explore whether a Christian ethics can be constructed depending on the Bible. Nor does it assume that sophisticated exegesis will solve the problem of potential tensions within Scripture. It agrees with Hays that ‘it is impossible to distinguish ‘timeless truth’ from ‘culturally conditioned elements’ in the New Testament’. This means that, ‘no single set of rules... can be promulgated for the community of faith. The New Testament is not a rulebook, not a cookie cutter for forming identical people or identical communities’.⁷

The lack of reliance of modern Christian ethics on the Bible is demonstrated in section 2 here on the basis of 5 sub-headings. The first is the most obvious. In the main, contemporary Christian ethicists do not analyse the biblical text to explore or develop ethical guidelines that might emerge from Scripture. Second, as part of this, Christian ethicists engage only in ‘plain-reading’ of biblical texts. Presuming the meaning and context of texts to be self-evident, they are cited and discussed without the assistance of biblical scholars and exegetes. Third, because few biblical texts are cited, no sense emerges of a potential sequential development of normative ethical themes throughout the Bible as a whole. The fourth issue arises from the third. Since no coherent framework is established for interpreting the Bible, where biblical texts are cited, it remains unclear why the particular text, or biblical book is chosen for reference. Biblical books, chapters and verse are thrust forward without being seen as contained within a sequence, paradigm or framework for interpreting the Bible. A fifth issue is that most contemporary books by Christian ethicists do not relate their ethics to modern life issues. Even fewer grapple with the problem of how a biblically-based ethic can be related to, and applied in, modern life. These five contentions are established below from examining the books selected for scrutiny.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS WITHOUT PRIMARY DEPENDENCE ON THE BIBLE

1. Lack of biblical reference

Most, but not all, Christian ethicists today start their books by maintaining the reliance of their ethics on the Bible. What happens after this initial acknowledgment is that biblical relevance is lost, becoming submerged in the contribution of Christian and non-Christian tradition to ethical development.

⁷ Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 310, 469.

A simple first step by which this biblical-downgrading tendency can be seen is by counting biblical *vis-à-vis* non-biblical references in the works of these authors. Dowler's (2011) *Theological Ethics*, in the first chapter on Sin and Grace, has 21 citations to works by Augustine, but none to the Bible. The second chapter has 7 citations to the Bible, but 19 to Aquinas, while chapter three has 31 citations to Aquinas, and 20 to the Bible. This pattern is repeated in subsequent chapters in which the Bible is cited decreasingly. The mere listing of numbers does not indicate the qualitative importance of these citations. Suffice to note that few of the Biblical texts cited are exegeted or interpreted in the context of the discussion of the theologians highlighted. Their meaning is taken to be self-evident.⁸

A similar pattern is demonstrated in Wells and Quash's (2010) *Introducing Christian Ethics*. They conclude their first chapter on the Story of God by pointing to the 'significant diversity of viewpoints' contained in the New Testament. If this is the case, it is unlikely that coherent and uniformly accepted normative ethical guidelines will emerge. Even if intelligible norms could be extracted, it does not mean being 'able to read off an answer for every issue one faces'.⁹ Every ethical norm has to be interpreted from the text, and then interpreted once again in relation to the issue in question. There is no direct reading of one to the other.

The means by which Wells and Quash arrive at their judgement of differing viewpoints in the New Testament actually establishes their conclusion. Thus, they pose a section in chapter 1 on 'is Jesus normative for Christian ethics?' This question is answered by dividing Jesus into four components, and each of these into categories with illustrative and normative implications. These divisions are artificial impositions on the scriptural witness, and conspire to bring about Wells and Quash's judgment above. For instance, the distinction between Jesus' being/teachings having illustrative versus normative implications is questionable. The illustrative view is supposed to depict norms 'that would have been right and good and true even if he had not come'. Alternatively, 'Jesus can be portrayed as establishing norms that could not and cannot be perceived without his unique person and/or work'.¹⁰ Why should potential contradiction occur between these two views? Consider the following. What was right and good had already been established by God in the Old Testament (illustrative). Jesus came to explicate these norms in his own person and teaching (normative). The phenomena are compatible with each other. Each of the four sub-divisions in this section could be harmonised in the same way. This does not happen because each is analyzed mainly via tradition, not biblical investigation. Where biblical texts are cited in

⁸ Dowler, *Theological Ethics*, chapters 1-3.

⁹ Wells and Quash, *Introducing*, 29.

¹⁰ Wells and Quash, *Introducing*, 14.

this section, 'is Jesus normative for Christian ethics', they are not explained. Instead, each sub-division is expounded in terms of how theologians (mainly deceased) understood their particular interest. Interrelationships between each of the sub-divisions are not considered.

Wells and Quash's section in chapter 1 on 'following Jesus' surveys the Synoptics, but no conclusions are drawn about what might be the ethical imperatives Jesus was promoting in either those books or in John. It is not difficult to assert that little uniformity exists in the New Testament's message. Partly, this conclusion stems from Hays' separation of the descriptive and synthetic tasks of discerning New Testament ethics on which Wells and Quash rely.¹¹ The separation is artificial because the only way of unearthing Jesus' ethics is to examine the Gospels, establish how each text with potential ethical meaning relates to those similar in the other Gospels (even with contradictory inference), and the Old Testament, and then to draw them together into a coherent ethical guideline. The descriptive nature of biblical ethics cannot be established without prior attention to the synthetic connections between biblical imperatives. This exercise is not undertaken by Wells and Quash.

Their chapters 2, 3 and 4, the stories of the church, of ethics, and of Christian ethics contain little mention of the Bible, being concerned with how church leaders and theologians throughout history viewed ethical questions. Chapter 5, universal ethics, is concerned with ethical theories in general and their history, again with scant reference to the Bible. Chapter 6 on subversive ethics is that most closely connected to the Bible. It reviews topics such as liberation theology with general comments about how it connects to Scripture. However, specific biblical texts are not cited or analyzed in relation to these phenomena. Chapter 7, ecclesial ethics, follows the same model. What would a reader derive from this introduction to Christian ethics up to this point? S/he would conclude that Christian ethics depends on the interpretations of theologians/church leaders, past and present, producing no unanimity in ethical guidelines. Further, that the Bible has little relevance to the historical development of Christian ethics.

Wells and Quash then move to the questions asked of Christian ethics, which means how Christian ethical imperatives relate to specific areas of modern life. Consider just one of these areas, chapter 9, the good life, and its first section on economics, wealth, and poverty. One page deals with Scripture on these matters, in which eight texts are cited, but none explicated. The chapter immediately moves to Aquinas, Locke, Tawney, Calvin, Hayek, Temple, Preston, liberation theologians, Wink, Gorringer, and others. How and whether any of these writers used the Bible is not investigated. Take just one of these authors, Temple. In his

¹¹ Wells and Quash, *Introducing*, 20; Hays, *The Moral Vision*. 3-4.

Christianity and Social Order (1942), no biblical citation occurs, nor is any reference made to theological writing. Another topic in Wells and Quash's chapter 9 is work, in which three citations to Paul are the extent of scriptural relevance. References and further reading for economics, wealth, poverty, and work omit all current Christian writing outside theology on these subjects. Wells (2010) follows a similar pattern, in which no Biblical texts are cited.¹²

Brown's (2010) *Tensions in Christian Ethics* also upholds the position that diverse and competing viewpoints occur in the Bible. He maintains that ethics is 'at the cutting edge of theological study today', but seeks to demonstrate tensions within it. As a prior, no sense emerges from Brown's chapter 2 on using the Bible in Christian ethics that coherent ethical guidelines might exist throughout Scripture. He sees this as arising because 'the Bible is read differently by Christians who each believe themselves to be reading it faithfully'.¹³ Brown does not assess how this issue might be resolved. It is something to be accepted. Brown depends on Wogaman (1994) to demonstrate six tensions within Scripture, such as that between status and equality. Only two biblical citations underline this issue, with neither exegeted. Generalizations are made about supposed scriptural orientations on these matters without analyzing Scripture to evaluate how valid they are. For instance, the 'prosperity gospel' is held to 'echo without ambiguity the Old Testament theme of riches as blessing'.¹⁴ An alternative interpretation from Brown is that normative Old Testament teaching wants everybody to be rich, and nobody poor. As is the traditional wont in Christian ethics, Brown's chapter 3 on roots of Christian ethical thinking, detaches itself from the Bible, focusing on Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, with barely any reference to the Bible. One can agree with the importance of tradition in developing Christian ethics. But invariably these early theologians are discussed without establishing how their ideas related to present-day biblical viewpoints.

Nevertheless, Brown is confident that the Bible and Christian tradition 'are the source of certain truths',¹⁵ that do not have to be constantly re-stated from the Bible. If this is the case, it is unclear from Brown what the ethical orientation of these 'certain truths' are. They do not emerge through Brown's text in relation to the Bible or Christian tradition. For instance, in chapter 4 on modernity, plurality and their consequences, mention is made of communitarianism and liberalism, presented as antitheses to each other. Argument between them is illustrated via the views of such as Hayek, MacIntyre, and Etzioni. A biblically-based discussion of these two systems is possible, and might permit greater ethical clarity to

¹² Samuel Wells (ed.), *An Introductory Reader* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

¹³ Brown, *Tensions*, 3, 27.

¹⁴ Brown, *Tensions*, 33.

¹⁵ Brown, *Tensions*, 35.

emerge than that deriving its conclusions from argument between Christians and non-Christians. *Tensions in Christian Ethics* rightly lives up to its name. It is a broad canvass of disagreements between innumerable Christian and non-Christian theologians, ethicists and philosophers, but its dependence on the Bible for its conclusions is tenuous.

When Brown moves from meta-ethics to concrete cases, the same tendency is apparent. For example, consider chapter 10 on the market economy. This starts with a lengthy review of responses to the Anglican Church's 1985 report, *Faith in the City*. No biblical analysis is made to evaluate this study. Where mention is made of issues that could be related to Scripture, such as equality, the matter is reviewed without scriptural reference. The chapter then moves to yet another tension within non-biblical based Christian economic ethics, disagreement between Novak and Duchrow. Neither of these authors constructed their cases from biblical material. Neither is Brown's review of them in terms of biblical ethical criteria.

The *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* exhibits a similar pattern. None of its thirty-six chapters depends on biblical explication, and few contain any biblical interpretation. Therefore, none analyzes how normative biblical expression relates to any of the chapter topics, although a few have partial accounts of this (such as McCarthy). This may be because *The Companion* invites us to believe that it has developed a new approach in Christian ethics, purviewing it through the lens of Christian worship. This may be so, but it hangs uneasily in the air, disconnected from the Bible as it is. Another lens by which Christian ethics might be scrutinized is via Christology. If Christology means that section of theology dealing with the identity of Jesus Christ, the relation of His human and divine nature, no sense emerges in Shults and Walters of what might be the ethical orientations of Jesus, or how this related to His Biblical teaching. *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* follows a similar pattern. None of its thirty chapters undertakes systematic biblical analysis to establish its ethical position. Far more reliance is placed on long-deceased theologians. Certain chapters, such as seven, do contain a few pages devoted to biblical explication. But these are lost in the mass of non-biblical analysis.¹⁶

Hays stands in contrast to the works above. He does undertake scriptural investigation to derive biblically-based ethical guidelines. In proposing ten

¹⁶ Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion*; David McCarthy "Becoming One Flesh: Marriage, Remarriage, and Sex," In *The Blackwell*, 276-288; LeRon Shults and Brent Waters eds. *Christology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); Meilaender and Werpehowski, *The Oxford Handbook*.

guidelines for developing New Testament ethics, the first is that ‘serious exegesis is a basic requirement’.¹⁷ What does not emerge from Hays, however, is his practice of the synthetic methodology he advocates. For example, no overview is provided of Paul’s ethical teaching in Hays’ chapters 1 and 2. Instead, specific texts are scrutinised closely, like 1 Timothy, but how the ethical teaching in this relates to Paul’s other writings is not explained. Whether Paul shows consistency throughout his ethical teaching remains unclear. In the same way, there is no examination of whether consistency exists between Paul’s ethical precepts and those of Mark. This omission pervades the rest of Hays’ treatment of New Testament books.

For these reasons, Hays is not able to answer the question he poses in chapter 9, whether coherency exists in the moral vision of the New Testament. It is easy to point to ethical imperatives in the New Testament that are ostensibly inconsistent with each other, and appear impossible to pursue. Hays¹⁸ gives the example of Lk. 14:33, Jesus saying ‘none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions’. On the face of it, this does not sit well with Jesus’ other teaching in Luke on sharing possessions, such as Lk. 12:13-21 (the parable of the rich fool), 12:33, 16:1-9 (the parable of the dishonest manager), 16:19-32 (the parable of the rich man and Lazarus), and 19:1-10 (the story of Zaccheus). In none of these does Jesus require his potential disciple to dispose of all his possessions. Nor does Lk. 14:33 comport with Paul’s teaching on material possessions, as Hays shows. What Jesus means in Lk. 14:33 cannot be understood simply by looking at that text alone. Part of the synthetic task is to interpret what Jesus taught about material possessions and alms-giving in the four Gospels. To answer this question, more of Jesus’ sayings than just Lk. 14:33 have to be looked at, assisted by the interpretations of biblical exegetes. Admittedly, Hays does cite two exegetes in a footnote, but their findings are not reported. A subsequent step would be to analyze how Jesus’ sayings on possessions in Luke compare with those in the other Gospels.

Part of Hays’ Conclusion deals with these issues, offering a brief synthetic reading and interpretation of relevant New Testament texts. However, he does not show how another two of his ten proposed guidelines relevant to synthetic construction apply, 1a, that ‘New Testament texts must be read with careful attention to their Old Testament subtexts’, and 2, that ‘we must seek to listen to the full range of canonical witnesses’. One can agree with Hays’ conclusions on certain ethical issues, for example, that ‘the church... will also embody in its economic practices the sharing that prefigures the joy and justice of the world to

¹⁷ Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 310.

¹⁸ Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 188.

come'.¹⁹ But to arrive at these, he is not able to practice the ten worthy guidelines he proposes earlier.

Verhey (2002) is also a partial contrast to the authors cited before Hays. He relies less on scriptural interpretation than Hays, and presents a less technical exegesis. Like Hays, Verhey does not use the readings of biblical scholars and exegetes to compare with his own conclusions. Consider the four chapters of part 4 dealing with biblical teaching and behaviour in relation to economic matters. He explains the economic implications of the Lord's Prayer, but cites few exegetes to support his deductions. The next section, Jesus' wisdom about wealth, has only two authorities to back-up his judgements. Thus, Verhey uses 'plain-reading' of the biblical material, and therefore relies little on biblical exegetes in his four chapters of part 4 (except Johnson, and Wheeler). Overall, the four chapters do not reveal a synthetic analysis of the biblical text to reach conclusions. At the same time, Verhey does show how the early church responded to economic inferences in Jesus' teachings, and he does relate his biblically-based deductions in part 4 to modern life.²⁰

Burridge (2007) likewise scrutinises the biblical text to develop his New Testament ethics, but mainly via 'plain-reading' interpretation. In his chapter 2 on Jesus of Nazareth, he refers to a wide range of theologians, but to few biblical exegetes. This pattern is repeated in the treatment of Paul and the Gospels. Also missing is any synthetic analysis of the ethics in the Gospels and Paul. It would have been helpful to have overviews of the ethical matters in the New Testament as a whole. Absent these explications, Burridge jumps straight into chapter 8 dealing with New Testament ethics and apartheid. Rather than putting whatever ethical guidelines he found in scripture to the fore, Burridge places methodological issues first, that is, to show how New Testament ethics conceptually could be used to analyze apartheid. This includes looking at the methodological approaches of other theologians. Then follows a lengthy explanation of how the Bible has been used to justify and to criticise apartheid. This is more an historical study, than one relating Burridge's earlier ethical insights to apartheid from the chapters on Jesus, the Gospels and Paul.²¹

2. *Biblical texts are interpreted only by 'plain-reading'*

¹⁹ Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 310, 467.

²⁰ Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

²¹ Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*.

An overview of the eleven books above (Dowler, Wells and Quash, Brown, Schweiker, Burrige, Meilaender and Werpehowski, Hauerwas and Wells, Verhey, Gill, Hays and Peschke) reveals certain common features, introduced above, and summarised following. First, since so little reference is made to the Bible in most of the works (Hays, Verhey and Burrige excepted), it is hardly likely that adequate biblical exegesis could occur. One of so many instances of this approach occurs in *The Oxford Handbook*. Benne has a chapter on Christians and government in which 3 pages among 16 are devoted to Biblical sources for the argument. However, no text is exegeted, no biblical commentators are cited to support the given explanations. On the basis of the 3 pages, unsurprisingly, the Old and New Testaments are held to contain ‘often contradictory, ideas of how Christians should relate to politics’. As is customary, the rest of the chapter leaves the Bible behind, devoting itself mainly to Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*. In the same book, Wheeler on Christians and family devotes 5 pages among 16 to biblical material, but, again, it is all ‘plain-reading’ interpretation. Christians and economics, chapter 21, resumes the normal methodology of ignoring the Bible altogether. The problem is summarized for evangelical ethics by Burrige that in the past it has interpreted ‘Jesus’ words... in a naïve or uncritical manner’.²²

To stress this deficiency does not presuppose ethicists becoming biblical scholars. Biblical interpretation can be done in various ways, although little evidence exists that alternative ways produce conflicting results. One way of approaching interpretation for the non-biblical scholar is to rely on the exegesis of biblical scholars and commentators. Since so many contemporary commentaries exist on each book of the Bible, seeking out a consensus for each text is not impossible. Exegetes may well use different methodologies from each other, but it is usually possible to arrive at a consensual exegesis for a text. Cosgrove’s five hermeneutical assumptions can be used in combination to serve as a useful adjunct in this exercise. However, this entire point may be summarized by suggesting that lacking in contemporary Christian ethics is the ‘serious exegesis’ proposed by Hay. One exercise that does engage in detailed biblical exegesis is Stassen and Gushee (2003).²³ Biblical scholars are cited to support their interpretations, and a coherent case is developed concerning ethical implications of the Sermon on the Mount. The limitation is that only the Sermon is analyzed. It would have been valuable for more of Jesus’ teaching to be investigated in this way. Lacking is point 3 below.

²² Burrige, *Imitating Jesus*, 11.

²³ Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

3. *Lack of sequential development of biblically-based ethics*

This means that little exercise is undertaken to follow through the biblical text to ascertain if ethical guidelines or themes emerge that might characterize the Bible as a whole. In Hays' terminology, the synthetic task of biblical ethical derivation is missing. Only the descriptive task is pursued, usually on the basis of one or few biblical books. However, this terminological distinction between the descriptive and the synthetic is misleading. No Biblical ethical theme carries weight either for the time it was developed, or for the present unless it can be shown to represent a trend or tendency throughout the Bible. It can be accepted that over time in the Bible's development, these norms may be modified, altered and transmogrified. For instance, Jesus reinterpreted the *Les Talionis* precept of the Mosaic Law to a love response, not eye for eye. Rogerson expresses it that 'some commands cannot be taken at face value because they may be expanded, modified or countermanded by other biblical passages'. Biblically-based ethics has the syncretic task of exploring how apparently irreconcilable ethical guidelines might be reconciled — which is not to say they all can be. This differs from Brown's, and Wells and Quash's readiness to accept tensions or disagreements as an inevitable part of Christian ethics. The PBC expresses the matter that 'in biblical perspective a discourse on moral norms cannot treat them in isolation... but it needs to insert them into the context of the entire biblical view of human existence'.²⁴

Where the syncretic biblical component of developing Christian ethics is avoided, it is not difficult to find ostensible differences in the biblical text dealing with the same issue. Thus Wells and Quash state that 'divorce is excluded wholesale in one place, under certain conditions in another'. Yet, as they recognize elsewhere, 'Jesus overturns the Old Testament's acceptance of divorce'. That certain differences and ambiguities in biblical interpretation remain is insufficient reason for concluding that the New Testament lacks coherent teaching on divorce. What can help resolve this matter is contemporary Christian writing on divorce attached to the Bible, of which a deal exists within the context of Christian ethics, such as McCarthy.²⁵

Gill (2004) wants to show how Christian ethics can be practiced. Unfortunately, the derivation of his ethical principles is problematic because he does not undertake syncretic and sequential development of the biblical text. Starting from the Ten Commandments is worthy ('plain-reading' interpretations aside), but Gill glides from that to claim that Jesus teaches us to 'do justice'.²⁶

²⁴ John Rogerson, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2007), 6; PBC, 7.

²⁵ Wells and Quash, *Introducing*, 20, 285; McCarthy, "Becoming One."

²⁶ David Gill, *Doing Right* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 48.

One might agree that this is the case, without accepting the legitimacy of jumping from the Decalogue to the claim. Once again, no syncretic methodology is employed by which biblical texts are explained, or how one relates to the other. What we have is a melange of biblical texts designed to support the given ethical principle, without being clear why any is chosen, or how any one relates to either those before or after. On the other hand, Gill does tie in his biblical texts with specific ethical guidelines intended for the present age.

4. Why particular texts or books of the Bible are cited is unclear.

Since no overall structure is established for interpreting the Bible, where biblical texts are cited, no sense emerges why the particular text, or biblical book is chosen for reference. Rogerson expresses this point that ‘anyone who appeals to the Bible does so *selectively*’. Selective users need ‘to justify *why* they use it *selectively*’.²⁷ To counter this problem, ethicists would need to show they have an overall framework or paradigm by which texts etc. are interpreted. Since the Bible is not their main concern, this does not occur.

One way of grappling with this problem would be to utilise Fee and Stuart’s approach. They stress the desirability of distinguishing ‘between the central core of the message of the Bible and what is dependent on or peripheral to it’. They list what they see as the central core, thereby recognising a hierarchy of narrative in Biblical books and texts. This approach is akin to Stassen and Gushee’s suggestion to make Jesus the centre of Christian ethical reflection. ‘Look first to Jesus’, and ‘read all the other Scriptures through the prophetic grid that Jesus employed’, as they put it.²⁸ Certainly, identifying such a hierarchy is a subjective exercise that could be challenged. Indeed, the inadmissibility of a hierarchy for analysing the biblical text might be justified by Paul’s admonition, that all scripture is of value for teaching (2 Tim. 3: 16-17).

5. Little relation is drawn between biblically-based ethical exposition and modern ethical issues.

With some exceptions, most of the books reviewed lack chapters drawing out ethical implications from the Bible with relevance for today, for the given topics discussed. For example, none of the sixty authors in the *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* discuss the relation of Christian ethics to contemporary ethical issues. In other of the eleven works, where particular ethical issues are discussed, little attention is given to how the biblically-derived guidelines might apply to the modern world. Exceptions do occur. For example, one that does explore some implications is McCarthy with 2 pages of biblical

²⁷ Rogerson, *According to*, 105; original emphasis.

²⁸ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003); Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 97.

citations. However, consistently with 2 above, no exegesis supports the discussion of the texts. Only ‘plain- reading’ is presented. However, in general, little connection is made between biblical exposition and contemporary ethical matters. *The Blackwell Companions to Christian Ethics*, and *Religious Ethics*, *The Oxford Handbook*, and *The Cambridge Companion* exemplify this contention. Some of them do discuss modern ethical issues, but usually with little reference to biblical texts. Burrige puts it that any attempt to relate New Testament ethics to today has ‘little by way of actual content or application’.²⁹

Another case is Peschke stressing the uplifting nature of work in the Bible, noting that ‘work is considered by Christ a natural, integral part of human life’. However, when Peschke starts to develop a theology of work, reliance on the Bible evaporates. The sources become Aquinas, de Chardin, and Catholic Church statements. Thus, in his 116 page chapter on work, property and social economy, Peschke devotes only 11 pages to biblical references, with none marked by their exegetical explication. For instance, Jesus is regarded as approving ‘of the practice of investing money at interest’.³⁰ This conclusion, derived from the parable of the talents/pounds, ignores biblical exegetes’ interpretations of the parables. A consensus of these does not accept Jesus approving of the payment of interest.

Stassen and Gushee³¹ also exemplify this tendency. They have many chapters relating biblical texts to ethical issues. However, when the details of these chapters are examined, they exhibit the pattern above. Take, for example, their chapter 20 on economics. A four and a half page discussion of the Sermon on the Mount starts this chapter. After this, a selection of Jesus’ teachings on wealth, greed, and the ‘Great Reversal’ is discussed. Stassen and Gushee then examine property rights, reject normative notions of a ‘rough equality of outcome’, and review the economic systems debate (capitalism versus communism), now largely superseded. The chapter finishes with business ethics, but no specific proposals occur for how they might apply. In the case of economics, few normative ethical guidelines emerge applied in any detail to the modern world.

In trying to cover so many contemporary ethical issues in the one book (at least 13 in Stassen and Gushee), ethicists overreach themselves. No author can be expert in subjects as disparate as just war, sexuality, and economics. It is just not humanly possible for authors to be up to date on secular analysis in each of these subject areas, and simultaneously relate synthetic biblical exegesis to each. The result is that contemporary application is skimmed over. More telling would be for Christian ethicists to narrow their focus to, say, two or three contemporary

²⁹ Burrige, *Imitating Jesus*, 31.

³⁰ Peschke, *Christian Ethics: Volume 2*, 631, 699.

³¹ Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*.

subjects to which they could relate their biblical exegesis.

Because of the five features above, no clarity emerges from the books cited above about what Christian ethics actually is. Coherent definitions of Christian ethics do not emerge from the work reviewed. The wide-ranging sources used for deriving Christian ethics in these books — Christian and non-Christian, deceased and living — apart from the Bible, obscure clear and comprehensible revelations of Christian ethics, even more so of biblical ethics. Because of the five matters above, the nature and substance of Christian ethics remains unclarified. *The Blackwell Companions to Christian Ethics*, and *Religious Ethics*, and the *Oxford Handbook* are instances of this, lacking clear definitions of either Christian or biblically-based ethics.

A summary of the qualities of the books above is:

1. Little exegesis is made of the biblical text from which to construct normative ethical guidelines, either for the times when the texts were written, or for the present day.
2. However, introductory chapters do provide overviews of the Bible as justification for employing the biblical text as part edifice for constructing Christian ethics.
3. Little connection is drawn between texts that might conceivably relate to the same issue. Hays' 'synthetic task' for Christian ethics is missing.
4. Assuming that normative values in Scripture exist and are to be applied today, no methodological guidelines are proposed by which transposition can be made from the contexts of Scripture to today. The hermeneutical status for the future of the ethics propounded in the Bible is not investigated, and remains unclear. A similar point was made by the PBC speaking of the necessary 'formation of some methodological criteria that will allow us to refer to Sacred Scripture in moral matters'.³²
5. Insufficient reliance is placed on biblical texts to substantiate perspectives on contemporary ethical issues.
6. The minority of Christian ethicists who do discuss topics relevant to today overreach themselves. Because they discuss so many given ethical topics in the one book, a lack of evenness and depth is revealed in the chapters.
7. An overwhelming dependence on past and present theologians, rather than the biblical text, is evident in their derivation of Christian ethics.
8. The importance of tradition, or more correctly, of deceased theologians/philosophers in Christian ethics is presented as axiomatic,

³² Pontifical Biblical Commission, 130.

rather than showing how their arguments relate to contemporary biblical analysis.

9. Non-believers would gain the impression that the Bible has little to do with Christian ethics, or to ethics more generally.

These features characterise the formulation and nature of contemporary Christian ethics. They occur with differing weight in the works of Christian ethicists. The features apply to books, as well as to journal articles that are not scrutinized here. For instance, an overview of articles in *Studies in Christian Ethics* in the last five years exposes their scant reliance on interpreting biblical texts. There is not space here to substantiate this contention. Nor is there space to extend the analysis to a wider range of books on Christian ethics. Suffice to allege that the following authors not mentioned above exhibit the tendencies discussed in varying degree. These include Geisler (2010), *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*; Long (2010), *Christian Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*; Rae (2009), *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*; Cunningham (2008), *Christian Ethics: The End of the Law*; Brock (2007), *Singing the Ethos of God*; Wells (2006), *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics*; and McCoy (2004), *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Christian Ethics*.³³

While broad comparability between these authors exists in terms of the features exposed above, differences between them must be acknowledged. For example, Geisler investigates eleven modern ethical topics, with reasonable biblical reference, but only via 'plain reading' interpretation. On the other hand, no early chapter explains how ethics derives from the Old and New Testaments. In *The Cambridge Companion's* seven chapters on issues in Christian ethics, little reference is made to biblical texts to back up the specific matters investigated. Compared with Geisler, more relation to Scripture occurs in earlier chapters. McCoy, perhaps because of his Catholic orientation, has virtually no reference to the Bible, but devotes much space to tradition, without mentioning the Catholic church's ethical or social teaching. Brock looks at five methodologies for developing biblical ethics, but the focus is on how particular theologians have pursued this task. No biblical interpretation is made in the five chapters to

³³ Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010); D. Stephen Long, *Christian Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Scott Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009); David Cunningham, *Christian Ethics: The End of the Law* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008); Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Samuel Wells, *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006); Alban McCoy, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Christian Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2004).

substantiate Brock's conclusions. On the other hand, close exegesis is made of a few psalms in chapter 9 to illustrate the place of Christian ethics in Scripture.

Perhaps contemporary writers who explore the nature of Old Testament (OT) ethics as distinct from the New might rely more on the biblical text. For instance, Rogerson³⁴ constructs his cases in closer association with Scripture than is the normal practice in Christian ethics. However, given the brevity of his 2007 book, certain controversial statements are made that might not find universal acceptance among Christians, such as Jesus' attitude to the Law, that require further biblical interpretation. Again, Pleins sticks closely to biblical exegesis, and summarises overriding themes in OT social ethics in his last chapter. Social ethics crop up throughout Pleins' painstaking dissection of the entire OT text. But it is not clear how the four trajectories in the final chapter are produced by the earlier analysis of the OT texts. Nor is it clear why the trajectories are necessarily divergent from each other, why 'diversity is a theological norm'. For instance, poverty is a 'salient... issue in the debate generated by the scriptures',³⁵ but the four trajectories do not demonstrate that differing views of poverty arise in the OT, or what should be done about it, the example of Proverbs notwithstanding. Authors like Hoppe, Wright, and Berman are much more sanguine about uniformity regarding the poor in the OT and NT.³⁶

A judgement of closer connection between the OT and ethics does not apply to all writers in this area. For instance, Arndt has a first chapter on the Hebrew Bible as a (re)source for Christian ethics, but no biblical interpretation is included. Again, Barton engages in close exegesis of certain Old Testament prophets, but no conclusions are drawn for how these relate to OT ethics as a whole. Although this might seem a too stringent a conclusion, the first five chapters of Barton, on morality and justice in the Hebrew Bible, engage in little biblical interpretation, and do not draw general conclusions about the nature of OT ethics.³⁷ One author who does construct an overall framework for identifying and interpreting OT ethics is Wright, who also undertakes detailed scriptural interpretation. On the

³⁴ John Rogerson, *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); *According to the Scriptures*. (London: Equinox Publishing, 2007).

³⁵ J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 522, 528.

³⁶ Leslie Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004); Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004); Joshua Berman, *Created Equal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁷ Emily Arndt, *Demanding Our Attention: The Hebrew Bible as a Source for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

other hand, Wright does not draw out implications from his analysis for the modern world. Certainly, he wants to ‘look for ways of applying the range of economic principles [in the OT] that will authentically reflect the totality of the biblical paradigm itself’. But little emerges of how this might relate to today. Overall, OT ethics makes little connection with the NT. Also, it does not show convincingly how the ethics it deduces relate to contemporary issues. On the latter, Kaiser outlines eighteen ethical topics with which the OT is concerned, but makes little connection to modern life. Again, Rogerson discusses six ethical topics from the OT that might be relevant to today. But little connection is made to contemporary thinking (Christian and otherwise) about the topics.³⁸

The detachment from the Bible demonstrated here characterizes not only academic Christian ethics. More popular treatments show similar trends involving their lack of reliance on the Bible. For instance, Stott’s 4th edition of *Issues Facing Christians Today*³⁹ has no introductory chapter explaining how the Bible might be used in formulating Christian ethics. It lacks also biblical analysis clarifying how normative biblical teaching relates to the specific ethical issues discussed, such as the world of work, and business relationships. An occasional biblical citation is made, but no systematic perusal of texts is explored.

CONNECTING CHRISTIAN ETHICS TO THE BIBLE

For a biblically-based Christian and theological ethics to depend more on the Bible, it seems necessary to analyze the biblical text in its entirety. A biblically-based Christian ethics can only develop from the Bible, analyzing the biblical text as a whole. This task might seem impossible to pursue, but some writers above have provided insight for how it could be undertaken. For example, Fee and Stuart’s methodology of establishing a hierarchy of narrative is a useful start. Only once the biblical analysis has been done might attention be turned to Christian (and non-Christian) tradition. The issue then becomes how this tradition relates to contemporary biblical analysis.

As Christian ethics became more attached to the Bible, it would clarify progressively a number of qualities. Some of these are summarized by the PBC, cited below as official spokesperson for the largest Christian tradition. This is used here to help rebut the charge that this paper has been putting only a Protestant evangelical viewpoint. First, it would emphasize that Christian norms

³⁸ Wright, *Old Testament*, 197; Walter Kaiser Jr., *What Does the Lord Require: A Guide for Preaching and Teaching Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

³⁹ John Stott, Roy McCloughry, and John Wyatt, *Issues Facing Christians Today* 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

of right behaviour from the OT or NT do not exist independently apart from God's love. The PBC puts it that 'the well-spring of Christian morality is not an external norm but the experience of God's love for every individual'. Indeed, so important is this that 'the more believers are guided by the Spirit the less they need to be given rules of conduct'.⁴⁰ In the enterprise of depending on God's love, and being guided by His Spirit, prayer plays a crucial role.

Second, a Biblical-dependent ethics would probably hold it to apply to the whole human race, not just the community of believers. This is because the biblical tradition 'presumes that the same moral responsibilities are entrusted to all human beings as part of the creation and as God's image, although the power of sin and alienation from God can warp moral decisions'. God wants all people to follow Him. That is, 'he invites all men and women to come to him and to enter a close and cordial communion of life with him'.⁴¹ It cannot be left just to the church to manifest these qualities. Individual Christians in business, government, the non-profit sector, voluntary organisations, and families have a responsibility to show how biblical ethics could be practiced.

As noted, this paper's purpose is not to reveal the content of these ethics. The preconditions derived in this paper have not been put into action. However, just one example is mooted. A Biblical ethic intended to apply universally is rectification of the lot of the poor. The PBC puts it that biblical 'morality [is] entirely concentrated on... solidarity with the poor', including the legislative codes of the OT, 'to avoid the enslaving of the poor... the objective of combating and overcoming poverty'.⁴² A complementary biblically-derived norm might be that all able-bodied people who so wish should be provided with paid work sufficient to support themselves and their families. Christians can discuss among themselves how these objectives might be pursued in contemporary society.

A third feature of a Biblically-based ethics would be that it is intended to be practiced now. The PBC puts it that the 'values and virtues that conform us with the will of God, to be fully affirmed and revealed in the future kingdom of God, must be practised now as far as possible in the sinful and imperfect circumstances of the present life'. This is because Christians have 'their active task of establishing the kingdom of God and of Christ and of bringing it ever more fully to reality'.⁴³

How can these three features be practiced? One, but not the only, approach is suggested by the PBC. This is that 'history must be read with one eye on the religious principles and values which God has revealed and continues to reveal, and the other on concrete events. A reading of these events within the framework

⁴⁰ Pontifical Biblical Commission, 81.

⁴¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, 186, 70.

⁴² Pontifical Biblical Commission, 49, 50.

⁴³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, 64-65, 98.

of the religious values and principles which throw light on them conveys an interpretation belonging to the wisdom genre'.⁴⁴

Even if all these preconditions could be met, there are still barriers standing in the way of developing a biblically-based ethics. Again, consider how the PBC sees these. First, it points to the complexity of modern life, arising because of the enormous time gap between when the scriptures were formulated, and today. The simple agrarian economy is seen to be of little relevance to the advanced industrial economy. The PBC summarises conventional objections against trying to use scripture to formulate ethical guidelines in this context. These are that 'scripture is of no use for offering solutions to the numerous problems of our times', that 'faced by such complex problems one is tempted to marginalize, totally or partially, Sacred Scripture'. The problem is that 'direct solutions to the numerous outstanding problems [of the world] cannot be found in Sacred Scripture'. However, attaching Christian ethics to the Bible does not presuppose that the Bible can be used prescriptively for the formulation of ethics. As the PBC notes 'although the bible does not offer prefabricated solutions, it does present some criteria whose application is certainly of help in finding valid solutions for human behaviour'.⁴⁵

Complexity has also encouraged the development of non-Christian views in the present age. According to the PBC, the nature of the complex contemporary economy has fostered 'the development of a culture based on relativism, tolerance and on an acceptance of new ideas dependent on inadequate philosophical and theological foundations'. Part of the complexity and acceptance of relativism in modern society involves an 'instinctive refusal of norms, obligations and commandments within the human person, particularly strong in our own days. Equally cogent in contemporary society is the desire to attain full happiness together with unlimited liberty, that is, freedom to act in accordance with one's whims, without the constraint of any norms', that 'each human person should freely and autonomously decide for himself what he deems just and acceptable'.⁴⁶ Biblically-based ethical guidelines are seen as barriers to achieving these ends.

Freedom from norms and obligations is a value prized highly in the contemporary world. The Christian perspective differs. The PBC notes that 'as regards the moral freedom given to human beings, it cannot simply be reduced to the liberty granted to them to regulate and determine themselves, for the ultimate point of reference is not a human person but God himself'. The secular problem is that 'the popular scale of values commonly followed in today's world runs contrary to the biblical proposal. It puts human beings before God'. We are confronted by 'the stumbling-block of a purely secular ethic that disregards the

⁴⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, 101.

⁴⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, 6, 7, 8.

⁴⁶ Pontifical Biblical Commission, 12, 5.

relationship of human beings to God'.⁴⁷. An interesting feature of all these proposals above is their affinity with Protestant evangelical viewpoints in a desire to place the Bible at the heart of Christian ethical development.

CONCLUSION

The methodologies practiced in numerous books on Christian ethics published from 2001 to 2011, plus two from the 90s, have been examined. With exceptions noted, a pattern emerges in the development of their Christian ethics. In the main, they make sparse reference to the biblical text, and therefore are not able to engage in close dialogue with it. More weight is put on Christian tradition in developing Christian ethics. Where biblical interpretation is undertaken, it is largely of the 'plain-reading' variety. That is, the assumptions underlying interpretation is that the meaning of texts is self-evident, and that texts interpret themselves, an approach bordering on biblicism.

The synthetic or syncretic requirement for developing a Christian ethics from the Bible is missing. This means the necessity to investigate the corpus of Scripture to ascertain if normative ethical themes and trajectories occur throughout the text. Where contradictions do occur, they can best be handled, even if not resolved, by 'serious exegesis'. Most of the books reviewed, instead, select portions of Scripture for scrutiny without clarifying why the particular section is chosen for analysis. Finally, only a minority of books show how their ethics relate and apply to contemporary ethical issues. Even fewer show how their biblically-derived ethical guidelines connect with modern topics warranting ethical analysis.

⁴⁷ Pontifical Biblical Commission, 23, 45, 48.