

New Geneva Theological Seminary
ST 509 Social Ethics
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course aims to examine the structure and content of morals and ethics from a Christian perspective. In the light of the deficiencies of secular ethics, which will be examined, the class will work toward a systematic approach to ethical decision-making predicated on biblical norms with special emphasis on the Ten Commandments. Theory will be followed closely by application to specific ethical questions, which are of great concern both to Church and to society.

OBJECTIVES

- To familiarize the student with standard terminology, concepts, and issues involved in ethics, both Christian and non-Christian.
- To provide the student a brief survey and critique of non-Christian ethical theories.
- To develop moral decision-making based on God's Word in order to respond to the issues of life with moral consistency, ethical accountability, and personal integrity.
- To assist the student in thinking through the application of God's Word to a range of contemporary ethical issues, principally through a study of the Decalogue.
- To develop the student's ability to think critically about contemporary ethical issues and to articulate a well-reasoned Christian position on those issues.

COURSE CONTENT

- I. Introduction to Ethics
 - A. Importance and role of worldview thinking
 - B. Defining key terms/concepts/problems
- II. Survey of Ethical Theories
 - A. Exploration of the major secular, ethical theories
 - B. Critical analysis of secular ethical theories
- III. Introduction to Christian Ethics
 - A. The Bible and Christian ethics
 - B. Foundations for Christian ethics
 - C. Essential paradigms for a proper understanding of ethics
 - D. Can we be good without God?
 - E. Moral decision-making based on biblical principles and rule
- IV. Application and Case Studies
 - A. Cases: E.g., abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, environment, sexuality (premarital sex, homosexuality, transgenderism, etc.), war, immigration.
- V. Conclusion to the Study

REQUIRED TEXTS AND MATERIALS

- John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (P&R, 2008).
- John Barber, *Earth Restored* (Christian Focus Publication, 2002).
- John Barber, “John M. Frame and Richard B. Hays on Ethical Methodology” (paper provided)
- John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Eerdmans, 1991).

RECOMMENDED SUPPLEMENTAL READING (These may be helpful for your class presentation)

- Alcorn, Randy C. *Pro-Life Answers to Pro-choice Arguments*. (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press), 2000. [This is an updated and expanded edition.]
- Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (P&R, 1996). [This exposition of the Decalogue is contrast to the Natural Law approach of Budziszewski and David VanDrunen. It influenced Frame’s *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*.]
- John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed. (Crossway, 2010). [A textbook on major topics in applied ethics from a conservative evangelical perspective.]
- Michael Lefebvre, ed., *The Gospel & Sexual Orientation* (Crown & Covenant Publications, 2012). [A summary on homosexuality. Includes an analysis of “sexual orientation”.]
- Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (P&R, 1991). [Part 2 speaks of how specific penalties of the Mosaic Law are altered today. Appendix B critiques Theonomy.]
- John Barber, “Transgender: the Facts, the Lies, and Our Hope” (<http://theaquilareport.com/transgender-the-facts-the-lies-and-our-hope/>)

Theories of ethics based on Natural Law (We will discuss the limitations of natural law for ethics).

- Francis J. Beckwith, *Defending Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- C. J. Budziszewski, *What We Can’t Not Know* (Spence Publishing Company, 2004).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- 3-5 page reviews on each of the main textbooks above (do not include my paper on Frame and Hays, although please read it). All papers should be 12-point, Double-Spaced, Times Roman with your name and course info at the top. These are due the first day of class. 25%
- 10-15-page paper on the moral-ethical topic of your choice. This paper is due no later than 2 weeks after the class ends. Your paper will be written in the second person to a friend. Although you are writing to a friend, your paper should include (1) An explanation of the issue demonstrating your understanding of it. (2) A survey of the different conclusions that Christians have reached on the issue, and the reasons for those conclusions. (3) A scriptural defense of your position which (a) Shows pastoral sensitivity to your friend (b) Engages the course material. Your paper will cite (Chicago or Harvard style is fine) scholarly resources (textbooks, journal articles, commentaries, etc.) and will include a standard bibliography at the end. 35%
- Class presentation. You will give a 10-minute defense in class of a particular ethical problem (e.g., Is it never right to lie? Is homosexual attraction different from other sinful inclinations? How to minister to ‘transgender’ youth? Under what circumstances is it right to divorce?) Your presentation will be graded according to (1) Grasp of the issue (2) Familiarity with the arguments pro and con (3) Clarity and coherence of thought and presentation. 30%.
- Attendance and participation. There will be a deduction for each unexcused absence. 10%

John M. Frame and Richard B. Hays on Ethical Methodology

John J. Barber, Ph.D.

Entrée to the heart of Frame's Christian ethical method precipitates a fundamental query. He has insisted that an effective ethic is only discovered from the trove of Christian ideals. But this only elicits a deeper problem. "Whose Christian ethic?" One could be blindsided considerably should one undertake the prestigious enterprise of particularizing an ethic according to the lordship principle, only to discover a plethora of other voices in the same field of study, and all claiming conclusiveness, or at the very least, to point us in the right direction. Why is Frame's procedure the better way? An instructive course of action would be to see how his work matches up in general terms to the work of another leading, Christian ethicist. Owing to the deft, hermeneutical gifts of Richard B. Hays, and also because he has presented a structural approach to ethics that has shared interests with those of Frame, the forthcoming pages will concentrate on a corroborative study of these two thinkers.

In *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard B. Hays (1996) outlines a fourfold approach to New Testament ethics. The multiplex schema represents a paradigmatically new method that grapples with the reality of the New Testament "text" without venturing into biblicism. Equally so, it ascertains the many ways the text is mediated by metaphor and narrative without venturing into the sort of deconstructive analysis that looks for "the world behind the text"—a procedure that historically has left us with little text to reconstruct for embodied living.

An abstract of his approach includes the descriptive task, the synthetic task, the hermeneutical task, and the pragmatic task. The *descriptive* task asks us "to explicate in detail the messages of the individual writings of the canon, without prematurely harmonizing them" (Hays, 1996:3).¹ This first step is really exegetical in nature. The *synthetic* task moves on to know the basis of "coherence among the various witnesses," otherwise "what methods might allow us to give an appropriate account of this canonical coherence" (Hays, 1996:4). This second step is focused on the unity of texts. The *hermeneutical* task understands that the New Testament was written with

¹ Hays is in the school of Stanley Hauerwas, who also resists the unity of the canon. "The narratives of Scripture were not meant to describe our world . . . but to change the world, including the one in which we now live." Stanley Hauerwas, (1994) "The Moral Authority of Scripture," in *From Christ to the Word: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. Wayne Bolton, Thomas D. Kennedy, Allan Verhey, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 135.

a specific people and time in view whereby it helps us to overcome “the temporal and cultural distance between ourselves and the text” (Hays, 1996:5). The *pragmatic* task is “embodying Scripture’s imperatives in the life of the Christian community” (Hays, 1996:7).

From here we want to investigate some shared and disparate representative points between Hays and Frame in their respective approaches to ethics. Correspondence of thought is seen in the developmental range of both proposals. Both Frame’s three-part perspectivalism and Hays’ fourfold account make plain that Christian ethics is a multifaceted undertaking that is dependent on the rich unity and diversity of both Scripture and human experience. A second similarity is that both plans are composed of parts that thrive in mutual dependence, or as Hays (1996:3) says of his own method, “The four tasks interpenetrate one another.”

Although the two syllabi do not permit strict equivalence, in a rough sort of way the normative perspective and the descriptive task provide the ethicist similar starting points as both begin with what Scripture says. The normative perspective also shares a common interest with the synthetic task as both take up principles that can account for the unity of Scripture. The situational perspective bears some affinity with the hermeneutical task seeing that “the hermeneutical task is the cognitive or conceptual application of the New Testament’s message to our situation” (Hays, 1996:7). The existential perspective looks something like the pragmatic task which is “the enacted application of the New Testament’s message in our situation” (Hays, 1996:7). In Hays, both the hermeneutical and pragmatic tasks are most closely aligned as both are governed largely by practical judgments. Thus, “It would be possible to group the two tasks together under the heading of application.” On the pragmatic task alone Hays (1996:7) echoes the Framian aphorism that “all theology is practice” in his insistence that “there can be no true understanding apart from lived obedience, and vice versa.” He means that the pragmatic task is not just what we do once we have deciphered Scripture’s ethical priorities. Embodying Scripture’s imperatives is rather an indispensable part of the interpretative process.

Paradigmatic tensions between Frame’s perspectivalism and Hays’ moral vision are far more sweeping. At the descriptive level, Hays is self-professedly reluctant to jump prematurely toward a strict harmonization of the New Testament canon. Any biblical theologian can understand this

disinclination. However, Hays (1996:4) contends that such a harmonization is impeded by a “hidden complication,” namely, that the explicit moral teachings of the New Testament texts are as much the product of the “community’s *ethos*,” as they are they are a manifestation of God’s revealed truth.² Since the New Testament writers work with disparate symbols and social structures we can speak in only hushed tones of the unity of the New Testament.³

The normative perspective of the lordship principle also consents to the vivification of community *ethos* in the formation of the New Testament canon. But for Frame that rich community is found solely in the inter-Trinitarian life of God. Prolegomenous in his doctrine of Scripture is the fact that “God’s word is God himself. God eternally communicates his love and purposes within the Trinity: Father to Son, Son to father, both to the Spirit, and the Spirit to both” (Frame, 2010:48)⁴ God’s self-referential speech is essential for understanding how Frame views the reciprocity of God’s self-communication and Scripture, for “by his grace and free decision he also speaks to his creatures. These communications do not exhaust his word, but they are truly his utterances, his expressions” (Frame, 2010:48). This positions the early Christian community not as producers of God’s truth, but as *conveyers* of it. Frame does not, therefore, feel burdened to challenge the type of claim made by Hays that the earliest Christian communities were source-points of Scripture.⁵ He simply traces Scripture from God to us.

This process forms the familiar CAP, or again, control, authority, and presence. It starts with the divine voice (normative) speaking to the prophets and apostles (situational), who compose the written word under direct inspiration (existential). The normative, situational, and existential

² Hays is following a modernist line of hermeneutics made prominent by F. C. Baur who, following Hegel, abandoned the effort to find “time-less truths” in the New Testament. In Baur’s hands, the New Testament became the product of the earliest believing communities. George Ladd provides a helpful précis of the history of biblical interpretation, including the period of Baur and his followers, in the introduction to *A Theology of the New Testament* (1974) Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans. Hauerwas also represents this trend. “The authority of Scripture derives its intelligibility from the existence of a community that knows its life depends on faithful remembering of God’s care of his creation through the calling of Israel and the life of Jesus.” Hauerwas, “The Moral Authority of Scripture,” p. 34.

³ “Thus, the work of the historical critic entails reconstructing a ‘thick description’ of the symbolic world of the communities that produced and received the New Testament writings” Hays, *Moral Authority*, p. 4. We think that makes any claim of absoluteness of the New Testament texts tenuous and the issue of coherence among the canonical writers problematic. As we will see, Hays does offer his own solution to the problem of coherence.

⁴ On page 253 of *DWG*, Frame adds the lordship principles to this definition when he says that “the word of God is God himself, expressing himself through his lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence.”

⁵ For Frame’s brief remarks on textual criticism, see pp. 232, 240, 253, 463, 536, and 544 of *DWG*.

components of the Framian principle are also readily apparent in this arrangement.⁶ Given the limitation of this deliberation to ethics, a full description of Frame's doctrine of Scripture will have to wait. Of immediate concern is that we know that for Frame (2010:231) "Scripture is sufficient to provide all the ultimate norms, all the normative premises, that we need to make ethical decisions." All extra-biblical data, though participatory in answering ethical questions, must defer to this higher priority.

Hays' 4-fold tasks are inter-related, yet the normative nature of New Testament ethics is not implied in the descriptive step; that all-important first step, in which the reader comes into contact with God's word. The answer to any ethical question must await further reflection. That is arrived at by making the descriptive task dependent on the outcomes produced by the other tasks with his model. As we will see in review of the next tasks, none ever arrive at an absolute ethical norm but each act as a link in the chain of ethical indeterminacy.

This brings us to the synthetic task. Above all the tasks the synthetic focuses on trying to achieve coherence among the voices of the New Testament canon. It does so by searching for a unifying set of "focal images" that arise most naturally from the texts and that make for a comprehensive characterization of all of the moral motifs in the canonical readings. For Hays, the most observable and comprehensive images that cohere the canon are *community*, *cross*, and *new creation*.⁷

⁶ See *DWG*, p. 239. That is not to suggest he is blind to the problem of harmonization or questions of factual consistency within the Bible. It is his way of handling these types of quandaries that is instructive. He reminds us that our loyalty to God's ethical claims does not derive from a consistent principle that is able to harmonize difficult Bible passages, but "Absolute ethical principle flows a *person* who is absolute. And only in the Bible do we find a God who is truly absolute and truly personal at the same time." *DWG*, p. 187, italics added. Frame is calling our attention away from titular "Bible problems" and toward a biblical worldview. If one presupposes the Bible to be the product of human effort, no amount of scientific harmonization can convince that it is "God-breathed." But if one works from the presupposition that the Bible *is* the word of God, then scholarship has its proper place in the study and resolution of such inconsistencies. Vern Poythress (2012) says something similar in *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible*, Wheaton, ILL: Crossway.

⁷ Reacting to the same need for hermeneutical continuity in the New Testament, Kevin J. Vanhoozer employs the notion of a "canonical script." His immediate concern is to express caution about what he sees as George Lindbeck's sudden move from biblical text to Christian community. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer (2005) *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine*, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, in reaction to George A. Lindbeck (1984) *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Louisville: KY, Westminster John Knox Press, underlining edition).

But why these three? Indeed, why images? Why not dogmas? In answer to the first question, Hays (1996:5) is firm “that no single principle can account for the Moral Vision of the New Testament writings.” He does speak of lordship, but not in summative way Frame utilizes the term as an abbreviation of the Bible’s message. Hays understands lordship principally in the narrower Pauline sense recorded in Romans 6—that decisive move of our allegiance from the dominion of sin to newness of life and obedience, and which is the effect of our participation in Christ’s death.⁸ As we will see in the approaching chapter on culture, Hays can move seamlessly from gospel *to* its cosmic and eschatological implications—a very Framian move. But he is far more at home when affirming that our ethical obligations move inescapably *from* the “cosmic context of what God has done in Christ” (Hays, 1996:39).

In reply to the second question, Hays tracks images, not dogmas, because the unity and sense of Scripture can be grasped *only* through an act of metaphorical imagination.⁹ Here Hays follows David Kelsey’s (1975:159) premise in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* that every theological appraisal of Scripture must depend upon “a single synoptic, imaginative judgment” in which the interpreter “tries to catch up what Christianity is basically all about.” Hays’ imaginative reconstruction connecting us with the text is his three focal images.

In a review of the same book by Kelsey, Frame reacts to Kelsey’s theological proposal of a complex *discrimen*. Here Kelsey is acquiescing to a path previously set of R. C. Johnson (1959:15) who explains *discrimen* as “a configuration of criteria that are in some way organically related to one another as reciprocal coefficients.” Kelsey (1975:160) reconfigures it slightly to mean “the conjunction of certain uses of Scripture and the presence of God.”¹⁰ The point is that Kelsey is looking for an interpretive matrix that combines the plain reading of Scripture with other premises, in some way unfixed to the plain reading of Scripture, in order to arrive at the meaning of the Bible while remaining “theological-position neutral” (1975:166).

⁸ Hays expresses this thought on pages 36-41, esp. p. 39. The actual phrase he uses to reflect the Pauline meaning is “transfer of lordship.”

⁹ More recently Hays’ (2005) has written on the role of the imagination in hermeneutics in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul As Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans. Here, however, Hays shows less interest in the role of imaginative judgments on Scripture for contemporary ethics and more in how the gospel reshaped the early Christian community’s identity *via* the imagination.

¹⁰ See Frame’s review of Kelsey’s book online. “Review of Kelsey’s *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*. <http://www.frame-poythress.org/review-of-kelseys-the-uses-of-scripture-in-recent-theology/>

Without cataloguing everything Frame says of Kelsey's (and by inference Hays') idea, this one response is ample.

Yet if Scripture is 'sufficient' with respect to any doctrine at all, it clearly must be 'sufficient' in setting forth the norms for its own use. Even if we cannot set forth those norms exhaustively, somehow they must be there. We cannot accept Kelsey's apparent position that these norms are indeterminate, or that they are communicated through some divine influence apart from . . . Scripture. And certainly we cannot accept any claim that such a view is 'theological position neutral!' (Frame, 2010:483).

At the heart of Hays' search for coherence is the human trait of "discernment."¹¹ Central to the formation of this judgment are the needs and responsibilities of the community of believers who form God's "primary sphere of moral concern"—even more primary than the individual.¹² We hear the readings together but not as receivers of an externally concretized set of rules of conduct. Rather, the needs of the community form the basis for a dynamic union of theology and ethics by which the word of the Lord is to be apprehended and appropriated faithfully.¹³ Evidently, those looking for epistemological closure on moral teachings will not find it in Hays' synthetic task. The synthetic task benefits us as a "contingent interpretive performance" that presents only *one* "coherent moral vision in the texts." We are free to seek other visions using our own metaphorical imaginative judgments. The authoritative ground for ethics was settled for Frame once the pages of Scripture were open; in fact before.

We have adduced that because the descriptive task is not enough to provide a definitive basis for ethics, the other tasks must be employed to arrive at a fully worked out conceptual framework. Even so, the hermeneutical task which, to repeat, serves the purpose of identifying interpretive

¹¹ Not to be confused with the aforementioned "*discrimen*."

¹² See Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 196. Due to the limitations of space, the focal images of cross and new creation are not dealt with here.

¹³ It is for this reason that Hays views Ephesians and 1 Timothy as "pseudo-Pauline" epistles. Ephesians could not have been written by Paul because it underplays the community as a whole, emphasizing instead a "series of admonitions addressed to persons in particular roles within the household: wives/husbands, children/parents, slaves/masters." Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 64. 1 Timothy lacks Pauline authenticity because it "vigorously promotes norms for the community" whereas "the writer is no longer thinking through ethical issues from their theological foundations. All that needs to be done is to guard the tradition entrusted by the apostle." *Moral Vision*, p. 71.

strategies for Christian ethics, is not meant by Hays to reach a standardizing of biblical ethics.¹⁴ This is surely the case if we wish to uncover how ethical warrants function authoritatively within the limits of Scripture. “No matter how seriously the church may take the authority of the Bible, the slogan of *sola Scriptura* is both conceptually and practically untenable, because the interpretation of Scripture can never occur in a vacuum” (Hays, 1996:209). For this reason Hays procures other sources of authority in order to arrive at a workable mode of hermeneutics. Those are *tradition, reason, and experience*.¹⁵

The need for these three sub-steps in the hermeneutical task is essential to carry out the hermeneutical “translation” of the New Testament. The hermeneutical task assumes that a given prerequisite for the search for any harmonizing idea is the strong acknowledgment of the necessary historical and cultural *distance* between us and the New Testament authors. “When we read Paul’s letters to his churches, we are reading the mail of people who have been dead for nineteen hundred years . . . Only historical ignorance or cultural chauvinism could lead us to suppose that no hermeneutical ‘translation’ is necessary for us to understand the texts” (Hays, 1996:6) This is why, in Hays’ judgment, the New Testament cannot be received as a repository of pan-historical, dogmatic, moral claims. The translation process helps us make the voices from the past come alive in the present.

Frame agrees that the Christian ethicist must look to extrabiblical data when interpreting Scripture. He explains that “when we teach the word of God we do legitimately make use of extra-biblical knowledge . . . for we are called to apply Scripture to the contemporary world.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Because Hays is a biblical theologian, and Frame is a systematic theologian, our comparative study is a bit like comparing “apples to oranges.” This disjunction is apparent when weighing Frame’s situational perspective against Hays’ hermeneutical task. Hays elicits the hermeneutical task as a way to discover a unifying set of ideas that bridge the biblical canon to us. In ethics, the situational perspective converges mainly on the data that comprises our outward environment, not internal biblical themes that are thought to function in the cross-cultural translation of Scripture. So we are working with limited overlap between the two men. To overcome this problem, a platform for conversation has been created by leaning more on Frame’s perspectivalism relative to the doctrine of Scripture.

¹⁵ For his complete explanation of these three sources, see *Moral Vision*, pp. 210-11. By “experience” Hays means “the experience of the community of faith collectively.” *Moral Vision*, p. 211.

¹⁶ Frame (2012) *The Academic Captivity of Theology*, Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Publications. In *DWG*, Frame, in addressing the logic of application, shows that a specific concern of the situational perspective is the mandatory use of non-biblical data. “Scripture contains no lessons on Hebrew or Greek grammar. To learn that, we must study extrabiblical information. Similarly, the other means that enable is to use Scripture, such as textual criticism, test editing, translation, publication, teaching, preaching, concordances, and commentaries, all depend on extrabiblical data.” *DWG*, p. 232.

The lordship principle, in fact, envisions the value of normative, situational, and existential data forming a requisite *instrumentum laboris*—what Frame calls the “hermeneutical circle.” This allied methodology suggests that Frame would be very comfortable with Hays’ nomenclature of *tradition, reason, and experience*.¹⁷ The main difference between hermeneutical translation and the hermeneutical circle is that “Scripture must remain primary,” (Frame, 2010:232) not just as *inceptum* but as *ultima ratio* among the hierarchy of norms. It is thus tradition and reason leavened with autonomy and presumed to speak with parity alongside Scripture that he consistently opposes.

But this still leaves Frame with the *historical gap* between exegesis and contemporary ecclesiology and life. How then does Frame bridge it? He argues that (1) The modern ethicist has not left us without reliable ties to the original anthropological and cultural settings in which Scripture was first penned.¹⁸ Hays also exploits the historical line of generational continuity, but differently. Rather than read the past as an anterior and settled basis of truth with consequential meaning for succeeding generations, the history of hermeneutics forms continuing points of posterior and reflective analyses for how Scripture can be re-read and reapplied. What we learn from Scripture is not what it meant and still means, but what it meant and *can* mean today.¹⁹ (2) “The work of the Holy Spirit in illumination and demonstration is the supernatural factor that enables us to hear the words of Scripture as God’s personal words *to us*” (italics added) (Frame, 2010:309). The Holy Spirit, to borrow from Hays, provides “the cognitive or conceptual application of the New Testament’s message to our situation.” (3) “The ultimate answer to [the historical] difficulty is that in an important sense the word of Scripture is always contemporary. God speaks it in our hearing, our time, our culture. This fact does not take away our responsibility to interpret Scripture in the context it was first given. But it does eliminate the possibility that the historical gap might make the Word inaccessible to us” (Frame, 2010:305).

¹⁷ Case in point, on the level of tradition Frame himself makes great use of the Larger Catechism, in concert with Scripture, to reach ethical positions. He is also clear that Christian belief is not unreasonable. And he has shown by his existential perspective that experience, the human person mainly, has a key role as both a source and an object of God’s revelation.

¹⁸ Frame says, “We learn from the previous generation, and the generation before then, all the way back to Bible time.” *DWG*, p. 295.

¹⁹ The reader is recommended to Chapters 40 and 42 of *DWG* for the processes by which Scripture reach us.

To wit, the standardization of God's revealed will across the strands of time is contained in its Author.

A familiar chord is again struck by Hays' pragmatic task. He asks a highly legitimate question. "How shall the Christian community shape its life in obedience to the witnesses of the New Testament?" At face value the question seems to be aimed at the practical implications of the New Testament. But in answering his own question, we find that "No single, definitive answer can be given to such a question, because the community of faith continually confronts new circumstances that require us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, forming fresh imaginative judgments—just as the New Testament writers themselves did—in response to the challenges of our time" (Hays, 1996:313). Each new generation of believers has accordingly its own job to seek out unique ethical solutions for this is what "New Testament writers themselves did." The pragmatic task does not therefore end at fixed decisions, but continues the work of the previous tasks of *in search of* solutions.

Frame would acquiesce to the need for original ethical answers for we live in an original age. Nevertheless, he would add that to shape our lives *imaginatively* with no recourse to a "single, definitive answer" is to lead us away from the witness *of* the New Testament, to the witness set *by* the New Testament—for the purpose of creating ever-dynamic contours in ethics. The question for Hays, in that case, becomes at what point does the Christian community introduce self-serving leniency into its progressive development of what it understands to be ethical in order to accommodate the interests of accelerating social change? In reacting to much feminist rhetoric, Hays correctly warns that private experience as a hermeneutical guide tends to be capitulatory to the political and social interests of the individual.²⁰ But can we say that he has answered this danger by replacing individual experience with the "focal image" of community or group experience? Without a definitive ethical answer at our disposal at what point does group-think and its socially-negative costs become a problem?²¹

²⁰ Exemplary is the critical insight conferred by feminism in subordinating Scriptural motifs on men and women to the discourse of modernity. See Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 211. Hays is reluctant on this count because existentialist readings are not in accord with the synthetic "focal image" of *community*.

²¹Paul 't Hart at Leiden University developed the concept of groupthink as "collective optimism and collective avoidance," in 1998 "Preventing groupthink revisited: evaluating and reforming groups in government," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 73, pp. 306–326.

Here we think is the most fundamental problem with Hays' outline. Because it recognizes no absolute source for morality, the pragmatic task is able to arrive at ethical conclusions that contradict the descriptive task. A representative example is Hays on homosexuality. After recapping a plethora of biblical texts, he says under the descriptive task that homosexual behavior is sin.²² But then under the pragmatic task, he asks, "Should persons of homosexual orientation be ordained?" He answers that "Strictures against homosexuality belong in the church's moral catechesis, not in its ordination requirements. It is arbitrary to single out homosexuality as a special sin that precludes ordination" (Hays, 1996:403). How did we go from one end of the spectrum to the other? For one, "The church has no analogous special rules to exclude from ordination the greedy or the self-righteous. Such matters are left to the discernment of the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination; these bodies must determine whether the individual candidate has the gifts and graces requisite for ministry" (Hays, 1996:403).

Is this not a little bit like jury nullification? The facts are in and the accused is clearly guilty of a pattern of sin. But the verdict is then left to "the discernment of the bodies"—that "imaginative judgment" of the community. But the church does have special rules that disqualify the greedy and the self-righteous from ordination.²³ Basic illogic is also evident. If strictures against homosexuality are for the church's catechesis, but not for its ordination requirements, how can we expect the ordained homosexual to catechize the youth accordingly?²⁴ Hays is right that that there has never been a time when the community of the faithful has not partnered in reaching consensus on many doctrinal and ethical issues. But we are also aware of periods in church's history when community assent has not led to a helpful *transmission* of the text, but to its *transformation*; and that into something wholly foreign to the plain reading of the text.

²² E.g., "The fact is that Paul treats *all* homosexual activity as *prima facie* evidence of humanity's tragic confusion and alienation from God and the Creator." Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 389.

²³ See 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

²⁴ In fairness to Hays, he is not in favor of open-ended acceptance of homosexuality within the churches. For those who look for "unqualified acceptance of homosexuality seem to be operating with a simplistic anthropology that assumes whatever is must be good; they have a theology of creation but no theology of sin and redemption." Hays, *Moral Vision*, p. 402. But this just adds to the questions regarding the connectivity of his general theological formulation.

To Frame, it is obvious that people who are guilty and unrepentant of the nadir of depravity in Romans 1 should not become church officers. According to the *normative* perspective, “church officers are to be spiritually mature, to the point that they can be examples to the flock.” Seen from the *situational* perspective, “people, who are gay, but closeted, presumably do not reveal themselves to the church, so the church cannot use their sexual orientation in determining their qualifications for office.” Should people reveal their homosexual orientation, there is an *existential* perspective. “People whose ‘orientation’ is homosexual, but are committed to a celibate life and struggling with their sinful inclinations, may be considered by the church for ordination on a case-by-case basis.”

Now by means of the existential perspective it looks as if Frame agrees with Hays that celibate homosexuals can be afforded a hearing for ordination. But there is a vastly important difference. It rests in Frame’s nuanced position on sexual orientation. Writing on the seventh commandment, he insists that homosexuals must change to seek ordination. What may linger is their homosexual orientation. By “orientation” he means “a strong pattern of temptation” (Frame, 2008:760). That pattern is common to all regenerated children of God, as it takes any number of forms, and is not sinful in itself. Temptations can always be resisted. However, if “orientation” refers to full-scale lust, then that is contrary to God’s law, and is sinful in itself.²⁵ Lust demands repentance. In either case, the ordinand must be born-again. Hays believes that even if people do not become “straight” but continue even as prisoners of homosexual lust, they are eligible for ordination provided that they practice abstinence from lustful activity. All over again we see how “the situational and existential perspectives may never be used to contradict the normative. In the end all three perspectives must lead to the same conclusion . . . there is nothing in the situational or existential perspectives that would lead us to rethink the normative in this case.”²⁶

On the other hand, Hays can produce a consistent outcome in ethics even when the outcome is at variance with the larger witness of the Bible. For this example, we will look at his ethic on

²⁵ See *DCL*, pp. 760; 766-86. Frame advances ideas on homosexuality, genetic disposition, and science in “Living with Ourselves,” pp. 260-66 of *DCL*.

²⁶ The previous quotes by Frame on homosexual ordination that are not footnoted are all part of an email to the author dated July 17, 2012, with some minor editing. It is important to note that in each case Frame is interacting with the author’s explanation to him about Hays’ handling of the same issue.

Christians serving in the military. On the descriptive level, he brings his remarkable interpretive skills to bear on a single passage: Matthew 5:38-48, which he calls “the central witness of the New Testament concerning violence” (Hays, 1996:335). Here Jesus says to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Hays argues from this text against all war and Christian involvement in it especially. That Jesus did not require the centurion (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10) to leave his profession “suggests that the New Testament writers did not see participation in the army as sinful a priori” (1996:335). However, the “central witness” of Matthew 5:38-48 must mean that the function of the stories of military men is like that of tax collectors and prostitutes: “so these stories about centurions cannot be read as endorsements of military careers” (Hays, 1996:335). Hays (1996:336) entertains the Old Testament holy war texts, but they are all easily discounted on the ground that “the New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament.”

Jesus prescription against Christian brandishing weapons in time of war is further established by inducing the synthetic focal images. The call to non-violence is given to the *community* as a whole, so even though it is possible for a believer to be a soldier, that option “can only be seen as anomalous” (Hays, 1996:337) within a people tasked with the vocation of suffering in the face of injustice. Equally serious is the use of proof texts for physical defense apart from the caveat that all such texts must be seen properly according to the “normativity of the cross” or else “we can be sure that the text is out of focus” (Hays, 1996:338). The determinative value of nonviolent behavior is further supported by the focal image of *new creation* that shapes the community eschatologically and prefigures the end of all war. The implication for all New Testament texts dealing even tangentially with brute warfare is that they “must therefore be read in this eschatological perspective. For example, even though Matthew 5:38-48 contains no explicit reference to eschatology, its directives must be read through the lens of the image of *new creation*” (Hays, 1996:338).

In the interests of space we will skip over the hermeneutical and pragmatic tasks and return to Hays’ discussion on homosexuality. We do so because here Hays offers practical advice on how to live in community with homosexuals that has meaning for military personnel and that finalizes what the remaining tasks say. Says Hays (1996:335),

Just as there are serious Christians who in good conscience believe in just war theory, so there are serious Christians who in good conscience believe that same-sex erotic activity is consonant with God's will . . . I think that both groups are wrong, but in both cases the questions are so difficult that we should receive one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and work toward adjudicating our differences through reflecting together on the witness of Scripture.

Despite Hays acknowledgment that Jesus never called the centurion away from his job, but did call the woman caught in adultery to "sin no more" that distinction seems to be lost on Hays who clearly lumps together soldiers and eroticists as being in sin.

Frame's case for the ethics of warfare and military service develops out of the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder." So it should not surprise us that he elicits something close to Hay's eschatological prefigurement of *new creation*, pointing out that David was forbidden to build the temple because he was a man of war, and the temple anticipates a time of perfect peace with Jesus, the fulfillment of the temple.²⁷ Moreover, he also agrees with Hays that Matthew 10:34, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword," is a horatory metaphor to believers to stand strong in persecution.²⁸ But rather than brandish the Old Testament passages on *herem* warfare as anachronistic relative to the witness of the New Testament, he explains the Old Testament conflicts in a theocentric setting. "God wants it to be plain that Israel gains its victories, not through numbers, but through God's power" (Frame, 2008:706). But none of this provides an ethical blueprint for nations today.²⁹

Divergently from Hays, Frame is willing to say that "part of the meaning of just war is that Christian believers may fight in them. The allowance is based in the theocentric footing of the sixth commandment: God's delights in life and thus permits us to defend innocent life."³⁰ He cites

²⁷ See *DCL*, p. 704.

²⁸ Cf. *DCL*, p. 705 and *Moral Vision*, pp. 332-33.

²⁹ See *DCL*, p. 706 for this point.

³⁰ The whole of Frame's work on the sixth commandment, which involves many issues, hinges on God's lordship over life and death as well as God's delight in life. Consequently, human life, *innocent* human life especially, is to be protected, which is why Frame is dead set against abortion on demand. By the same standard we may take life if it means protecting innocent lives (see *DCL*, p. 685). In either case, God's delight in life is not to be ratified as a static principle that forbids Christians from joining the military, or is war always "violence"—the *unwarranted* exertion of force.

the fact that John the Baptist confronted soldiers and told them not to extort, but never suggested that they should leave the army. The New Testament recognizes the extraordinary faith of the centurion, who said gazing up at Jesus on the cross, “Truly this was a son of God.”

Conscientious objection is a real possibility for Frame, but it presupposes that there are *some* wars we do not need to object to.³¹ Fundamentally, “a Christian will never advocate war unless it is a genuine responsibility of the civil magistrate, pursuing his office to protect the nation against hostile enemies” (Frame, 2008:713).

These differences on point are derivative of the larger theological contexts out of which both men work. Hays seems to want to do ethics out of specific biblical events (community, cross, new creation) rather than by a global examination of the whole Bible. Frame’s issue with this approach by and large is that an ethic of any specific biblical event can only ever set a trajectory of biblical ideas in motion that support and circle back to that specific event. Thus, “An ethic of incarnation might focus on how we should follow Jesus’ example by entering fully into the lives of others . . . An ethic of atonement would focus on self-sacrificing love as the paradigm of love . . . An eschatological ethic would see everything in the light of our future hope, including the rewards of heaven” (Frame, 2008:931).

When Hays explains that the purpose of involving centurions in the New Testament narrative is as a foil analogous to the account of tax collectors and prostitutes against unbelieving Israel, does that position arise naturally from the whole witness of the New Testament, or is it what “the New Testament’s central message of peacemaking” (Hays, 1996:335) demands of the reading? We can go through all of Hays’ rationales that call for an end to Christian participation in combat. But the question Frame would likely ask is, “What makes community, cross, and new creation the methodological guideline for deciding this issue?” As Hays encourages us all to construe our

³¹ The notion that killing, even in self-defense, is never appropriate for Christians comes up in Frame’s discussion of Anabaptism, which he thinks is manifestly unbiblical, given Genesis 9, the capital punishments of the Mosaic law, God’s rebukes of Israel for not killing enough, and the war imagery of the Psalms, Romans 13, etc. See *DCL*, pp. 606-10, p. 692, and pp. 706-08.

own focal images, who is to say that those are right?³² And what is it about Matthew 5:38-48 that makes it “the central witness of the New Testament concerning violence,” to wit, all other bible passages are to defer? As Frame (2008:932) cautions, “To derive from the event simply in itself is a case of the naturalistic fallacy.”³³ Salient here for Frame is the fact that any event recorded in Scripture cannot be anything less than a matter of biblical law. It is for this reason that his ethics is an explication and application of the Ten Commandments. To conceive ethics according to preferential biblical events e.g., creation, cross, and new creation, overlooks that “An ethic based on one or more redemptive-historical events inevitably reverts to law when it seeks to define its specific standards.”

One can retort that Frame is no different in that he uses the lordship principle as his *lens* on Scripture and ethics. The difference, we think, is that Frame sees Scripture’s voice in ethics as immeasurably theistic in nature and thus momentarily decisive of the authoritative range of its witness, and of us. Control, authority, and presence differ significantly from community, cross, and new creation, in that the lordship principle is an all-embracing rubric for the whole message of the Bible understood as a mandate from heaven to us. Hays’ focal images represent one anthropologically based “vision” of the New Testament.

³² Hays is thoughtful when he says, “The unifying images must be derived from the texts themselves, rather than superimposed artificially, and they must be capable of providing an interpretive framework that links and illumines the individual writings.” *Moral Vision*, p. 5. There are qualified themes in Scripture: redemption, love of God, Sabbath, and so on. And the Bible is replete with images, such as, the image of prosperity in Genesis 49:10, “He ties *his* foal to the vine, And his donkey’s colt to the choice vine; He washes his garments in wine, And his robes in the blood of grapes.” So there is no question that Hays’ focal images arise naturally from the New Testament. My concern is his use of images as functionally independent devices that eventually stand between us and the text. Then we are in danger of losing Scripture’s thematic consistency in favor of criteria that pre-adapt us to equivocate on texts that do not conform to the model. The question is how to carefully relate image to metaphysics (biblically defined) to ensure that we are not venturing into some quasi-aesthetic ethic, but are working from a purely theistic basis of revelation and analogy. Then all biblical data is regulatory of ethics whereby we no longer need to decide between concepts and images to illumine the biblical texts.

³³ Identified with the analytic philosophy of E. G. Moore, the “naturalistic fallacy” (often called the Open Question Argument) vehemently argues against the extrapolation of a general ethic or fixed values, such as “good” or “goodness,” from this simple premise. For Moore’s pinpointed discussion see *For Moore’s pinpointed discussion see Moore (1903) Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., especially §13 and §14 on pp. 66-71. Frame exploits the idea to help support Christian theism over and against secular thought. E.g., *DCL*, p. 932.

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