

# BIBLICAL ETHICS FRAMEWORK PAPER

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by

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### **Introduction**

In our increasingly post-Christian world, the Christian is frequently engaging with immorality on a new, deeper and more fundamental level than perhaps ever before in modern history. From the discussion of partial-birth abortive medical procedures, to the ever-advancing LGBTQ rights movements, to euthanasia and even to the more recent realms of planetary colonization and genetic manipulation, the Christian is dealing with new, complicated and extremely challenging decisions. These ethical choices are of the utmost importance for several reasons. Firstly, the Christian has an obligation and desire to serve Christ fully, and to the best of our ability in a holy manner. Thus, we need to engage in this conversation carefully, wisely and with the utmost integrity. Secondly, we preserve a fundamental belief in the dignity of human life, knowing that mankind is made in the image of God and therefore human life ought to be preserved and protected at all costs. Thirdly, we understand that these ethical decisions will have drastic implications for society, and thus God's intended order ought to be encouraged for the preservation of a healthier society, even though, as we know from Psalm 2, the nations will rage against God's plans.

### **Methodology**

This paper will outline the Biblical framework for a Biblical, Christian ethic that can be employed when faced with difficult, ethical choices. To do this, I will work through the six aspects of a Christian framework, highlighting the progressive and hierarchical nature of the theological decisions we make, and specifically noting that our lens ought always to be theological, not political nor purely personal. I will then conclude this paper with a reflection as to how one may apply this Biblical framework in a certain example.

## Christic Level

The first, and most important, level of ethical thought for the Christian is the *Christic* level. This is the level that underpins the entire Christian worldview, and is the foundation for all subsequent thought. As Dr. Moore said in his lecture, ‘to be ‘moral’ means to be conformed to Christ.’<sup>1</sup> The impact of this truth on the believer must be monumental. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 10, the believer must ‘take every thought captive to Christ’ which means that even our thought life is under the Lordship and dominion of Christ. As such, this very first level is vitally important because it impacts not just our decisions, but our decision-making process. We aren’t simply expected to make ‘good’ or even ‘moral’ choices based upon our knowledge or intellect. No, we are expected to make choices that conform to Christ, and to do so, we must have our minds infused by the Words of Christ, so that we, as Christians, think as subjects to the King. The only way we can have Christ-centered minds, is to live a Christ-centered life, with other Christ-centered people and by reading, learning, feeding on the words of Christ in Scripture.

Dr. Moore also explained that this foundational principle, a Christocentric ethic, is fundamental to the Christian faith. He uses Ephesians 1 to articulate a theological position that the entire universe is centered around Jesus, the Son of God. As this is the case, therefore, those who think like, and act like, Jesus are the ones who are living as a human most effectively and correctly. This also means that there is an obligation on the creation to obey the will and commands of Jesus, because He is our King. This is a personal King, and a personal wisdom. All mankind has wisdom to varying degrees; however, the Christian not only has access to that wisdom, but to the author and Personification of that wisdom in Jesus. As such, therefore, the more conformed we are to Christ, by the power of His indwelling Spirit, the more likely we are to be able to think Biblically and theologically about the issues we will face.

There are two parts to the Christic level of ethical decision-making. The first is to see Christ in the creation ordered mandate. As the creator, and sustainer, of creation, we look to

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, Russell, Lecture material.

Genesis and then the new creation patterns to see what God intended for creation. This can also be discerned by looking at, and considering, the law and holiness of God. Secondly, however, is the life of Jesus, and the work of Jesus. What did he prioritize? How did He speak of government, morality, holiness, integrity, money, position, personality etc.? The third is by the rest of Scripture, asking what we see about Jesus' priorities from these texts, such as poverty, religion, worship, freedom and any other issue we might ever need to address. Although Scripture doesn't mention abortion or genetic manipulation directly, for example, we can derive clear principles about these topics by understanding this fundamental aspect of Christ's sovereignty in creation and in the purpose for His creation.

### **Kingdom Level**

The second level of a Biblical ethical framework follows from the foundation of Christ, and it is the *Kingdom* level. As Christ is the author of creation, and the example from which we derive our ethical knowledge and lifestyle, then we also need to understand how to correctly read, interpret and live out the words of Christ from Scripture. As Davis rightly articulates, 'The teachings of Scripture are the final court of appeal for ethics.'<sup>2</sup> This also requires that we know where in time we are located. We are not under the Old Covenant, and therefore we know that we have the final revelation of Scripture in our hands, and we also know that we have a different covenant that places us under the direct Kingship of Christ, regardless of ethnicities or geopolitical borders. Grasping this is vital for our understanding of Scripture, so that we don't impose an Old Testament ethic (particularly in areas of ceremonial law) onto our New Testament situation.

Of course, simply understanding the chronology of the Bible isn't quite enough. The Kingdom level is deeper than this; it is a deepening of Moses' ethic on the stone tablets. Now, under Christ, the purpose of Jesus' Kingship is to reclaim from sin, death and the Devil what is

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<sup>2</sup> Davis, John Jefferson, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), p. 15

rightfully His: everything. Further to this is the knowledge that we, as Christians, serve the King as His ambassadors. When we grasp this truth, then we can no longer think in terms of our short lifespan here on earth. Rather, we look at the movement of history and the ultimate end of time itself, which is the glorification of Jesus and the reclamation of His territory from evil and sin.

When that vision of Kingship takes hold of us we will begin to think in terms of eternal dimensions, and not merely in terms of centuries or even our own lives. Rather, we will be grasped by the power of the Gospel, and thus when we are faced with an ethical decision, we won't think about our own comfort, our own pleasure or the ease of our life, nor even our own preferences. Rather, we must think in terms of the Kingdom. If Christ is our King, and everything is about Him, not us, then my response will be Christocentric, and will be about the Kingdom of God, not the Kingdom of self. This will help me think in a larger, theological picture. That larger vision is that we are placed, by God's sovereign and good hand, into the situation we find ourselves, to train us and prepare us for an eternity serving Him in the New Creation. As Dr. Moore rightly said, 'If you have a longer picture of time then you have a bigger understanding what it is that God is doing in the Universe.'<sup>3</sup>

The guiding ethical principles of the Kingdom level are that we are to stop thinking in terms of temporal, selfish ways, but to begin to think and live with eternity in mind. This means that we accept where God has placed us, in whatever situation we may be in, so that we can learn and grow to be prepared to serve in the future however He decides. When we do this, we will see that our current predicaments are small in terms of the future plans He has for all His people, and thus we can grow to delight and have joy in the circumstances, because we know God is good.

### **Ecclesial Level**

Following from the Christic level and the Kingdom level is the *Ecclesial* level. Here, we begin to see the ethical framework take shape. If the Christic level focuses on Christ as the center of all our theological and ethical decisions, and the Kingdom helps reorient our mindset to

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<sup>3</sup> Moore, Russell, Lecture material.

one of eternal dimensions, and more accurate understanding of the Words of Christ, the Ecclesial level is the governing body for our training, teaching and outward witness to the world.

The church exists because the Kingdom of God has not come into the fullness of reality yet. It is, to use theological terminology, the ‘already, not yet’ reality. The Kingdom has been established by Christ, but is not yet inaugurated. This will happen with the return of Christ. Because this is the situation, therefore, the church plays a key role in the world today, in both demonstrating what the Kingdom looks like, and taking the message of the Kingdom into the world, to win over rebels to the King.

Christ rules, now, over the church. We are the outposts of Christ’s kingdom in hostile territory, and He, as head of the church, rules over us by the power of His Word and in us by the power of His Spirit. We learn how to live and what the King wants of us by the proclamation of His Word through the preaching of the Scriptures every week, and He guards who enters His kingdom through the gateway of baptism to the church. It is like being granted a visa to access a country: baptism is our visa, our proof of identity, that is validated by the church to say, ‘He is one of us,’ only now we have switched allegiance to the King. He also rules us through communion, membership, discipline and fellowship.

The reason why the church is so important, and is registered in this framework as above the ‘personal’ level, is because our identity is not to be shaped by things we naturally ‘like’ or dislike, but by our allegiance to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, as lived out by members of the Church of Christ. When we consider issues, therefore, of an ethical nature, and we are being conformed to Christ in our thoughts and deeds and we are submitting to His kingship, and thinking in kingdom terms, we are then forced to see our ethical standard as, firstly, being played out in reality within the confines of the church. We are in training now, as members of the church, to be leaders in the New Creation. So how we judge ourselves, our morality, one another, how we lead, love, care for, protect and overcome our sinfulness together through forgiveness and repentance, is vitally important for us as a people of God.

This change of view and opinion in the church is designed to overturn the world's philosophies. 'The first shall become last,'<sup>4</sup> and 'greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for a friend,'<sup>5</sup> become the mantra that powers, fuels and drives the church forward into the world's territory. We are no longer to live by the world's standards, and we are to be in a community of fellow-alien who share the new values of the King, to help us maintain our commitment to the King, and to help us deepen that desire to serve and honor Christ. Thus, in terms of ethical decisions, we must ask how the issue affects the church, and how the church should apply the ethical decision in its life, and, more specifically, how are we to train and disciple our fellow believers, to be able and willing to engage with, and understand, the importance, consequences and spiritual connotations of our thinking and decision-making.

The clear principles that can be established from the Ecclesial level of our framework are that we are to think in terms of community. We are not alone in this life of service, but we have a shared vision as the church of God to implement the rule of God across the dominion of God. Therefore, when thinking through issues, we need to understand how the church thinks about them, how we handle them, to protect the name of Christ and one another, and to prepare ourselves to overcome the world's attempts to drag us back into the rebellion.

### **Personal level**

After we consider the Ecclesial level, we then consider the *Personal* level, which is to say that the ethical framework of our decision-making must understand how the issue in question speaks to the person, and of the person. As a Christian, however, this is the other side of the Christic level. As Christ is the pattern we are to follow, learn from and ultimately emulate, we are therefore to be transformed and conformed to the image of Christ. Before, when we were rebels, we lived as rebels, we fought against God with the other rebels and we aimed to overthrow the rule of God on earth. Now, however, as redeemed members of the Kingdom of Christ, we are to

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<sup>4</sup> Matt. 20:16

<sup>5</sup> John 15:13

live in a way that ultimately reorients our entire life to be like Christ, so that we are replicas of the King here on earth.

This impacts us very clearly in two ways. Firstly, we are to fulfil the mandate of dominion over creation, which was given to Adam and Eve, which means, in part, that we are to bring God's sovereign rule over the world. Secondly, however, it also means, that the actions of our lives are brought into submission to the will of the King so that we are living examples of what *true* humanity, *true* submission to Christ looks like. Therefore, it means that it should be more attractive than a pagan lifestyle, for even though there is pain and suffering, there is purpose and satisfaction in knowing we serve the King, and that we have an eternal dimension to our existence and decision-making.

The clear ethical principles that can be derived from this level, therefore is that we are to be like Christ, and submit our own, personal will and preferences to Him, as our King. In doing so, we refuse the autonomy that the world desires, and we submit ourselves to Christ, aware that He knows more about us, and about our situation than we do. We, personally, trust Him and His goodness.

### **Social Level**

After the Personal level comes the Social level. This is an important step, for now we have moved from the realm of 'faith' to the realm of the rebel. The people who are the majority of society don't believe in our morality, nor share in the foundation of our understanding of purpose, are not passive in this world. They, too, have a worldview, and they are in competition with us for adherents to that worldview. Not only do they want to keep people from joining the Kingdom, but they also want to steal people from the Kingdom. Consequently, therefore, we must ask how we are to discern what we ware imbibing from society, either wittingly or unwittingly, that is unhelpful and even antithetical to the Gospel.

Beyond this, of course, there is an importance in asking how we, as believers, are to impact society, also. We are to love our neighbors, so what does that look like as a believer,



living in a society who ultimately, and often aggressively, rejects our morality, our loyalty and our integrity?

The key principles that we are to glean from this level, although shorter, are vitally important. Notably, we are to think through our own dependence or indoctrination by the world, and to reject the world's thinking for Christ's thinking, as Paul writes in Romans 12, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.'<sup>6</sup> Further to this, once we are able to see how we misunderstand the Gospel because of the world, we are then to take that information and use it to build up the church (Ecclesial level) and to endeavor to impact society for good, and to win souls for the Kingdom.

### **Political Level**

The final level of our framework flows from the Social level and is the *Political* level. This level focus particularly on the governmental side of society, but is distinct because of how readily we, as humans, are to become tribalistic in our allegiances. As a Christian however, we are to remember the previous steps. Christ alone is worthy of our allegiance as the creator and sustainer of all things. We are under His Kingship and serve His Kingdom, so we ought not to think in terms of election cycles of even political systems, but in eternal terms. We are part of an organization, a Kingdom, that transcends geographical borders and even political boundaries. We are to be Christlike in our actions, thought processes and morality, so that when we interact on a governmental level we are not corrupted by power, but are able to harness it for the Gospel. We are to avoid falling into incessant arguments about 'the greater good' in society, because this line of reasoning typically means compromises on things and issues that ought not to be compromised. Thus, the political level is one that requires discipline and care, for we can all too easily worship the beast of power and politics as savior, rather than Christ as King.

Further, we are to engage with the legislative process where we can, and should, present a moral worldview. This is not to say that we police morality, or endeavor to stop

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:1.

corruption and sinfulness by means of a law (history shows this to be impossible). Again, Davis is helpful: ‘The believer will not...have *utopian* expectations of what laws can accomplish; only the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit can produce radical transformations in the human heart.’<sup>7</sup> The principle of engaging where there is reasonable expectation that morality can be observed and understood is wise; *general revelation* can speak to general truths for all people.

From this level, we develop the principles of ensuring that we act in a manner that speaks of politics and government in the correct way; we are not defeatist over an election. We are not arrogant or overly confident of God’s favor merely by an election victory. Rather, we are reminded that God is sovereign over all things, including the houses of power, and as such we are to interact with others not as enemies, but as people bewitched by the enemy, and in need of rescue. Rescue not by force, but by the Gospel.

### **An Application: Pornography**

To put these principles into practice, I will work through the example of how a Christian makes an ethical decision about the use of pornography. At the Christic level, the principles are to acknowledge Christ as the creator. He created sexuality, and declared that sex was good. Marriage, however, is the only appropriate place for sexual pleasure to be enjoyed, and as He is the Creator, He designs the rules. Secondly, Jesus speaks of tearing out our eyes,<sup>8</sup> rather than engaging in sinful activity. Clearly, at this first level, the use of pornography is a rebellion against the Creator and His order.

At the Kingdom level, we are to think in terms of eternal proportions. Marriage is a mystery that points, ultimately, to Christ and the church.<sup>9</sup> If we, therefore, are thinking in terms of immediate gratification, we are not thinking about the eternal ramifications of our addiction to lust. Our sexuality is to be a part of the picture of Christ and the church, not merely part of our own selfish, sexual gratification. If we are single, therefore, we are to remain single and pure

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<sup>7</sup> Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, p. 26

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5:29

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 5:32

until the Lord calls us to marriage. If we are married, we are to honor our spouse with our bodies and minds. Clearly, at this second level, pornography is wrong.

At the Ecclesial level, we are to understand that the pull of pornography is strong, especially on our younger men and women, and so we are to be a place of refuge as a church, to help the broken reed, to engage with their sin and help them take it captive. We are not to stand in an ivory tower (As we previously have done with homosexuality) throwing stones at those who struggle, but come alongside, as a community, to demonstrate healing, to be a witness to the world about holy living, pure living and true living. We are witnesses of the healing power of community by the power of the Spirit of Christ. At his level, pornography is wrong, but can be combatted, and should be overcome, as part of a community, as a witness to the world.

At the Personal level, we are to submit to the will of Christ. Christ tells us that to look at a woman with lust in our heart is wrong, and unholy.<sup>10</sup> We are, therefore, to flee sexual immorality, not engage with it.<sup>11</sup> This is how we submit to the will of Christ. Rather than fulfill our immediate, sinful desires of sexual gratification outside the marriage, we are to submit to the will of Christ as the Creator, because He is our King. This means saying ‘No’ to pornography and ‘Yes’ to purity.

At the Social level, we are to discern the views of the world upon us. The world, post 1960s sexual revolution, tells us that we are to enjoy sex in whatever form or persuasion we choose, so long as it hurts no one else. This is beginning to permeate the Christian mindset, as we often hear things like, ‘Pornography hurts no one, and in fact keeps me from having sex, so it’s actually helpful.’ This type of defense and justification demonstrates just how far the zeitgeist of the world has penetrated our thinking. We must refute this, reject it, and show the world what a holy person, a pure person and a loyal person looks like, as individual witnesses to our neighbors.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:28

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:18

Furthermore, we are to love our neighbors in the pornography business by not participating in their abuse, defilement and slavery. Society continues to crumble around us, and sexuality is merely another domino in that effect. As Berry states, ‘The community...is being destroyed by the desires and ambitions of both private and public life...private life and public life, without the disciplines of community interest, necessarily gravitate toward competition and exploitation.’<sup>12</sup> By contrast, however, we as the church are to be a community who twists that trajectory on its head, and protects rather than exploits those trapped by pornography.

At the Political level, I think should not police, or legislate, pagans into morality. However, we ought to be engaged in using the political offices to teach about the snares of sexual immorality, as well as endeavor to protect those trapped in the system, either as active participants (the actors and actresses) or those trapped in addiction to it. The state will not legislate morality, per se, but it can be used to at least rescue those caught in the snares of evil.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this paper has presented a clearly defined ethical vision paper that looked at the various levels of consideration, noting how these levels are Biblical and then deriving clear principles for the believe from them. These principles shape the way in which we are to think about ethical and moral decisions, and this paper demonstrated how they can be used in the example of pornography, showing that the use of pornography is wrong, and that the Christian has a theological and an ethical obligation to avoid using pornography, as well as to assist those caught up in using it.

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<sup>12</sup> Berry, Wendell, *Sex, Economy, and Community: Eight Essays* (New York: Panteon, 1993), p. 121

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