

On Reviving the Study of Biblical Ethics

Wayne McCown*

“The simple task of honest and clear exegesis,” Thomas C. Oden has recently perceived, “may be the undiscovered beginning point for contemporary Protestant ethics.”¹

The “exegetical” work currently presupposed by and presented in the ethicists² (and in the pulpit!) is sadly inadequate. Too often, the Bible is appealed to in an arbitrarily selective way. Texts or paradigms are adduced in evidence as convenient, while others equally but inconveniently germane, are ignored, played down, or even repudiated. Further,

*Professor-elect, in the field of Biblical Literature, at Seattle Pacific College. He received his Th. D. from Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia.

1. Thomas C. Oden, *Radical Obedience: The Ethics of Rudolf Bultmann* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), pp. 18, 21.
2. In recent years, theologians in Christian ethics have produced quite a number of stimulating volumes. These scholars, of course, focus primarily on the present situation; they dedicate most of their attention to elucidating it and the ethical processes pertinent to it. But, appeal to the Bible is, for none of them, an unnatural act. Rather, it is integral to both the methodology and message of Christian ethics.

The ethical works studied of late, with attention especially to the exegetical question posed here, include the following: John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1963), and *Christian Morals Today* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1964); Paul L. Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963); Joseph Sittler, *The Structure of Christian Ethics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958); James Sellers, *Theological Ethics* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966); Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), and *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965); James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968); Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Volume I: Foundations*, ed. William H. Lazareth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

sentences lifted out of their context become, in the hands of some, little more than mottos—as if authority attaches to them regardless of the use to which they are put. But *use* of the Bible (in a supportive role), rather than submission to its authority, is, from the exegetical side, an unreliable method and a misuse of the Bible's authority.³

If the Bible is to be at all normative, or genuinely illuminative, in matters of ethical decision and conduct, certainly it must be the Bible rightly interpreted. “. . . it is the biblical word in its true meaning, and that alone, that can claim to be normative in the church.”⁴ In a word, we have to do with the task of exegesis.⁵

Exegetical work in the “ethical” parts of the Bible has been woefully lacking.⁶ But now, there are signs of renewed interest in this endeavor.⁷ And, there are tentative signs of an attempt to bridge the long-standing gap between biblical studies and Christian ethics.⁸ But how? That is the problematic point in the process, and its touchstone.

The present paper is intended, in part, to summon the evangelical church to participation and leadership in the revival of biblical ethics.

3. For this reason, the attitude and approach to Scripture espoused by James Sellers is unacceptable: “For Christian ethics,” he has asserted, “the basis of hermeneutics is a pragmatic affirmation of *what we are to expect to find in the Bible*” (*Theological Ethics*, p. 102; underscoring added).
4. John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 42.
5. Cf. James M. Gustafson, “Christian Ethics” in *Religion*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), pp. 337-338, who lamenting the “paucity of material that relates the two areas [of biblical exegesis and Christian ethics] in a scholarly way,” has called urgently for more work to be done at this point.
6. Cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *New Testament Theology Today*, trans. David Askew (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963), pp. 123-124; Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), p. 7; C. Sleeper Freeman, “Ethics as a Context for Biblical Interpretation,” *Interpretation*, (October, 1968), XXII, 443.
7. See the works cited below, in note 24.
8. See, e.g., Amos N. Wilder, “Kerygma, Eschatology and Social Ethics” in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube, in honour of Charles Harold Dodd (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1956), pp. 509-536; and, William Baird, *The Corinthian Church: A Biblical Approach to Urban Culture* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964).

More specifically, it will propose, as an initial step, a method of interpretation appropriate to the study of the exhortatory (ethical) materials in the New Testament epistles.

Problems of an Exegetical Ethic

Evangelicals are among those prone to short-circuit the process of interpretation. The demands of Scripture are wont to be pressed into immediate application, through a “super-direct mode of casuistry.”⁹ But the inadequacies of a naively literal hermeneutic are perhaps nowhere more evident: the exhortatory commands in the Bible cannot be appealed to mechanically, non-contextually, non-historically—as if each had the flat authority of law in its text. Not all the directives in the Bible (even “moral obligations) are equally binding on the Christian today (consider Lev. 20:9, “every one who curses father or mother shall be put to death”).¹⁰ We are obliged, then, to ask a profoundly critical question: what *is* it in Scripture that commands us and *how* is its authority to be appealed to rightly?

The problem is a difficult one; it also is one we must face more courageously, if we expect to find a sound and satisfying solution (which, at present, we do not have). Carl F. H. Henry, in his lengthy apologetic treatise on Christian personal ethics, repeatedly emphasizes the eternal and absolute quality of the transcendentally revealed Hebrew–Christian ethic. Yet, he must also concede: “In both Testaments there is the moral law that is binding upon all men in all circumstances and places; there are also commandments of temporary significance.”¹¹ Dr. Henry, however, fails really to grapple with the problem thus posed. Precisely *how* he (or any of the rest of us) determines which injunctions are absolute and which temporary seems unascertainable, or at best, arbitrary. Such a methodological flaw, at such a crucial point, means the whole structure of evangelical ethics is posited on an uncertain foundation.

-
9. Harold B. Kuhn, “Ethics and the Holiness Movement” in *Insights into Holiness*, comp. Kenneth Geiger (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1962; third printing, 1963), pp. 249-250.
 10. In the New Testament consider, e.g., 1 Cor. 14:34ff., “. . . the women should keep silence in the churches. . . . for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”
 11. Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 269.

A related problem also required a great deal more thought and attention. How are the demands of Scripture to be applied in the church today? Harold B. Kuhn has suggested: “. . . the task of the Christian moralist must be essentially this: to *abstract* from the temporary and local precept [of the New Testament] *the principle which underlies it and which it encases*; and then, to *reapply the principle in terms of the contemporary situation*.”¹² This description points us somewhat in the right direction (although exegetical rationale is lacking, this phrasing may be employed for expressing the task thus, in terms of ‘encasement’ and ‘abstraction’).¹³ But Dr. Kuhn’s statement is no more than a general description—one which invites contextual investigation of precise hermeneutical, analytical and critical procedures from both ends, the biblical and the modern. On this score, evangelicals too often seem unbelievably immature, in knowing how to apply the Scriptures.

Another problem: we cannot expect to find in the Bible a direct word for many of the most important moral choices confronting contemporary man (e.g., abortion—on—demand, genetic manipulation, environmental pollution). Can Scripture be brought to bear on these pressing questions—how? Dr. Henry submits, that the questions to which the Bible gives no explicit answers “may be considered under large principles and examples.”¹⁴ Other Christian ethicists accomplish the task similarly, by applying theological motifs and biblical images or moral beliefs based on the Bible. But, as Professor Gustafson has pointed out, “The way one moves from basic Christian beliefs to moral intentions has not been the subject of much close analysis.” He further asserts:

The “because” or the “therefore” that joins belief and action often covers a mass of confusion. The moves from theological statements to ethical principles, and to the existential moral question are often hidden in religious rhetoric.¹⁵

12. Kuhn, p. 249 (italics in original).

13. Henry’s procedure in this regard is much less precise methodologically, and can hardly be deemed helpful at all: “This content of morality is not limited to the express precepts but embraces all they imply—building churches, establishing Christian schools and seminaries, endowing hospitals, printing and circulating the Bible, keeping the Lord’s Day, holding family worship” (Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, p. 338).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

15. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life*, p. 260.

These represent some of the provocative problems raised by prior research in Christian ethics, at the point of its contact with the Bible. One fact is abundantly clear: in the recovery of a sound exegetical (evangelical) ethic, we are obliged to begin with a diligent study of exhortation in the Bible itself.

Dibelius on Exhortation in the New Testament

Modern New Testament scholarship, in its understanding and interpretation of the exhortatory (or "paraenetic") passages, has been strongly influenced by Martin Dibelius.¹⁶ He appropriated for their study a definition developed by Rudolf Vetschera relative to the Greek moralists. It reads as follows: "Paraenesis is a literary form which, in accord with its usage and purpose, presents a collocation of precepts; these it relates to the practical conduct of life, as spurs to progress and guides to virtue."¹⁷

-
16. Of Martin Dibelius' studies, see esp. *Der Brief des Jakobus*, Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament Begründet von H. A. W. Meyer, Bd. XVI (7. Auflage; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921); and, *An die Thessalonicher I. II. An die Philipper*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament hrsg. von H. Lietzmann, Bd. II (3. Auflage; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1937). Dibelius' influence is evidenced in all of the following monographs: Karl Weidinger, *Die Haustafeln. Ein Stück urchristlicher Paränese*, Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, Bd. XIV (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1928); Siegfried Wibbing, *Die Tugend- und Lasterkatalogischen Paränese im Neuen Testament und ihre Traditionsgeschichte unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Qumrantexte*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, Bd. XXV (Berlin: Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, 1959); Erhard Kamlah, *Die Form der katalogischen Paränese im Neuen Testament*, Wissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, Bd. VII (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1964). Cf. also David Bradley, "The Origins of the Hortatory Materials in the Letters of Paul" (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Yale University, 1947).

Rudolf Vetschera, *Zur griechische Paränese* (Smichow: Druck von Rohřicek und Sievers im Prag. Im Selbstverlage, 1912), p. 7 (the somewhat free translation is my own; underscoring added). On the character and function of paraenesis in the Greek (and Jewish) tradition(s), see also Victor Paul Furnish, *Paul's Exhortations in the Context of His Letters and Thought*, Microcard Theological Studies, SSVI (Washington, D. C.: Microcard Foundation for the American Theological Library Association, 1960), chap. I, "The Paraenetic Tradition: Its History and Character," pp. 6-72.

This "preceptorial" mode¹⁸ is intended to provide a place of ready reference for all sorts of moral directives, as a comprehensive guide for a man's practical life.¹⁹ The logic behind the form comes to fore most clearly in a syllogism preserved by Seneca (4 B.C.—65 A.D.): "The happy life consists in upright conduct; precepts guide one to upright conduct; therefore precepts are sufficient for attaining the happy life."²⁰

What results when exhortation in the New Testament is interpreted by this standard? The traditional, eclectic characteristics of certain paraenetic materials is brought into focus. But, for Dibelius, this aspect obscured any possibility of theological *entente* or specifically Christian content. In his commentary on James, he declares:

. . . the Epistle of James has no "theology." Although the world of ideas and values which the Epistle attests, despite its eclecticism, is relatively uniform—yet, paraenesis offers no room for the unfolding and development of religious ideas. At best, now and then they are touched on or alluded to, but, for the most part, they are only presupposed. . . . One may compare the paraenetic parts of the Pauline epistles: only with difficulty could anyone derive from them any kind of "theology"; and, in any case, it certainly would not be Paul's.²¹

The general, traditio-historical, pedagogical aspect of such hortatory passages essentially determine their hermeneutical import. Thus, for example, it can be affirmed, further:

The hortatory sections of the Pauline letters are clearly differentiated in material from what Paul otherwise wrote. In particular they lack an immediate relation with the circumstances of the letter. The rules and directions are not formulated for

-
18. Cf. Seneca's reference to "this department of philosophy which the Greeks call 'paraenetic,' and we Romans call the 'preceptorial' . . ." (*Epistulae Morales*, XCV. 1).
19. Furnish, *Paul's Exhortations*, p. 40; Vetschera, *Zur griechische Paränese*, p. 6.
20. Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, XCV. 4.
21. Dibelius, *Jakobus*, p. 19 (The translation is my own).

special churches and concrete cases, but for the general requirements of earliest Christendom.²²

Similar results are obtained by application of this interpretation of paraenesis to the Epistle to the Hebrews. The treatise does not address itself to the situation of one beleaguered community; rather, the seemingly concrete expressions (e.g., 10:32-34; 12:4) reflect phenomena “typical” of the young Church. And, the hortatory passage 5:11–6:12 resolves into a mere pedagogical preface for the expository treatment of Christ as high priest in chapters 7-10. Apostasy does *not* threaten as an imminent possibility, but the motif has been utilized to “mobilize” the readers for the message proffered.²³

Requisites in Rethinking the Task

A critical comment may be submitted at this point. Although he begins with Vetschera’s limited formal definition of paraenesis, Dibelius, by necessity, in his New Testament studies proceeds to use the terms “paraenesis” and “paraenetic” in a more general sense, to describe any type of exhortation or appeal. The functional characteristics of paraenesis specified as a literary genre, however, have continued to be enforced also in the extended sense of exhortation (as an earnest appeal).

Due to its exegetical and theological inadequacies, a reaction against the Dibelian approach has set in, quite recently, in the field of Pauline studies. Wolfgang Schrage and Victor Paul Furnish insist that tradition-historical (and form-critical) description constitutes only a part of the hermeneutical task requisite to these hortatory sections. The Apostle’s commands and appeals also must be considered seriously in terms of their

22. Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, trans. from 2d rev. ed. by Bertram Lee Woolf (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), p. 38; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe*, *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testament*, Bd. XIII (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), pp. 99-100.

23. Martin Dibelius, “Der Himmlische Kultus nach dem Hebräerbrief” in *Botschaft and Geschichte; gesammelte Aufsätze, Bd. II: Zum Urchristentum und zur hellenistischen Religions-geschichte* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1956), pp. 160-176.

epistolary and theological context(s).²⁴

Robert W. Funk, too, has recognized the need for renewed thinking in regard to the paraenetic sections of the (Pauline) epistles:

This particular aspect of the letters, as it appears to me, requires rethinking in two respects. (1) Are the ethical sections framed by and referred to theological sections? If so, how? (2) Are the paraeneses constructed with the particular situation in mind? How can we determine what has specific reference and what not? What is required in resolving these questions is more than the customary exegesis can provide, for it is necessary to attend to the way in which the paraeneses are set in the letter as a whole, and the way in which traditional material is framed in its own immediate context, in addition to which one must be alert to Paul's disposition to conventional language. These factors may drastically affect the [Dibelian] understanding of the paraenesis which takes the items *seriatim* and refers them to tradition.²⁵

A Proposed Method of Interpretation

What is needed in the study of New Testament exhortation entails, in the first place, an exegetically derived definition and delimitation of the

24. Wolfgang Schrage, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote in der paulinischen Paränese* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus [Gerd Mohn], 1961); Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul*.

See further, Lorenz Nieder, *Die Motive der religiös-sittlichen Paränese in den paulinischen Gemeindebriefen. Ein Beitrag zur paulinischen Ethik*, Münchener theologische Studien, I. Historische Abteilung, Bd. XII (Munich: Carl Zink Verlag, 1956); A. Grabner-Haider, *Paraklese und Eschatologie bei Paulus. Mensch und Welt im Anspruch der Zukunft Gottes*, Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen, N. F., Bd. IV (Münster: Aschendorff, 1968). Substantial work also has been done in this regard by Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Die sittliche Botschaft des Neuen Testaments* (2. Auflage; Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1962), who essays to survey the place of ethics within the theological perspective of Jesus as well as the major New Testament writers. Celsus Spicq, another Roman Catholic scholar, has contributed too in his extensive treatment, *Théologie Morale du Nouveau Testament* (2 vols.; Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1965).

25. Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: the Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 254.

“hortatory sections.” The understanding of exhortation in the New Testament epistles, evidently, must be sufficiently broad to allow consideration, ultimately, of their paraenetic purport or applicability in its totality. Hebrews embraces lengthy expository passages (e.g., 7:1-10:18); yet the author himself designates the whole of his writing as “my word of exhortation.” Even Romans (often cited as typical of the apostolic practice of handling hortatory and ethical matters²⁶) has, almost from the beginning (see c.2), a hortatory aspect—“of which chapters 12-15 are only, so to speak, the denouement.”²⁷ Yet, a recognition of the features distinctive to the explicitly hortatory passages in an epistle, too, is salutary. Their specific uniqueness, of course, inheres in their intimate embrace of, or immediate attachment to, an exhortatory appeal.²⁸

These specifically hortatory demands, however, are not immediately to be sifted out of their contexts for contemplation (and application). Rather, the hortatory sections thus defined must be analyzed as exegetical units. They are first to be studied according to the principles of grammatico- and form-historical criticism by which other kinds of (biblical) texts are approached.²⁹ At some points, though, it is helpful in studying hortatory appeal to move “beyond form criticism” to the kind of “rhetorical criticism” lately suggested by James Muilenberg.³⁰ Or, to put it another way and thereby introduce a further stage, the study needs to

-
26. See, e.g., William D. Davies, “Ethics in the New Testament,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, II, 175: “Most of the letters reveal a twofold structure: a first part, dealing with ‘doctrine,’ is followed by a second, dealing with ethics. Romans is typical.” This usual division of the letters now seems highly questionable and somewhat misleading, on closer examination of the evidence; cf. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul*, pp. 98ff.
27. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul*, p. 107.
28. Note that, in addition to such obvious grammatical forms as imperatives, hortatory subjunctives and verbs of entreaty, many subtler and less direct ways are used with the force of exhortatory appeal: e.g., rhetorical questions; entreaties in prayers, thanksgivings and benedictions; even indicative affirmations (expressions of “need,” “fear,” etc.)
29. A helpful introduction to the methodology of form criticism and its role in biblical exegesis, now available in English, is Klaus Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: the Form-Critical Method*, 2. Auflage, rev., trans. S. M. Cupitt (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969).
30. James Muilenberg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, (March, 1969), LXXXVIII, 1-18.

attend to analysis for form, style and sequence, as Professor Funk would encourage.³¹ Thus, we recommend adaptation and application of methodologies, not only form-critical (and traditio-historical), but also rhetorical and literary, as appropriate to the subject matter at hand.

The procedural order may be outlined as follows:³²

(1) Having *demarcated* the sections specifically concerned with hortatory appeal, first consider each separately, analytically, EXEGETICALLY, in terms of form (i.e., *structural format*) and *content*.

(2) Working with the descriptive data thus collocated, it is possible to move the study forward by attending more carefully to the various FORMAL CHARACTERISTICS of the materials involved: (a) the "*hortatory techniques*" exhibited in the several sections; (b) the *backgrounds and appropriation of materials* used therein; and, (c) the *stylistic and logical aspects* of the explicitly exhortatory statements.

(3) Finally, the move must be made from form-critical, traditio-historical and rhetorical analyses, to synoptic consideration of the hortatory sections IN CONTEXT: (a) their relations to the other (i.e., expository or doctrinal) parts apropos *literary structure*; and, (b) their relations to the *theological themes and concerns* of the epistle.

The method of interpretation suggested here should open up for us several specific lines of inquiry which must be pursued if we are to explore biblical ethics in its comprehensive perspective.³³ (a) To what extent are the data for ethical reflection in the New Testament epistles provided by the experiences of the early Christians, by the tradition of ethical insight shared by their community, and by events in the secular world? (b) What hortatory techniques and materials common to the ethical teaching of the

31. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God*, esp. p. 254.

32. See Wayne Gordon McCown, "The Nature and Function of the Hortatory Sections in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (unpublished Th. D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1970).

33. Cf. Freeman, "Ethics as a Context," pp. 449-450.

period were taken up by early Christianity, and how were they appropriated? (c) How did the authors of the New Testament employ and interpret the (Old Testament) Scriptures relative to their ethical concerns? (d) What actual concerns, theological and sociological, prompted the exhortations of the individual authors; with what purpose in view did they extend their commands and appeals? (e) What kinds of ethical norms operated for the biblical writers, and by what logical and rhetorical means did they give substance and life to their appeals? (f) What, precisely, are the relations between “theological” proclamation and “moral” exhortation?

Serious investigation along these lines should provide us with better criteria for relating the biblical message to our own ethical concerns. The Scriptures proffer to us—scholar and preacher and layman alike—a source of great illumination in the methodological aspects of ethical reflection, as well as preserving, in content, our ethical heritage.

The biblical writers exhibit an extensive concern with ethical issues. We simply cannot understand the New Testament apart from this concern; exhortatory application is integral to the very theological message. The signs of a renewed interest in biblical ethics is, therefore, in a real sense simply the recovery of a neglected aspect within the biblical sources themselves.³⁴ Reviving the study of biblical ethics, thus, should be a vital concern in the evangelical church.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 449.