CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY

Table of Contents

We apologize for publication delays in recent years. We assure you that all overdue issues are in process and will be mailed as each is printed. We plan to be back on our normal quarterly publication schedule by January 2008. Thank you for your patience! The Editors

Looking at the Moral Vision of the New Testament with Richard Hays

Dean O. Wenthe

The Moral Vision of the New Testament is a striking and persuasive engagement of the issues involved in using the sacred Scriptures for ethical and moral guidance, whose aim is to "reflect on how the church's life should be shaped by the New Testament witnesses."[1] This brief statement, when placed in context, captures the richness and the scope of this work. Unlike the university professor whose horizon is defined and limited by a narrow *Wissenschaftlich* or *Religionsgeschichte* approach, Hays forthrightly writes as one interested in the life of the church. But more than that, he seeks to bring the witness of the New Testament to bear in such a manner as actually to shape the life of the church.

For undertaking such a task, and for doing it in such a thorough and careful manner, I thank Richard Hays and also state that he has placed many, including those from that corner of Lutheranism known as the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, in his debt. This work is so rich and magisterial that this essay will only be able to address a few of its contents.

This expression of appreciation and response will consist of three parts. First, a bit of contextual analysis will show how this study is timely and needed. Second, a brief overview of its method and content will be provided. Lastly, several questions will invite a response to topics integral to the appropriate use of the New Testament.

I. Contextual Observations

First, then, a word about the ecclesial and cultural context that *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* has entered. A colleague who teaches systematic theology once challenged an exegete with this suggestive statement: "You exegetes are everywhere and nowhere at the same time, namely, you know and preen yourselves in myriad details but

---

[1] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 159.

Dean O. Wenthe is Professor of Exegetical Theology and President of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

simultaneously resist any theological conclusions as though they were deadly viruses." Contrary to this caricature, Hays is an exemplary exegete who carefully and thoroughly handles the details of exegesis, but then goes on not only to theological conclusions, but to recommend specific behaviors as in keeping with the moral vision of the New Testament.

It is important to note, for those unfamiliar with the current contours of much biblical scholarship, that this separates Hays from the assumptions of significant sectors of the contemporary scholarly guild. To cite but one example, a recent article on the Scriptures and ethics advances this viewpoint:

> Where more indeterminacy and dialogue come legitimately into play is at the level of specific decisions, actions, and practices, and policies, as is acknowledged in the prudential aspects of virtue ethics, and in dialogic proposals for the discernment and testing of moral truth in practice. Of course, it is not the purpose of character ethics to settle in advance the rightness or wrongness of all specific actions, nor even to supply general rules for such determinations.[2]

There is increasingly an allergy within the church, not only in the culture at large, to say that anything is definitely wrong, definitely against the claims of sacred Scriptures. Where there is indeterminacy, a reluctance to define rightness and wrongness clearly, and an antipathy to general rules, the community is left without a definition of who they are. The consequences are apparent all around us. Particularly devastating is this moral ambiguity to the church. Listen to the penetrating analysis of Barbara G. Wheeler, President of Auburn Seminary:

> We mainline Protestants are lacking a sense of identity, direction, and purpose. This is most evident in the erosion of our patterns of life, our piety, a term that I use in its classical sense to encompass not only religious practices but also the whole way of life of faithful people. This deficit, the loss of a sense of how we should live in and lead communities of our kind of faith, is far more serious than our other, more visible losses. Religious groups can weather oscillations in their size and institutional power, but they cannot survive without what Brian Gerrish calls a 'way'—ideas, metaphors, attitudes, language, values, habits and aesthetics, woven into practices that express a particular species of faith. If a religious tradition cannot maintain such a 'way,' it does not really exist, even if some religious organization continues to bear its name. Our way, our piety, is so faded and frayed that the

---

[2] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Christian Character, Biblical Community, and Human Values," in *Character and Scripture*, ed. William B. Brown (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 14.

patterns that comprise it are often not distinguishable. The condition is serious: without the ingredients of a way of life, there can be no community in the church and no presence of the religious community in the world.[3]

One might be tempted to think that what is true of mainline Protestants is not so true of the Evangelical community or of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Certainly caution is in order at this point. An uncritical triumphalism based on formal doctrinal statements of a church body but not exhibited in the lives and way of her people has little merit. The same forces that have eroded the piety of mainline Protestants are potently present in our circles. An analysis from a keen observer of the ecclesial landscape suggests that the entire Christian community is facing subtle but real erosion of central components of faith and especially of practice. Malcolm L. Walford comments:

> Our difficulty as a church is that for most of our members the Christian life is less a set of practices than it is a range of feelings. Our images are privatistic, individualistic, and emotive. We assume that the vitality of local congregations depends on our ability to sustain good feelings and to meet individual needs. The idea that there are practices of the Christian life that shape our emotions and form our commitments is a foreign understanding. The concept of faith as a discipline is not a familiar image. In this sense, the local congregation is not so much a tradition composed of practices as it is another form of entertainment that satisfies the religious feelings of spectators who can hardly tell any difference between the dynamics of the sports arena and the church on the corner.[4]

Regretfully, this description fits so much of the church's life, including that of the Lutheran community, like a finely tailored glove.

In such a context, Hays's *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* offers a clear pathway to practices, to ethical choices, in keeping with the New Testament. A singular contribution is the rigor with which he joins careful exegesis (his command of the scholarly literature is transparent) to methodological clarity that results in clear guidance on specific issues. If communities of faith wish to have their habits of life conform to the New Testament, this book grounds those practices in specific texts.

---

[3] Barbara G. Wheeler, "Henry Sloane Coffin and Charles R. Erdman and Our Search for a Livable Piety," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 21 (Fall 2000): 24–25.

[4] Malcom L. Warford, "Renewing the Practices of Ministry," *Theological Education* 33 (Spring 1977): 74–75.

It is refreshing and beneficial for the church to hear the witness of the New Testament at a time when, within the scholarly guild, there is significant confusion about whether such a witness can be framed. Not a few scholars suggest that the voices within the New Testament are so disparate and conflicting that one can only describe Paul's view or Matthew's view or John's view but not claim them as the divine view on the matter.

In response to such a viewpoint, Hays supports, with careful qualifications, the coherence of the New Testament's moral vision.

Anyone conversant with recent hermeneutical discussion will realize at once how problematical such a recommendation is: we have learned to suspect that all interpretation serves the power needs of the interpreter. Nonetheless, the claim that texts do have their own voices (i.e., that they do express meaning distinguishable from our whims and predispositions, and that reasoned discussion can approximate consensus about these meanings) is a necessary assumption for any discourse that attributes authority to the Bible; it is also a necessary assumption for living daily life in a world where there are laws, street signs, and other 'texts' that are presumed to constrain our behavior."[5]

II. An Overview

The structure of Hays's volume will indicate how the case for *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* is made and then expounded upon in such a way as to lead to inferences and recommendations about practice.

Part One describes actual New Testament witnesses: "Paul: The Koinonia of His Sufferings," "Developments of the Pauline Tradition," "The Gospel of Mark: Taking Up the Cross," "The Gospel of Matthew: Training for the Kingdom of Heaven," "Luke-Acts: Liberation through the Power of the Spirit," "The Gospel and Epistles of John: Loving One Another," "An Excursus: The Role of 'the Historical Jesus' in New Testament Ethics," and "Revelation: Resisting the Beast." Any one of these sections will be a delight to the serious student of the New Testament. Hays's ability to reflect faithfully these themes of these various witnesses in a concise fashion is enviable.

Part Two describes the distinctive witness of the voices in the New Testament and finds coherence in three focal images: "Community, Cross, and New Creation."

Part Three illumines the "Hermeneutical Task," namely, how the New Testament is used in Christian ethics. This section is particularly helpful

---

[5] Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 191, n. 1.

because it overviews "Modes of Appeal to Scripture," "Other Sources of Authority," "The Enactment of the Word," and provides a "Diagnostic Checklist." These factors are then illustrated by "Five Representative Hermeneutical Strategies," namely those of Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. In a section that sparkles with insight and exegetical clarity, Hays addresses the fundamental question of "How Shall We Use the Texts?" His summary of proposed guidelines merits citation here. His fundamental proposals are:

1. Serious exegesis is a basic requirement. Texts used in ethical arguments should be used as fully as possible in their historical and literary context.

   a. New Testament texts must be read with careful attention to their Old Testament subtexts.

2. We must seek to listen to the full range of canonical witnesses.

3. Substantive tensions within the canon should be openly acknowledged.

4. Our synthetic reading of the New Testament canon must be kept in balance by the sustained use of three focal images: community, cross, and new creation.

5. New Testament texts must be granted authority (or not) in the mode in which they speak (i.e., rule, principle, paradigm, symbolic world).

   a. All four modes are valid and necessary.

   b. We should not override the witness of the New Testament in one mode by appealing to another mode.

6. The New Testament is fundamentally the story of God's redemptive action; thus, the paradigmatic mode has theological primacy, and narrative texts are fundamental resources for normative ethics.

7. Extrabiblical sources stand in a hermeneutical relation to the new Testament; they are not independent, counterbalancing sources of authority.

8. It is impossible to distinguish 'timeless truth' from 'culturally conditioned elements' in the New Testament.

9. The use of the New Testament in normative ethics requires an integrative act of the imagination; thus, whenever we appeal to the authority of the New Testament, we are necessarily engaged in metaphor-making.

10. Right reading of the New Testament occurs only where the Word is embodied.[6]

So rich is the discussion that leads up to these guidelines that the only adequate way to appreciate and to understand them adequately is to read the text.

Part Four of *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* is especially pertinent here because Hays applies the witness of the New Testament with hermeneutical clarity to five distinct issues: "Violence in Defense of Justice," "Divorce and Remarriage," "Homosexuality," "Anti-Judaism and Ethnic Conflict," and "Abortion."[7] In a word, Hays finds warrants at the center of the moral vision of the New Testament to support the sanctity of marriage, the sanctity of life, and classic Christian convictions about homosexuality. He does so with considerable pastoral sensitivity while maintaining the authority of the relevant texts to shape the church's life and practice. The treatment of "Violence in the Defense of Justice" is a very nuanced challenge to just-war theory.

Before advancing a few questions about Hays's book, let me say that every seminarian, professor, and interested layman will benefit from the substance and analytical clarity of this study. The movement from the descriptive, to the synthetic, to the hermeneutical, and to the practical is a model of rigor and lucidity. Even where there may be questions or reservations — in substance or in method — the reader's own position will be enriched and refined by engaging the questions that are posed and then addressed. You will never doubt that here is an author who gives the New Testament texts foundational primacy in his exegetical and theological method.

III. Additional Reflection

As one reflects on *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, several observations carry special interest.

First, Hays does little to engage what has historically been known as the natural law tradition. In a very interesting comment, Luther expressed his wish that the Germans would at least behave like godly Turks. Another way of posing this inquiry is: To what extent can those who are in Christ make appeals to those who are in Adam on the basis of the Torah, namely, that we share a common humanity that bears with it the capacity to reflect, however imperfectly, the image of God? Can appeals be made not to steal and not to kill on the basis of a human nature that shares an organic unity if one takes the Torah's claims seriously?

---

[6] Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 310.

[7] Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 317–461.

Succinctly, does the long and rich tradition usually associated with Thomas Aquinas but used also within the Protestant tradition deserve a respected place in the church's moral reflection?[8] Even more interesting is the question of the extent to which 'natural law' can be *exegetically* grounded. A recent and sympathetic attempt to do so is advanced by Markus Bockmuehl:

> It is instructive to observe some of the human sins described in Genesis 1–11. Adam and Eve are expelled for disobeying God's command of 2:16 and for wanting to be like God (3:5) which could be seen as an act of blasphemy. The Promethean serpent is cursed for deception (3:14). Cain and Lamech murder a man and raise the question of retribution. (4) God's reason for sending the flood is the violence (6:11,13) of humanity. Ham is guilty of exposing his father's uncovered nakedness (9:20–27). . . . Unlawful sex of a different kind is perpetuated by the 'sons of God' in chapter 6. God also establishes a covenant with Noah and his descendants, with positive commands against bloodshed and the consumption of blood from an animal (chapter 9:4–6) . . . Genesis 11, finally, almost by way of *inclusio*, describes the urban cultural equivalent of wanting to be God: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves" (11:4). *One might argue, then, that Genesis 1–11 already endorses a number of general moral precepts which could be taken to apply to humanity as a whole.*[9]

Bockmuehl finds support for this view in the so-called Noachide Commandments of the Rabbinic tradition. His point invites reflection:

> The doctrine of the Noachide Commandments is a rabbinic development of the biblical laws about resident aliens. In its explicitly developed form it does not predate the second century, but the underlying ideas are clearly present in literary sources of the Second Temple period. To be sure, the Noachide Commandments are not the *theological* key to New Testament ethics: that should instead be sought in Christology and the teaching and example of Jesus. But the cumulative argument here presented shows that these legal constructs and their predecessors provide an essential clue to the specific *rationale and content* of early

---

[8] For a recent restatement of natural law thinking, see John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

[9] Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 151; emphasis mine. A broader point is made earlier in the study about the relationship between nature and Torah: "And while there is thus, significantly, no 'law of nature' terminology as describing a reality distinct from the law of God, the Hebrew world view does operate on the assumption that all creation expresses God's law and moral purpose, and all of God's law is law according to nature" (89).

Christian ethics, as well as its criteria of selection in the use of Old Testament laws.   During the transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity, the laws for resident aliens established the hermeneutical parameters within which to appropriate the moral teaching and example of Jesus for a worldwide church. In practical and political terms, Jewish concepts of a universal law for Gentiles proved to be indispensable for the development of Christian ethics.[10]

The opposite theological view has argued that no such exegetical basis exists. Representative of this view is the following:

First, advocates of narrative ethics reject any attempt to specify moral norms from the working of pure practical reason. The problem with so-called 'Enlightenment' ethics, especially in Kantian form, is that it tries to generate universal moral norms from self-relation in thinking and willing. But we are social animals; accordingly, moral norms are rooted in traditions and not in the immediacy of reason. Second, proponents of narrative ethics jettison an assumption of traditional virtue theory. Classical Western ethics explored human nature to specify the kinds of lives we ought to live. Plato and Aristotle thought we naturally seek happiness (eudaimonia); Augustine insisted that we seek after God; the Stoics spoke of the 'logos' and moral choice (proairesis) as a distinctly human good. Ancient thinkers examined the real to generate ideas of possible lives.   Ethics presented a theory of *human nature* (emphasis original) and not simply an account of moral formation.[11]

Most interesting would be whether Hays's views of nature and narrative are as an either-or or a both-and construction in the moral vision of the New Testament as expounded especially by Bockmuehl.

Another related question is whether the tensions perceived in the New Testament are perhaps exaggerated by our particular hermeneutical milieu. Have our lenses been grounded to perceive what is, in fact, a rich and multifaceted coherence or as more than that? Two quotations from different vantage points place this question in the foreground.   Eric Auerbach writes in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*: "The world of Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality — it insists that it is the only real world, and is destined to autocracy...the Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us — they

---

[10] Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law*, 172–173; emphasis original.

[11] William Schweiker, "Images of Scripture and Contemporary Theological Ethics," in *Character and Scripture*, ed. William P. Brown (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 41.

seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected, we are rebels."[12] This capacity on the part of a noted literary scholar to view the Scriptural stories as an integrated tapestry, a world as it were, may be a needed corrective to the deconstructive atmosphere of current hermeneutical models. Or, as Hays himself has succinctly written:

> I propose that one reason we have lost our grip on reading the Bible is that we have forfeited our understanding of it as a single coherent story — a story in which OT and NT together bear complementary witness to the saving action of the one God, a true story into which we find ourselves taken up. In order to recover a sense of Scripture's coherence — in order to live into this story and perceive its claims on our lives — it is necessary to affirm the mutually interpretive relation of the two Testaments. When we lose this sense of the coherence of Scripture, the Bible becomes somebody else's story. . . . the Gospels teach us how to read the OT, and — at the same time — the OT teaches us how to read the Gospels.[13]

Our particular exegetical nook in the Christian family has too frequently flattened out the richness and variety of the scriptural texts. How often have you heard the Apostle Paul speaking from the pulpit even though the text was from Matthew, or Luke, or John? At the same time, when the variety and diversity is recognized, something the church has been aware of from the beginning, is there not a legitimate coherence that again needs to be recaptured in the use of the Scriptures for the moral formation of the church? Exegetical balance takes effort to maintain, particularly in a setting so captive to deconstructionist categories. My question for Hays is: Should not biblical exegetes sin at least somewhat boldly in making the case for coherence?

If we were to sin boldly in the direction of coherence, we might find ourselves in some noble company, namely, that of the church through the centuries. The recent revival of interest in the patristic use of the

---

[12] Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1953), 14–15.

[13] Richard B. Hays, "Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?" *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (Fall 2002): 404–405. Earlier in the article, Hays provides this analysis: "in postmodern culture the Bible has lost its place, and citizens in a pluralistic secular culture have trouble knowing what to make of it. If they pay any attention to it at all, they treat it as a consumer product, one more therapeutic option for rootless selves engaged in an endless quest to invent and improve themselves. Not surprisingly, this approach does not yield a very satisfactory reading of the Bible, for the Bible is not about 'self help', but about *God's* action to rescue a lost and broken world" (402; emphasis original).

Scriptures might assist in retrieving the New Testament for the formation of the church's life. Christopher Hall summarizes this well:

> The fathers insist that the narrative of the Bible is a continuous, deeply connected story from Genesis through Revelation. The Old Testament is not discontinuous with the New. Rather, the themes presented in the Old Testament find their fulfillment in the narrative structure of the New Testament. Continuity and fulfillment characterize the entire story. Most importantly, the fathers insist that the biblical narrative reaches its culmination, its thematic climax, with the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Son of God. Indeed, the incarnational, soteriological and eschatological foci of the New Testament further clarify and deepen the Old Testament witness itself. We will read the Bible ineffectively and incorrectly, the fathers warn, if we fail to read its individual portions in light of its overarching, unifying message.[14]

I would be curious as to whether Hays believes this interest in a holistic reading of the Bible to be a healthy development or one attended by such exegetical license as to render it unhelpful in facing the church's present situation. Based upon my reading of Hays, I think he would emphasize its benefits.

---

[14] Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 191.