

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

JOHN M. FRAME

Volume 3


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And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:37–40)

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:29–31)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10)

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

CONTENTS

Analytical Outline	xi
Preface	xxv
Abbreviations	xxx

PART ONE: INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

1. Introduction	3
2. An Ethical Glossary	8
3. Ethics and Divine Lordship	19

PART TWO: NON-CHRISTIAN ETHICS

4. Lordship and Non-Christian Ethics	41
5. Ethics and the World's Religions	54
6. The Existential Tradition	72
7. The Teleological Tradition	91
8. The Deontological Tradition	101

PART THREE: CHRISTIAN ETHICAL METHODOLOGY

SECTION ONE: THE NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE

9. The Organism of Revelation	131
10. Attributes of Scripture	144
11. The Sufficiency of Scripture	156
12. Law in Biblical Ethics	176
13. Applying the Law	200

SECTION TWO: THE SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

14. Situation and Norm	238
15. Our Ethical Situation	250
16. Redemptive History	271
17. Our Chief End	299

SECTION THREE: THE EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

18. Goodness and Being	317
19. Motives and Virtues	325
20. The New Life as a Source of Ethical Knowledge	350
21. The Organs of Ethical Knowledge	362

PART FOUR: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

22. Introduction to the Decalogue	387
23. The First Commandment: No Other Gods	407
24. The First Commandment: Contemporary Issues	423
25. The Second Commandment: Prohibited Images	452
26. The Second Commandment: Regulating Worship	466
27. The Third Commandment: Reverence for God's Name	490
28. The Fourth Commandment: Views of Sabbath Keeping	516
29. The Fourth Commandment: Theology of the Sabbath	531
30. The Fourth Commandment: The Sabbath in the New Covenant	558
31. The Fifth Commandment: Honoring Authorities	579
32. The Fifth Commandment: Family, Church, and State	597
33. The Fifth Commandment: Man and Woman	627
34. The Fifth Commandment: Equalities, Racial and Otherwise	653
35. The Sixth Commandment: Respecting Life	690
36. The Sixth Commandment: War and Punishment	700
37. The Sixth Commandment: Protecting Life	724
38. The Seventh Commandment: Sexual Purity	753
39. The Seventh Commandment: Divorce and Remarriage	777
40. The Seventh Commandment: Reproduction	790
41. The Eighth Commandment: Respecting Property	804
42. The Eighth Commandment: Wealth and Poverty	816
43. The Ninth Commandment: Truthfulness	839
44. The Tenth Commandment: The Desires of the Heart	853

PART FIVE: CHRIST AND CULTURE

45. What Is Culture?	863
46. Christ and Culture	873
47. Christ and <i>Our</i> Culture	886

48. Christians in Our Culture	898
49. Culture in the Church	913
PART SIX: PERSONAL SPIRITUAL MATURITY	
50. Growing in Grace	923
Appendix A: Ethics and Biblical Events	943
Appendix B: Zwingli and Reformed Ethics	945
Appendix C: Schleiermacher and Protestant Ethics	948
Appendix D: Gentleness in the Pastorate	950
Appendix E: In Defense of Christian Activism	955
Appendix F: Is Natural Revelation Sufficient to Govern Culture?	964
Appendix G: Review of R. J. Rushdoony, <i>The Institutes of Biblical Law</i>	970
Appendix H: Review of Peter Richardson, <i>Paul's Ethic of Freedom</i>	991
Appendix I: Review of Margaret Howe, <i>Women in Church Leadership</i>	993
Appendix J: Review of Hessel Bouma III et al., <i>Christian Faith, Health, and Medical Practice</i>	997
Appendix K: Review of R. F. R. Gardner, <i>Abortion: The Personal Dilemma</i>	1009
Appendix L: Review of Beverly Wildung Harrison, <i>Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion</i>	1013
Bibliography	1015
Index of Names	1027
Index of Subjects	1041
Index of Scripture	1047

ANALYTICAL OUTLINE

PART ONE: INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

1. Introduction
 - A. Why Study Ethics?
 - B. What Should Be Our Ethical Bias?
2. An Ethical Glossary
 - A. Ethics and Theology
 - (1) Knowledge of God
 - (2) Doctrine
 - (3) Theology
 - (4) Ethics
 - (5) Metaethics
 - (6) Morality
 - B. Value Terms
 - (1) Moral, Ethical
 - (2) Immoral, Amoral, Nonmoral
 - (3) Moralistic
 - (4) Value
 - (5) Fact
 - (6) Norm
 - (7) Virtue
 - (8) Good
 - (9) Right
 - (10) Obligation, Duty, Ought
 - (11) Permission
 - (12) General and Specific Obligations
 - (13) Justice
3. Ethics and Divine Lordship
 - A. The Lordship Attributes
 - (1) Control
 - (2) Authority
 - (3) Covenant Presence

- B. The Lordship Attributes and Christian Decision Making
 - (1) How God Governs Our Ethical Life
 - (2) The Demand for Appropriate Response
 - (3) The Three Theological Virtues
 - (4) Necessary and Sufficient Criteria of Good Works
 - (5) Biblical Reasons to Do Good Works
 - (6) Types of Christian Ethics
 - (7) What Really Matters
 - (8) Factors in Ethical Judgment
 - (9) Perspectives on the Discipline of Ethics
 - (10) Interdependence of the Perspectives
- C. Triperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith

PART TWO: NON-CHRISTIAN ETHICS

- 4. Lordship and Non-Christian Ethics
 - A. Transcendence and Immanence
 - B. Irrationalism and Rationalism
 - C. Specifically Ethical Interpretations of the Rectangle
 - (1) Absoluteness and Relevance of the Moral Law
 - (2) Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility
 - (3) Objectivity and Inwardness
 - (4) Humility and Hope
 - (5) Freedom and Authority in Society
 - D. Three Ethical Principles
 - E. Are the Three Principles Consistent?
 - F. The Three Schools of Non-Christian Ethics
 - (1) Teleological Ethics
 - (2) Deontological Ethics
 - (3) Existential Ethics
- 5. Ethics and the World's Religions
 - A. Outline of the Treatise on Ethics
 - B. Ethics and Religion
 - C. Ethics Based on Fate
 - D. Ethics as Self-Realization
 - E. Ethics as Law Without Gospel
- 6. The Existential Tradition
 - A. Philosophy and Ethics
 - B. The Existential Focus

- C. The Sophists
- D. Hume and Rousseau
- E. Karl Marx
- F. Friedrich Nietzsche
- G. Ludwig Wittgenstein
- H. Emotivism
- I. Existentialism
- J. Postmodernism
- K. Conclusion
- 7. The Teleological Tradition
 - A. Cyrenaicism
 - B. Epicurus
 - C. Aristotle
 - D. Utilitarianism
 - E. John Dewey
- 8. The Deontological Tradition
 - A. Plato
 - B. Cynicism
 - C. Stoicism
 - D. Immanuel Kant
 - E. Idealism
 - F. Moore and Prichard
 - G. Conclusions on Non-Christian Ethical Philosophy

PART THREE: CHRISTIAN ETHICAL METHODOLOGY

SECTION ONE: THE NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE

- 9. The Organism of Revelation
 - A. God Himself as Ethical Norm
 - B. The Word of God as Norm
 - (1) The Word Through Nature and History
 - (2) Revelation Through Persons
 - (3) The Word as Spoken and Written Language
 - C. The Unity of the Word
- 10. Attributes of Scripture
 - A. Power
 - B. Authority
 - C. Clarity

- D. Comprehensiveness
- E. Necessity
- 11. The Sufficiency of Scripture
 - A. Confessional Formulation
 - B. Biblical Basis
 - C. General and Particular Sufficiency
 - (1) General Sufficiency
 - (2) Particular Sufficiency
 - D. The Use of Extrabiblical Data
 - E. The Logic of Application
 - F. Adiaphora
 - G. The Strong and the Weak
- 12. Law in Biblical Ethics
 - A. Law and Grace
 - B. God's Law as the Christian's Norm
 - C. Law and Gospel
 - (1) The Traditional Distinction
 - (2) Law and Gospel in Scripture
 - (3) Which Comes First?
 - (4) Legitimate Use of the Traditional Distinction
 - (5) Law/Gospel and the Christian Life
 - (6) The Objective and the Subjective
 - (7) Concluding Observation
 - D. Law and Love
 - (1) Love Is a Command, Part of the Law
 - (2) The Love Commandment Requires Obedience to the Whole Law of God
 - (3) Love Is a Provocative Characterization of the Law
 - E. Moral Heroism
- 13. Applying the Law
 - A. Creation Ordinances
 - B. The Decalogue and the Case Laws
 - C. The Old and New Covenants
 - D. Moral, Ceremonial, and Judicial Law
 - E. Theonomy
 - F. Priorities
 - (1) Normative Priorities
 - (2) Situational Priorities

- (3) Existential Priorities
- G. Tragic Moral Choice
- H. Casuistry

SECTION TWO: THE SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

- 14. Situation and Norm
 - A. Natural Law
- 15. Our Ethical Situation
 - A. God
 - B. The Angels
 - C. Human Society
 - (1) The Cultural Mandate: A Corporate Task
 - (2) The Fall: A Corporate Failure
 - (3) Fallen Society
 - (4) The Corporate Character of Redemption
 - (5) Corporate Life and Moral Decisions (Summary)
 - D. Living with Ourselves
 - (1) Living with Our Genes
 - (2) Living with Our Limitations
 - E. Our Natural Environment
- 16. Redemptive History
 - A. Narrative
 - B. The Redemptive Story
 - C. The Two Ages
 - D. Ethics and the Millennium
 - E. Ethics and Eschatology in Scripture
 - F. Between Resurrection and Parousia: The Burdens of Change and Knowledge
 - G. Ethics, Preaching, and Biblical Theology
- 17. Our Chief End
 - A. The Doctrine of the Twofold End
 - B. To Glorify God
 - C. To Enjoy Him Forever
 - D. The Kingdom of God
 - E. The Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission
 - F. Vocation
 - G. Short-Range Goals

SECTION THREE: THE EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

18. Goodness and Being
 - A. God's Image and Human Goodness
 - B. God's Image and the Fall
 - C. God's Image and Redemption
19. Motives and Virtues
 - A. A Virtue Ethic That Is Christian
 - B. Faith
 - C. Repentance
 - D. Hope
 - E. Love
 - (1) Covenant Loyalty
 - (2) Gratefulness
 - (3) Comprehensive Reorientation of Life
 - (4) Imitation of God's Atoning Grace
 - (5) Imitation of God's Common Grace: Loving Our Enemies
 - (6) Seeking to Carry Out Our Responsibility
 - F. Other Virtues in the New Testament
 - G. The Fear of the Lord
20. The New Life as a Source of Ethical Knowledge
 - A. Ethical Knowledge, a Product of Sanctification
 - (1) The Knowledge of God
 - (2) Wisdom
 - (3) Truth
 - (4) Doctrine
 - B. Intellectual Knowledge and Ethical Knowledge
 - (1) The Ethical Presupposes the Intellectual
 - (2) The Intellectual Presupposes the Ethical
 - C. Moral Discernment
 - D. The Doctrine of Guidance
21. The Organs of Ethical Knowledge
 - A. The Heart
 - B. Conscience
 - C. Experience
 - D. Reason
 - E. Will
 - F. Imagination
 - G. The Emotions

- H. The Pathos Game
 - (1) Negative Lessons from History
 - (2) Scripture on the Emotions
 - (3) Hurting People's Feelings

PART FOUR: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

- 22. Introduction to the Decalogue
 - A. The Decalogue in the History of Redemption
 - B. Decalogical Hermeneutics
 - C. The Unity of the Law
 - D. Ten Perspectives on Ethical Life
 - E. Broad and Narrow
 - F. Preaching Christ from the Decalogue
 - G. The Prefaces to the Commandments
 - (1) God's Name
 - (2) The Historical Prologue
- 23. The First Commandment: No Other Gods
 - A. Love
 - B. Worship
 - C. Consecration
 - D. Separation
 - (1) False Gods
 - (2) God-Substitutes
 - (3) Practices of False Religions
 - (4) False Prophets and Religious Figures
 - (5) Unholiness and Uncleaness
- 24. The First Commandment: Contemporary Issues
 - A. Theological Controversies
 - B. The Occult
 - C. Secret Societies
 - D. False Religion in the Church
 - E. Secularism
 - F. Some Objections and Replies
 - G. Conclusion
- 25. The Second Commandment: Prohibited Images
 - A. Are Images Always Bad?
 - B. Objects of Worship
 - C. Images of the True God

- D. Grounds for the Commandment
 - (1) God's Redemptive-Historical Invisibility
 - (2) God as the Living God
 - (3) Respect for God's True Image
 - (4) God's Covenant Jealousy
- 26. The Second Commandment: Regulating Worship
 - A. The Regulative Principle
 - B. Evaluating the Regulative Principle
 - C. Problems in Applying the Regulative Principle
 - D. Conclusions on the Regulative Principle
 - E. Images in Worship
 - F. Images of Jesus
- 27. The Third Commandment: Reverence for God's Name
 - A. The Name of the Lord
 - (1) Naming Is Exercising Sovereignty (Control)
 - (2) Naming Is Characterizing (Authority)
 - (3) Naming Is Locating (Presence)
 - B. Bearers of God's Name
 - C. "Taking" the Name
 - D. Vanity
 - E. The Sanction
 - F. The Name of God in Worship
 - G. Oaths and Vows
 - H. Oaths and Sin
 - (1) Oaths with Wrong Content (Normative)
 - (2) Oaths Not Kept (Situational)
 - (3) Oaths Arising from Wrong Attitudes (Existential)
 - I. Confession
 - J. Blessing
 - K. Humor in Religion
 - L. Profanity
 - M. Bathroom and Sexual Slang
 - N. Language in Literature and Drama
- 28. The Fourth Commandment: Views of Sabbath Keeping
 - A. Views of the Sabbath
 - (1) From Sabbath to Lord's Day
 - (2) John Calvin
 - (3) The Decrees of Dort
 - (4) Kline's Later View

- (5) Kline's Earlier View
- (6) The Westminster Standards
- 29. The Fourth Commandment: Theology of the Sabbath
 - A. The Sabbath and Creation
 - B. The Sabbath and Common Grace
 - C. The Sabbath and Redemption
 - D. Work and Rest
 - E. Recreation
 - F. Works of Necessity
 - G. Works of Mercy
 - H. Worship
 - I. Summary
- 30. The Fourth Commandment: The Sabbath in the New Covenant
 - A. The Teaching of Jesus
 - B. Hebrews 3:7–4:13
 - C. The Lord's Day
 - (1) Is the Lord's Day a Sabbath?
 - (2) The Change of Day
 - (3) The Meaning of the Change
 - D. The Keeping of Days in the New Covenant
 - E. Feasts, Sabbath Years, and Jubilee
- 31. The Fifth Commandment: Honoring Authorities
 - A. Honor
 - (1) Reverence (Existential Perspective)
 - (2) Submission (Normative Perspective)
 - (3) Financial Support (Situational Perspective)
 - B. Father and Mother
 - C. The Promise of Prosperity
- 32. The Fifth Commandment: Family, Church, and State
 - A. The Family
 - B. The Two Families
 - C. Other Views of the State
 - (1) Early Non-Christian Thought
 - (2) Social Contract Theory
 - (3) Roman Catholic Thought
 - (4) Anabaptism
 - (5) Lutheranism
 - (6) Calvin and Rutherford
 - (7) Abraham Kuyper

- D. Should Churches Be Politically Active?
- E. Civil Disobedience and Revolution
- F. Operation Rescue: A Case Study in Civil Disobedience
- 33. The Fifth Commandment: Man and Woman
 - A. Men and Women in the Image of God
 - (1) Both Men and Women Made in God's Image
 - (2) Men and Women Equally in the Image of God
 - (3) Sexual Differentiation Itself Images God
 - (4) Men and Women Equally Represent God
 - (5) Summary and Conclusion
 - B. Men and Women in the Family
 - C. Men and Women in the Church
 - D. Women as Adult Sunday School Teachers: A Case Study
 - E. Men and Women in the Workplace
- 34. The Fifth Commandment: Equalities, Racial and Otherwise
 - A. The Nations in Scripture
 - B. Slavery
 - (1) Foreign Slaves
 - (2) Hebrew Slaves
 - (3) Greco-Roman Slavery
 - (4) Slavery in the American South
 - C. Prejudice
 - (1) Racism and Sexism in Current Debate
 - (2) Some Concluding Thoughts
 - D. Minorities and the Reformed Churches
 - E. The Disabled
- 35. The Sixth Commandment: Respecting Life
 - A. Love, Vengeance, and Self-Defense
- 36. The Sixth Commandment: War and Punishment
 - A. Theories of Punishment
 - (1) Motives for Punishment
 - (2) Observations
 - B. Prison
 - C. Capital Punishment
 - D. War
 - E. Pacifism
 - F. Just War Theory
 - G. Some Ideas from Scripture
 - H. Nuclear War and Deterrence

- 37. The Sixth Commandment: Protecting Life
 - A. Abortion
 - (1) Exodus 21:22–25
 - (2) Psalm 139:13–16
 - (3) Psalm 51:5
 - (4) Judges 13:3–5
 - (5) Luke 1:35
 - (6) The Doctrine of Carefulness
 - (7) Scientific Evidence
 - (8) Can Abortion Ever Be Justified?
 - (9) Our Obligation to Defend the Weak and Helpless
 - (10) Defending Unborn Life in the Present Social Context
 - B. Death
 - C. Killing and Letting Die
 - D. Care for the Sick and Injured
 - E. Euthanasia
 - F. Suicide
 - G. Health and Safety
 - (1) Alcohol
 - (2) Tobacco
 - (3) Drugs
 - (4) Food, Drink, and Exercise
 - H. The Environment
- 38. The Seventh Commandment: Sexual Purity
 - A. Marriage
 - B. Polygamy
 - C. Prostitution
 - D. Homosexuality
 - E. Incest
 - F. Pedophilia
 - G. Fornication
 - H. Lust
- 39. The Seventh Commandment: Divorce and Remarriage
 - A. Deuteronomy 24:1–4
 - B. Matthew 5:31–32; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18; Matthew 19:3–9
 - C. The Exception of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9
 - D. Remarriage After Divorce for Sexual Immorality
 - E. 1 Corinthians 7:10–15

40. The Seventh Commandment: Reproduction
 - A. Birth Control
 - B. Means of Birth Control
 - C. The New Reproduction
 - D. Genetic Manipulation and Playing God
 - E. Stem Cells
 - F. Cloning
41. The Eighth Commandment: Respecting Property
 - A. Presuppositions
 - (1) Private Property
 - (2) Work Ethic
 - B. Tithing
 - C. Taxation
 - D. Boycotts
 - E. Financial Responsibility
 - F. Gambling
42. The Eighth Commandment: Wealth and Poverty
 - A. Wealth
 - B. Poverty in the Covenant Community
 - C. World Poverty
 - D. Economic Systems
 - E. Homelessness
43. The Ninth Commandment: Truthfulness
 - A. Must We Always Tell the Truth?
 - B. Protecting Others' Reputations
44. The Tenth Commandment: The Desires of the Heart
 - A. Coveting and Other Desires
 - B. Summary of the Ten Commandments

PART FIVE: CHRIST AND CULTURE

45. What Is Culture?
46. Christ and Culture
 - A. Christ Against Culture
 - B. The Christ of Culture
 - C. Christ Above Culture
 - D. Christ and Culture in Paradox
 - E. Christ, the Transformer of Culture

47. Christ and *Our* Culture
 - A. God, the Critic of Culture
 - B. Christian Criticism of Culture
 - C. Francis Schaeffer
 - D. Os Guinness
 - E. David Wells
 - F. Kenneth A. Myers
 - G. Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern
 - H. Cornelius Van Til
48. Christians in Our Culture
 - A. Should Christians Join the Cultural Elite?
 - B. Should Christians Go to Movies?
 - C. Film and Culture
 - D. Questions to Ask of Films
49. Culture in the Church

PART SIX: PERSONAL SPIRITUAL MATURITY

50. Growing in Grace
 - A. The Dynamic of the Biblical Ethic
 - B. The Gospel Deepens the Law
 - C. The Means of Grace
 - (1) The Word
 - (2) Fellowship
 - (3) Prayer

Appendix A: Ethics and Biblical Events

Appendix B: Zwingli and Reformed Ethics

Appendix C: Schleiermacher and Protestant Ethics

Appendix D: Gentleness in the Pastorate

Appendix E: In Defense of Christian Activism

Appendix F: Is Natural Revelation Sufficient to Govern Culture?

Appendix G: Review of R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*

Appendix H: Review of Peter Richardson, *Paul's Ethic of Freedom*

Appendix I: Review of Margaret Howe, *Women in Church Leadership*

Appendix J: Review of Hessel Bouma III et al., *Christian Faith, Health, and Medical Practice*

Appendix K: Review of R. F. R. Gardner, *Abortion: The Personal Dilemma*

Appendix L: Review of Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion*

PREFACE

This volume will deal mostly with ethics, but also with a number of other subjects, grouped around the general title *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (henceforth *DCL*). The ethics course I taught at Westminster Seminary had that title, but it was James Hurley, as I recall, who suggested to me that the Christian life was much more than ethics. The Christian life is not only a matter of following rules of morality, but a dynamic experience: living in the fallen world, in fellowship with the living God. So in this book I will discuss not only ethics (the normative perspective), but also the culture in which we live (the situational perspective) and the resources of redemption on which we draw daily (the existential perspective).¹

I suppose, given my perspectival orientation, I could stretch the meaning of ethics to include the other two disciplines (and vice versa), but I should admit at the outset that this book does go beyond ethics as ethics is usually conceived.

Most of the book, however, will deal with ethics in the usual sense, for that is what I know most about. Yet I have always felt a certain uneasiness with the discipline.

I cringed a bit in 1968 when my senior colleague, Norman Shepherd, asked me to teach the course in ethics. But it was my first teaching job, at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, and I probably would not have refused any assignment. Shepherd evidently thought me qualified because ethics is partly a philosophical discipline, and I had studied philosophy at Princeton and Yale. Cornelius Van Til had, in past years, taught a philosophically oriented ethics course at Westminster, and I was much impressed

1. I shall discuss these “perspectives” in this volume, as I have in the other volumes of this series. The triperspectival scheme actually originated in my ethics teaching, and, in a way, ethics is its natural home. I have applied it to epistemology in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, because I believe that epistemology can be fruitfully analyzed as a subdivision of ethics. And many other applications of this approach have occurred to me, which I have presented in *The Doctrine of God* and intend to present in other books of this series. But readers who are not yet comfortable with this approach may find that the present volume presents it in areas where it is most clearly and obviously useful. And if you don’t find it persuasive in this volume, you probably won’t find it persuasive anywhere.

by his thinking.² I also believed that in ethics, as in all theological disciplines, biblical exegesis must have the final say. John Murray had taught an exegetically oriented ethics course at the seminary, and I greatly admired his writings in the field.³ Even at that time, too, I was convinced that theology had to speak to the lives of people, not just to their intellectual conceptions. Shepherd knew these things about me, so he probably thought that I was suited to teach this kind of course.

As a matter of fact, however, I had always been rather uncomfortable in the field of ethics. As a philosophy major at Princeton, I had avoided every opportunity to take a course in ethics, even though I could have studied under Paul Ramsey, who had a huge reputation in the field. I likewise avoided ethics courses at Yale, though James Gustafson taught ethics during my years there. The only course in ethics I had ever taken was the two-credit-hour course I took at Westminster as part of the required curriculum. At that time, neither Van Til nor Murray was teaching the course, but rather Edwin H. Palmer. Palmer did what he could in the time he had available, but, though I loved him as a teacher and as a man, his course did not make much of an impression on me.

My aversion to ethics was mainly an aversion to the secular ethics literature, which, of course, even we nonsecularists are expected to read in preparing lectures and books. That literature seemed to me to be very confused indeed: overly dogmatic on some points (the pieties of liberalism) and relativistic on all others. I soon came to see this in the light of Van Til's insight that non-Christian thought is always both rationalistic and irrationalistic. But that insight left me with little motivation to study the literature on ethics, beyond the writings of Van Til, Murray, and others in the evangelical and Reformed theological traditions.

Over the years, however, I have gained a greater appreciation of the secular literature. Non-Christians often have a better grasp than Christians of the complications of ethical decision making. They may be ultimately confused, but at least they can help us define the options. And, given the multiplicity of options, this literature can help us to sympathize more with those who are wrestling with hard questions and can increase our humility as we come to admit our own uncertainty. Christianity, unlike any other ethical system, provides a solid basis for ethical decision making, but it does not make ethical decisions easy.

2. See his *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971).

3. *Principles of Conduct* (Eerdmans, 1957); *Divorce* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961).

So here I am writing a book mostly on ethics, based on a love-hate relationship with the field that goes back forty-five years.

In the Theology of Lordship series, I had intended this to be the fourth of four volumes (putting it off as long as possible). My original plan was to write *The Doctrine of the Word of God (DWG)* following *The Doctrine of God (DG)*, which was published in 2002. But I decided to produce the present volume before *DWG*. I had already written much more material on ethics than on the Word of God. I had a 250-page lecture outline and maybe thirty supplementary papers that I had used in my classes. It seemed to me, therefore, that this book could be written much more quickly than *DWG*.

My original idea was to start the series with *DWG*, setting forth the basis for everything to come, followed by *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God (DKG)*, since our knowledge of God is based on his Word. Then would have come *DG*, giving the content of that knowledge, and finally the present volume, indicating the kind of life that is consistent with the knowledge of God.

More recently, however, I have been inclined toward a different order of topics:

1. *DG*, since God himself is the foundation of everything, including his Word
2. *DWG*, describing how he communicates with us
3. *DKG*, indicating how we gain knowledge from the Word
4. *DCL*, indicating the life that is warranted by this knowledge

But this order fails to indicate a major theme of this series, namely, that our knowledge of God is a subdivision of ethics (that is, thinking is part of life). That consideration would suggest a reversal of items 3 and 4 in the above list, putting *DKG* last. This is not to say that my other suggested orders are wrong. Rather, the point is that the four topics are interdependent, indeed “perspectival.” If we put *DKG* last, for example, how can we account for the fact that the other three areas must be governed by a biblical epistemology?

I wish to express my thanks again to all who have encouraged and stimulated my thinking over the years, especially my students, who have been a captive audience for the testing of this material. I thank many for giving me criticism and other feedback on previous volumes in the series. Many offered kind words about *The Doctrine of God*, and I am especially thankful to the Evangelical Christian Booksellers Association for giving to that book their Gold Medallion award for 2003 in the area of theology and doctrine.

The only substantial negative criticism of *DG* among reviewers was that it made insufficient use of the historical tradition. That criticism leaves me a bit perplexed, because I cited a great many historical and contemporary sources in the volume. How much more of this should I have done in a volume that was already 888 pages long?

Is the point of that criticism that I did not include a thorough, systematic history of the doctrine of God? To that I answer simply that an author cannot do everything in one volume. *DG* was, of course, deeply influenced by many historical and contemporary currents of thought. But its purpose was to set forth biblical teaching, not to list all those currents. Surely it is not wrong for an author to write a book expounding biblical themes without also feeling it necessary to address historical themes and contemporary discussions in systematic detail.

My purpose in writing *DG* was not simply, or even primarily, to expound the doctrines, but mainly to establish their foundation, to persuade readers that they are true. *DG* is an argumentative book. Ultimately, for those who believe in *sola Scriptura*, the only way to establish the truth of doctrines is to appeal to Scripture. It might have been helpful for me to include more historical material to help people understand the doctrines better, to understand why they have been formulated as they have been. But I cannot think of a single instance where additional historical citations would have made my presentations of these doctrines more persuasive.

Given *sola Scriptura* (about which I will say more in chapter 11 of this book), even when a theologian does cite historical sources, including confessions, it is then necessary to go back to Scripture to establish the truth of what those sources say.⁴ The main value of the confessions, then, is to mediate the biblical teaching. But is it too much to ask that in an 888-page book I might occasionally bypass the middle man?

Another question occurs: Is it possible that the desire of some for a more ecclesiastical and historical focus is related to the hyperhistorical trend in evangelical scholarship that I criticized in “*Sola Scriptura* in Theological Method”⁵ and in “Traditionalism”?⁶

4. A former colleague has described this procedure, not favorably, as “zero-based budgeting.” If that is a fault, I plead guilty. Zero-based budgeting in theology is a good thing, a necessary consequence of *sola Scriptura*. I am thankful to Luther and Calvin that they did not merely assume the truth of their traditions, but brought them under the scrutiny of Scripture. They were zero-based budgeters with a vengeance.

5. Appendix 2 in Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (P&R Publishing, 1997), 175–201.

6. Available at <http://reformedperspectives.org> and <http://www.frame-poythress.org>.

At any rate, readers and reviewers are advised that in this respect the present volume will be like *DG*. Although I shall include here many references to secular and Christian sources, historical and contemporary, my purpose, as in *DG*, is not to exposit the history of these doctrines, but to present and defend what I consider to be the biblical position. Everything else will serve that purpose, and thus the book will be inadequate for other purposes.

I should mention that the Bible quotations in this book come from the English Standard Version. This is a change from the previous books in the Lordship series.

I wish to thank Reformed Theological Seminary, which has provided the best possible working environment for me as a teacher and writer. I'm also grateful to Richard Pratt, Ra McLaughlin, and the staff of Third Millennium Ministries, for putting together a video series with me on the subject of ethics, helping me to rethink a number of formulations. I am also grateful to P&R Publishing, with whom I have had a great working relationship over the years, and especially to Jim Scott, who edited this book for them.

ABBREVIATIONS

I will refer to classical titles merely by title (or abbreviation). These can be found in a variety of editions. Other frequently cited titles are as follows:

AGG	John M. Frame, <i>Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief</i> , ed. Joseph E. Torres, 2nd ed. (P&R Publishing, 2015)
CVT	John M. Frame, <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i> (P&R Publishing, 1995)
DG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of God</i> , 2nd ed. (P&R Publishing, 2026)
DKG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i> , 2nd ed. (P&R Publishing, 2026)
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism

Part One

**INTRODUCTORY
CONSIDERATIONS**

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Christian life is a rich journey, and it is not easy to describe. Without any pretense of comprehensiveness, I try to describe it in this volume as living under God’s law, in God’s world, in the presence of God himself. Those of you who have read other books of mine will recognize that triad as indicating what I call the normative, situational, and existential perspectives, respectively. Those of you who haven’t read other books of mine can learn about that triad in the present volume.

We begin now with some introductory considerations. After defining terms and relating ethics to God’s lordship, I shall discuss ethics itself from three perspectives: situational (the history of ethical thought), existential (a Christian ethical method), and normative (ethical principles, following the pattern of the Ten Commandments). But first we should address a couple of important introductory questions:

Why Study Ethics?

We should study ethics at least for the following reasons:

Servants of Jesus are people who have his commandments and keep them (John 14:21). Over and over again, Jesus tells us, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15; cf. vv. 21, 23; 15:10; 1 John 2:3–5; 3:21–24; 5:3). Jesus’ “new commandment” is “that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34). Love is to be the mark of the church, distinguishing it from the world: “By this all

people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v. 35). This is not to say that we are saved by works, obedience, or keeping commandments. It is simply to say that if we want to be disciples of Jesus, we must be devoted to good works (Titus 3:8; cf. Matt. 5:16; Eph. 2:10; 1 Tim. 2:10; 5:10; 6:18; 2 Tim. 3:17; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:14; Heb. 10:24; 1 Peter 2:12). If we are to be devoted to good works, we must know what works are good and what ones are bad. So we need to study ethics.

One purpose of Scripture itself is to promote ethical behavior. The familiar passage 2 Timothy 3:16–17 reads, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” Note the ethical focus here. God breathed out the words of Scripture so that we may be trained in righteousness, so that we may be equipped for every good work. Of course, Scripture has other purposes as well. Many have emphasized that Scripture bears witness to Christ, and so it does (Luke 24:27; John 5:39). But Scripture presents Christ as one who equips us to be lights in the world (Matt. 5:14). Consequently, a great amount of Scripture is devoted to defining and motivating our good works.

In one sense, everything in the Bible is ethical. Even when Scripture expounds doctrinal propositions, it presents them as propositions that *ought* to be believed. That ought is an ethical ought. Indeed, all the content of Scripture ought to be believed and acted upon. The whole Bible is ethics. Of course, the Bible is not only ethics. It is also narrative, for to understand the history of redemption we must have recourse to everything in Scripture. So the whole Bible is narrative as well as ethics. Similarly, the whole Bible is doctrinal truth, wisdom, evangelism, apologetics, and so on.¹ But we have not understood the Bible until we have understood its ethic.

This is another way of saying, as I did in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, that theology is “the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life.”² Any study or teaching of the Bible is an attempt to answer human questions, to meet human needs. Those questions or needs may be relatively theoretical (e.g., “What is the meaning of *ratzah* in the sixth

1. So I call all of these *perspectives* on the nature of Scripture. See *DKG*, 185–88. On apologetics as a perspective on the whole Bible, see Ezra Hyun Kim, “Biblical Preaching Is Apologia,” a D.Min. project submitted to Westminster Theological Seminary in California, Spring, 2000.

2. *DKG*, 79.

commandment?") or relatively practical (e.g., "When should I remove life support from my dying father?"). But they are all practical in the sense that they deal with human questions and needs. In that sense, all theology is addressed to people to help them think and live to the glory of God.³ So all theology involves ethics.

The study of ethics is enormously important for our witness to the world. We live in an age in which people are greatly concerned about ethics. Every day, the news media bring to mind issues of war and peace, the environment, the powers of government, abortion and euthanasia, genetic research, and so on. Many people seem very sure of the answers to these ethical questions. But when you probe deeply into their positions, you find that their conviction is often based on little more than partisan consensus or individual feeling. But the Bible does give us a basis for ethical judgments: the revelation of the living God. So discussions of ethical questions open a wide door for Christian witness.

People are far more open to discussing ethics than to discussing theistic proofs or even "transcendental arguments." Philosophy does not excite many people today, and many do not even want to hear personal testimony and the simple gospel. But they do care about right and wrong. Christians who can talk about ethics in a cogent way, therefore, have a great apologetic and evangelistic advantage.

It is true that many do not want to hear this witness today. They consider Christianity a "religious" position and therefore one that should not be discussed in the public square. But this view is utterly unreasonable, and that unreasonableness should be pressed. Why should religious positions be excluded from the debate, especially when secular positions have been unable to present a convincing basis for ethical judgments? As I shall indicate in this volume, the main currents of twentieth- and twenty-first-century thought have become bankrupt, confessedly unable to provide any basis for distinguishing right from wrong. I believe that many people today are hungering for answers and are willing to look even at religious positions to find them.

I shall argue as well that all ethics is religious, even when it tries hard to be secular. In the end, all ethics presupposes ultimate values. It requires allegiance to someone or something that demands devotion and governs all thinking. That kind of allegiance is indistinguishable from religious

3. Thinking is part of life, and so it too has an ethical dimension. It is subject to the authority of God's Word. Thus, epistemology can be understood as a subdivision of ethics. See DKG, 60–62.

devotion, even if it doesn't involve liturgical practices. So the line between religious and secular ethics is a fuzzy one, and it is arbitrary to use such a line to determine who is entitled to join a dialogue on ethics.

But more important than the ability to talk about ethics is the ability to live it. This is true of our witness to the world. People see how we live. Even Christians who are not articulate or eloquent can make, through their actions, a great impact on others. Jesus comments on the importance of our works to our witness: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

What Should Be Our Ethical Bias?

Before we begin our study, there is another question we need to ask. All of us are biased in favor of certain conclusions, even at the outset of our study. We cannot be neutral. But we ought to be self-conscious, even critical, of our biases.

There are those who enter the field of ethics with a goal of dispelling legalism. Perhaps they were raised in a church that imposed all sorts of rules on the kids and they didn't like it. So as ethicists they want to emphasize our freedom as individuals to make decisions for ourselves.

Others enter the field disgusted by the moral decline in our society. They may also be impressed by the rigorousness of Scripture and the high cost of discipleship. They are attracted to an ethic that does not compromise with worldliness, a radical ethic of discipline and self-control.

We tend to describe the first type of ethic as liberal, the second as conservative. Down through the years, ethicists have tended to divide into conservative and liberal parties. For example, in ancient Judaism there were the schools of Shammai (conservative) and Hillel (liberal). Catholicism has had Jesuits (liberal) and Jansenists (conservative). The liberal tendency to find loopholes in the moral law, to justify apparent sin, has given casuistry a bad name. The conservative tendency toward harshness and austerity has given moralism a bad name.

In this book, I urge readers not to side with either tendency. The point of Christian ethics is not to be as liberal as we can be, or as conservative. It is, rather, to be as biblical as we can be. So this book will seem to be more liberal than the majority on some issues (e.g., worship, cloning, just war, gambling, deceiving) and more conservative on others (e.g., the Sabbath, the roles of women, stem cell research). God's Word has a way of surprising us, of not fitting into our prearranged categories. Jesus rebuked both the

conservative Pharisees and the liberal Sadducees; Paul rebuked both legalists and libertines. Understanding God's will rarely means falling into lockstep with some popular ideology. We need to think as part of a community, listening to our brothers and sisters, but we also need the courage to step aside from the crowd when God's Word directs us in that way.

So in this book I will be drawing some fine distinctions, as theologians are wont to do. I do this not to gain a reputation for subtlety and nuance, but simply to follow Scripture. My goal is to go as far as Scripture goes, and no farther, to follow its path without deviating to the left or the right. I trust God's Spirit to help us thread these needles, to help us find the biblical path, even when it is narrow and relatively untraveled. May he be with writer and reader as we seek to walk by the lamp of God's Word.

Chapter 2

AN ETHICAL GLOSSARY

Definitions are never a matter of life and death. Scripture gives us no directions for defining English words. So two people may use the same term with different meanings, without differing in their actual views. One theologian, for example, may define faith as intellectual assent, while insisting that trust always accompanies it. Another may define it as trust, while insisting that intellectual assent always accompanies it. The differences between these two theologians should not be considered significant at this particular point. We may define terms as we like, as long as our definitions don't confuse people or mislead them on substantive issues.¹

In this chapter, I will define some important terms, indicating how I will use these terms in this particular book. These definitions are not necessarily best for all situations, even for all discussions of ethics.

Ethics and Theology

The first group of definitions will relate ethics to other theological disciplines. The earlier ones review discussions in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.

Knowledge of God

I use this phrase to mean a personal, covenantal relationship with God, involving awareness of his self-revelation, an obedient or disobedient response to that revelation, and the divine blessing or curse upon that response.²

1. Compare the discussions in *DKG*, 74–75, 208–33.

2. *DKG*, 9–47.

This definition connects our knowledge of God to his lordship (see chapter 3) and to ethics, as I define it below.

Doctrine

Doctrine is the Word of God in use to create and deepen one's knowledge of God, and to encourage an obedient, rather than disobedient, response to his revelation. Or, more briefly, doctrine is the application of the Word of God to all areas of human life.

This definition is built upon the use of the Greek terms *didaskō*, *didachē*, and *didaskalia*, especially as Paul uses them in the Pastoral Epistles.³ I prefer to define *doctrine*, therefore, not as theological propositions, but as an active process of teaching that leads to spiritual health: as Paul puts it, “sound (*hygiainousē*) doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1).

Theology

I define *theology* as a synonym of *doctrine*.⁴

So theology, too, is an active process of teaching, not first of all a collection of propositions. I am not opposed to theological propositions; there are quite a few of them in my books. But theological propositions are useful only in the context of teaching that leads to spiritual health.

In that sense, theology is a practical discipline, not merely a theoretical one.⁵ I do not disparage theory; indeed, my own books are more theoretical than practical. But, in my definition, theory is not the only kind of theology there is, nor is it theology par excellence. Theology takes place, not only in technical books, but also in children's Sunday school classes, evangelistic meetings, preaching, and discipleship seminars. Theology is the application of the Word to all areas of life. Academic or theoretical theology is one kind of theology, not the only kind. And I shall argue later that theory is not more ultimate than practice, nor is it the basis of practice; rather, theory and practice are both applications of God's Word, and they enrich one another when they are biblical.

For that matter, the line between theory and practice is not sharp. Theory is one kind of practice, and *theoretical* and *practical* are relative terms that admit of degrees.

3. *DKG*, 79–83.

4. For the “traditional theological programs” of exegetical, biblical, systematic, and practical theology, see *DKG*, 199–207. For historical theology, see pp. 294–304. All of these are different ways of applying the whole Bible. They do not differ in subject matter, but in the questions we ask of Scripture in each program.

5. See *DKG*, 82–83, on the relationship between theory and practice.

Ethics

Ethics is theology, viewed as a means of determining which persons, acts, and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not.

This formulation defines ethics as Christian ethics. Many will find this objectionable. Given this definition, for example, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is not about ethics! Aristotle was not trying to determine what persons, acts, and attitudes are blessed by the God of the Bible. The same could be said of any non-Christian thinker.

It may seem absurd to define ethics in such a way as to exclude all non-Christian writers from the discipline. But, as I said earlier, I don't object to people using a different definition in a different context. If I were to discuss ethics with a disciple of Aristotle, for example, I would agree with him to define the topic as, say, the study of right and wrong.⁶ But I mean my present book to be a distinctively Christian work, and I intend to show that non-Christian ethics is flawed, not only in its conclusions, but also in its initial understanding of its task. For that purpose, my theologically enhanced definition will be most serviceable.

Note also that on this definition ethics is not merely a branch of theology, but is in fact the whole of theology, viewed in a certain way. All theology answers ethical questions. Even the more theoretical kinds of theology, as we saw earlier, are explorations of what we *ought* to believe. That ought is an ethical ought. So, when we ask what we ought to believe about, say, the order of the divine decrees, we are asking an ethical question.⁷

All theology, then, has to do with ethics. It is also true that the subjects we usually treat in ethics, such as murder, stealing, and adultery, can be integrated with the rest of theology more thoroughly than in most theological systems. In a theological curriculum, it would be possible to deal with ethical issues (even those issues we normally think of as ethical) throughout, rather than postponing them to a special course. We could discuss the creation ordinances, the moral laws given to Adam and Eve before the fall, in the course of describing the original condition of the human race. Then we could teach the Decalogue in connection with the Mosaic covenant, ethical methodology in connection with theological prolegomena, and so on. But, in fact, theologians (including myself) have tended to avoid the more practical

6. Of course, at some point I would have to show the Aristotelian that his method of ethics is fundamentally flawed. But I would not insist on making that point at the beginning of a conversation.

7. Compare the argument in *DKG*, 60–62, 71–73, 105–6, 145–47, 239–40, that epistemology can be seen as a branch of ethics.

kinds of ethical questions in the main curriculum of systematic and biblical theology. So seminaries have come to offer courses in ethics as a separate discipline. In fact, however, ethics covers the whole range of human life and all the teaching of Scripture.

In this book, however, I will stick pretty much to the standard subject matter that theologians have called ethics, that is, the subject matter of the Ten Commandments, together with the presuppositions and applications of those commandments.

Finally, in this definition, take note of the triad of persons, acts, and attitudes.⁸ These are the three subjects of ethical predication in the Bible. Only these can be ethically good, bad, right, or wrong. A rock can be good in a nonethical sense (e.g., good for use in construction). But a rock cannot make ethical choices; it cannot seek to bring itself, its actions, and its attitudes into conformity to God's will. So a rock is not a subject of ethical predication. Only rational creatures (God, angels, and human beings) are subjects of ethical predication, together with their actions and attitudes.⁹

Metaethics

Metaethics is a second-order discipline, a theological reflection on the nature of ethics. Ethics is about good and bad, right and wrong, blessing and curse. Metaethics is about ethics. Metaethics discusses the nature of right and wrong, ethical methods, the presuppositions of ethics, and so on. But, like Christian ethics, a Christian metaethic must be subject to Scripture and thus must be theological. In that way, metaethics is a part of theology, and therefore, according to my earlier definition, a part of ethics.

Morality

I will use the terms *morality* and *ethics* synonymously in this book, although they are often distinguished. Jochem Douma, for example, makes

8. I'm not sure whether this threefold distinction should be integrated with the other threefold distinctions of my *Theology of Lordship* books. And if it is to be so integrated, I'm not sure exactly how to do it. Both "persons" and "attitudes" are good candidates for the existential perspective. At the moment, I lean toward the following: person, normative; acts, situational; attitudes, existential. Of course, the beautiful thing about these triads is that they are perspectival, so that different arrangements are possible. For readers who are drawing a blank here, I will explain the perspectives in the following chapter.

9. Of course, we can make further distinctions within the categories of persons, actions, and attitudes. Actions, for example, can be divided into thoughts, words, and deeds, a distinction invoked, for example, in WLC, 149. These subdivisions are also subjects of ethical predication in Scripture.

this distinction: “*Morality* consists of the entirety of traditional and dominant customs, while *ethics* is reflection upon those customs.”¹⁰ I think, however, that either term can refer (descriptively) to human customs¹¹ and (normatively) to the evaluation of those customs as right or wrong.

It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to reflect on the customs of human life, and I will be doing that in this book to some extent. But I believe that for Christians the work of ethics is essentially theological. Theology does, of course, reflect on human customs, as do many other disciplines. But theology reflects on those customs specifically for the sake of applying biblical standards to them. The same is true of ethics and morality in the normative sense, as I shall use the terms.

The two terms, also, can equally refer *de facto* to people’s moral standards, or *de jure* to the standards they ought to have. Joe’s ethics (*de facto*) are Joe’s moral standards and/or the ways he applies those standards in his decisions. But from a normative standpoint (*de jure*), Joe’s ethics may be wrong, unethical, or immoral.

Value Terms

Moral, Ethical

In light of the above discussion, I will treat the adjectives *moral* and *ethical*, like the corresponding nouns, synonymously. Both of the terms, however, can be used either descriptively or normatively. Descriptively, they mean “pertaining to the discipline of ethics,” as in the sentence “This is an ethical, not an aesthetic, question.” Normatively, they mean “conforming to ethical norms,” as in the sentence “Senator Ridenhour is an ethical politician.”

Immoral, Amoral, Nonmoral

The word *moral* can be negated in three different ways. *Immoral* is usually a normative term, used to criticize a person, act, or attitude as ethically bad or wrong. An *amoral* person is someone who is unable or unwilling to bring ethical considerations to bear on his decisions. *Nonmoral* is the opposite of the descriptive meaning of *moral* above, by which we distinguish ethical from nonethical topics of discussion. So the question of whether clam chowder should contain tomatoes is usually considered to be a nonmoral question, except occasionally by partisans on either side.

10. J. Douma, *Responsible Conduct* (P&R Publishing, 2003), 3.

11. As in the related terms *mores* and *ethos*.

Moralistic

This term is vague, and I will not be using it much in this book. It can mean (a) trite or provincial in ethical attitude, (b) self-righteous, (c) putting too much emphasis on morality, (d) legalistic, putting works in the role that Scripture reserves for grace, or (e) (in preaching) failing to note or sufficiently emphasize the redemptive-historical purpose of a biblical text.¹² Usually the word is used as a term of reproach, but rarely with any precision or clarity. The word has bad connotations, and people seem to use it mainly for the sake of those connotations, to make an opponent look bad, rather than to bring clarity to a discussion. We should generally avoid using words in this way.

Value

A value is a quality of worth or merit. There are various kinds of value, including economic, aesthetic, medicinal, recreational, and ethical. So ethics may be regarded as a division of value theory. It is important to make distinctions between ethical values and other kinds of values. Writing a great symphony may be an act of great aesthetic value, but, depending on the composer's motive, it may be of no ethical value or even of negative ethical value.

Fact

Facts are states of affairs. Statements of fact (propositions) claim to assert what is the case. Philosophers commonly distinguish, sometimes very sharply, between facts and values, and those distinctions can be important in ethical philosophy, as we shall see. However, it is also important to see the closeness of the relationship between fact and value. If a moral principle (e.g., "Stealing is wrong") is true, then it is a fact. Further, statements of fact presuppose moral values.¹³ When someone says, "The book is on the table," he is implying that his hearers *ought* to believe that proposition. And that ought is an ethical ought.

Norm

A norm is a rule or standard that determines the ethical rightness or wrongness, the goodness or badness, of any person, action, or attitude. In biblical ethics, the ultimate norm is God's revelation.

12. I have discussed redemptive history (that is, biblical theology) in *DKG*, 200–205, and I will try in chapter 16 in this book to show its role in ethics.

13. See *DKG*, 136–37. See also pp. 69–70, on the relation of facts to interpretations. Note also the texts in *DKG* cited in footnote 7 to show that epistemology is part of ethics.

Virtue

Virtues are grounds of praise for someone or something. There are non-moral virtues, such as efficiency, skill, and talent. Moral virtues, like love, kindness, fidelity, and integrity, are elements of a good moral character. Virtue ethics is a kind of ethics that focuses on these inward character traits. This type of ethics is often contrasted with command ethics (focusing on moral rules) and narrative ethics (focusing on a history or story that provides a context for ethical decision making). We shall see that as Christians we need not choose among these; Scripture provides us with divine commands, a narrative basis for moral choice, and a list of virtues, together with God's gracious means of conferring those virtues upon us.

Good

Good is the most general adjective of commendation. We use the term to ascribe any sort of value to anything: aesthetic, economic, etc., as well as ethical. So we should distinguish between moral goodness and nonmoral goodness. The most common form of nonmoral goodness may be described as teleological goodness. To be good in the teleological sense is simply to be useful—good for something, producing a desirable state of affairs. A good hammer is a tool that is useful for pounding nails into surfaces. Pounding nails is its purpose, its telos, its end. The hammer is not morally good, for moral goodness (in accord with our earlier definition of *ethics*) describes a person, action, or attitude that receives God's blessing. The hammer is not a person, so it does not receive God's blessing for the jobs it performs.

We do sometimes describe human beings as good in a teleological sense. A good plumber, for example, is someone who is skilled at fixing pipes. To say that Sid is a good plumber is not the same as saying that he is a good person. He may be skilled at fixing pipes, but otherwise a scoundrel. In such a case, we usually say he is a good plumber, but a bad person. To be sure, there is some overlap between the concepts. If Sid is skilled at fixing pipes, but he overcharges, steals objects from the kitchen, or makes an awful mess without cleaning it up, we probably would not call him a good plumber, for fear of being misunderstood. So there is a point where someone's ethics disqualifies him even from teleological commendations.

And in some cases moral turpitude compromises a person's skills. If skilled concert pianist Karl Konzertstück stays up partying all night and arrives at his recital with a hangover, with the result that he plays his music poorly, people will not recognize him that day as a good pianist. If such

behavior becomes a habit, he may entirely lose his reputation, and his skills may also decline. So moral evil can imperil teleological goodness. Still, as a matter of definition, it is possible to speak of teleological goodness without reflecting on moral goodness.

Both teleological goodness and moral goodness are important to ethics. Morally good people seek in their actions to achieve goals that are teleologically good. For many philosophers, the highest goal (*summum bonum*) is happiness, either individual or corporate. Morally good acts, in their view, are acts that promote the happiness of oneself and others. So morally good actions are those that promote teleological goodness.

Scripture describes the highest good theologically: it is the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). We shall see that these goals incorporate the happiness of people in various ways. But they are fundamentally theocentric, rather than anthropocentric. These provide the telos, the goal, of the believer's ethical actions: moral goodness seeks teleological goodness. For Christians, the teleological is theological, theistic, and theocentric.

Right

Right is generally synonymous with *moral goodness*: a good act is a right act. Its nuances, however, are somewhat different. *Right* belongs to the legal vocabulary. So when it describes moral goodness, it describes it as conformity to norms, laws, or standards. The corresponding biblical terms *tsaddiq* and *dikaios* have similar associations, and they can be translated “just” as well as “right.”

In the triad mentioned earlier as the subjects of ethical predication, *good* applies equally to persons, acts, and attitudes, while *right* applies to actions and attitudes, but very rarely to persons. We often hear people described as “good guys,” but not “right guys,” though I often heard the latter phrase when I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. Scripture and theology, however, often refer to righteousness as a virtue, as conformity to God's standards.¹⁴

A common meaning of the noun *right* in ethics is “deserved privilege.” We have a right when we have ethical and/or legal permission to do something or to possess something. In this sense, right is correlative with obligation. If Joey has a right to life, society has an obligation to protect his life. If Susanne has the right to an education, someone must provide her with that education.

14. God is righteousness, not only in his character, his conformity to his own ethical standards, but also in his actions to redeem his people, his “righteous deeds.” See *DG*, 450–57. Of course, those actions are righteous because they conform to his standards.

If Jerome has the right to free health care, then someone else has the obligation to provide him with it. Of course, it is possible to give up one's rights, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 9:4–6, 12, 15. Rights in this sense are governed by moral and/or legal standards, and the emphasis on those standards is what connects this meaning of *right* with that of the previous paragraph.

Obligation, Duty, Ought

I shall use *obligation* and *duty* synonymously. These refer to actions we are required to do, commanded to do, by an ethical norm. *Ought* is a verbal form of *obligation*. What we *ought* to do is what the norm requires of us.

Some obligations are immediate, requiring us to carry them out right now, at the expense of anything else we may be doing or planning to do. For example, if we are in the midst of committing a sin, we are obligated to stop immediately. Other obligations are more general—things we must do at some time or within a certain time frame, but not necessarily right away. Later we shall discuss obligations that may legitimately be postponed in favor of other duties, such as the obligations to study the Scripture, to pray, to share the gospel with a neighbor, and so forth.

Some obligations are individual and some are corporate. For example, in Genesis 1:28, God tells the human race, represented by Adam, to replenish the earth and subdue it. This is not a command that Adam could have fulfilled by himself. He was to play a role, with others playing other roles, in the fulfillment of this command by the whole human race. Similarly, in the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus commands the church, represented by the apostles, to make disciples of all the nations of the earth. Those eleven men, whether as individuals or as a group, could not carry out that command by themselves. The command was given to the whole church, and each Christian is to fulfill a different role in the accomplishment of it.

Obligations include their applications. For example, if Sharon is obligated to go to a meeting on Wednesday, she is also obligated to find and utilize transportation that will get her to that meeting. So when God commands us to glorify him in all things (1 Cor. 10:31), everything we do ought to be an application of that command. Everything we do is either a fulfillment or a violation of that obligation. In that sense, all our actions are ethical. They are either good or bad, depending on whether they glorify God or not.

This is not to say that every choice is a choice between good and bad. We often make choices between two or more goods, as when choosing one

cabbage or another at the grocery store.¹⁵ But even the choice of a cabbage involves a choice to glorify God or not to; in that respect, it is an ethical choice. And of course in making that choice, as in making all choices, we have an obligation to choose the right rather than the wrong. In this situation, there are actually two choices being made at the same time: (1) the choice to glorify God, and (2) the choice of one good cabbage over another. The first is a choice between good and evil; the second is a choice between two goods.

Permission

Ethical norms regularly permit actions that they do not prohibit.¹⁶ Permission, however, is not the same as commandment (1 Cor. 7:6). In my previous example, the ethical norm (God's word) does not command me to choose one cabbage over the other (assuming both are equal in all relevant respects). But since that norm does not forbid me, explicitly or implicitly, to buy that cabbage, it thereby permits that action. Permitted actions are good actions, and so we are inclined to say that some good actions are not obligatory. Obligated actions and permitted (but not obligated) actions form two separate classes of good actions.

In one sense, however, these classes of actions overlap. God does not command me to buy cabbage A rather than cabbage B. But he does command me to glorify him, and one way to apply that command is to supply nutritious food to my family. So my action is an application of a command, and, as we saw earlier, commands include their applications. In that sense, when I buy the cabbage I am carrying out a divine command. But making the purchase is not the only possible way to obey that command. I might equally well fulfill the command by buying a different cabbage, or by buying carrots or Brussels sprouts, or by buying nothing and getting food at another time.

General and Specific Obligations

We should distinguish between general and specific obligations. God's commands in Scripture are always to some extent general. For example, he says, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12). In that passage, he does not specify precisely how we are to honor them. Other divine commands supplement this general command by requiring more specific duties, such as providing for aged relatives (1 Tim. 5:3–8). But even those are not completely

15. I shall argue later that we are never called to choose between two or more wrongs, without the opportunity to choose a right alternative.

16. A prohibition is, of course, a negative command.

specific commands, for they must be applied to our own experience. For example, suppose that Jim must find a way to take care of his mother, who is blind and deaf. He could fulfill that obligation in several ways. Jim could take his mother into his own home. Or he could arrange for his sister to take their mother into her home, with Jim rendering financial assistance. Or he could arrange for some sort of institutional care. Any of these options, and others, might be a godly response to the situation.¹⁷

So there are different levels of generality and specificity in moral norms. As we apply the general norms, we usually find that there are a number of permissible ways to carry them out. But an obligation must be carried out in some way, not neglected altogether. So although any specific application may not be obligatory, we are still obligated to choose one or more of the permitted alternatives.

Justice

The word *justice* brings us back to the legal vocabulary, which I mentioned in connection with the word *right*. In general, justice is that which is morally right. But the word tends to be used mostly in social contexts with the predominant meaning of “fairness” or “equity.” More specifically, justice is the integrity of society’s legal system. That includes especially the fairness of the courts, as they render verdicts and determine penalties.

People disagree, of course, on what constitutes justice or fairness. In today’s political dialogue about economics, conservatives argue that justice is equality of opportunity, while liberals argue that justice is not achieved until there is also some level of equality of wealth.

17. I don’t have the space here to argue my ethical evaluation of these alternatives.