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Greetings	Dr. Michael Spradlin
The Future of Theological Higher Education	Dr. Michael Spradlin
Wrestle to Contendation in 1 Samuel: Two Case Studies	Dr. Matt Allen
Centering Women in Theological Higher Education	Dr. Julia Buckley
Biblical Counseling with Minorities	Dr. Larry and Geneva Day
The Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9:24-27: A Summary of Major Interpretations	Dr. Stephen Miller
Dealing with Depression	Marta Trice
Dealing with Anger	Dr. Lon Perdue
The Pastoral Counseling of Richard Baxter	Dr. Chris Reiland
Biblical Counseling in a Pastoral Setting	Dr. Steve Phillips
Constructing the Secular and NeoBerke Approach to MBL/AMBC	Dr. Timothy Galt
Calling from Death to Life	
Donald McGarvey and the Relationship of Evangelism and Social Ministry	Dr. Jeff Wallum

Book Reviews

... through faith in
Christ Jesus.
All scripture is given by
inspiration of God, and is profitable
for doctrine, for reproof, for
correction, or instruction in
righteousness, that the man of
God may be perfect, through
the law of liberty, that he may
bring forth good works.



**BIBLICAL
COUNSELING**

The Ethical Vision of the Bible. By Peter W. Gosnell. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic Press, 2014, 410 pp., \$19.95, softcover, ISBN 978-8308-4028-1

Peter W. Gosnell currently teaches at the Muskingum University in New Concord, Ohio where he also holds the Chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy. He received his PhD from the University of Sheffield (England). He has recently authored “Comparison, Reversal and Mercy: The Tales of Two Gospels” soon to be released in *Conversations with the Biblical World*.

A plethora of new Christian Ethic’s textbooks arrives each year. Many of these do a good job taking on difficult ethical, social, and cultural topics from a Christian perspective. However, this myriad of topics is generally considered from various philosophical “schools” co-mixed and co-mingled with Biblical exegetical perspectives, methods, and / or applications.

There are two problems for Christian Ethics: First, because of the two divergent backgrounds in ethical theory—philosophy and Scripture—a clash of different world views will invariably arise. This situation can lead to more confusion rather than an ethical resolution or action. An example of this is western philosophy’s focus on personal autonomy versus the Biblical focus on God’s sovereignty. A second major concern for this teacher of ethics is the casuistic or a case-based reasoning method. This relates to the idea of precedent in law—finding a similar case, then arguing or reasoning from it to the situation at hand. In the realm of Christian ethics—when an ethical dilemma arises—then the Bible is searched to find a particular text to fit that immediate ethical dilemma.

It seems the collision of world views or “cherry picking” hermeneutics can affect ethical outcomes adversely. But Gosnell does neither. He “takes a descriptive rather than a prescriptive approach to the subject focusing on Torah, Proverbs, the Prophets, the Gospels and Paul.”¹

¹ This quote is taken from an advertisement flier from IVP Academic Press for Gosnell’s *The Ethical Vision of the Bible*. This reviewer found this to be an objective observance.

A “prescriptive . . . [approach] looks to the religion, including the Bible as Christian Scripture, to advise or make behavioral demands for the present moment” (16). Think legal precedent here; or in Christian ethical nomenclature “divine command theory.”

Gosnell’s descriptive “pursuit” is “to observe the ways of distinguishing right from wrong that are encouraged within the biblical writings” and “what rationale and motivations those writings offer for performing right activities and avoiding wrong ones” (16). This ethical method highlights a second dynamic of Gosnell’s work that is worth noting. His rather simple definition of ethics can be grasped, understood, and employed by anyone: “[E]thics involves championing behavior that advances good or hinders harm in one’s world” (15).

A third unique dynamic employed by Gosnell is referred to as the “ethic of relationship.” He asserts: “Throughout the Bible are sets of ethics rooted in people’s relationship with God” (22). His ethic of relationship is the generic theory and is applied specifically and relationally as “micro ethics.” Micro ethics is the application of his “ethic of relationship”: “[It] . . . refers to what people do when they interact directly with someone else” (33) on a personal level.

Gosnell’s descriptive approach, definition of ethics, and ethic of relationship are teased out in the following chapters:

Chapter One; he defines ethics.

Chapter Two; Abraham’s story and how his morality and ethics both flow from his relationship with God.

Chapter Three; Israel’s morality and ethics were to flow from the Chosen Peoples’ covenant relationship with Jehovah.

Chapter Four; the Torah was to produce an ethic of relationship with God based on the Covenant.

Chapter Five; Wisdom Ethics focuses on consequences not morality per se. Morally good behavior brings good consequences—morally bad behavior brings bad consequences.

Chapter Six; the Prophets demand good conduct based on their Torah Covenant relationship with God—bad conduct is condemned.

Chapter Seven; Christ's Reversal Exemplar—those in Luke's Gospel know they are beneath God and need His restoration.

Chapter Eight; relationship ethics are taught in Matthew's Gospel when true discipleship is demonstrated by active obedience.

Chapter Nine; in I Corinthians, Jesus resurrection brings his followers into a new community of relationships. It also signals a global restoration at His return—a proleptical transformation for the church.

Chapter Ten; this transformation is worked out. This is a major emphasis of Gosnell's: the transformation is more concerned with the present "micro-ethics" of relationships than with the "macro-ethics" of institutions, governments, or policies and programs. Although Gosnell does not condemn the traditional divine command theory or casuistic method used by some ethicists, it seems he does move Christian Ethics to a higher plane with his understanding of descriptive ethics based on a relationship model.

Gosnell has done a wonderful service to those of us who teach Christian Ethics. This is a fit work for upper level college students as well as an introduction for graduate level. His descriptive approach, definition of ethics, and ethic of relationship are refreshing. Those who would want an intro work uncluttered by the morass of competing philosophical world views, "ethical schools," or confusing "ethical methods" should give this work serious consideration.

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