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An Appreciation and Response to Dr. Richard B. Hays' *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*

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In my graduate work, it was required that those who majored in Sacred Scripture should select a minor from another discrete theological discipline, namely theological inquiry (a parallel to our systematic theology) or liturgy. Aware of my utter incapacity to chant in a manner pleasing to God or to man, the systematic options seemed to be the more prudent. At that particular time, the faculty members in ethics had distinguished themselves widely and provided a clear opportunity to strengthen one's awareness of the key issues and methods that were being discussed. This led to several seminars: a very stimulating one with Dr. Stanley Hauerwas (who, incidentally makes Dr. Scaer the elder appear to be hopeless pietist) and one that provided a rich exposure to classical Catholic ethical reflection, offered by Dr. Edward Malloy, who went on to become President of the University of Notre Dame. Since these seminars sparked an abiding interest in how Sacred Scripture is used in ethical formulation and moral theology, Dr. Gieschen invited a response to Dr. Hays 1996 volume *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.¹

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. On page 159 of its 470 pages, Dr. Hays succinctly writes that the aim of his book is to "reflect on how the church's life should be shaped by the New Testament witnesses."² 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, Dr. 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 to actually "shape" the life of the church.

For undertaking such a task, and for doing it in such a thorough and careful manner, I not only want to thank Dr. Hays, but indicate that he has placed many, also from that corner of Lutheranism known as the Missouri Synod, in his debt. This work is so rich and magisterial that a full day could be devoted to its content.

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

Contextual Observations:

First, then, a word about the ecclesial and cultural context that *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* has entered. A colleague from systematics once challenged an exegete with this suggestive statement: "You exegetes are everywhere and nowhere at the same time, i.e., you know and preen yourselves in myriad details but simultaneously resist any theological conclusions as though they were deadly viruses." Contrary to this caricature, Dr. Hays as an exemplary exegete 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 not familiar with the current contours of much Biblical scholarship that this separates Dr. Hays from the assumptions of significant sectors of the contemporary scholarly guild. To cite but one example, a recent article on Scripture and ethics advances this viewpoint:

¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996).

² Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 159.

“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.”³

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 Scripture*. 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. She writes:

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 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.⁴

One might be tempted to think that what is true of mainline Protestants is not so true of the evangelical community or of the 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, in the “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.⁵

³ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Christian Character, Biblical Community, and Human Values,” *Character and Scripture*, William B. Brown, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002) 14.

⁴ Barbara G. Wheeler, “Henry Sloane Coffin and Charles R. Erdman and Our Search for a Livable Piety,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* (Vol. XXI, No. I, New Series 2000), 24-25.

⁵ Malcolm L. Walford, “Renewing the Practices of Ministry,” *Theological Education* (Spring 1977, Vol. 33, No. 2), 74-75.

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

In such a context, Dr. Hays' *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, i.e., if communities of faith wish to have their habits of life conform to the New Testament, this book grounds those practices in specific texts.

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, etc.

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

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.⁶

Overview:

The structure of Professor Hays' 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. Dr. Hays' ability faithfully to reflect 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," i.e., how the New Testament is used Christian Ethics. This section is particularly helpful for 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, Dr. Hays addresses the fundamental question of "How Shall We Use the Texts?" His summary of proposed guidelines merits citation here.

His fundamental proposals are:

⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 191, f. n. 1.

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.

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.⁷

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 for here Dr. 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."⁸ In a word, Dr. 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 for Professor Hays consideration, 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

⁷ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 310.

⁸ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 317-461.

addressed. You will never doubt that here is an author who gives the New Testament texts foundational primacy in his exegetical and theological method.

Additional Reflection:

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

First, I would like to invite Dr. Hays' evaluation of 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, i.e., that we share a common humanity that bears with it the capacity to reflect, however imperfectly, 'the image of God'? Can appeals be made "to not steal," "to not kill," on the basis of a human nature that shares an organic unity if one takes the Torah's claims seriously?

In a word, 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?⁹ 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 Professor Bockmuehl of Cambridge University. He writes:

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 (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* (emphasis mine).¹⁰

Professor 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 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

⁹ A recent restatement of natural law thinking is John Finnis' *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

¹⁰ Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000), 151. 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.

political terms, Jewish concepts of a universal law for Gentiles proved to be indispensable for the development of Christian ethics (emphasis is the author's).¹¹

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.¹²

I would be interested in whether Dr. Hays’ views “nature” and “narrative” as “either...or” or “both...and” in the moral vision of the New Testament as expounded, especially by Professor Bockmuehl.

Another and related question is whether the “tensions” perceived in the New Testament are perhaps exaggerated by our particular hermeneutical milieu, i.e., have our lenses been ground to perceive what is, in fact, rich and multifaceted coherence as more than that? Two quotes from different vantage points place this question in the foreground.

Eric Auerbach in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* writes: “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 seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected, we are rebels.”¹³

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, Dr. 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.¹⁴

¹¹ Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law*, 172-3.

¹² William Schweiker, “Images of Scripture and Contemporary Theological Ethics,” *Character and Scripture*, William P. Brown, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002) 41.

¹³ Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1953), 14-15.

¹⁴ Richard B. Hays, “Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?” *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XI, No. 4 (Fall 2002) 404-5. Earlier in the article, Dr. 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

Our particular exegetical nook in the Christian family has too frequently flattened out the richness and variety of the Scriptural texts. How often haven't you heard St. Paul speaking from the pulpit 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, isn't there a legitimate coherence that again needs to be recaptured for 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 to Dr. Hays is: "Shouldn't Biblical exegetes sin at least somewhat boldly in making the case for coherence?"

If we would "sin boldly" in the direction of coherence, we would 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 Scripture might assist in retrieving the New Testament for the formation of the church life. Christopher Hall summarizes:

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.¹⁵

I am curious as to whether Dr. Hays believes this to be a healthy development or one attended by such exegetical license as to render it unhelpful in facing the church's present situation?

There is no more fitting way to conclude this response than to express deep gratitude for a truly outstanding book. May *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* and its author play a significant role in shaping the thinking of seminarians, professors, pastors, and laity. And, by God's grace, may such thinking *and living* bear witness to that Epiphany Light that radiates in this season and always from the Christ Child, the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

P.S.: Dr. Hays: This is a rough draft of my response to *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. I have benefited a great deal from your rich and insightful work. Various travel and related commitments have prevented me from having a polished manuscript. Nonetheless, I will present something very close to the above with the hope that the time factor—receiving it now rather than later—will make up for any lack of precision. Our seminary community is very much looking forward to your presence with us. If previous years are an indication, there should be some six hundred pastors and laity here to hear your lecture and the responses to your books. Safe travel and God's blessings!

Dean O. Wenthe, President

approach does not yield a very satisfactory reading of the Bible, for the Bible is not about 'self help,' but about *God's* (emphasis his) action to rescue a lost and broken world." 402.

¹⁵ Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 191.