

COVENANTAL APOLOGETICS: THE ONLY FOUNDATION FOR
CONSISTENT CHRISTIAN ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
NEGATIVE COVENANTAL APOLOGETICS: THE FOUNDATION FOR CRITICISING ETHICAL SYSTEMS	2
The “Common Good” Common Ground	2
The “Moral Law” Common Ground	4
The Biblical Common Ground	8
The Standard	12
Point of Contact	13
Ethical Criticism: Conclusion	14
POSTITIVE COVENANTAL APOLOGETICS: THE NECESSITY OF ESTABLISHING THE CHRISTIAN ETHICAL SYSTEM	16
High Christianity	17
Ethical Considerations	19
The Sanctity of Life	20
One Man, One Woman	22
Final Thoughts on Morality	24
CHRISTIAN CONCLUSIONS	27
WORKS CITED	28

ABSTRACT

As ambassadors of Christ, it is within the prerogative of Christians to be a prophetic voice in the culture they happen to find themselves in; they are to call all men everywhere to submit to the lordship of Him who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. In this enterprise an apologetic methodology must be insisted upon, not only in order to prove the truthfulness of the claims of Christianity, but also to establish the standard of morality that all men are held accountable to. This means that developing a uniquely Christian ethic, and contending for it against other competing ethical systems, is unavoidable for Christians. This paper will argue that Covenantal Apologetics is the only foundation for consistent Christian ethical engagement. The authors will show by example that this apologetic approach provides the purpose and the means for both critiquing opposing ethical systems, and proving the supremacy of the Christian ethical system, by finding the universe and all of its systems (including true ethics) to be ontologically, epistemologically, and teleologically contingent upon the covenant—making God of the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

For Christians to engage in the ethical arena, the enterprise of apologetics is necessary. Such is the case by the very nature of ethical dialogue; every ethical system must be defended—it must have an *apologia*—and for the Christian ethical system, Covenantal Apologetics is the most ruthlessly biblical means to this end. These authors would define Covenantal Apologetics as: “the tangible pursuit of defending the high Christian faith by finding all things—ontologically, epistemologically, and teleologically—from beginning to end, holistically contingent upon the Triune God of the Bible, who has revealed Himself to man covenantally.” It should be stated at the onset that these authors, as Reformed Baptists who represent a nuanced version of 1689 Federalism, differ from the traditional Covenantalists who typically pioneer this discussion.¹ Nevertheless, they feel justified in having a voice in the conversation, given the somewhat inclusive nature of Oliphint’s Ten Tenets.² Such being the case, the telos of this paper is to establish Covenantal Apologetics as the only apologetic methodology for engaging consistently as a Christian in the ethical arena. Covenantal Apologetics will thusly be used (1) negatively, in order to critique competing, non-Christian ethical systems, and (2) positively, in order to establish the Christian ethic as the only truly ethical system.

¹ It is important to distinguish between traditional Covenantalism and the nuanced version of Baptist Covenantalism represented by these authors; although, the differences between these two views do not explicitly become manifest in this paper. For an example of the difference between traditional Covenantalism and Baptist Covenantalism, see Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism* (Vestavia Hills: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013).

² Oliphint speaks broadly regarding the nature of Covenantalism as it relates this apologetic method; this can be seen primarily in the second of his Ten Tenets. K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 49-50, 55.

NEGATIVE COVENANTAL APOLOGETICS: THE FOUNDATION FOR CRITICISING ETHICAL SYSTEMS

By: Samuel G. Parkison

In a world such as this one—in which competing ideas are constantly in collision with one another—the proposal of one ethical system is by definition the rejection of all others. This is not something that Christians should fear; part of commending Christianity involves critiquing all conceivable forms of non-Christianity. This is particularly true in the realm of ethics. With respect to ethics, all meaningful conversation necessitates some notion of a standard. Without an assumed standard of ethical conduct, one is left without any room to endorse or critique any other position. In other words, to engage in this conversation, one must have a standard to justify *how* his position is right, and *how* his opponent's position is wrong. This portion of the paper will argue that the only consistently Christian method of critiquing different ethical systems is the method established by Covenantal Apologetics.

The task at hand is to explore how a Christian might criticize a competing ethical system. For simplification, two ethical topics shall be examined throughout the following discourse: the topic of “same-sex marriage,” and the epidemic of abortion. In both cases, the Christian’s final stance will be taken for granted (that is, that the Christian is *against* “same-sex marriage” and is *against* abortion). What shall now be considered are the various methodological approaches a Christian might take in criticizing the ethical systems which are in favor of “same-sex marriage” and abortion.

The “Common Good” Common Ground

One strategy a Christian might be tempted to take in engaging the culture on ethical positions is to appeal to the *common good*. In this approach, the Christian is assuming a common

notion of social harmony, shared between the believer and the non-believer alike. This approach is to effectively bypass any discussion of competing ethical systems; it essentially assumes a shared ethical system at the start, and subsequently seeks to work out the nuances of positions within that larger framework.

In the case of “same-sex marriage,” a Christian who adopts the *common good* methodology may point to the devastating social ramifications of legitimizing the institution; such as the emotional consequences of children being raised up in and around same-sex households, the redefinition of “the family” in society, the demonization of individuals with opposing religious convictions, etc. Likewise, in considering the topic of abortion, such a Christian may emphasize the fetus’ right to life, the future ramifications of preventing an entire generation of potential societal contributors from ever coming into the world, the promotion of promiscuous sex by isolating sex to be ultimately disconnected from raising children, etc.

The problem with such a methodological approach to criticize these ethical positions is that it underestimates the sharp antithesis between the secular notion of the *common good* and the Christian’s. An ethical system that endorses “same-sex marriage” will likely have no problem with the emotional consequences of children being raised in and around same-sex households; as far as they are concerned, those consequences are changes for the better. Such an ethical system does not recognize the redefinition of “the family” in society, or the demonization of disapproving individuals with religious convictions as hindrances to the *common good*. To the contrary; such an ethical system will list these consequences as benefits, rather than as drawbacks. Likewise, an ethical system that endorses abortion will be able to place the same sort of spin on the ramifications listed above.³

³ A subscriber of a pro-abortion ethical system might respond by denying that the fetus’ right to life is intrinsically as important as the grown woman’s who is carrying the fetus, or by insisting that a society should be

In the past, this methodology would have appeared to be successful on the surface, due to an apparent shared notion of the *common good*. Christians would essentially start the discussion by saying, “We can all agree that such and such would be a good thing for society.” However, the starkness of today’s ethical landscape strips away any such illusion of commonality here. Many subscribers of ethical systems represented in today’s marketplace of ideas can simply respond with, “No, we cannot agree that such and such would be a good thing for society.” In other words, despite any apparent commonality in practice, the Christian’s notion of the *common good* is fundamentally not the same as the non-Christian’s.

The “Moral Law Argument” Common Ground

A more frequent strategy for commenting on ethical positions is for the Christian to take one step backward; namely, to start by recognize the surface-level differences of respective ethical systems, and to then focus on key features of shared convictions between them. Typically, such a method is framed within the larger context of the classical apologetic *Moral Law Argument*.⁴ What is meant here by “Moral Law” is not the traditional reformed category within the larger framework of biblical law, but rather the concept utilized by classical apologists which depends on the natural theology of Thomas Aquinas. Such an argument postulates that every human being intuitively knows that there is some sort of objective moral law; otherwise, meaningful conversation would be impossible. One cannot condemn or commend the moral action of another without assuming some sort of moral standard to which both parties are held

conscious of over-population (which would imply that the prevention of an entire generation is good thing in the long run), or by insisting that “promiscuous sexuality” is actually “liberated sexuality.” All of these retorts would be consistent with a pro-abortion ethical system’s conception of the *common good*.

⁴ See: Paul Copan, “A Moral Argument” in *To Everyone An Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 3-32. Although Lewis often reasons as a Presuppositionalist, he does so inconsistently, and should properly be identified as a Classicist.

accountable. So, given the commonly assumed (conscious or unconscious) reality of an objective moral law, it is argued that the most likely origin of the moral law is a moral law-giver; namely, God. For example, a Christian might appeal to the moral crime of murder and say, “You see, non-Christian? I believe that murder is wrong and you believe murder is wrong. We both recognize the same objective morality. Now, consider the possibility that God is the origin of that morality.” Essentially, this method banks on a neutrality of objective morality; it assumes epistemic commonality between the Christian and the non-Christian in the realm of ethics. It is postulated that although the non-believer may not agree with the believer about where his objective moral standard originated, there is plenty of common ground regarding the objective moral standard itself for ethical dialogue. However, saying that there is some sort of objective standard of morality is not really saying anything. In his critique of C.S. Lewis regarding this very topic in *The Defense of the Faith*, Van Til wrote,

“...surely this general objectivity is common to Christian and non-Christian in a formal sense only. To say that there is or must be an objective standard is not the same as to say what that standard is. And it is the *what* that is all important.”⁵

There are several fatal flaws with trying to compete with different ethical systems based on these basic commonalities. The most glaring issue is that no such commonalities are as clearly basic as this position assumes. Take murder for example. A proponent of this methodological approach may appeal to the commonly shared condemnation of murder as an objectively moral offense. But just what constitutes as “murder?” Would the execution of an entire people-group constitute as “mass murder?” Surely few would object to such a designation. So what of God’s command for the armies of Israel to annihilate all of the Amalekites--consisting of men, women and children (1 Sam. 15:1-3)? Would this command constitute as a command for “mass

⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd Ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1967), 59.

murder?” It is doubtful that any unbeliever would not answer in the affirmative. Yet for a Christian to both affirm that God is consistent with himself, and that God also commanded this military mission (Ex. 20:13), he cannot answer in the affirmative without calling God a moral monster; which is, by a Christian definition, an oxymoron. So the “basic common ground” between differing objective moral standards turns out to be not so “basic” after all. If this is true for the most seemingly obvious ethical topics, such as murder, how much more for those that are already in hot debate, such as “same-sex marriage” or abortion.

Another problem with a Christian adopting the method of criticizing different ethical systems based on ethical commonalities is that it depends on a faulty ontological understanding of the nature of ethics. If the moral law is given by a moral law-giver, and that moral law-giver is God, then that moral law could justifiably be defined as “conformity to God’s character.” In other words, the rightness of a moral action is right to the degree that it conforms to God’s character, and the wrongness of a moral action is wrong to the degree that it deviates from God’s character. This much has been affirmed even by Classical Apologists.⁶ However, if such is the case, morality could (and should) be defined as *godliness*. This puts the aforementioned Christian in a difficult situation: is he to affirm that the non-believer, in conforming to his notion of morality, is in fact godly, or is he to deny the continuity between morality and godliness, and thus sever the tie between moral objectivity and a moral law-giver (i.e., his original argument)? To affirm the “godliness” of a system that is predicated on the suppression of the truth about God (Rom. 1:19-21), as an expression of worship to not-God (Rom. 1:25), is to affirm the “godliness” of idolatry. On the other hand, to say that morality and godliness are distinct from one another is

⁶ “Indeed, the final resolution to the Euthyphro dilemma is that God’s good character/nature sufficiently grounds objective morality. So we don’t need to look elsewhere for such a standard.” Copan, “A Moral Argument,” 120.

to undermine the argument of a moral law-giver, giving a moral law that conforms to his character. This method is either blasphemous, or else it is self-defeating. Thus, any such apparent common ground turns out to be filled with land-mines.

Of course, this is not to say that the non-believer cannot at some points inconsistently conform to this standard of godliness on an external level. This they do because of the lingering reality of union to their prelapsarian federal head, Adam. No one in this fallen world is fully epistemologically consistent; there are some aspects of their thinking in which non-believers are not consciously rebelling against God.⁷ This paper is not concerned with whether or not these instances occur; the issue is whether or not the ethical system propagated by any non-Christian can be affirmed. Non-Christian subscribers of all sorts of ethical systems unconsciously conform to the standard of godliness that has been branded on them as image bearers of God, but this morality is always in spite of their ethical system, never because of it. In this way, a Christian could conceivably affirm the moral action of a non-Christian, but never the conscious “moral” motivation of such an action. The non-Christian’s notion of morality is necessarily antithetical to the Christian’s, and anytime a non-believer is conforming to true standards of morality, it is in contradiction to his system.⁸ These seemingly moral actions of unbelievers are not proofs of the

⁷ This conception of unconscious conformity to godliness comes to these authors almost exclusively from Van Til, in his work on *Common Grace*. Particularly potent is Van Til’s analogy of the prodigal son for the non-believer who occasionally falls back into his original posture as a prelapsarian image bearer of God, in Adam. “It is the nostalgia of the prodigal who has left the father’s home but sometimes has misgivings. On his way to the far country he may halt, he may even turn back for a distance, thinking that after all it was good and natural for a son to be in the father’s home. Soon he will crucify unto himself the Son of God afresh, but for the moment the voice of God drowns out his own. He is at the moment not at all himself: he is *not yet* fully himself.” Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel, 2nd Ed.* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing), 103-104.

The idea is that the non-elect, when fully himself, will eventually discover every part of himself that resembles the image of God, and will consciously seek to suppress every hint of godliness. But until such is the case (i.e., the end of history for that non-believer), he will contradict his rebellious posture with occasional, unconscious godliness.

⁸ This, again, comes from Van Til, who writes, “There is no single territory or dimension in which believers and non-believers have all things wholly in common...even the description of facts in the lowest dimension presupposes a system of metaphysics and epistemology. So there can be no neutral territory of cooperation. *Yet*

legitimacy of their ethical systems, for the Christian and the non-Christian are not consciously in agreement with what morality actually is; and defining and prescribing morality is precisely what ethical systems do. The moment a non-Christian consciously conforms to his ethical system is the moment he diverges from true morality; that is to say, true godliness.

The Biblical Common Ground

Now that certain methodologies for interacting with, and criticizing, different ethical systems have been thus considered, and subsequently shown to be inadequate, this author now intends to offer a consistently Christian method for engaging in the ethical arena. For a Christian to criticize an ethical system, he must first establish some sort of common ground between himself and his opponent. Far from being a contradiction of what has previously been established, this common ground is an ontological one, rather than a self-conscious epistemological one. In other words, this common ground is not some agreed upon neutrality governed by an epistemology shared by the Christian and non-Christian alike; rather, it is an ontological common ground governed by the will of God, rooted in man's derivative makeup as an image bearer of God. The Christian and the non-Christian are necessarily going to disagree about the existence of this ontological common ground, but the Christian knows that it is there, and given the non-Christian's natural disposition to twist any other contrived common ground against the knowledge of God due to the antithesis that exists between the regenerate and the unregenerate (Rom. 1:19-21), the consistent Christian knows that this is the only common

*unbelievers are more self-conscious epistemologically in the dimension of religion than in the dimension of mathematics...*The fully self-conscious reprobate will do all he can in every dimension to destroy the people of God. So while we seek with all our power to hasten the process of differentiation in every dimension we are yet thankful, on the other hand, for "the day of grace," the day of *undeveloped differentiation*." Ibid, 102-103 (emphasis added).

Van Til again, "It is thus that we finally come to some fruitful insight into the problem of civil righteousness or the works of non-regenerate men. It is not that in some lower dimension no differentiation, epistemological or psychological, needs to be made by believers. It is not that there is even a square foot of neutral territory. It is not that in the field of civics or justice, any more than in any other particular dimension, men, *to the extent that they are epistemologically self-conscious*, show any righteousness." Ibid, 104 (emphasis added).

ground that can be posited in ethical discussions. That is to say, since the non-Christian will take every agreed upon standard and use it in his enterprise to suppress the truth about God, a Christian should not feel compelled to concede the designation of the “rules of engagement” to the non-Christian. Even if such a strategy comes from a sincere desire to argue the non-Christian into his position in an acceptable manner, it is nevertheless futile; the non-Christian, whenever given the option, will rig the outcome to rule the Christian conclusion out. The Christian should rather stick to the only true common ground—the Biblical common ground—even if the non-Christian refuses to accept such commonality. This section of the paper will deal with the essence of this common ground and its relevance for ethical dialogue.

The Christian doctrine of Creation is crucial for establishing ontological coherence (Gen. 1:1, Ps. 33:6-9, Jn. 1:1-3, Col. 1:15-16, Heb. 1:1-3). This doctrine starts with what Van Til describes as the “ontological Trinity;” that is, God eternally existing as a self-contained being.⁹ This means that God did not create the world out of any sort of necessity; his creation contributes nothing to his ontological substance, but is absolutely derivative of who he is. As Van Til put it,

When men ask us, What is, according to your notion, the nature of reality or being?, we shall have to say that we cannot give an answer unless we are permitted to split the question. For us God’s being is ultimate while created being is, in the nature of the case, derivative.¹⁰

This notion of creation being “derivative” is of crucial importance. If God created everything *ex nihilo* then nothing can exist apart from him (Jn. 1:3). Outside of God there is nothing. This is why understanding God as Creator will consistently yield the understanding of God as Sustainer

⁹ “God is absolute personality and therefore absolute individuality. He exists necessarily. He has no non-being over and against himself in comparison with which he defines himself; he is internally self-defined...It is only in the Christian doctrine of the triune God, as we are bound to believe, that we really have a concrete universal. In God’s being there are no particulars not related to the universal and there is nothing universal that is not fully expressed in the particulars.” Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 26-27.

¹⁰ Ibid, 29.

(Heb. 1:3). If everything is ontologically derivative of God, then for anything to be finally and ontologically separated from God would be for that thing to cease to exist at all. This includes man. When a Christian says that man is made in the image of God, he is making a metaphysical statement that is by definition absolute; if it is true, it is true independent of what anyone might think. It is important for Christians to thus realize where they are arguing from when it comes to ethical discussion; they believe something about the absolute ontological makeup every single part of the universe. So whatever is true about any fact, it is at least true that that fact is ontologically contingent upon God

Furthermore, the doctrine of creation dictates what the Christian is permitted to affirm as true of the non-Christian's observations of the world. If God is the actual ontological source of everything, then a statement about anything is only finally true if it recognizes God as such. The universe is ultimately the handiwork of God, and to say anything less about it is to say something less than true. This means that one's understanding of ontology will determine one's understanding of epistemology. The doctrine of Creation says that the universe is not only derivative of God, but that this reality is ontologically revelational (Ps. 19:1-6, Rom. 1:19-20).¹¹ This means, an epistemology that does not find God as the ontological source of whatever is being examined is false by definition; thus the only epistemology that can consistently coincide

¹¹ This is a concept that Doug Wilson identifies in his designation of Natural Law, which is to be distinguished from Aquinas's notion of Natural Theology. "If the church is going to speak authoritatively in the public square--theocracy--then there needs to be a basis for speaking to non-believers. The covenant of creation provides that basis. Suppose one of them comes back with 'Well, we don't believe in your covenant of creation,' and asks you what you think of them apples. The reply is that the covenant of creation is the only possible basis for natural law, which he *does* recognize (perhaps in spite of himself). He cannot account for this natural law within the framework of his worldview, but it is there nonetheless. For example, the late Christopher Hitchens did not use the language of natural law, but he sure appealed to it all the time." Doug Wilson, *Rules for Reformers*, (Moscow: Canon Press, 2014), 145-146. Here, Wilson alludes to a crucial point on epistemology, which has been more fully teased out through essentially all of Van Til's work. See also: Vern Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013). The idea is essentially that, in order for logic to be consistently utilized, a worldview must provide the necessary preconditions to justify such an enterprise; and Christianity is the only worldview that provides such a justification for logic. Therefore, non-Christian worldviews must borrow from the Christian worldview to even disagree with it.

with Christianity is the one that presupposes that everything (including the epistemology itself) is revelational. There can be no neutrality here: knowledge itself can only be understood by the Christian as ontologically derivative of God.¹²

Additionally, the Christian position demands even more to be said. Not only does the Trinitarian ontological contingency of the universe justify—and demand—a revelatory epistemology, the Christian must also insist that this revelatory epistemology has a teleological aspect to it as well; namely, the purpose of glorifying God (Ps. 19:1-6, Rom. 1:19-25). It is not enough to say that the universe was created by God and that any knowledge of this universe must come from God; the Christian must also insist that any such knowledge will not only conclude with the universe's ontological contingency on God, but also its purpose to glorify Him. A Christian theory of knowledge can never be in the abstract; the very nature of the universe contains doxological obligations.

The Christian perspective on these three inseparable branches of philosophy (ontology, epistemology, teleology) serves as a unified common ground for ethical engagement. The Christian understands that he and his non-Christian opponent are both made in the image of God. The Christian understands that he and his non-Christian opponent are both located in a universe that is inherently revelational, which they themselves are part of, their own consciences bearing witness to them about God (Rom. 2:15). The Christian understands that he and his non-Christian opponent are both in such a universe whose revelation includes a purpose for existing; namely, the glorification of God. The consistent Christian will know not only all of this, but also that the ultimate ethical dilemma lies in the fact that fallen man is in a perpetual struggle to suppress all such knowledge. Such an awareness will necessarily lead to the Christian's refusal to grant the

¹² "As Christians we cannot begin speculating about knowledge by itself. We cannot ask *how* we know without at the same time asking what we know." Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 32.

truthfulness of any ontological statement that doesn't ultimately rest on the sovereign will of God, the legitimacy of any epistemology that isn't consciously revelatory, or any ultimate ethical standard that isn't founded on the teleological conclusion that everything exists to glorify God. This ground he will refuse to yield because he will know that any non-Christian system that operates as such is not run by innocently ignorant truth-seekers, but rather by judicially guilty rebels who seek to use such ground as an outpost of defiance. The consistent Christian will recognize that engaging in ethical dialogue, predicated on any common ground apart from the one described above, is to concede the debate at the onset.¹³

The Standard

Now that the Christian's prerogative to confront differing ethical systems has been established and justified, the task at hand is to establish what standard the Christian is to bring to the non-Christian, by which the opposing ethical system is to be judged. It shall now be argued that the Word of God, which has been revealed to man covenantally, is to be the absolute standard of judgement for ethics. Again, Van Til:

Such a being as the Bible speaks of could not speak otherwise than with absolute authority. In the last analysis we shall have to choose between two theories of knowledge. According to one theory God is the final court of appeal; according to the other theory man is the final court of appeal.¹⁴

The Christian is to insist on the special revelation of God's Word as his final court of appeal when it comes to ethics. This a Christian can do because the law of God has been written on the hearts of every human being; Scripture is a verbalization of what man necessarily knows, as a

¹³ "Are we not, by saying that the question of knowledge is independent of the question of being, excluding one possible answer to the question of knowledge itself? If the being of God is what on the basis of Scripture testimony we have found it to be, it follows that our knowledge only to the extent that it corresponds to his knowledge. To say that we do not need to ask about the nature of reality when we ask about the nature of knowledge is not to be neutral but is in effect to exclude the Christian answer to the question of knowledge." Ibid, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid, 34.

derivative image bearer of God.¹⁵ The self-authenticating nature of revelation brings with it an ethically obligatory element; everything testifies of God, and as such, God's moral law (since His moral law is inseparably tied to his person).¹⁶ It is in this sense that ethics are covenantal; the ethical dimension of man's activity can only be ethical to the degree that his activity conforms to God's will.¹⁷ Therefore, the only standard that a Christian can possibly bring to the table of ethical dialogue is God's revealed standard; which would include not only that which is manifest through general revelation, but also the Special revelation that names the standard. Further, the ultimate expression of this standard is embodied in the God-man, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only person who has ever perfectly conformed to the standard of God; his morality, and thus his "godliness," is perfect. There is no differentiation between God's ethical standard and Jesus' actions. He is the only true covenant-keeper, and given the fallen nature of man's state, in Him is the only place of true morality.¹⁸

Point of Contact

Since every non-Christian lives in perpetual rebellion against God on account of the antithesis, and every self-conscious non-Christian ethical system is consistently (inconsistently) therefore anti-God (and thus anti-moral), the only point of contact between the Christian and the non-Christian ethical system is one of head-on collision. In the case of the previously mentioned ethical topics, then, the Christian is to insist that "same-sex marriage" is wicked because it is in

15 For sin to actually be sin, this point is necessary. Van Til writes, "To maintain this ethical character one needs, with Calvin, to presuppose the idea that man is inherently and inescapably, in history and after the consummation of history, in the realm of the blest and in the realm of the damned, in his very being revelational of the will of God. It is only thus that sin retains its ethical nature." Ibid, 166. In other words, for depravity to have any element of ethical condemnation, man must be a knower of God.

16 For more on this see Van Til: Ibid, 195-196.

17 See footnote 1.

18 Therein lies the ultimate moral answer to the ultimate moral problem of sin: the gospel.

contrary to God's revealed designation of what constitutes as marriage, and it is a perversion of the gospel (Eph. 5:22-33). It is unethical precisely because it is dishonoring to God. Any ethical system that denies such categories is to therefore be criticized not as incomplete, but as totally wicked. In the case of abortion, the Christian is to condemn it as nothing short of the destruction of God's image bearer; it is wicked because of its offense against God. Abortion is to be identified as cold-blooded murder, and the ethical system that defends it is to be marked as culpably condemnable for its attempt to call evil good and good evil (Isa. 5:20). Any criticism of any ethical system that is less than a criticism for its deviation from God's righteous standard is not a truly Christian criticism. Consequently, Covenantal Apologetics is the only method of apologetics that can truly justify a Christian's criticism of other ethical systems because it is the only apologetic method that establishes God's righteous standard as the only standard for ethics.

On this point, Van Til writes:

Disagreeing with the natural man's interpretation of himself as the ultimate reference-point, the Reformed apologist must seek his point of contact with the natural man in that which is beneath the threshold of his working consciousness, in the sense of deity which he seeks to suppress. And to do this the Reformed apologist must also seek a point of contact with the systems constructed by the natural man. But this point of contact must be in the nature of a head-on collision. *If there is no head-on collision with the systems of the natural man there will be no point of contact with the sense of deity in the natural man.*¹⁹

The Christian must therefore stand on the absolutely self-authenticating authoritative standard of God's Word in his criticism of differing ethical systems, knowing full well that the criticism will surely resonate with the non-Christian representatives of said ethical systems because of their "sense of deity," being made in the image of God.

Ethical Criticism: Conclusion

¹⁹ Ibid, 98.

In order for a critique of an ethical system to be meaningful, it must appeal authoritatively to a standard. For the Christian, this standard is the character of the Triune God of the Bible, and Scripture instructs the Christian on the fact that such a standard is actually recognizable to the non-Christian. That is not to say that the non-Christian will affirm the legitimacy of such a standard (the above discussion of the antithesis should lead to the conclusion that the non-believer will in fact do the opposite), but rather that the standard is fundamentally accessible to the non-believer by virtue of his ontological identity as an image-bearer of God, living in a revelatory universe. To say anything less is to dishonor God, by denying the perspicuity of general revelation; that is, to insinuate that His revelation is not as clear as He has declared in his Word (Rom. 1:20). In other words, the only option for the Christian in ethical engagements is to insist on what the non-Christian already knows and seeks to suppress with his ethical system.

POSITIVE COVENANTAL APOLOGETICS: THE NECESSITY OF ESTABLISHING
THE CHRISTIAN ETHICAL SYSTEM

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Now that Covenantal Apologetics has been explored negatively, in its prerogative to critique competing ethical systems, it shall now be considered positively, in its manner of establishing a “high Christian” ethic. To do this effectively, an assessment of the present situation must be given. Post-modernity has all but saturated twenty-first century thought. It is not a groundbreaking assertion to claim that this cultural condition has infected a variety of worldviews resulting in the degradation of any explicit claims at authority, or at minimum the reduction of said claim to relativity regarding the beholder. Not only has this zeitgeist targeted explicit claims at truth made by the Christian, but it has also sought (even if by reaction) to establish its own twisted version of the absolute. In a system where absolute authority is holistically, in a sense, rejected for the sake of relativity – relativity is the ultimate authority. There is no worldview absent of authority. It is this truth that necessitates all cultures to make claims, whether positive or negative, surrounding the topic of ethics. Because every worldview presupposes its own sufficiency, while submersed in the ocean of its own biases, claims surrounding ethics, even in the realm of relativity, come with an authoritative tone bolstering themselves as the necessary framework for pursuing the topic of this paper, namely, ethics. It is the purpose of this portion of the paper to establish “high Christianity”²⁰ as the only moral ethical system; this will be done primarily by outlining the biblical “high Christian” ethic as it relates to

20 This concept as diametrically opposed to “low” Christianity seeks to establish what actual God-fearing Christians believe. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003), 89.

a selection of topics and commending this understanding as objectively true; this will be done by the method of Covenantal Apologetics.²¹

High Christianity

To establish a Christian ethical framework, first a positional understanding of Christianity must be asserted. At the generic table of discourse sits a multitudinous amount of cultural conceptions, most of which would lump all people claiming the banner of Christianity together under one massive caricatured label that assumes familiarity. From an exterior non-Christian perspective, say an atheistic naturalist perspective, this banner of Christianity equates each person as truly belonging to the fold of Christians. Proceeding with caution, it is necessary in order to understand ethics at all, to understand that there are a variety of sects who claim the banner of Christianity who might not or will not experience glory, as well as those who do not know the resurrected King as fully as Scripture would demand.

In positive response to B. B. Warfield,²² Cornelius Van Til in his work *Christian Apologetics* draws a major distinction between high Christianity and low Christianity. Low Christianity embodies everything from passive belief to faith that affirms a poor theological system. Thus anything below low Christianity would rest at a non-Christian level. Often, these groups will present unfortunately Christian-esque platitudes that give off the perception of being a part of the consistent ‘high Christian’ field. There is no yardstick in which to measure the Christian ethic when all who claim the Christian worldview are lumped into one generic group. For example, one does not have far to look in order to find a person commending “same-sex marriage” as an ethically permissible concept while holding a supposed Christian outlook on life.

²¹ See the introduction to this paper for a definition of Covenantal Apologetics.

²² Van Til dealt with much material written by Warfield in the totality of his work but specifically in his work *Christian Apologetics* (ed. William Edgar) he deals heavily with Warfield’s *Plan of Salvation* and *Studies in Theology*.

Contrary to the belief of said person, the Bible speaks broadly regarding the abomination of homosexuality and the sanctity of traditional marriage.

Much to the chagrin of the inconsistent Christian, the Bible does not allow for an ambiguous “your truth is yours, and my truth is mine” relativistic understanding of authority. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 shows the believing reader the depths of reality that Scripture encompasses. Primarily, Scripture is spirated, breathed-out by God, and is profitable for: teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. This method of transmission and mode culminates in “the man of God” being moved towards completeness (godliness) and being “equipped for every good work.” It is the God of Scripture by the mode of Scripture who completes and equips the saints. This vast and encompassing “every good work” statement made by Paul, if not primarily – then secondarily, includes apologetics *and* ethics. Meaning, Scripture equips the man of God to pursue apologetics (Acts 17:16-34, 18:28; 2 Cor. 10:5; 1 Pet. 3:15-16; Jude 1:3) and ethics (Matt. 5:48; 1 Pet. 1:13-21).

This complete man that is being described in 2 Timothy 2:16-17 by his very nature will be a man with immense scriptural understanding for apologetics, ethics, and the correlation between the two. For, how could he be complete without having addressed these areas? Then, in the pursuit of scriptural completeness, it is the duty of the consistent high Christian to pursue these disciplines. Those who seek this completeness most consistently are high Christians. High Christians do not fear the growth that comes from seeking to understand and embody the whole counsel of God. All of this means the truest form of Christian ethics, the high Christian ethic, must be understood in terms of the highest form of Christianity, which is Calvinism.

To grasp the truths of Calvinism, looking towards an ethical framework, one must start at the beginning. The triune God created, Genesis 1:1 “*In the beginning God created...*” This same

Word of God that created is the Word of power of Jesus Christ that simultaneously holds all of the universe together (Heb. 1:3.) The preexisting God of the universe, out of his own freedom and delight in himself, created and is forever sustaining His creation. No aspect of the tangible or intangible world exists outside of this creative craftsmanship. Meaning, everything that exists is ontologically derivative of Him. All things, first and last, find their being contingent upon God.

Ethical Considerations

Amid recent cultural happenings there are a few ethical concerns that desperately need to be addressed and defended from an explicitly clear biblical position. In light of these controversies biblical views on marriage and sanctity of life will be asserted (reacting against “same-sex marriage” and abortion). Consider Hollinger,

As Christians we are called to live out the spiritual realities in the midst of the situations God places us. The gospel is not only spoken but also lived and evidenced in the actions of those who follow Christ. A full-orbed Christian mission will always involve both word and deed, and they should never be pitted against each other...²³

Gospel truths and ethical truths are not held in tension. A Christian ethic, that is, developing a model by which Christians functionally participate in society, must seek to embody the perfection of Jesus. True morality is only morality inasmuch as it directly conforms to and finds its identity in Jesus. Christ is the standard by which ethics is measured as well as the mode of conduct that holds the Christian opponent accountable. Jesus in his incarnational life on earth was tempted in every way that humanity is tempted (Heb. 2:18). Thus His “without sin-ness,” despite being tempted in every way, makes his perfection the ethical standard of conduct by which all must be held to.

²³ Dennis Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 11.

In order to bear the freight that comes with ethical situations that will be presented, dialoguing with alternative non-Christian worldviews is essential. While the scope of this paper does not allow for an explicit handling of this nature, K. Scott Oliphint demonstrates this (although, not with regards to ethics) in wonderful fashion in his book *Covenantal Apologetics*.²⁴

The Sanctity of Life

Living in a country that still champions the genocidic expulsion of babies, abortion, it is essential for the body of Christ to fully understand the biblical teaching of the Sanctity of Life. God's perfect creation in the garden narrative displays the ontological reality that man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28.) Skeptics are quick to make qualifications on the Christian position of the *Imago Dei* arguing from statistically rare boundary issues; issues including life of the mother, or pregnancies occurring as a result of incest or rape. While some of these issues are heavily debated even amongst those among the "high Christian" fold (primarily life of the mother), the Bible is ruthlessly clear on the precious nature of life. Consider the life of Jesus. John Jefferson Davis in his book *Evangelical Ethics* writes:

In the New Testament, the incarnation of Jesus is a profound testimony to God's affirmation of the sanctity of prenatal life. In theory it might have been possible in the eternal plan of God for the Savior to come to earth as a grown man, but in the wisdom of God, Jesus Christ recapitulated the full span of human existence—from conception through death—in order to fulfill the purposes of God. The personal history of the Son of God on earth begins not when he was "born of the Virgin Mary," but when he was "conceived by the Holy Spirit." His human history, like ours, began at *conception*. His conception was of course, a supernatural one, but the significant point is that God chose to begin the process of incarnation there, rather than at some other point, thus affirming the significance of that starting point for human life.²⁵

²⁴ Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics*, 180-191.

²⁵ John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 158.

There was no eternal prerogative on God's part mandating that Jesus come to earth as a babe, but he chose to. Think about what the world is implying about Jesus when they affirm abortion. God incarnated himself into the world, was brought to full term by Mary, and was born a babe. Jesus has in all eternity past and all eternity future been wholly, *completely*, God. And, when he advented into the world he became *fully* man. Not partially man up until his birth, no, Jesus was fully man from the moment he was spiritually conceived.

In God's eyes there is no distinction between the stages of biological human life and the amount of rights one human has. To this point some might claim that fetuses have no human rights or merely have quasi-human rights, despite their supposed consciousness in the womb, because they are codependent on the life of the mother. Not only is this view inconsistent with the conception of Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, but the whole counsel of Scripture sings a song of much different tone than that of the 'lacking human rights' objectors. The Psalmist poetically illustrates the intimate nature by which God creates his children. "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Ps. 139:13-14) One created by God will not find their ultimate teleological purpose in anything outside of God, therein humans are created by God for His Glory and their ultimate good. To clarify this point of humanity's intrinsic God-given rights as established by His awe-inducing handiwork, God speaks to Jeremiah saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." (Jer. 1:5)

Working under this logical Christian framework for understanding God's most prized creation, abortion should be understood in the most deplorable of terms. Abortion is, by its very nature, the erasure of an image of God bearer – and therein abortion removes that child from fulfilling its God given telos.

One Man, One Woman

Traditional, or more aptly, biblical marriage is the sanctimonious union between one man and one woman as established by God. From Genesis to Matthew's Gospel, the Bible speaks in a clear and plain tone surrounding marriage, marriage is God ordained institution of one man holding fast to one woman. Jesus in Matthew 19: 4-6 says this, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let no man separate." In biblical marriage, men and women are covenantally bound to one another and by God's design become one flesh.

"Same-sex marriage" is not marriage. It is a façade the mocks the true union of marriage. And this topic, more-so than others, carries multiple layers of complexity; namely because the issue at hand deals not only with the functional misunderstanding of humanity's God given nature, but it also establishes another system in an attempt to see sin flourish. Consider this, the same perversion embodied by the slaughtering of unborn children; homosexual acts too are transgressions against the image of God. Homosexual acts are according to Romans 1:26-27 "shameless" and "contrary to nature," and those participating in such acts are "receiving in themselves due penalty for such error." Davis says this,

Homosexual relationships cannot fulfill the procreative dimensions of human sexuality and marriage, which are part of the divine intention for mankind, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen.1:28).²⁶

These acts in and among themselves display a reflection of an inner impurity of heart. This sin and the acceptance thereof is an approval of the destruction God's greatest creation: man. Unlike

²⁶ Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 121.

abortion however, this sin instead of neutralizing an infant's life affirms a foundational system that prevents the biological production of infants! Homosexual marriage then takes this grievous sin one step further from participation to celebration. Both homosexual acts and homosexual marriage are issues of the heart, but their offense takes root against different aspects of high Christianity; the former against the image of God and the latter against the image of the Gospel.

Ephesians 5:25 commands, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." This text exhibits the relationship between Christ's redemptive work on the cross for his people; he gave himself up for the church, and husbands are to do the same for their wives. Any diversion from this is by very definition a perversion of it. Christ did not give himself up for himself,²⁷ and the church did not give themselves up for themselves. These are foolish notions. He knew no sin despite being tempted, and yet took on the full punishment for sin on behalf of the church. And he did this so we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). The analogous relationship the Bible displays between the church and Christ, that is, the core message of the Gospel, is sneered at and rejected by those who participate in a "same-sex marriage." Christ was morally perfect and homosexual acts and homosexual marriages transgress this perfection by diluting the image of God and presenting a perverse false Gospel. If ethics is to be understood as conformity to Jesus, by the simple fact that Christ explains his gospel by comparing it to one man and one woman marriage, then it is clear that on a biblical level "same-sex marriage" is properly unethical and immoral.

However, many God-fearing inconsistent Christians misunderstand basic tenets of the faith. And these unconscious diversions from orthodoxy allow them to comfortably affirm God-

²⁷ This point is not saying that Jesus did not willingly submit himself to the will of the Father, but rather is functioning in the analogy of Christ and the church relating to husbands and wives; as in, husbands do not give themselves up for husbands and wives do not give themselves up for wives.

hating sin. Again, all things being derivative of God means all things find their purpose in God, even our physical human bodies. What we do with our bodies reflects the level of understanding we have of the maker of our bodies. In other words, those inconsistent Christians do not understand the true meaning and necessity of being made in the image of God for the purpose of God. To them, it is their life, and they can do as they please. It is for this ignorance and the willful participation in physical or ceremonial homosexual acts that the Christian Apologist must establish this biblical ethical framework.

Final Thoughts on Morality

Having outlined the aforementioned positions there remains a couple of loose ends to tie up. First, in the realm of public policy Christians should have no reservation in joining arms with someone of an opposing worldview who comes to the same practical conclusion regarding an ethical issue. This is not so much an eschatological claim as much as it is a practical one. For, a Mormon who opposes abortion or a Muslim who disagrees with “same-sex marriage” the Christian ethicist should be thankful. Both of these examples embody a phenomenon where a non-Christian worldview has reached the same practical conclusion as the Christian. And while the practical answer is the same, the nature of their decision does not make it moral. These decisions in the secular non-Christian life will always be the result of a temporal, non-salvific, inconsistency in their worldview. While always on the depraved path leading toward damnation, unconscious glimpses and unintelligible reactions can result in seemingly Christian decisions; this always happens in direct contradiction to that person’s affirmed worldview. Morality does not rest in conclusions. To be moral is to conform to the likeness of Jesus. Understanding existence first in terms of ontology (being) then epistemology (logic) and teleology (purpose) it is inescapable to affirm morality as the pursuit of godliness.

Second, of all the points of this paper, morality being a holistically Christian pursuit is probably the most controversial. Arguments have been made from Romans 13 regarding “governing authorities” and the prerogative to judge righteously. The passage discusses “rulers” as being a “terror” to “bad” conduct and not “good,” implying that rulers are given the prerogative to judge actions of their people. Those being governed are told to “do what is good, and you will receive approval” and “if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is a servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” While it has been said that this passage demonstrates an anti-Christian government, Rome, would Paul affirm the righteousness of the Roman magistrates who threw him in prison? No – Paul is showing how powers can be given to a certain entity, and these powers should be submitted to, but this does not mean that they (governments) will righteously enact the powers given them. Meaning, a governing body has the prerogative to rule but that does not equate them using that power appropriately.

It was in God’s sovereign design in eternity past for man to be governed by His will. Romans 13 illustrates this reality in God’s provision of governance. His sheep are to be tended too. But, an eternally broken means, without an eternally perfect solution, will never produce eternally perfect results. An earthly government exercising judgement does so with a mind that does not understand God to be the ontological creator and sustainer of all things. And while governments have been given authority by God, this does not mean that in them rests the keys to exacting morality. Governments are in fact to abate evil powers and to judge, but without a proper view of God, their ability to decree or function morally will be an ontological impossibility.

Lastly, the goal of ethics is not to create Christian-like non-Christians. But rather, the goal of pursuing ethics is to establish the Triune God of the Bible as the exquisitely transcendent and faultlessly immanent author of all reality who has a standard of conduct that every person is held accountable to. Covenantal Apologetics then is the only means by which one can contend for the Christian faith by establishing its standard and laying out its necessary ethical framework; therefore it is not only a worthy discipline to be pursued by the church, but a necessary one.

CHRISTIAN CONCLUSIONS

[T]he only possible way for the Christian to reason with the non-believer is by way of presupposition. He must say to the unbeliever that unless he will accept the presuppositions and with them the interpretations of Christianity, there is no coherence in human experience. That is to say, the argument must be such as to show that unless one accept the Bible for what true Protestantism says it is, as the authoritative interpretation of human life and experience as a whole, it will be impossible to find meaning in anything, it is only when this presupposition is constantly kept in mind that a fruitful discussion of problems pertaining to the phenomena of Scripture and what it teaches about God in his relation to man can be discussed.²⁸

In order to have healthy discussion amongst non-Christians regarding ethics it is important to walk through the necessary presuppositions that lead the Christian to his appropriate conclusions. This is why the above Van Til quote is so important for the pursuit of Covenantal Apologetics. It is the duty of the Christian Apologist to deconstruct the non-Christian's worldview; once it is shown to be inconsistent, only then can the Christian Apologist begin to establish his worldview. Without an argument that deconstructs first and constructs second there is no room for the Christian Apologist to work because it will be in the default of the non-Christian to rest on his inconsistent interpretation of the world, and without knowing he is being inconsistent he will still view his understanding of the world as ultimate.

Covenantal Apologetics, both in negative and positive fashion, allow the Christian Apologist to correctly critique opposing worldviews through the lens of Scripture and commend the whole counsel of God as true. It is by God's authoritative Word alone that the Christian is charged to demonstrate a biblical model for ethics that finds its origin, culmination, and fulfillment in Christ's perfect work.

²⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 197.

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