The how and why of love

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CHAPTER THREE

Using the Bible in Ethics

Biblical Morality and Christian Ethics

A general distinction was made in Chapter One between morality and ethics. A more particularized version of this distinction must now be introduced. This is the distinction between biblical morality and Christian ethics. Biblical morality has to do with the morality found in the Bible. Israel's morality at the time of the Exodus is an example of biblical morality. It is encapsulated in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). Detailed accounts of this morality are spelt out in other parts of the book of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. One moral obligation, for example, placed upon the people of Israel at that time was the obligation to care for the poor and needy. Some provision for the poor was made by a law instructing the land owners to leave the gleanings, the ears of corn and other grain dropped by the reapers as they harvested, for the poor and the aliens (Leviticus 19:9–10).

If we were to list all the moral obligations and virtues found in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy we would simply be describing the morality of Israel. The question of whether this morality was obligatory for Christians today is not answered by describing the morality of Israel. We can still ask the question whether or not it applies to Christians today. Christians disagree on the answer to this question. Using Paul's statement that Christians are not under the Law, some ignore the morality of Israel. Others argue that while we are not under the whole package of the Law, we are still bound by the moral rules and principles contained in it. For the moment it does not matter who is correct. The task of Christian ethics is locating what is normative for Christians in this present age.
Some unreflective Christians believe that the revelation of God is exactly the same in any part of the Bible. These Christians would claim that the morality of Israel was normative for Christians today. For them, biblical morality and Christian ethics are identical. Christian ethics is rather easy for these people. They can take a moral rule, principle or virtue from any part of the Bible and without further interpretation apply it directly as moral guidance for Christians today.

Simple deliberation about some of the contents of Israel's morality would also suggest that this unreflective position is wrong. The rule about gleanings in Leviticus 19:9-10 is a case in point. One can imagine that this rule was adequate for the ancient people of Israel who lived in an agriculturally based society. The villages and towns were not far from the farms. But it is highly unlikely that this rule would be satisfactory for poor people living in huge modern cities such as London or New York. People in these cities do not live close to the places where the farming is done. Even if the poor could get transport to the farming areas they would lack the facilities to process and use the grain. The aphorism 'Time has made some ancient good uncouth' is applicable here.

A simplistic hermeneutic (way of understanding the Bible) that assumes that the revelation of God is exactly the same in any part demands that the Bible be used in this way. We need to note that the Bible does not declare that the revelation of God is the same in any and every part. In fact there are statements in the New Testament that suggest that parts of the Mosaic Law cannot simply be placed upon the Christian as a moral burden. Paul says that Christians are not under the Law (Romans 6:15). Indeed they are delivered from the Law (Romans 7:6). On the surface, these statements suggest that this unreflective approach is wrong. We will see later that the Bible does not see all its parts as interchangeable. Rather, the Bible sees God's revelation as progressive, moving through stages until it is completed in Christ. The moral elements of the Old Testament may well reveal a true morality, and still ring true to Christians today. But this may be because they are parts of a greater whole. We may need to base our Christian ethic on the
greater whole. Only a proper understanding of the whole Bible will answer the question about the validity and application of the moral elements of the Law.

Hermeneutics, the Bible and Ethics

As previously mentioned, the study of this process of understanding is called 'hermeneutics'. In general it is true that the shape of a Christian's ethic is determined by the way he or she understands the Bible. The ethic follows the hermeneutic.

Over the centuries, Christians have employed various hermeneutics in relation to the Bible. Arriving at an overall understanding of the Scriptures, each of these understandings locates a dominant feature that sets the pattern for understanding the purposes of God. This pattern is then applied to ethical matters. Spohn (1984) has provided a useful summary of several of the more recent positions that will serve as illustrations and models of what a hermeneutic is and how one's hermeneutic determines the shape of one's ethic. The first model we will examine focuses on those passages in Scripture that describe God's call to specific individuals like Moses or Elijah and infers that this pattern of relating to God is the pattern to be followed by all Christians. The understanding of the Bible that is arrived at in this way is one that sees the Bible as a book through which God speaks to people directly. God comes and speaks directly to individuals through the Bible and tells them what they ought to do. We shall call this approach to Christian ethics the Divine Command theory.

Since ethics is about what people ought to do, the command of God should provide the substance for ethics. Now it must be emphasized that the Divine Command theorists do not imply that God comes and speaks literally and directly to each individual. Rather the theory states that as Christians read God's word and reflect on their own situation they understand what God is commanding them to do. For many of these people the command of God comes as the voice of conscience. The content of the command does not come directly from God, it involves thought and
deliberation, but the force of the command comes from God. To disobey the command is to disobey God. The sense of moral 'ought' that the Christian apprehends comes from the voice of God.

The hermeneutic employed by the Divine Command theorist is a simple one. The Bible is seen as the Word of God. When people of faith read the Bible, God tells them what to do. Since ethics is about what people ought to do, it is concluded that people ought to do what God commands. Now while there is truth in this theory, it is too simple. It leaves too much to the individual subject who is reading the Bible. It ignores the fact that the Bible itself presents a hermeneutic. The Bible as the objective Word of God gives many clues as to how it is to be understood. If the individual reading the Bible misses these clues he may well end up following a false command. The old Sunday School joke about the person who read in the gospels that Judas went and hanged himself, and then turned to another section of Scripture that said 'Go and do likewise', is crude, but it does illustrate an intrinsic weakness in the Divine Command theory. The theory does not help people to understand the Bible. The theory's great strength is that it understands moral injunctions as having the force of the command of God. That is to say, the theory appreciates that the obligatory nature of moral injunctions—the sense of 'oughtness' which comes with moral imperatives—comes from the fact that it is the Creator God who sets the direction and the goal of human activity.

Another influential hermeneutic that has generated its own peculiar ethic is that found in liberation theology. Arising out of the situation in the third world, this hermeneutic takes Israel's exodus from Egypt as the paradigm or pattern of God's relating to the world. The understanding of the Bible is that it is a book about how God liberates the poor and oppressed. According to this view, the big picture presented by the Bible is that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed, and works for their liberation. The conclusion drawn from this understanding, or hermeneutic, is that Christians must join in the struggle to liberate oppressed people for that is where God is to be found at work. God is committed to liberate the poor and oppressed, and those who serve him must display the same
commitment. A more detailed analysis of the big picture would show, according to this view, that sin may be evident in the hearts of individuals, but that it is most evident in the social structures or arrangements that advantage some people and disadvantage others. True and lasting conversion will come only, according to this view, with the changing of wrong social structures. The task of the Christian is basically the task of changing wrong structures. This is the task of social engineering. If the structures of government or of the family, for example, are wrong and oppressive then the Christian's moral duty is to act to change them.

There are elements of truth in this perspective also. Of course Christian people are obligated to help the poor and change wrong social structures where it is within their power. But the hermeneutic of liberation theology seems to have adopted the Marxist perspective of collectivism. Collectivism is the view that society is more than the sum of the individuals who belong to it. According to this view the parts of society, the individuals who make it up, can only be understood in terms of the whole. Little significance is given to the individual members, for it is the social structures, laws, and attitudes that are significant. The weakness with this hermeneutic is that it does not, in the end, seem to be biblical. There is a great deal of evidence that suggests that the Bible does not hold that society is to be understood in purely collectivist terms. Also, the New Testament writers, while not disinterested in structural sin, seem to give a far greater weight to personal sin. (The particular issue of personal versus structural sin will be dealt with in more detail later in the book.) Again the point to note here is the link between hermeneutic and ethic.

One final illustration of a hermeneutic is seen in the case of Natural Law. Proponents of the Natural Law approach to ethics mentioned in the previous chapter believe that an understanding of the Bible, the big picture as it were, shows that there are purposes and goals inherent in things because God has made them. Moreover, this biblical picture of reality indicates, as does common experience, that ordinary people are able, without the help of the Bible, to discover the purposiveness embedded in reality. This discovery takes
place by way of an intelligent examination of the world. The significant factor for ethics arising from this hermeneutic is that the God-given goals and purposes set the standard for behaviour. We ought to note that the big understanding of the Scriptures advocated by this approach contains many other elements. On this view, the Bible is basically concerned with how God saves his people. But this big picture includes the elements essential for an understanding of ethics. The key element of purposiveness provides the logic for an understanding of sin and the need for salvation. Sin is the failure of people to achieve God's purposes. Salvation is lifting the consequence of this failure.

Again one would have to concede that there are many elements of truth in this hermeneutic and ethic. Nevertheless, this approach has been rightly criticized. Perhaps the major criticism has been that the Bible actually teaches that sin has adversely affected human reason and that people cannot read off the pattern of God's purposes without the help of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit. The consequences of a Natural Law approach to ethics is that it lessens the importance of Scripture. The Bible now becomes just a moral reminder. God's general purposes, that are the substance of morality, can be known by anyone anywhere just by the application of reason. Advocates of Natural Law see this universal availability of moral standards as a positive feature. However, Paul and other biblical writers deny fallen human beings can understand the big picture of reality without the help of revelation. Moreover the Bible teaches that the original order established by God in Eden has been fractured and disordered by sinful humanity. Even if people could read off the order of the present world it would not be God's good and undefiled order.

An important observation can be made at this point. All the hermeneutical approaches we have discussed above have one thing in common. Since biblical hermeneutics is concerned with interpreting the Bible, these approaches are all concerned with locating or finding the meaning or significance of the Bible as a whole. Each of the above approaches has a different understanding of the significance of the big picture presented in the Scriptures.
Each locates what is the ultimate significance of the Bible and then draws out consequences for our understanding of morality. As a consequence each ends up with a different account of morality. Each produces a different ethic.

The difference in understanding and the difference in the big pictures drawn have to do with the way the various approaches interpret the Bible. That is, the variation has to do with differences in hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has to do with the principles they use to arrange and integrate the various bits and pieces of Scripture and the significance that is given to the various parts. If we are going to develop an evangelical approach to ethics we must now examine the principles that evangelicals use to interpret the Bible and then go on to observe the understanding or big picture this hermeneutic produces.

An Evangelical Hermeneutic

Since our understanding of the overall message of the Bible will shape and determine the nature of our ethic, we must give careful attention to the way we put this 'big picture' together. Putting the bits and pieces of the Bible together in many ways is like putting a jigsaw puzzle together.

The pieces of the jigsaw cannot be put together in any old fashion. Evangelicals believe that the Bible is the Word of God. Because it is the Word of God, there is an essential unity to the Bible. It is the story of one God working towards one ultimate goal and purpose. He may have immediate and intermediate goals and purposes along the way, but these all feed into his ultimate and final purpose. The Bible is God's message of how he has graciously acted in history to reverse the effects of sin and establish a new creation. Although human hands wrote the Bible, it was inspired or God-breathed. God was and is the author of the message. Moreover it is a living word. It is the message by which God continues to reverse the effects of sin and establish a new creation. When people read the Bible with an open heart, they engage themselves with the living God, not only as he has revealed himself in history but as he
is today. Evangelicals believe these things precisely because it is what they discover when they read the Bible.

Several hermeneutical principles follow from a commitment to the Bible as a unified message from God. The first is that the Bible has to be understood in its own terms. Statements in the Bible must be understood in the biblical context in which they are found and proper account must be taken of the Bible’s own structure. Let me illustrate these two points by use of analogy. Imagine someone receiving a ‘Dear John’ letter. (A ‘Dear John’ letter is a letter written by a person who wants to break off a romantic engagement.) Suppose that in this particular example a woman has written a letter that has two clear sections. In the first section she describes her affection for the man she had previously dated. She uses the word ‘love’ by which she refers to the emotional attachment she feels for him. In the second section she outlines the reasons why she does not want to have a permanent relationship with the man. The particular reasons mentioned are the facts that he cannot control either his money or his temper. She argues that this lack of self-control in these two areas would make any permanent relationship painful. Now if the recipient of the letter took the statement ‘I love you’ from the first section and concluded that this meant that the writer was anxious to share life with him on a permanent basis he would be taking the statement out of context. By ignoring the second section and isolating the statement from the context of the whole letter, he would attribute the wrong meaning to the statement and draw a wrong conclusion. In essence he would make the word ‘love’ mean more than it does in its original context.

Two factors help in locating the significance of a text. The first has to do with the type of literature and the second with the apprehension of the author’s intentions. These factors are usually linked together. There are many different types of literature or genre in the Bible. Within the Scriptures there is a rich variety of material including narrative, prose, poetry, legal documents, letters, gospels and so on. Various authors adopt different literary genre to suit their purposes. The selection of one genre rather than another often has to do with intention or purpose. One would not, for
example, use poetry to write a scientific report, or legal language to express feelings of love. Because the logic of each genre differs each piece of literature has to be understood in its own way. When the psalmist writes in Psalm 65:13 that the hills, meadows and valleys “shout and sing together for joy”, the language is not meant to be taken literally. In this section of the psalm, the writer is using poetry to paint the richness of the scene when God visits a land and blesses it. The remarkable abundance is such that it is as though the hills and valleys shout and sing for joy. The use of such metaphors enriches our understanding by providing the appropriate emotional colouring; a suitable response to God's exuberant graciousness. While the language of poetry is suitable in the Psalms it would be unsuitable for framing a legal agreement where clarity and precision was paramount. A legal agreement would require words to carry their plain and literal sense.

Understanding the Bible is a complex matter. Gaining an overall understanding of the Bible is a three-stage process. The process begins with the exegesis of the bits and pieces that go to make it up. Exegesis is not limited to the study of word-meanings. It includes the structure of sentences, paragraphs, chapters and the text as a whole. Each of these linguistic units only reveal their meaning when they are integrated in the appropriate way. The study of the way linguistic units are integrated is significant for a proper understanding. Grammar and syntax are vital to an understanding of the structure of the text at this stage.

The careful student will note that there was another exegetical factor embedded in the 'Dear John' illustration. Mention was made of the historical context. The woman writing the letter and the recipient had been involved in a romantic relationship. Knowledge of this historical background made the letter easier to understand. Indeed some of the details of the letter provided clues to the nature of the historical background. The fact that the woman gives reasons for not wanting a permanent relationship indicates that they did have a relationship. Cultural background is also exegetically relevant. Different cultures have different ways of expressing themselves. The parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18
may be a good example here. A man seizes his fellow slave by the throat. Given the culture this action may not signify that the man was trying to choke the fellow slave. In the prevailing culture it may have been a way of claiming a debt. Cultural elements will intrude into the exegetical process.

Beyond the exegetical phase comes biblical theology, the second step. This is the process by which the logical structure of the overall message is located. We will see later that the biblical revelation moves through a number of distinct phases. If we do not engage in doing biblical theology we might end up giving the wrong value and significance to the content of the various stages. For example, without understanding the progressive structure of the Bible we might conclude that Christians still have to offer animal sacrifices and worship at a temple in Jerusalem. Biblical theology is vital in the process of understanding the Bible as a whole and on its own terms.

Finally we reach the stage of systematic theology. This is the stage where particular bits and pieces from all over the Bible are collected together in a systematic way to form a more complete picture. If we did not go through the stages of exegesis and biblical theology before collecting the parts together, we run the risk of imposing our own understanding on the Bible. Without the two previous stages, bits and pieces of the Bible can be given the wrong significance and put together in an inappropriate way. Suppose, for example, we wish to have a fuller picture of the nature and character of God. If we neglect the first two stages of exegesis and biblical theology and move straight to the task of systematic theology, we can take bits and pieces about the nature and character of God and put them together in our own way. Without the controls of a biblical theology we might conclude that there were three Gods, or that there was one God who wore three different masks at different periods in salvation history. We would not be forced to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity, the belief that there is one God and three Persons, if we ignored the second stage of the process.

It needs to be recognized that understanding the Bible is an ongoing activity. The more we read it the better we understand it. This is because the three-stage process feeds back on itself. It is a
recursive process. As we build our systematic understanding through the process of exegesis and biblical theology we find that our systematic theology throws light on our exegesis and biblical theology. As we get to understand the various parts of the Bible through exegesis we discover that we see the significance of the parts better in the light of the emerging fuller picture. In the same way our better understanding of the parts enhances our understanding of biblical theology and this, in turn, again improves our understanding of the more integrated and comprehensive picture derived from systematic theology. Again the analogy of the jigsaw puzzle is helpful. The more bits we put together the better we can imagine what the whole picture will look like. The more we understand what the whole picture looks like the more we are able to see where the rest of the bits and pieces might go. Scholars liken this process of understanding to a spiral—the hermeneutical spiral. The idea is that a line representing our understanding moves both upward and inward as it curves back upon itself. As the line moves along it curves closer and closer to a full and correct understanding represented by the axis of the spiral. In the same manner the more familiar we become with the Bible using this three-staged process the better our understanding develops.

An evangelical hermeneutic, or evangelical way of understanding the Bible, is multi-levelled. This three-stage process of understanding the Bible presupposes (i) that the Bible is one unified message from God revealing his nature and his purposes and (ii) that his nature and his purposes are revealed in progressive stages. Some may argue that evangelicals are imposing these two key ideas on the Bible. However, our argument is that these presuppositions are not imposed on the Bible, but discovered in the plain reading of the text itself. They are adopted in an attempt to let God's word speak for itself. If God is going to speak he must be allowed to speak for himself.

The detailed exegetical work underlying the biblical and systematic theology found in this book will not be recorded. Space will not permit it. The reader must trust, to some degree, that it has been done adequately. But this trust can be augmented by some examination. One test of the adequacy of the underlying exegesis
will be the shape of the biblical and systematic theology presented. If these do not seem to fit the reading of the text then there will be room for challenge. But even if the exegesis is deemed to be inadequate the exercise of developing an ethic will not prove fruitless. The book will still provide the reader with a sound way of proceeding to develop an ethic from the Bible as a whole.

We have spent some time on the discussion of a biblical hermeneutic. The reason for this, you will remember, is that the hermeneutic determines the ethic. We must turn our attention now to the content of the big picture of the Bible emerging from the employment of our hermeneutic. This content will provide the shape of our ethic.
Developing a Biblical Theology

If the argument in the previous chapter is correct then we will need to focus on the second stage of our hermeneutic and discover the logical structure of the Bible as a whole before moving on to outline a systematic theology from the Bible. Many students of the Bible have noticed a basic structure to its overall message. A number of scholars have outlined this structure. (See Dumbrell, 1985; Hebert, 1950; Robinson, 1955; Goldsworthy, 1981 and 1991.) This structure becomes apparent if one focuses on the biblical themes of promise and fulfilment.

The themes of promise and fulfilment are set against the background of Genesis 1-11. The logic requiring the implementation of the process of promise and fulfilment is caught up in the movement from creation through the fall to a disordered and destructive world. God creates a paradise where humankind can walk and talk with him. To use Goldsworthy’s description, in the garden we see God’s people, under God’s rule, in God’s place. These three elements are the essence of the notion of the Kingdom of God. Despite the Creator’s gift of life in a setting where all humankind’s needs and desires are met in abundance, Adam and Eve violate God’s just order. The breach of this order in the context of the Creator/creature relationship can only be seen as an attack on the majesty of God and the rejection of his Lordship. Genesis 4-11 records the disorder and destruction that follows humankind’s disobedience. The thing that unites humankind in this period of his-
tory is its opposition to God (Genesis 11:1–9). Despite humankind's rejection of God's rightful majesty and his just order in creation, God immediately takes the initiative to restore things.

The attitude that rejects God's majesty and right to rule is called sin, and it leads to actions that are called sins. The story of God's activity in history to save people from the consequences of their sin, and reinstate his order and lordship, can be divided up into three basic stages. The first epoch runs from the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12) to the realization of this promise in the establishment of the historical Kingdom of Israel under Solomon. The second epoch commences with the decline of the Kingdom after Solomon and terminates at the end of the period of the prophets. The final period begins with the coming of Christ and concludes with the consummation of the age at his return.

The promise to Abraham that God would make him a great nation and bless him must, in the context, be understood to be an assurance of salvation. Moreover, this salvation would be extended to 'all the families of the earth'. The two great events of this first stage of salvation history are those of exodus/redemption and land/inheritance. The realization of the promise in history includes escape from bondage in a foreign land by way of the Passover, and the presence of God in the midst of his people through the instruments of covenant, law, tabernacle/temple, and priesthood. In a diminished way, the majesty of God is restored through the practice of worship, and God's just order is re-established through obedience to the Law. Many indicators are provided to show that this fulfilment of the promise can only be a foreshadowing of something greater to come. Unlike the situation in Eden, the sanctuary where God resides in the temple is veiled off from the people. The people continue to sin and sacrifices for sin need to be offered repeatedly. The archetypical rulers, David and Solomon, whom God has appointed through the symbolism of anointing, in the end, fail to obey God and keep his order. Like the rest of humanity they are slaves to sin.

The climatic significance of Solomon's reign has often been passed over or ignored. Without an awareness of the historical
fulfilment of the promise to Abraham in the reign of Solomon, the idea that the Kingdom of Israel is a foreshadowing of God's greater Kingdom will not seem feasible. It is important that the notion of historical fulfilment be secured at this point. Robinson (1997, p. 10) supplies three compelling reasons for accepting the climactic significance of Solomon's reign. The first of these reasons comes from 2 Samuel 7, where God reveals that through David's offspring the Kingdom will be established. The second comes from 1 Kings chapters 3 to 10, where Solomon and his Kingdom are described at length. Not only has the whole of the Promised Land been captured and occupied but God has also given peace to Israel in fulfilment of this promise (8:56). Moreover Solomon excels all the kings of the earth and the whole earth seeks "the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom" (10:24). Finally in a psalm 'Of Solomon', Psalm 72, the prayer is not only that "all nations serve him" (v. 11) but that all nations be blessed in him (v. 17). Clearly Solomon, in some way, fulfils the promises made to Abraham.

Because of Israel's failure to keep God's laws, the latter prophets project the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham into the future. They predict a new exodus, a new Passover, a new inheritance, a new David, a new temple. In this new era, there will be a new covenant and the people of God will have new hearts. The significance of this last point should not be lost. The heart in the Old Testament is the inner being where the emotions, will and mind are located. Through the integration of these various aspects of the heart people formulate intentions. Unlike the people of Israel who were slaves to rebellion (Romans 6:17), the new people of God will be committed to obeying God's rule and maintaining his just order. All this will happen on the coming 'Day of the Lord'.

The New Testament writers identify Jesus as the promised Lord—the one designated as the true king. He is "the son of David" (Matthew 21:15; 22:45), "our passover" (1 Corinthians 5:7), the one who "dwelt among us" (John 1:14), and he offers up his "blood of the covenant" for the sins of many (Mark 14:24).

However, this final epoch of salvation history does not arrive all at once. There is a tension between that which has arrived and that
which is still to come; a tension between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’. The manner of God’s rule being exercised over God’s people in God’s place has several facets. The nature of this tension is made apparent by Goldsworthy:

In his first coming he (Jesus) is revealed as the last Adam, the seed of Abraham, the faithful Israel, the son of David. In his resurrection he, as the covenant keeper, is justified and accepted into the eternal presence of the Father. This representative and substitutionary role of Jesus only touches others if the Kingdom somehow comes to them also. This happens with the coming of the exalted Christ in his word and by his Spirit. Those who are united to him by faith find that they now experience the Kingdom tension in themselves. They are in the Kingdom in their representative, but in themselves they are strangers and pilgrims in the world. The resolution of the tension is promised in the return of Jesus to consummate universally what is already a reality in him (1997, pp. 42–43).

According to the New Testament writers, the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus as the Christ secures the long-awaited redemption: the goal of God’s activity. In this way Christ establishes the rule of God and God brings people into his presence through Christ. The preaching of the events of Christ’s life and death is the evangel or gospel; the good news by which all peoples are called to enter into the Kingdom. The redemptive pattern of sacrifice, forgiveness and restoration found in the Old Testament foreshadows the pattern found in the gospel. Hence the true significance of the practice of animal sacrifice in Israel is only discovered in the light of the gospel. Since the basic theme of salvation history is the redemption secured by God for his people, the gospel becomes the hermeneutical key to the Bible.

Two things become apparent from this brief outline of God’s activity in the world. The first is the unifying theme of the notion of the Kingdom of God. The second point is that the nature and establishment of this Kingdom is revealed progressively. Although
the phrase 'the Kingdom of God' is not used frequently outside the Synoptic Gospels, the underlying elements of God's rule over God's people are to be found everywhere. The rejection of God's rule in Eden, and the consequent fracturing of his order in creation, are followed by a series of revelations concerning the re-establishment of his rule and the restoration of his order. At a basic level the stages of revelation could be reduced to four. This would include Eden, followed by the Fall and then the Kingdom foreshadowed by Israel and the Kingdom established in Christ. But our brief outline of salvation history would suggest that it is a little more complicated. Goldsworthy (1981) suggests six stages are necessary to cover the picture revealed in the Scriptures. These are:

1. The Kingdom Pattern Established EDEN
2. The Fall ADAM'S SIN
3. The Kingdom Promised ABRAHAM
4. The Kingdom Foreshadowed DAVID—SOLOMON
5. The Kingdom at Hand JESUS CHRIST
6. The Kingdom Consummated THE RETURN OF CHRIST

The inclusion of stage three is justified on the grounds that the promise to Abraham incorporates two levels of understanding. The first level is fulfilled under David and Solomon and the second under Christ. Stages 5 and 6 are warranted because of the 'now' but 'not yet' tension in the New Testament. Some aspects of the Kingdom are realized in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Other components await the new age that will come with his return.

The common themes that flow through each of these stages bind them together, and vindicate the presumption that the Bible is one unified message from God. Dumbrell (1985), for example, shows how the themes of Jerusalem, temple, covenant, Israel and creation are taken up and developed in the movement of God's revelation. These five themes find their final development and expression in the vision of the new heaven and new earth in the book of Revelation chapters 21-22. The message is that through the stages of salvation history God "is making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). In his study of these themes Dumbrell shows that "the entire
Bible is moving, growing according to a common purpose and towards a common goal" (1985, Introduction). The study of biblical theology is not only the study of major themes but also how various parts of the Bible relate to these themes.

The Claim of Biblical Theology

We need to be absolutely clear about what is being claimed on behalf of biblical theology. The claim is not that the stages of progressive revelation are found in each book of the Bible. The argument is that the pattern of progressive revelation is found in the Bible as a whole. The pattern established by the stages of revelation has to do with the logic of the story as a whole and not the logic of individual books or sections. Because of the unity of God's action and message the various parts of the Bible hang on the skeleton of the logic of the progressive stages. Some parts of the Bible refer to only one stage of revelation. Others cover several stages. Some books, like Romans, cover all the stages. Nevertheless the logic of each book or section fits into the logic of the story as a whole.

For the purpose of this book, we will modify Goldsworthy's six-stage schema. The reason for so doing is that the promises to Abraham (Genesis 12, 15) are very general and on most occasions provide no content in relation to ethics. They promise a great nation and a land but do not generally give us any understanding of and the nature of the moral order imposed. From this point of view the promises are not helpful for ethics on most occasions. By way of contrast Israel and its laws supply a great deal of information about the shape of God's moral requirements. I, therefore, propose to adopt the following five-stage schema in the rest of the book on most occasions. Where the promises to Abraham are relevant to the issue at hand I will drop back to using Goldsworthy's six-stage schema.

1. EDEN The Kingdom pattern established.
(God's people under God's rule in God's place.)
2. THE FALL The rejection of the Kingdom pattern.
(The rejection of God's majesty and order)
3. ISRAEL/LAW The Kingdom foreshadowed.
4. JESUS CHRIST The Kingdom at hand.
5. RETURN OF CHRIST The Kingdom consummated.

Developing a Systematic Theology

With a clear idea of the different stages of revelation and how they are related, we are in a position to systematically integrate relevant bits and pieces of the Bible without distorting their significance. We can collect together the material from each stage and see how it is related to the other stages. In this way we will give the right weight or significance to the material in each section. For example, we can put together Moses' instructions in relation to divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) and Malachi's word that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16) without accusing God of inconsistency. A law restraining a people who are slaves to sin (Romans 7:14) cannot be equated with God's ideal purpose. Moses' instruction regulates the behaviour of a hard-hearted (Matthew 19:8) and disobedient people. It does not provide an insight into the ideal.

An outline of the overall picture of the Bible is vital to a proper understanding of the Scriptures. The big picture provided by systematic theology will be a vital part of the process of understanding the Bible. We must leave the development of this outline to future chapters. For the moment the implications of this three-staged process must be considered.

The Implications for Theology and Ethics

Since God reveals himself and his purposes through progressive stages in history then biblical theology will be a necessary part of any hermeneutic. The implications for the study of theology are straightforward. We will not be able to take any part of Scripture and claim that it contains the message of the whole. It will not do, for example, to take the God who is revealed at creation and use this information to deny that God is Trinity. This is because later stages of revelation reveal that God is three Persons.
Given a biblical understanding of salvation history, the weight of the material in the historical foreshadowing by Israel cannot be given the same weight as the material on the fulfilment in Jesus. The theological significance given to animal sacrifice in the time of Israel, for instance, cannot be the same as the significance given to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Christians are not obligated to offer animal sacrifices on behalf of sin according to the New Testament. In fact, to continue to offer animal sacrifices after the death of Jesus would be to deny the efficacy of his sacrifice for sin.

Just as the theological material of the Scriptures has to be weighed according to the schema of salvation history, so the moral material unveiled at the various stages of revelation will have to be given its appropriate significance. The obligation to leave the gleanings of their fields, although morally binding on the people of Israel, may not have the same significance in the lives of Christians in the 21st century. If we are going to understand the moral material in the Bible correctly we will have to take into account the structure of the biblical message.

The task of this book is to provide a biblical account of ethics. That is, the purpose of this book is to build an understanding of morality on the basis of God's revelation of himself and his purposes. In the end, our ethic or account of morality will be built upon systematic theology. But if our systematic theology is to be consistent with God's revelation it will have to be a systematic theology arrived at through an understanding of biblical theology. Unfortunately, many books on Christian ethics develop a theology without giving heed to the inherent progressive structure of God's word. By ignoring biblical theology these books invalidate their foundations. The hope is that the approach taken in this book will correct this tendency.

**An Evangelical Hermeneutic**

We are now in a position to understand what we mean by an evangelical hermeneutic. An evangelical hermeneutic is a biblical hermeneutic, a way of interpreting the Bible. The way is defined in
terms of presuppositions, principles and rules. These presuppositions, principles and rules come from the three levels of the process of understanding outlined above. The second level of the process establishes the nature of God’s revelation as progressive revelation. Israel under the Law foreshadows a reality yet to come. The pattern of salvation is the same in each stage of history. Salvation is by grace through faith. The actual mechanism of atonement varies. Animal sacrifice is replaced by the death of God’s Son.

The essence of an evangelical hermeneutic of the Bible is that it makes the gospel the key to a right interpretation and understanding. The gospel is the proclamation that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ. This was the message preached beforehand to Abraham. It was foreordained before creation that Christ would be the saviour of the world and that he would suffer for the sins of others. The grace of God finds its ultimate expression in the death of Christ, and salvation is through faith in him and his work of atonement. The use of the gospel as the key to understand the Bible is the defining characteristic of an evangelical hermeneutic and the distinctive attribute that marks it off from other ways of interpreting the Bible. The great virtue of an evangelical approach is that it allows the word of God to speak for itself. It does not allow the readers to rearrange the message of the Bible to suit themselves.
Let us continue to develop the analogy between understanding the Bible and putting a jigsaw puzzle together. After we have put the jigsaw together we can stand back and look at the big picture. From a distance, the overall shape of things will capture our attention. The bigger shapes will dominate the scene. Close up, the details will display themselves. So it is with the Bible. Imagine that we have understood all the bits and pieces of the Bible and have been able to put them together in the right way using our three stage hermeneutic. From a distance, as it were, the stages of salvation history will dominate. Close up the details will be clearly revealed. Both overall shape and details are necessary parts of the big picture. We cannot build an ethic on the mere skeleton of salvation history. We need to include the details to fill out the account. We need to construct our ethic from a fuller understanding of the Bible.

If this book were an exercise in systematic theology and not ethics, I might attempt to provide an extensive understanding of the Bible. Undoubtedly this would take many volumes. Moreover, the number of volumes would be greatly extended if I attempted to justify my understanding and not just recount it. I shall not endeavour to make explicit a full understanding of the Bible (if that were possible) as attempts at recounting the fuller picture as well as justifying it would take us away from our purpose. I shall merely recount and draw on such aspects of the big picture that are relevant to developing an ethic.

In my judgment, the material relevant to developing an ethic occurs at three different levels in the Bible. These are the levels of
creation order, personal relationships, and the Kingdom of God. We shall deal with each of these aspects in turn.

**Creation Order**

In this book, I will argue that the original creation with its revealed goals or purposes provides us with the basis for determining what is morally good. Creation witnesses a plethora of individual things come into existence, which are not found swimming in a sea of chaotic disorder. The creation accounts emphasize the fact that there is an intelligible arrangement to creation. The phrase ‘according to its kind’ is repeated some nine times to highlight the fact that many of the created entities have certain properties in common. Among the kinds mentioned in Genesis are plants yielding seeds, fruit trees, birds and sea creatures. There is a common nature found among things of the same kind. Birds share common properties such as beaks and wings. Sea creatures share characteristics that enable them to inhabit the sea. It is these common characteristics or similarities that enable individual things to be grouped together into kinds. Philosophers refer to this arrangement, according to similarity, as ‘generic order’.

There is, however, another kind of ordering that is evident in the creation accounts. The various kinds of things are subsequently arranged according to *purpose*. For example, mankind is given every plant yielding seed, and every tree with seed in its fruit, for food. The birds and the beasts and the creeping things are given every green plant for food. It is clear that the purpose of plants and fruit is to serve as food for other creatures. Moreover, mankind is given an overall goal or purpose. Humans are to have dominion over the earth. In the context of Genesis there is no doubt that this includes multiplying in number and keeping the order which God has given to creation. Dumbrell (1988, p. 20) reminds us that the word ‘dominion’ in the Bible means ‘protecting the relationship for which one is responsible; it is to serve others and to seek their good’. Philosophers refer to this purposive order or arrangement as ‘telic order’ because it involves being ordered towards a goal or telos.
No complete account of the generic and telic ordering of creation is supplied in Genesis. Nevertheless the meagre account presented achieves its purpose. It creates the overwhelming impression that creation is ordered according to God’s plan. God gives everything a nature, and this nature is in accordance with his purposes. Put another way, a thing’s design is governed by God’s purpose and his purpose becomes its goal. The relationship between nature and purpose, or, generic and telic order, is an intrinsic one. The goal governs the nature of the design. The goal is, in a sense, included in the design. God created kinds with certain purposes in mind. By the very act of creation these purposes were built into the nature of things. Things can be used for purposes that were not intended, but the nature or design of those things limits the range of uses. A stone cannot be food for humans and a tree cannot fly like a bird. Their design or nature will not allow this. The examples found in the creation accounts will illustrate the point.

Human beings are given a number of goals. One is to be fruitful and multiply. Another is to fill the earth and subdue it. In order to achieve this second goal, humans are given dominion over every living thing. In relation to the first goal humankind was separated into two sub-kinds: male and female. The different sexual natures given to these two sub-kinds were in accordance with God’s purpose that individual males should be united with individual females to become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). Out of this unity would come the issue of children. According to Paul, the rejection of God’s authority and the consequent violation of God’s order (Romans 1:18) is clearly illustrated when women exchange natural intercourse with men for intercourse with others of the same kind and when men commit sexual acts with men (Romans 1:26-27). The different natures of male and female are such that they are designed to meet God’s primary purpose for unity. Sexual intercourse between a man and a woman binds them together psychologically. From this unity comes the possibility of reproduction. Human sexuality may be used in ways that God did not intend. Homosexual intercourse, on the evidence available, does not seem able to secure the unity of
marriage. Nor is it capable of leading to reproduction. It, therefore, fails to achieve God's purposes.

In relation to the purpose of subduing the earth, God provides humanity with a suitable nature. In the course of our examination of ethics we will see that a doctrine of human nature, or anthropology, is central to ethics. Every ethic is based on some understanding of human nature. The biblical writers use a variety of notions to describe human nature (see Cooper, 1989, chapters 2–6). Basically, the biblical writers recognize that humanity may be described from two different but complementary aspects. Humankind has an outer and an inner nature. The outer nature is the body. The actions of the body can be observed by others. The inner nature is referred to in three basic ways, which highlight various aspects of the inner being. They cannot be construed as parts.

The three basic aspects of the inner being are the soul, the spirit and the heart. The soul refers to the inner self. Humans are conscious of the self. The spirit designates the internal force that enlivens the soul and gives it direction. The heart identifies the integrated components of the mind, the emotions and the will, which enable people to think, feel, and choose. The integrated activity of the heart formulates intentions and intentions lead to actions when opportunity presents itself. Thus while the inner being cannot be observed, some clues as to its nature can be inferred from the actions of the body. Only God sees the true and comprehensive state of the inner being.

The fact that the mind can be aware of creation, and reflect upon it, provides people with the capacity to understand God's order and purposes. The emotions or affections locate things of value, and people become attached to them. The will provides the opportunity of choice, such that people can choose to do the right or wrong thing. In this way, human nature is appropriate to the goal of subduing the earth. Humans have the capacity to understand God's commands and ways. They can attach themselves to the purposes of God, and choose to obey him, or they can set their affections on other things and rebel against him.

There is yet another purpose that God had planned.
Genesis 3:8 indicates that it was part of God's purpose that human beings should share a friendship with him. Appropriately, they have the capacity to walk and talk with him in the garden. This capacity for a personal relationship with God is unique amongst the creation. Being personal and relational beings makes humans like God, in one sense. God, being a Trinity, is personal and relational, and so it is no surprise that humans are also personal and relational. Using their minds, humans can understand God's character and purposes. Through the operation of the affections and the employment of the will they can respond in trust toward God. This human capacity for personal relationships opens up the possibility of friendship with God. If human beings had a different nature or design, the goal of friendship might not be possible.

Nature and purpose are logically related. The fact that human nature has the capacity to think, feel, and choose means that humans can understand God's plan and choose to follow it. Nature allows a thing to achieve its purpose. But the design supplied also limits what can be achieved. For example, a stone cannot have unity through sex as its goal. The nature of a stone limits the purposes it may be used for. Just as nature limits the possible goals so the purpose given by God shapes the nature of a thing. But this shaping still allows a range of possible goals. For example, people can use their sexuality in a number of ways. Bestiality, homosexuality, promiscuity, adultery, and rape are all options for those who have inherited a human nature. But God's purpose, which ought to be humanity's goal, is that individual males and females, when they give expression to their sexuality, might give themselves to each other in service and find the unity of marriage. Clearly the capacity given to individuals by nature does not necessitate that only one goal can be reached. Nature is not totally determinative. A person may choose to be single and celibate. However when a person does not act in accordance with their nature, damage of some sort follows. There is a price to be paid for not keeping nature and purpose synchronized. The principle that misuse leads to damage is embedded right across the created order. It is a principle that follows logically from the idea that everything has a nature.
Given the creation account's emphasis on nature and purpose, the theology of the Bible would seem to give partial support to the doctrine of Natural Law discussed in Chapter Two. You will remember that the doctrine of Natural Law contained three basic claims. The Bible seems to support two of these claims and deny the third. The first claim was that things, especially persons, have a purposiveness that is part of their very being. The third claim was that the purposiveness revealed in reality sets the standard for the moral life. The goals that God has built into the various kinds of things that he has created determine what is morally good for these things. The second claim was that the purposive nature of reality could be discovered by an intelligent examination of the world. The biblical writers reject this second assertion of Natural Law (e.g. Romans 1:21; 12:2). Romans 2:12–16 suggests that people can understand only bits and pieces of the picture of reality. They can know that fidelity in marriage is good and lying is wrong, but they cannot understand God's plans and purposes in an integrated and holistic way. To do this they require a revelation from God.

The evidence that natural teleology is deeply embedded in the biblical narrative goes on beyond the creation accounts. It is found in all the stages of biblical revelation. After the rebellion of humankind against the rule of God, people were not able to locate their true purpose. A gap appeared between generic and telic order. Nature was separated off from its true purpose. Creation experiences the futility of not being able to secure its proper goals (Romans 8:20). However all was not lost. God put a plan into action whereby nature and purpose would be united again. This was a plan that God had had before the creation of the world. The historical sequence of events that led to the achievement of this goal takes us into the area of historical teleology or eschatology.

It must be noticed that natural teleology determines one of the major ways we use the word 'good'. The good for any kind of thing is found in its God-given purpose or purposes. Sticking to the example we have been using, the good of human sexuality is found in marriage. We will call the use of the word 'good' in such cases objective. This is because this use is based on the objective nature
of the kind of thing in view. There are other uses of the word ‘good’ that are subjective. I might want to buy an old dilapidated car to participate in a demolition derby. I find a big old car with little miles left in it and no comforts and I say, ‘This is good’. By this statement I mean that the car suits my purpose. The ‘goodness’ is tied to my purpose, and not to the nature of cars. In the study of ethics it is important not to confuse the objective use of ‘good’ with its subjective use.

God’s plan for creation has a complicated design. Various things are arranged according to various purposes. It appears that the multiple and various purposes found in the created order fit together. There is to be harmony in creation. All the bits and pieces are to fit together in the right way. The Bible labels this harmony as peace. This is the way things were in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve sinned. The order untouched by sin provides the ideal for fallen humanity in the rest of the Bible.

The important point being made in the creation accounts is that there is an order to creation. The creation accounts are not concerned to provide a detailed account of the shape of creation, but they do demonstrate an objective order of creation. This is important because it is the basis on which all moral values will be founded. The fact that we don’t have a revelation of the complete order in the creation accounts is significant, but not overwhelmingly so. We will discover the basic shape of this order by an examination of the rest of the Scriptures.

The Fall

The creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 are followed by a passage that describes the Fall (Genesis 3) and its consequences (Genesis 4–11). The Fall takes us from the state of harmony of Eden in Genesis 1–2 to the state of disorder and death in Genesis 4–11. How did one tiny event have such catastrophic consequences? In Romans 1:18 Paul uses two Greek words to summarize the event. The English equivalents of these two words are ‘godlessness’ and ‘wickedness’. ‘Godlessness’ refers to a rejection of the majesty of