

A CRITICAL STUDY OF NORMAN L GEISLER'S
ETHICAL HIERARCHICALISM

by

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PROMOTER: PROF L D HULLEY

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SUMMARY

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SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

Problem

At least from the time of Augustine, Christians have been reflecting on the question of moral conflicts. Since the mid-1960s this issue has become the center of attention for several scholars, including Norman L. Geisler, who developed ethical hierarchicalism in an attempt to resolve these conflicts. The question therefore arises: Is ethical hierarchicalism comprehensive, consistent, and biblically sound, and the only viable approach for Christians, as Geisler claims? Because Geisler is the most articulate and influential proponent of this strategy, his ethical method was selected for this research.

Method

To provide some framework, a brief survey was made of various methods relating to ethical dilemmas. In addition to observing the contrasting ways in which eminent early Christians, Reformation leaders, post-Reformation thinkers, and twentieth-century scholars have dealt with moral conflicts, this overview examined utilitarianism, situationism, non-conflicting absolutism, conflicting absolutism, hierarchicalism and the principle of double effect. Additional background traced Geisler's

philosophical, theological, and ethical development over the years.

Then, after outlining what Geisler considers the fundamental presuppositions of theistic morality and Christian ethics, hierarchicalism was delineated. Next, Geisler's moral methodology was critiqued, firstly against his own basic presuppositions, then by comparing contradictory concepts within hierarchicalism, and finally by contrasting his theories with those of other Christian thinkers, and with the biblical passages that Geisler uses. Following this, positive aspects of hierarchicalism were enumerated, a synopsis and recommendations made, and a final conclusion drafted.

Results

This study indicates that ethical hierarchicalism contradicts most of the essential characteristics of theistic morality and Christian ethics as specified by Geisler himself. Careful research suggests that, while this theory holds to divinely-derived objective moral norms, it also embraces relativistic, utilitarian, situational, antinomian, and teleological components. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that hierarchicalism is based on falsely assumed responsibilities, inaccurately specified absolutes, naturalistic definitions, a descriptive approach to Scripture, a bifurcation in God's law, and subtle semantic strategies.

Conclusion

Though hierarchicalism does grapple with difficult issues, emphasize personhood and individual responsibility, and offer relief from false guilt, this method of moral reasoning appears unacceptable for Christians since it is incoherent, inconsistent, self-contradictory, and unscriptural.

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CHAPTER I

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In his important volume on the foundations of ethics, Helmut Thielicke notes that theological ethics usually makes the mistake of using the "normal cases" as its standard for measuring reality. The result is the illusion that problems are solved. The reality is that, as in medicine, problems do not arise with the ordinary cases, but rather with the borderline, abnormal cases.¹ Thus Thielicke posits that "the real test, even in respect of foundational principles, is whether an ethics has been proved in the crucible of the borderline situation and emerged with even deeper insights."²

This concept of testing the validity of an ethical approach by means of a borderline situation is not to be confused with the attempt to actually construct an ethical

¹Helmut Thielicke, Theological Ethics, vol. 1, Foundations, ed. William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 578. Frankena concurs, stating that "most moral problems arise in situations where there is a 'conflict of duties,' that is, where one moral principle pulls one way and another pulls the other way;" William K. Frankena, Ethics, 2d ed., Foundations of Philosophy Series (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 3.

²Thielicke, 1:578.

methodology upon exceptional cases. John Macquarrie rightly posits that "an ethic cannot be built on exceptions. Indeed hard cases can be recognized only because there is already a tacit acceptance of norms."¹ While it is true that a framework of ethics should not be structured on unusual cases,² Richard Purtill is right in his assessment that the failure of an ethical theory to resolve dilemmas indicates that the theory is unsatisfactory as an ethical approach.³

In other words, though the practice of constructing an ethical method on moral conflicts⁴ should be avoided, it is not only reasonable but also imperative to keep these dilemmas in mind when attempting to formulate an acceptable method of doing ethics.⁵ For it is in conflict situations

¹John Macquarrie, Three Issues in Ethics (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), 39-40.

²Erwin W. Lutzer, The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes, Christian Free University Curriculum Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 88.

³Richard L. Purtill, ed., Moral Dilemmas: Readings in Ethics and Social Philosophy (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1985), 2.

⁴In this doctoral thesis the term "moral conflicts" is used interchangeably with other terms such as borderline situations, conflicting moral obligations, ethical dilemmas, etc. Just as in the writings of Norman L. Geisler this research project makes no distinction between the words "ethical" and "moral."

⁵Admittedly, some argue against the concept of the necessity of consistency in ethics, (see, for example, Richard H. Bube, "Of Dominoes, Slippery Slopes, Thin Edges of Wedges, and Camels' Noses in Tents: Pitfalls in Christian Ethical Consistency," Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 42 [September 1990]: 162-172). These arguments, however, will not be considered here, since Geisler's

that one can best ascertain the workability of any ethical approach.¹ As Thieliicke concludes: "The borderline situation is thus an instructive example in terms of which to study the fact of the fallen world and to put the problem of ethics in its sharpest form."²

As part of an attempt to investigate the issue of moral conflicts, this chapter of general introduction provides the framework and background necessary for investigating this matter. First, the widespread concern of ethicists, theologians, and philosophers is noted so as to briefly indicate the extent of interest in this topic. Next, the relevance of Norman L. Geisler in the current discussion on ethical dilemmas is addressed in order to demonstrate why his work has been selected as the focus of this research project. Following this, the purpose and method used in this study are outlined. A brief section on the limitations of this research then closes this chapter.

Concern for an Adequate Christian Ethic

For several decades now an extensive discussion about moral conflicts has developed in the moral theological

position is one that argues for and assumes the necessity of consistency in ethics. See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 22, 23, 130.

¹Robert V. Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," Criswell Theological Review 2 (Spring 1988): 240-241.

²Thieliicke, 1:582.

literature.¹ This phenomenon has given rise to a great deal of debate in moral theory. However, this topic is not merely a modern concern. At least as far back as Augustine, thinking Christians have been deliberating over the issue of moral conflicts. As an example of a borderline situation, Augustine once discussed what to do if "a man should seek shelter with thee who by thy lie may be saved from death."²

Over two centuries ago William Paley, the noted Anglican priest and celebrated moralist, addressed these kinds of conflicts in an influential book on moral philosophy.³ Perhaps more than any other, it was the writings of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, that brought this concept of the moral dilemma to prominence. In

¹This point is made by Anthony J. Blasi, Moral Conflict and Christian Religion, American University Studies Series VII, Theology and Religion, vol. 35 (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1988), 9. Note also the extensive listing in the bibliography of works dealing with moral conflicts.

²Augustine On Lying 1.9. Blasi (p. 2) says that the principle of the lesser evil was formulated by Gregory the Great, who held that if there were no opportunity to avoid one of two sins, the lesser should always be chosen.

³Paley says it is not a lie to "tell a falsehood to a madman, for his own advantage; to a robber to conceal your property; to an assassin, to defeat or to divert him from his purpose;" William Paley, The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy, 9th ed. (Boston, MA: West and Richardson, 1818), 113-114. About a century after the first edition of Paley's book, the president of Yale College published a book on morality in which he too discussed borderline situations; see Noah Porter, The Elements of Moral Science: Theoretical and Practical (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885).

his classic work, Fear and Trembling,¹ Kierkegaard discussed the story of Genesis 22 in which God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. In brief, Kierkegaard concluded that there are times when the normal canons of morality may be set aside in order to obey the Divine will.

Clearly, Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical"² has not been seen by several Christian thinkers as the final answer to ethical dilemmas. This can be observed from the fact that over the years many others, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer,³ Karl Barth,⁴ Emil Brunner,⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr,⁶ and Paul Ramsey⁷ have continued to address the issue.

¹Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans. Alastair Hannay (London, England: Penguin Books, 1985).

²Ibid., 95.

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, trans. Neville Horton Smith, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1955), 363-371.

⁴See, for example, Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. III, part 4, The Doctrine of Creation, trans. A. T. Mackay, T. H. L. Parker, Harold Knight, Henry A. Kennedy, and John Marks, ed. G. W. Bromiley, and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 324-564.

⁵See, for example, Emil Brunner, The Divine Imperative, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1947), 222-224.

⁶See, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), 257-277.

⁷See, for example, Paul Ramsey, "The Case of the Curious Exception," in Norm and Context in Christian Ethics, ed. Gene H. Outka and Paul Ramsey (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 67-135.

Since the mid-1960s this problem of conflicting ethical norms has become a focus of attention for many Christian ethicists and theologians. A spate of books specifically devoted to this topic attests to this fact.¹ Joseph Fletcher in his popular book, Situation Ethics: The New Morality, posited that there are only three approaches to making moral decisions: the legalistic, the antinomian, and the situational. He opted for the third approach, which holds that everyone must decide according to the circumstances what is the most loving thing to do.²

Following the publication of this book of Fletcher's, there was a flurry of activity on the part of Christians, especially evangelicals.³ Most of their

¹See the bibliography for an extensive listing of works dealing with moral conflicts, but note especially: Joseph L. Allen, Love & Conflict: A Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984); Michael James Almeida, "The Impossibility of Moral Conflicts" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1988); Richard Higginson, Dilemmas: A Christian Approach to Moral Decision Making (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1988); Terrance C. McConnell, "Moral Dilemmas and Ethical Consistency" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1975); Richard A. McCormick, and Paul Ramsey, eds., Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

²Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics: The New Morality (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1966), 17-39.

³See, for example, John C. Bennett, et al, Storm over Ethics (Philadelphia, PA: United Church Press, 1967); Harvey Cox, ed., The Situation Ethics Debate (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1968); O. Sydney Barr, The Christian New Morality: A Biblical Study of Situation Ethics (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1969); Erwin W. Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972); Gordon Kainer,

concern revolved around the refutation of the theory of situation ethics.

Among those who read Fletcher's book was a young evangelical pastor, Norman L. Geisler. Already Geisler had been reflecting on the various logical alternative ways of dealing with ethics in the contemporary Christian world. However, it was on reading Situation Ethics: The New Morality that, as Geisler puts it, "I was awakened from my dogmatic slumbers."¹ The kinds of situations raised in this book confirmed Geisler in his understanding that real moral conflicts occur in this world.² Then he looked at the biblical illustrations and concluded that "there are a lot of real conflicts right in the Bible."³

Geisler maintains that the existence of moral conflicts in the real world, and its occurrence in the Bible stories are the two most significant factors that went into his thinking in the formulating of his method of ethical

Faith, Hope and Clarity: A Look at Situation Ethics and Biblical Ethics (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1977).

¹Norman L. Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic," cassette (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Productions, 1989). Geisler was here quoting Immanuel Kant who reacted this way on reading David Hume.

²Since it is not the primary focus of this research project to determine whether genuine moral conflicts exist or not, this study will proceed, through the first four chapters, on the premise that real moral conflicts do occur in this world, as Geisler posits.

³Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

hierarchicalism¹ (also known as graded absolutism, or the greater good ethic). In essence, he used the "borderline situation" as a catalyst to develop and test his proposed method of moral decision making.²

Geisler's Relevance in the Current Debate

The clearest, most forceful statement of ethical hierarchicalism can be found in the writings of the Christian ethicist Norman Geisler.³ His material on ethics is considered to be the most systematic, logical, coherent and comprehensive elaboration currently available on the perspective of a hierarchical approach to ethics.⁴

¹Ibid.

²Admittedly, the one who believes in the existence of borderline situations can only do so from the background of an already assumed basic approach to philosophy, theology, and ethics. These basic presuppositions, as held by Geisler, will be considered in this project only as they relate to his method of dealing with conflicting moral obligations.

³Rakestraw ("Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 246) concurs with this fact by stating that Geisler's Ethics: Alternatives and Issues "contains the most significant case for hierarchicalism in recent years." In agreement, Luck says that Geisler is the "major exponent" of hierarchicalism; see William F. Luck, "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics: A Second Look at the Salvaging Operations," Grace Theological Journal 8 (Spring 1987): 20.

⁴Olson supports this by saying that "Geisler has shown a clarity of thought and expression, and a breadth of knowledge which dwarfs earlier works;" see C. Gordon Olson, "Norman Geisler's Hierarchical Ethics Revisited," Evangelical Journal 4 (Spring 1986): 4.

Admittedly some contemporary ethicists dismiss the kind of schematization that Geisler has been involved in as a misplaced emphasis. They contend that the focus of attention should be character, or virtue, or narrative.¹ Stanley Hauerwas holds that "arguments for the 'greater good' or 'lesser evil' are too abstract."² Nevertheless, these ethicists too must deal with the less than ideal borderline situations.

Geisler maintains that hierarchicalism is the most realistic, consistent, and biblically viable method of ethics.³ He considers all other ethical approaches as inadequate or unsound for a Christian,⁴ and posits that

¹See Higginson, 113-124, where he mentions but disagrees with these views.

²Stanley Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 128. This emphasis on "virtue ethics" has been perceptively critiqued by Lucinda J. Peach, "The Relationship Between Virtue and Law: A Response to the Critics of Contemporary Morality," 1990, TMs [photocopy], a paper presented at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting, New Orleans, LA. She concludes: "What is needed in contemporary ethics is not an approach founded on character and narrative like that proposed by MacIntyre and Hauerwas. Ethics requires methods for resolving practical moral problems, which require decision and action, not merely a virtuous character in a narrative context;" 14.

³In his master's thesis Pack says: "It is clear that Norman Geisler believes that hierarchicalism is the only true ethical system;" Rolland W. Pack, "An Examination of Norman L. Geisler's Ethic of Hierarchy" (M.A. thesis, Harding College, 1979), 151.

⁴See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 137; Norman L. Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book

ethical hierarchicalism "seems to be the only viable option."¹

His major works on ethics contain both an explication and an evaluation of other approaches as well as an extensive outline of his own theory. Thus, ethical hierarchicalism can be understood in contrast to competing views, and as a complete method on its own.

Geisler's earliest view on ethical approaches is clearly outlined in his Ethics: Alternatives and Issues,² first published in 1971. This volume addresses itself primarily to the problem of ethical norms and their justification. Early in the discussion Geisler opts for "norms" rather than "ends," and considers in turn the manner in which a normative ethic has been treated in recent times. He explicates six approaches: antinomianism, generalism, situationism, non-conflicting absolutism, ideal absolutism,

House, 1981), 8, 64-101. Pack (p. 151) says Geisler "believes that anyone accepting God's revealed ethics must espouse the ethic of hierarchy. Consequently, his exploration and defense of hierarchicalism is momentous." In respect of moral values, Geisler himself maintains that "the Bible provides an objectively knowable referent point for discovering the will of the immutably loving and just God;" Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 34. Apparently, the reason that not everyone agrees on these moral absolutes is due to the fact that the Bible "can be misunderstood, misapplied, and even twisted;" *ibid.*

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 101.

²Admittedly Geisler had been previously producing articles on ethics, but this was his first published statement on the theory of ethical hierarchicalism.

and hierarchicalism. Building upon his conclusion derived from the discussion of Part I of the book--that the Christian ethical stance is best understood in terms of "the hierarchical arrangement of the many relationships of love,"¹ Geisler seeks to suggest the appropriate attitudes of the Christian toward war, sex, ecology, and other social and personal issues.

Just two years after the publication of his first text on ethics, Geisler produced a more popularized version of his ethical method. Called The Christian Ethic of Love,² this book was obviously an attempt to promote his views among Christians in general. The first half of this volume provides a strong biblical basis for a clearly defined "love" to be the norm for a Christian ethic. Then, after a chapter dealing with other methods, Geisler outlines his views together with practical examples of his ethic in real life situations.

A third book, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, was produced in 1981. While some of the material of this volume is clearly similar to earlier works,³ this book

¹Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 137.

²Norman L. Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973).

³For example, compare his discussion of unqualified (non-conflicting) absolutism, conflicting (ideal) absolutism, and graded absolutism (hierarchicalism) in Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 79-136; with Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 43-101.

was written specifically with the evangelical Christian in mind. It is thus an attempt to offer an adequate, systematic, comprehensive and consistent ethical framework for evangelicals. In addition to much biblical support for his position, Geisler discusses the implications for theology, psychology, society and politics, ethics, and biblical inspiration that arise from maintaining the view of ethical hierarchicalism.

Then in 1989 Geisler produced a totally new work, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues. While in some ways there is an obvious continuity with previous works, the structure, content, and much of the thought in this volume are new.¹ This work contains changes in approach to certain topics, an updating of material, a discussion of emerging new issues, and even a shift of viewpoint from earlier works.² In brief, this book is an attempt to contribute to a clearer understanding of the ethical problems facing Christians today.³

The very next year, at the end of 1990, a fifth volume on ethics, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 13.

²See, for instance, his move to a stronger prolife position concerning abortion; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 135-155.

³Ibid., 13, 14.

Our Time,¹ came off the press. This book, which Geisler coauthored with J. P. Moreland, is aimed at reaching secular university students. In order to accomplish this, the authors avoided the use of the Bible in establishing the basis for their ethical approach, but used instead natural law and general revelation.² Although this work deals primarily with ethical issues, the approach of ethical hierarchicalism is promoted both in the first and last chapters as well as throughout the issues dealt with in the book.

While these five books stand out as the major focus of his elaboration of hierarchicalism Geisler has produced many other articles, tapes and books which disclose, develop and defend his ethical approach. For instance, in the taped lecture, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic," Geisler elaborates on "some of the factors that went into my thinking as I developed hierarchical ethics."³

¹J. P. Moreland, and Norman L. Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time (New York, NY: Praeger, 1990).

²In addition, they specifically chose to have the book published by a secular press, instead of by a Christian publishing company.

³In addition to this and other audio cassettes, notice the following examples of works in which Geisler discusses ethical hierarchicalism: Norman L. Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," Bibliotheca Sacra 131 (July-September 1974): 219-228; Norman L. Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 1977, TMs [photocopy], Center for Research and Scholarship, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA; Norman L. Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society 2 (1979): 1-7; Norman L.

Over the years several favorable reviews of some of these books have been published. For example, Harold Kuhn considered Ethics: Alternatives and Issues to be a valuable contribution to evangelical literature.¹ He believed that Geisler had "used scriptural texts carefully, with a due regard for the rightness of God's creation, and for the dignity of personhood."² While Joseph Wang felt that Geisler had done well in analyzing difficult problems,³ reviewer Louis Goldberg similarly noted that "he has treated in a viable manner issues on which non-Christians have so long had the last word."⁴

Geisler, and Paul D. Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 413-427; Norman L. Geisler, and Ronald M. Brooks, When Skeptics Ask (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 273-289; Francis J. Beckwith, and Norman L. Geisler, Matters of Life and Death: Calm Answers to Tough Questions about Abortion and Euthanasia (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 77-79, 156-157.

¹Harold B. Kuhn, review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 16 (Spring 1973): 96.

²Ibid., 95.

³Joseph S. Wang, review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Asbury Seminarian 26 (July 1972): 44.

⁴Louis Goldberg, review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Moody 73 (September 1972): 59. For further positive reviews, see Michael P. Andrus, review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Calvary Review (Summer 1973); James M. Grier, review of Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Grace Theological Journal 10 (Fall 1989): 257-258; Carl Gearhart, review of Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Reformed Review 44 (Winter 1990): 155-156; H. Wayne House, review of Christian Ethics:

Besides the evidence seen in the positive book reviews, Norman Geisler's relevance in the current debate concerning ethical approaches can be observed by the manner in which his ethical hierarchicalism is being seriously challenged by several Christians. For instance, in his mixed review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, Michael Andrus charges Geisler with failing to demonstrate from Scripture "not that there is a hierarchy of values, but exactly what that hierarchy is and how it can serve as a basis for moral judgment."¹ Cyril Barber, in an earlier edition of The Minister's Library, lumps Geisler with situationists Joseph Fletcher and John Robinson, and accuses Geisler of trying to make situation ethics acceptable to evangelicals by merely changing the terminology. Barber says: "Some of his conclusions are certain to be rejected by evangelicals."² A former colleague of Geisler's, John

Options and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Themelios 17 (October-November 1991): 33.

¹Andrus, review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues.

²Cyril J. Barber, The Minister's Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 233-234. Note that Barber's disagreement with Geisler's ethical approach is so strong that only in this case does he make such negative statements about a book on "Moral Theology," thus departing from his normal brief and even-handed annotations. This critical position surfaces again when he praises Erwin Lutzer's The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics for rejecting hierarchicalism and offering instead a biblical discussion of morality (ibid., 233). Interestingly, Barber's 1985 edition of The Minister's Library, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1985), 287, contains a significantly reworded and less critical annotation on Geisler's book.

Warwick Montgomery, rejects hierarchicalism on the grounds that it stands outside the grand tradition of the Protestant Reformers.¹

Commenting on Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, ethicist David Gill states that Geisler's ethical approach falls short of satisfying the three criteria that Geisler himself affirms, i.e., biblical, comprehensive, and consistent.² Gill notes further that prayer and the Holy Spirit are absent from Geisler's ethics, while his work shows a strong emphasis on rationalism and casuistry.³ He adds that "Geisler's dilemmas are often false dilemmas arising from his imposition of worldly definitions of truth on the Bible."⁴ Thus Gill concludes that Geisler's theory will not do for evangelicals who desire an ethical framework that grows out of the Scriptures.⁵ Similar to Gill's critique, Guy Greenfield, in reviewing Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, notes that Geisler's rationalistic

¹See the back page of Lutzer's The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics.

²David W. Gill, review of Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, by Norman L. Geisler, in Transformation 1 (October-December 1984): 28.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

approach is "devoid of the Holy Spirit and a community of faith."¹

Voicing a different concern, Allan Bevere observes that Geisler's stance "allows him to neglect such crucial subjects as character, virtue, and most importantly sanctification."² In addition to these book reviews, various critiques of Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism have been done. Rolland Pack's 1979 master's thesis set out to evaluate the arguments for hierarchicalism as well as some of the position's definitions, similarities to other views, and consequences. Pack, contending that the substructure of hierarchicalism is faulty, concludes that "at the point of ethical embarkation, hierarchy may seem appealing, but as the voyage is extended the danger of imprecision and ambiguity becomes more obvious."³

In 1984 Gordon Olson wrote an article critiquing hierarchicalism. He maintained that while Geisler's method had moved ethical theory ahead in giving recognition to a valid hierarchical principle, he had seriously overextended this principle beyond its limited legitimate areas of applicability, and without adequate scriptural basis had

¹Guy Greenfield, review of Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Southwestern Journal of Theology 33 (Summer 1991): 53-54.

²Allan R. Bevere, review of Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Ashland Theological Review 22 (1990): 97.

³Pack, 152.

universalized this principle as a basis for resolving supposed conflicts between absolute ethical norms.¹

The 1987 article of William Luck concluded that Geisler's ethical approach is self-contradictory.² Furthermore, Luck noted that since in the hierarchicalist method all laws lower than the highest are laws subject to an exempting process, only one law in this approach can be retained as an absolute. As such, Luck posited that hierarchicalism "is unacceptable to Evangelicals who find that Scripture teaches the plurality of absolutes."³

Though they were not written with the main purpose of critiquing Geisler's ethical theory, mention should be made of four other works. Erwin Lutzer's 1972 book was written primarily as a response to situation ethics.⁴ Yet Lutzer devotes virtually an entire chapter to refuting hierarchicalism from his own position of ideal absolutism. Likewise, John Tape's article in support of conflicting absolutism contains a section evaluating hierarchicalism,

¹Olson, 3, 4. Similarly, Brown, in his unpublished paper draws this conclusion on page 26: "Hierarchical ethics, even though a brilliant system originated by Norman L. Geisler, has been shown to be wanting in Biblical support;" Chris Brown, "A Brief Analysis of Geisler's Hierarchical Proof Texts," 1985, TMs [photocopy], Center for Research and Scholarship, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA.

²Luck, 26.

³Ibid., 25.

⁴Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 96-113.

specifically in connection with the principle of double effect.¹ In a similar manner Robert Rakestraw critiqued various aspects of Geisler's approach from a perspective of non-conflicting absolutism.² Also, in his book on evangelical ethics, Donald G. Bloesch has made a brief but incisive analysis of ethical hierarchicalism.³

For more than two decades Geisler has been producing a considerable amount of both written and audio material concerning ethics in general, and hierarchicalism in particular. Now in his mid-sixties, Norman Geisler is still prolific. Articles, tapes, book reviews and books produced by him are flowing in a steady stream from several publishing houses.⁴ Since Geisler is an eloquent and captivating speaker and an engaging writer, his ethical method is bound to have an impact on Christians in general.

¹John Tape, "A Case for Conflicting Absolutism," 1990, TMs [photocopy], pp. 3-7, a paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting, New Orleans, LA.

²Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 246-267.

³Donald G. Bloesch, Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 181-183.

⁴Note that from 1990 through 1994 at least ten books by Geisler have come off the press. Over the years his books have been published by Baker Book House, Moody Press, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Tyndale House Publishers, Zondervan Publishing House and others. See the bibliography for further information.

In addition, Geisler's work is taken seriously by many influential Christians.¹ This can be observed by the scores of book reviews in dozens of journals and magazines,² by the frequent reference to the works of Geisler,³ as well as by specific articles, some agreeing

¹For instance, talking about Christian Apologetics Pinnock says: "In its class it may be the best there is, and deserves to be widely read;" Clark H. Pinnock, review of Christian Apologetics, by Norman L. Geisler, in Christian Scholar's Review 8 (1979): 383. J. P. Moreland says: "Through his writings, Norm Geisler has been a role model of apologetical activism to a generation of evangelicals." Also, John F. Walvoord calls Geisler "a distinguished theologian, an effective public speaker, and an experienced radio personality;" see the brochure Quest Productions, Lynchburg, VA. Carl F. H. Henry regards Geisler's work to be worthy of more than casual mention in three of his five volumes on God, Revelation and Authority, 5 vols. (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1976-1982), 2:105, 108, 113; 3:364-365; 4:118.

²See Asbury Seminarian, Ashland Theological Journal, Bibliotheca Sacra, Calvin Theological Journal, Christian Scholar's Review, Christianity Today, Concordia Journal, Concordia Theological Quarterly, Covenant Quarterly, Eternity, Ethics, Evangelical Journal, Fides et Historia, Fundamentalist Journal, Grace Theological Journal, Journal of Psychology and Christianity, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, Lutheran Theological Journal, Moody, Perspectives, Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith, Quarterly Review, Reformed Review, Reformed Theological Review, Review and Expositor, Scripta Theologica, Skrif en Kerk, Southwestern Journal of Theology, Themelios, TSF Bulletin, Transformation, and Westminster Theological Journal. Admittedly these are mostly, but not exclusively, journals with an evangelical perspective. However, it should be noted that among others they include journals of Calvinists, Lutherans, Wesleyans, United Methodists, and Southern Baptists.

³Here are a few recent examples of writers who cite Geisler in several different journals: Jack Barentsen, "The Validity of Human Language: A Vehicle for Divine Truth," Grace Theological Journal 9 (Spring 1988): 26-28; Graham A. Cole, "Thinking Theologically," Reformed Theological Review 48 (May-August 1989): 57; Robert B. Fischer, "Scientific

and some disagreeing with various components of his theories.¹

Moreover, since the initial publication of Geisler's first volume on ethics in 1971, a hierarchical view of ethics somewhat similar to his preferred method appears to be gaining some degree of acceptance among some Christian ethicists. For example, even though Millard Erickson does not quote Geisler, he uses similar concepts such as "a

Truth: A Case Study Within the Biblical Christian World View," Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 41 (September 1989): 135; Dennis Hollinger, "Can Bioethics be Evangelical?" Journal of Religious Ethics 17 (Fall 1989): 164-165; Gary R. Habermas, "Jesus' Resurrection and Contemporary Criticism: An Apologetic (Part II)," Criswell Theological Review 4 (Spring 1990): 382; Steven B. Cowan, "Common Misconceptions of Evangelicals Regarding Calvinism," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 33 (June 1990): 194; Richard R. Topping, "The Anti-Foundationalist Challenge to Evangelical Apologetics," Evangelical Quarterly 63 (January 1991): 60; Joe M. Sprinkle, "The Interpretation of Exodus 21:22-25 (Lex Talionis) and Abortion," Westminster Theological Journal 55 (1993): 234; David H. Lane, "Special Creation or Evolution: No Middle Ground," Bibliotheca Sacra 151 (January-March 1994): 15, 16.

¹See, for example, Robert Wennberg, "Norman Geisler on the Doctrine of Hell," Christian Scholar's Review 9 (1979): 109-112; Richard A. Purdy, "Norman Geisler's Neo-Thomistic Apologetics," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 25 (September 1982): 351-358; Robert H. Gundry, "A Response to 'Methodological Unorthodoxy'," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 26 (March 1983): 95-100; Randall Basinger and David Basinger, "Inerrancy, Dictation and the Free Will Defence," The Evangelical Quarterly 55 (July 1983): 177-180; Stanley J. Greutz, "The Flight from God: Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling and Universal Ethical Systems," Perspectives in Religious Studies 14 (Summer 1987): 157-158; Dolores E. Dunnett, "Evangelicals and Abortion," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 33 (June 1990): 224-225; Christopher J. H. Wright, "Bibliography of Writings on Ethics," Transformation 10 (July/September 1993): 30.

hierarchy of principles," giving the ethical right-of-way to principle A over principle B, and that one should sense regret but not guilt when one acts in such a way as to most fully actualize the good in a conflict situation.¹

Stephen Mott attempts to resolve the problem of conflicting duties by means of prima facie duties.² However, he clearly shows his dependence on Geisler's method by repeated references to him, as well as by utilizing his concepts, such as the following identification of priorities: "persons are more valuable than things," "Infinite Person is more valuable than finite person(s)," and by suggesting that choosing to fulfill a "stronger" duty might produce sorrow, but "this regret is not equivalent to guilt."³ It seems as though John Jefferson Davis uses the prima facie duty approach to help elucidate his view, which

¹Millard J. Erickson, Relativism in Contemporary Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 142-144, 153. Geisler himself states that Erickson "favors a form of hierarchicalism that considers it one's obligation to follow the higher command in irresolvable conflicts;" Norman L. Geisler, review of Relativism in Contemporary Christian Ethics, by Millard J. Erickson, in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 18 (Winter 1975): 55.

²On this issue of prima facie duties Mott repeatedly refers to W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1930), 20, 21, 29, 38, 41; see Stephen Charles Mott, Biblical Ethics and Social Change (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), 155. While this view of Ross is purely a philosophical discussion which predates Geisler's first proposal of this position by several decades, it is nonetheless interesting for its similarity to Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism.

³Mott, 155-159.

he calls "contextual absolutism."¹ Nevertheless, he admits that it is similar to the hierarchicalism of Geisler. Also, he uses illustrations and concepts similar to those found in Geisler's work. For instance, he notes that occasionally "a higher obligation suspends a lower one."² Also, he says Rahab's actions, "rather than being the lesser of two evils, were actually good."³

In brief then, it can be stated that for the variety of reasons listed above, the ethical hierarchicalism of Norman Geisler can be considered crucial in the current debate on ethical approaches and theories. This would be so for the large evangelical community and for all Christian believers who are seeking for clear ethical guidelines for proper Christian conduct. Thus, since no doctoral research project has been devoted exclusively to an evaluation of

¹Interestingly, in his survey of Christian Ethics, Long says that Geisler's "scheme might be called a graded absolutism or even a contextual absolutism;" Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., A Recent Survey of Christian Ethics (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), 30.

²John Jefferson Davis, Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1985), 14-15.

³Ibid., 16. See also, Higginson, 139-146, 201-226. While Higginson nowhere refers to Geisler, his view of a "hierarchy of values" is rather similar to hierarchicalism. The influence of Geisler's ethical method can further be observed in this statement by a book reviewer: "The final chapter 'Do Moral Duties Ever Conflict?,' actually persuaded me to change a rather long-held position regarding the matter of responsible choice-making;" L. R. Bush, review of Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, by Norman L. Geisler, and Paul D. Feinberg, in Southwestern Journal of Theology 24 (Spring 1982): 87.

Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism,¹ it seems appropriate that a careful scholarly analysis of this theory can make a valuable contribution to the present discussion of ethical methods, and to knowledge in general.

Purpose and Method

The purpose of this study is to gain a thorough understanding of the ethical method of hierarchicalism as set forth in the works of Norman L. Geisler. An attempt will be made to outline hierarchicalism, to analyze and critique any difficulties or problems discovered, as well as to enumerate the positive qualities observed. The fundamental presuppositions and internal coherency of ethical hierarchicalism, together with other crucial issues related to Geisler's strategy will be investigated in order to determine its inner consistency and reliability as an ethical approach for committed Christians.

To begin with, a background study will be done in order to better grasp the historical and contemporary discussions regarding conflicting moral obligations. Then, a general description will be made of the personal and

¹Note however, that Geisler's apologetic methodology has been evaluated in doctoral dissertations; see Kenneth D. Boa, "A Comparative Study of Four Christian Apologetic Systems" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1984); and, Richard Allan Purdy, "Carl Henry and Contemporary Apologetics: An Assessment of the Rational Apologetic Methodology of Carl F. H. Henry in the Context of the Current Impasse between Reformed and Evangelical Apologetics" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1980), 5-17, 157-191, 206-217, 585-598.

ideological background from which Geisler's philosophy has developed. Following this, hierarchicalism will be described and systematically outlined.

It is to be noted that over the years that Geisler has been writing and speaking on ethics his ethical approach has shown very little, if any, significant change or development. Admittedly, there has been some refinement, and clarification of various points, but no major shift of viewpoint has apparently taken place. Thus, rather than analyzing Geisler's work in chronological sequence, this study will attempt to address his ethical hierarchicalism according to the basic framework of the method he outlines in his works on ethics.

After this descriptive outline, hierarchicalism will be critically analyzed. In more specific terms this discussion will address questions such as the following: How are the presuppositions that Geisler considers fundamental to theistic morality and Christian ethics implemented in ethical hierarchicalism? Is hierarchicalism an absolutist ethic, or is it relativistic? Is this ethical technique normative or utilitarian? Is Geisler's approach grounded in prescriptive ethics, or does it also depend partly on descriptive concepts? Is hierarchical ethics truly a deontological approach, or is it a mixture of teleological and deontological views? Does this ethical theory promote a plurality of substantive absolute moral norms or not? What

are the similarities and differences between the principle of double effect and hierarchicalism's use of it? And finally, is hierarchicalism genuinely biblically based, or does it depend partially on naturalistic premises?

In order to be able to attain this objective of analyzing hierarchicalism, all accessible material pertinent to the topic, both published and unpublished, will be carefully examined. In doing this, the analyses done by other writers will doubtless prove to be valuable. However, it must be noted that the inner flow of Geisler's own thought in his writings and teachings will be the decisive factor in understanding his ethical hierarchicalism. In addition to all available primary sources, relevant secondary materials will be taken into consideration in order to provide the needed perspective.

Since Geisler maintains that hierarchicalism is a truly biblical approach to ethics, an attempt will be made to meticulously scrutinize the primary scriptural passages utilized as support for this strategy. Though no attempt will be made to do an exhaustive research of Geisler's hermeneutical principles, the manner in which he uses the Bible deserves attention, since this could shed light on the consistency and coherency of the biblical evidence which he puts forth for his ethical approach.

Finally, once Geisler's ethical methodology has been critically analyzed, the beneficial contributions of

hierarchicalism will be briefly outlined. This positive evaluation will be followed by a synopsis of the entire project, some suggested recommendations for further research, and a final conclusion.

Limitations

The data gathered for this research project indicates that, due to the interrelatedness of the subjects, a study of Geisler's position on a hierarchy of ethical norms¹ will need to take into account his views on such subjects as dispensationalism, natural law, revelation and inspiration, free will and determinism, christology, the doctrine of God, and biblical authority, as they relate to the theme of this study. However, while including certain facets of Geisler's overall outlook that impinge on the topic under discussion, this investigation will be limited in that it will not provide an exhaustive coverage of the total scope of his theology.

A second limitation is that this study will deal primarily with Geisler's ethical approach. Thus, while recognizing that his method of dealing with ethical matters is directly related to and dependent upon his theological

¹Geisler maintains that the terms "principle," "norm," and "rule" are "roughly synonymous, although the last two have more content;" Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 22. Long (p. 29) also notes that Geisler "uses terms like principles, norms, and rules almost interchangeably." Furthermore, Geisler sometimes uses the terms "values" and "norms" interchangeably (see Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 36).

beliefs which in turn are based on his philosophical presuppositions, this thesis will not focus on these issues. However, the relationship between Geisler's ethics, theology, and philosophy will be discussed wherever necessary and relevant to the main purpose of this research.

Third, the focus of this research will be specifically on Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism. Thus, this work is not an examination of everything that Geisler has produced in the area of ethics, but only those things related to his hierarchicalism. Along with these issues, concerns that are currently being discussed among Christian ethicists, such as the principle of double effect, will be dealt with only to the extent that they shed light on the central issue of this study.

And finally, since Norman Geisler is still contributing prolifically to the ethical corpus through his literary works, this research project will be able to deal with only what he has produced up to the end of 1994. Brought together, these facts underline the restricted nature of this investigation.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND TO VIEWS ON CONFLICTING MORAL DUTIES

In Book I of the Republic, Socrates, the famous Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C., considers the question as to what to do if a person has promised to return weapons to a man who comes back for them obviously bent on harm.¹ Four centuries later, by the time of M. Tullius Cicero, the most celebrated of all Roman eclectics,² the idea of choosing the least evil when faced with conflicting moral obligations, had already become proverbial.³

Some feel that consideration as to how to deal with moral conflicts goes back even further, as far back as

¹The Dialogues of Plato: Republic, Book I; see also, William K. Frankena, Ethics, 2nd ed., Foundations of Philosophy Series, eds. Elizabeth and Monroe Beardsley (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 14.

²Frederick Copleston, S.J., A History of Philosophy, 9 vols. (New York, NY: Image Books, 1985), 1:418.

³Cicero, de Officiis III, 28; he stated: Minima de malis ("Of evils choose the least"). See also, John Finnis, Fundamentals of Ethics (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1983), 90; Alan Donagan, The Theory of Morality (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 152; Paul Janet, The Theory of Morals, trans. Mary Chapman (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), 242 (footnote #1).

Moses,¹ the liberator of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. For the purposes of this research project, however, only those who deal with this matter from a Christian perspective and during the Christian era, will be taken into account as needed.

With this delimitation in mind, this chapter first sets out to consider the early Christian views regarding ethical dilemmas. Then, the various positions of the most prominent Protestant Reformers on this issue are addressed. Following a synopsis of some important post-reformation perspectives, and some twentieth-century thinkers, the most significant modern ethical approaches of dealing with moral conflicts are outlined, including hierarchical ethics other than that of Norman L. Geisler. Next, the principle of double effect is appraised in relation to conflicting moral obligations. Finally, a short summary and conclusion ends the chapter.

Early Christian Views on Moral Conflicts

J. Philip Wogaman posits that "the problem of moral exceptions or necessary compromises with evil has apparently occupied Christians from the very beginning."² He notes that over time Christian thinkers developed arguments

¹See, for example, Robert C. Campbell, "Teachings of the Old Testament Concerning Divorce," Foundations 6 (April 1963): 177; J. Philip Wogaman, Christian Moral Judgment (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 106.

²Wogaman, Christian Moral Judgment, 106.

permitting moral exceptions to perceived dangers, and suggests that this early Christian grappling with moral conflicts was parallel with and influenced by that of the Stoics,¹ who preceded the rise of Christianity.

One of the most respected of the early church fathers, Augustine, was well aware of the problem of borderline situations. There is some debate, however, as to the actual position espoused by the famous fifth century Bishop of Hippo. On the one hand, it has been pointed out that Augustine held firmly to moral absolutes. For example, he stated that it is never right to deceive even in order to save a life.² Also, adultery, abortion, and infanticide are always wrong, irrespective of the situation.³ On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that Augustine did not take such a moral absolutist position with respect to certain forms of killing. While he believed that murder was always wrong, he asserted that "there are some exceptions made by the divine authority to its own law, that men may not be put to death."⁴ He maintained that two exceptions

¹Ibid.

²Augustine, On Lying, 22, 23. See also, Norman L. Geisler, ed., What Augustine Says (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 210-211; Richard G. Jones, Groundwork of Christian Ethics (London, England: Epworth Press, 1984), 227.

³See William E. May, Moral Absolutes: Catholic Tradition, Current Trends, and the Truth (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1989), 8-9.

⁴Augustine, The City of God, I, 21.

have been given by God in the Old Testament--in special individual cases such as the command that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac, and in the general case of the waging of war. Based on such views it has been concluded that Augustine treated war as a tragic evil to be indulged in so as to prevent greater evils.¹

While there might be some debate as to where Augustine stood on moral conflicts, the position taken by Pope Gregory the Great is clear. In his commentary on the book of Job he stated that if there were no opportunity for avoiding one of two sins, the lesser one should always be chosen.²

Of all pre-reformation Christian philosophers, the works of the eminent thirteenth-century scholastic, St. Thomas Aquinas, probably contribute more than any other to the discussion of moral conflicts. Here, as in the case of Augustine, interpreters have not always agreed. Some have concluded that Aquinas was a moral absolutist, holding that "all the precepts of the Decalogue are moral absolutes--so much so that not even God can grant dispensations from

¹Wogaman, Christian Moral Judgment, 107. See also, Arthur F. Holmes, ed., War and Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), 61-71; Richard Higginson, Dilemmas: A Christian Approach to Moral Decision Making (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1988), 82.

²See Anthony J. Blasi, Moral Conflict and Christian Religion, American University Studies Series VII, Theology and Religion, vol. 35 (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1988), 2 (footnote #1).

them."¹ Others, however, have concluded that Aquinas was "aware of the fact that there are conflicts among laws,"² and that he "abandoned that absolute position of Augustine."³ This tension can presumably be resolved by a closer look at the writings of this prolific theologian. As one scholar, referring to Aquinas' view, has noted: "The global and imprecise formula, 'The precepts of the decalogue . . . are indispensable,' could easily cause problems."⁴

In an article dealing with the ethical views of Aquinas, John Dedek concluded that St. Thomas took two approaches to the question of whether dispensations from the decalogue are possible. "No dispensation is possible from the precepts of the first tablet, because these order men directly to God their last end. And no dispensation is possible from the precepts of the second tablet, because these prescribe the order of justice among men, and God

¹May, Moral Absolutes, 13. See also, Christopher W. Gowans, "The Debate on Moral Dilemmas," in Moral Dilemmas, ed., Christopher W. Gowans (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 5; John O'Neill, "'The Same Thing Therefore Ought to Be and Ought Not to Be:' Anselm on Conflicting Oughts," The Heythrop Journal 35 (July 1994): 312.

²Norman L. Geisler, Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 168.

³Jones, 227.

⁴Franz Scholz, "Problems on Norms Raised by Ethical Borderline Situations: Beginnings of a Solution in Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure," in Readings in Moral Theology, No. 1, Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition, ed. Charles E. Curran, and Richard A. McCormick, S.J. (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1979), 169.

cannot go against justice because he himself is justice."¹ Dedek went further, however, and noted that Aquinas posited that God can authorize by dispensation the material actions (e.g., homicide, adultery, and stealing) forbidden in the second table of the law,² as in His command to Abraham to kill Isaac. While St. Thomas maintains that, since these laws come from God only He can dispense from them,³ he holds that God has shared this authority with human beings in the realm of civil responsibilities.⁴ A valid caution has been sounded nevertheless, that this teaching of Aquinas should not be misused to support the view that on occasion acts such as adultery or abortion can be morally good.⁵

Further evidence that Aquinas wrestled with the concept of moral conflicts can be seen in his discussion of, for example, whether it is lawful to kill a person in self-

¹John F. Dedek, "Intrinsically Evil Acts: An Historical Study of the Mind of St. Thomas," Thomist 43 (July 1979): 409. See also, Brian Stiltner, "Who Can Understand Abraham? The Relation of God and Morality in Kierkegaard and Aquinas," Journal of Religious Ethics 21 (Fall 1993): 236.

²Dedek, 409-410. See also, Jean Porter, "Moral Rules and Moral Actions: A Comparison of Aquinas and Modern Theology," Journal of Religious Ethics 17 (Spring 1989): 135.

³See Dedek, 411.

⁴John Giles Milhaven, Toward a New Catholic Morality (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), 160-161.

⁵William E. May, "The Natural Law and Objective Morality: A Thomistic Perspective," in Principles of Catholic Moral Life, ed. William E. May (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981), 175.

defense.¹ Also, St. Thomas promulgated a view that was later developed into the principle of double effect, which will be discussed below in relation to borderline issues.

Positions of Protestant Reformers

The sixteenth century Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther attacked the casuistic ethics of the medieval Catholic Church as idolatry.² While he tried to make a place for the keeping of the decalogue, Luther believed that this was clearly subordinated to the demands of love: "When the law impels one against love, it ceases and should no longer be a law; but where no obstacle is in the way, the keeping of the law is a proof of love, which lies hidden in the heart."³ Convinced of the existence of moral conflicts, Luther concluded that if the commandments of God "cannot be kept without injury to the neighbor, God wants us to suspend and ignore the law."⁴ Observing the deceptive actions of Old Testament characters, for instance, Luther states that they did not sin in this for they acted

¹See, for example, the discussion by Paul Ramsey, War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly? (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), 39-40.

²See Eric W. Gritsch, "Bold Sinning: The Lutheran Ethical Option," Dialog 14 (Winter 1975): 26.

³Donald G. Bloesch, Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 111.

⁴Ibid.

in this way to bring about God's will. Looking at the major emphases of the two parts of the law, he thus postulated that obedience to the first table of the decalogue may at times require the breach of the second table.¹

John Calvin, the brilliant reformer and Bible commentator, embraced a different view from Luther. His position, in contradistinction to the more relativistic perspective of Luther, remained true to the more traditional absolutist position.² Therefore, he did not justify the illegitimate devices used by Bible characters,³ but, for example, condemned every lie as evil.⁴ As an absolutist, Calvin stressed the continuity between natural law, the decalogue, and the moral teachings of Jesus,⁵ and thus apparently did not theorize concerning moral dilemmas.

Post-Reformation Perspectives

A search of the moral theological literature reveals that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there

¹See David Wright, "The Ethical Use of the Old Testament in Luther and Calvin: A Comparison," Scottish Journal of Theology 36 (December 1983): 465-466. See also, Jones, 228.

²See Jones, 228.

³See, for example, John Calvin, Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, reprint 1979), Gen 27:1ff. See also, David Wright, 466-468.

⁴See Jones, 228.

⁵See Bloesch, 111.

were some thinkers addressing issues related to ethical approaches to moral conflicts.¹ For example, in the mid-1780s William Paley, the prominent Anglican priest and acclaimed moralist, addressed ethical dilemmas in an influential book on moral philosophy. Paley stated that it is not a lie to "tell a falsehood to a madman, for his own advantage; to a robber to conceal your property; to an assassin, to defeat or to divert him from his purpose,"² because these people have no right to know the truth. About a century later theologian Charles Hodge concluded that, "if a mother sees a murderer in pursuit of her child, she has a perfect right to mislead him by any means in her power, because the general obligation to speak the truth is merged or lost, for the time being, in the higher obligation."³ Other Christian authors noted that killing in self-defense is in accord with Christianity,⁴ as long as it is done

¹While it is to be recognized that Utilitarianism was formally articulated during these two centuries, it will however not be discussed here but will be considered below, since it is one of the twentieth-century approaches still being used in an attempt to address moral conflicts.

²William Paley, The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy, 9th ed. (Boston, MA: West and Richardson, 1818), 113-114.

³Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, 3 vols. (United States of America: Scribner, Armstrong, and Company, 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1946), 3:442.

⁴Laurens P. Hickok, and Julius H. Seelye, A System of Moral Science, rev. ed. (Boston, MA: Ginn & Company, 1886), 48-49.

solely to save oneself and not to take vengeance on the attacker.¹ Around the same time Noah Porter, the president of Yale College, produced a book in which he likewise discussed moral dilemmas. He concluded, for example, that in relation to the duty of truth, it is "not always wrong to convey a false impression"² when the spirit of love calls for it or when violent consequences are threatened.³

While it is obvious that moral conflicts were being discussed during these centuries by different thinkers, the most outstanding philosophical minds to address ethical concepts at this time were undoubtedly Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kant set out to construct an integrated and yet comprehensive ethical theory.⁴ Thus, of necessity, he had to deal with the matter of moral conflicts.

Basically, Kant held that the possibility of moral conflicts was ruled out on logical grounds.⁵ "A conflict

¹This concept is similar to the principle of double effect, which will be discussed below.

²Noah Porter, The Elements of Moral Science: Theoretical and Practical (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885), 423.

³Ibid., 425-426.

⁴See N. H. G. Robinson, The Groundwork of Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 39.

⁵See Michael James Almeida, "The Impossibility of Moral Conflicts" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1988), 2. See also, Gowans, 7.

of duties and obligations is inconceivable (obligationes non colliduntur). For . . . two conflicting rules cannot both be necessary at the same time."¹ In other words, "if it is a duty, and hence a moral necessity, that a person do A, then it cannot also be a duty, and hence a moral necessity, that the person do something incompatible with A."² In practical terms this meant that Kant was an absolutist, admitting no exceptions under any circumstances. For example, he maintained that one must tell the truth about a possible victim's whereabouts even to someone intent on murder.³ The reason that one must always tell the truth is that "a lie always harms another; if not some other particular man, still it harms mankind generally, for it vitiates [i.e., invalidates] the source of law itself."⁴

The Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, reacted against the moral absolutism of Immanuel Kant. For instance, while Kant criticized Abraham's conduct in

¹Immanuel Kant, "Moral Duties," in Moral Dilemmas, ed. Christopher W. Gowans (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 39.

²Gowans, 6. Gowans is here commenting on Kant's statement that a conflict of duties is inconceivable.

³Immanuel Kant, "On the Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives," appendix, in Sissela Bok, Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1978), 286-287.

⁴Kant, "On the Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives," 286.

connection with his willingness to sacrifice Isaac,¹ Kierkegaard lauded his act as that of a "knight of faith."² For Kierkegaard, this story clearly illustrates a conflict of obligations.³ From his study and analysis of this incident, he concluded that true faith in God may at times require one to set aside the normal canons of morality in order to obey the Divine will.⁴ In his most famous book, Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard referred to this act as the "teleological suspension of the ethical."⁵ While many scholars continue to debate this concept,⁶ it seems clear

¹See Ronald M. Green, Religion and Moral Reason: A New Method for Comparative Study (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 123.

²Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans. Alastair Hannay (London, England: Penguin Books, 1985), 95.

³Based on their own interpretation of Kierkegaard, several modern scholars disagree with his view, saying that his explication of the Abraham-Isaac episode is clearly wrong. See, for example, Marvin Fox, "Kierkegaard and Rabbinic Judaism," Judaism 2 (April 1953): 161-169; Ronald M. Green, "Abraham, Isaac, and the Jewish Tradition: An Ethical Reappraisal," Journal of Religious Ethics 10 (Spring 1982): 1-18; Robert Gordis, "The Faith of Abraham: A Note on Kierkegaard's 'Teleological Suspension of the Ethical,'" Judaism 25 (Fall 1976): 416-419. Gordis (p. 419) notes: "Kierkegaard's interpretation of the text must be pronounced an anachronism It is a grafting of an alien concept upon the authentic Biblical and Jewish understanding of God's will which does not command or condone the violation of the moral law, either by God or by man."

⁴See, for example, Kierkegaard, 88; Gordis, 414.

⁵Kierkegaard, 95.

⁶See, for example, Joseph A. Magno, "How Ethical is Abraham's 'Suspension of the Ethical'?" Faith and Philosophy (January 1985): 53-65; Edmund N. Santurri, "Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling in Logical Perspective," Journal of

that Kierkegaard believed that "obedience to God's call, even when this entails disobedience to ethical norms, demands that the Christian suspend the norms for the sake of a higher goal."¹

Twentieth-Century Approaches

Early in the twentieth century some well-known scholars grappled with questions related to ethical conflicts. For example, Karl Barth, a prolific theologian and an ethicist of the first rank,² discussed these issues at some length. For Barth, the essence of Christian ethics is obedience to the Divine Command. While it may at first seem that he held to an absolutist ethic, on the questions of suicide, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, war, and killing in self-defense, Barth permits exceptions

Religious Ethics 5 (Fall 1977): 225-247; Edward F. Mooney, "Abraham and Dilemma: Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension Revisited," International Journal for Philosophy and Religion 19 (1986): 23-41; Ronald M. Green, "Enough Is Enough! Fear and Trembling Is Not about Ethics," Journal of Religious Ethics 21 (Fall 1993): 191-209; Gene Outka, "God as the Subject of Unique Veneration: A Response to Ronald M. Green," Journal of Religious Ethics 21 (Fall 1993): 211-215; Ronald M. Green, "A Response to Gene Outka," Journal of Religious Ethics 21 (Fall 1993): 217-220; Stiltner, 221-245.

¹Stanley J. Grenz, "The Flight from God: Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling and Universal Ethical Systems," Perspectives in Religious Studies 14 (Summer 1987): 158.

²See Henry Stob, Ethical Reflections: Essays on Moral Themes (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 103.

wherever the loss of life involved is overridden by what he considers some more important obligation.¹

A contemporary of Barth, and also a theologian of note, Emil Brunner however felt that "the 'conflict of duties' is only apparent, and does not really exist at all," since the only duty one has is to listen to and obey the Divine Command.² In contradistinction to Brunner, it is evident that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was executed for his part in the unsuccessful plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, wrestled with the concept of conflicting obligations. Further evidence of this struggle can be observed in Bonhoeffer's volume on ethics, where he deals with the matter of telling the truth, carefully defining it so as to resolve the conflict.³

¹See Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. III, part 4, The Doctrine of Creation, trans. A. T. Mackay, T. H. L. Parker, Harold Knight, Henry A. Kennedy, and John Marks, ed. G. W. Bromiley, and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 421-455; see also, Higginson, 94-97; Bloesch, 51, 221 (footnote #40).

²Emil Brunner, The Divine Imperative, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1947), 204.

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, trans. Neville Horton Smith, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1955), 363-372. In his book The Cost of Discipleship (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1959), Bonhoeffer speaks of "the simple alternative of obedience or disobedience" (p. 69), and "the absolute, direct, and unaccountable authority of Jesus" (p. 48), which supercedes all law. Statements such as these do not, however, contradict Bonhoeffer's position on conflicting moral obligations, as noted above in his Ethics, since he is not addressing that issue in these passages in The Cost of Discipleship.

In addition to these more well-known intellectuals, the literature on moral philosophy and ethical theory reveals that there are many scholars who have and are dealing with the issue of moral conflicts. Some have felt that this focus on moral conflicts is a misplaced emphasis.¹ Yet, they too must deal with the less than desirable borderline situations. Other thinkers have concluded that, in connection with moral dilemmas, "the reasonable conclusion is that they are impossible."² Still others are firmly convinced of the reality of these situations of conflicting moral obligations.³ In fact, one

¹See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 4, 128; Richard J. Mouw, The God Who Commands (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 116-120, 128.

²Earl Conee, "Against Moral Dilemmas," in Moral Dilemmas, ed. Christopher W. Gowans (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 247; see also, Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," in Gowans, 115-137; Terrance C. McConnell, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency in Ethics," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 8 (June 1978): 269-287.

³See, for example, Edward John Carnell, Christian Commitment: An Apologetic (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1957), 223-229; Sidney Hook, "Moral Conflicts," in Morals and Values: Readings in Theoretical and Practical Ethics, ed. Marcus G. Singer (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 303-312; Joseph L. Allen, Love & Conflict: A Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 86-87; Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Moral Dilemmas (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 97-107; Charles A. Baylis, Ethics: The Principles of Wise Choice (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1958), 130-133; John Lemmon, "Moral Dilemmas," in Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy, The Library of Philosophy and Theology Series, ed. John McIntyre, and Ian T. Ramsey (London, England: SCM Press Ltd., 1966), 262-279; John Ladd, "Remarks on the Conflict of Obligations," Journal of

writer has posited that "fidelity to Christ seems deeper and more truly biblical when it acknowledges moral ambiguity, when it grants the need for exceptional practice in exceptional circumstances."¹

This belief in the conflict of moral obligations has given rise to various ethical methodologies over time. While there may be a few areas of overlapping concepts between some of the approaches outlined below, in essence each of these theories addresses the issue of moral conflicts in a distinctly different manner.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism, which was originally addressed to social policy, has been described as "probably the most influential ethical approach in English-speaking philosophy during the twentieth century."² The utilitarian movement, which was the first phase of nineteenth-century empiricism,

Philosophy 55 (11 September 1958): 811-819; Richard H. Bube, "Of Dominoes, Slippery Slopes, Thin Edges of Wedges, and Camels' Noses in Tents: Pitfalls in Christian Ethical Consistency," Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 42 (September 1990): 162-172; Helmut Weber, "Der Kompromiss in der Moral: Zu seiner theologischen Bestimmung und Bewertung," Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift 86 (1977): 99-118.

¹Charles Wayne Scriven, "The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics after H. Richard Niebuhr" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1985), 313.

²Arthur F. Holmes, Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions, Contours of Christian Philosophy Series, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 41.

may be said to have originated with Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832).¹ Bentham and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the classic exponents of this strategy, posited the ethical notion that the conduct that is right is that which will produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people.²

While it has been suggested that this ethical approach is non-transcendental, makes no appeal to religious considerations, and is free from Christianity,³ the writings of both Bentham and Mill contradict these concepts. For example, both men include the threat of punishment from God as one of the factors which will induce people to act for the general happiness of all.⁴ Furthermore, Mill states that, far from being a godless doctrine, utilitarianism is "more profoundly religious than any

¹Frederick Copleston, S.J., A History of Philosophy, 9 vols. (New York, NY: Image Books, 1985), 8:1. See also, Lucius Garvin, A Modern Introduction to Ethics (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953), 277-278.

²Jeremy Bentham, "The Principle of Utility," in Moral Philosophy: An Introduction, ed. Jack Glickman (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 528. See also, Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, 7th ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 411; Norman L. Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 63-64; Copleston, 8:9-10.

³Bernard Williams, Morality: An Introduction to Ethics (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), 90.

⁴Bentham, 531-533; John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism," in Moral Philosophy: An Introduction, ed. Jack Glickman (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 555. See also, Garvin, 278-279.

other,"¹ and is encapsulated in the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth.²

Though this ethical method has been critically analyzed and been shown to contain significant and serious difficulties,³ it has with some success addressed the issue of borderline situations.⁴ Mill illustrates this in his discussion of the expediency of lying in order to save someone from great and unmerited evil.⁵ He concludes: "If the principle of utility is good for anything, it must be good for weighing these conflicting utilities against one another and marking out the region within which one or the other preponderates."⁶ Thus, since the goal of utilitarianism is the greatest good for the greatest number of people, in essence all moral conflicts can be resolved by appealing to this end.⁷ Furthermore, because there are no unchanging moral absolutes in this ethical approach, some

¹Mill, 551.

²Garvin, 281.

³See, for example, Frankena, 36-43; Holmes, Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions, 42-47; Garvin, 287-313; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 75-78; Sinnott-Armstrong, 72-81.

⁴Admittedly, utilitarianism may be a useful tool for assessing the value of social systems in a pluralistic and secular society.

⁵Mill, 551-552.

⁶Ibid, 552. See also, Almeida, 5.

⁷See Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 67, 74.

scholars have concluded that utilitarianism rejects the possibility of any genuine moral dilemmas.¹ As one scholar noted: "For utilitarianism, tragedy is impossible."²

Situationism

The most articulate promoter of situationism, Joseph Fletcher, summarizes his method of doing ethics as follows: "Christian ethics or moral theology is not a scheme of living according to a code but a continuous effort to relate love to a world of relativities through a casuistry obedient to love; its constant task is to work out the strategy and tactics of love, for Christ's sake."³ James Packer, looking at this approach more critically, defines the ethical approach of situationism as including "all views which reject the idea that the way to decide what to do is always to apply rules, positive and negative, concerning types of actions (e.g. keep your promises, do not steal, do not rape, do not torture)."⁴ In other words, no types of

¹See Williams, 92-93; Frankena, 35; Gowans, 7. Admittedly, not all scholars agree with this perspective. For example, based on his critique, Sinnott-Armstrong (p. 81) concludes that "every version of utilitarianism either fails to exclude moral dilemmas or excludes them only by using implausible and unjustified stipulations."

²Williams, 93.

³Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics: The New Morality (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1966), 158.

⁴James Packer, "Situations and Principles," in Law, Morality, and the Bible, ed. Bruce Kaye, and Gordon Wenham (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 152.

action can be said to be immoral; only failures of love in specific situations can be called immoral.¹

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to accurately trace the complete historical development as well as all the factors which led to this ethical method,² some of the major components need to be noted. One of the strongest influences on situationism is that of existentialism,³ which holds that human beings are totally free and responsible for their acts. In addition, it is clear that situationism was largely conditioned by a revolt against authority and traditional morality.⁴ In a response to further discussions on this method as elucidated in his

¹Ibid., 153.

²For two perspectives of this information see, Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., "The History and Literature of 'The New Morality,'" in The Situation Ethics Debate, ed. Harvey Cox (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1968), 101-116; and Michael E. Allsopp, "Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics: Twenty-five Years after the Storm," Irish Theological Quarterly 56 (1990): 170-171.

³Robert L. Cunningham, Situationism and the New Morality, Contemporary Problems in Philosophy, ed. George F. McLean, O.M.I. (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), 6. See also, Millard J. Erickson, Relativism in Contemporary Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 31-33; James Sellers, Theological Ethics (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1966), 140-141.

⁴See E. Clinton Gardner, "Responsibility in Freedom," in Storm over Ethics, John C. Bennett, et al (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967), 38; Robert W. Gleason, S.J., "Situational Morality," in Storm over Ethics, John C. Bennett, et al (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967), 112.

book, Fletcher himself admits: "I must confess that the main thrust of Situation Ethics was against legalism."¹

Ever since the publication of this landmark volume of Fletcher's, this procedure of dealing with moral issues has caused considerable discussion and debate among Christian thinkers.² A reading of Situation Ethics: The New Morality reveals that Fletcher places a great amount of emphasis on conflicting moral obligations. Throughout this book he uses a variety of borderline situations in order to explain the need for this type of ethical strategy.

¹Joseph Fletcher, "Reflection and Reply," in The Situation Ethics Debate, ed. Harvey Cox (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1968), 250.

²See, for example, The Situation Ethics Debate, and Storm over Ethics. See also, Allsopp, 172-190; James I. Packer, "Situations and Principles," in Law, Morality, and the Bible, ed. Bruce Kaye, and Gordon Wenham (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 160-165; Erickson, 1-127; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 43-61; Erwin W. Lutzer, The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes, Christian Free University Curriculum (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 27-39; Joseph Fletcher, and John Warwick Montgomery, Situation Ethics: True or False (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1972); William Barclay, Christian Ethics for Today (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), 69-91; Gordon Kainer, Faith, Hope and Clarity: A Look at Situation Ethics and Biblical Ethics (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1977); Eric Osborn, Ethical Patterns in Early Christian Thought (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 210-213; J. Philip Wogaman, A Christian Method of Moral Judgment (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976), 14-21; George Woods, "Situational Ethics," in Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy, ed. Ian T. Ramsey, The Library of Philosophy and Theology Series, ed. John McIntyre, and Ian T. Ramsey (London, England: SCM Press Ltd., 1966), 329-339; Robertson McQuilkin, An Introduction to Biblical Ethics (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989), 145-162.

Furthermore, based on his experience as pastor, educator, and medical ethicist, Fletcher concludes that moral agents usually are decision-makers faced with conflict situations, having to choose between competing goods and values.¹ He posits: "There can be and often is a conflict between love and law,"² and on these occasions one should do the most loving thing, for love replaces law.³

Based on the presuppositions of pragmatism, relativism, positivism, and personalism,⁴ Fletcher posits that situationism has six propositions: (a) Only one thing is intrinsically good, namely, love: nothing else at all; (b) The ruling norm of Christian decisions is love: nothing else; (c) Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed, nothing else; (d) Love wills the neighbor's good whether we like him or not; (e) Only the end justifies the means; nothing else; (f) Love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively.⁵ By way of summary then, it could be said that when faced with a moral conflict, "the situationist holds that whatever is the most loving thing in the situation is the right and good

¹Allsopp, 174.

²Fletcher, Situation Ethics: The New Morality, 71.

³Ibid., 69.

⁴Ibid., 40-56.

⁵Ibid., 57-145.

thing."¹ Whether it be abortion, suicide, prostitution, or adultery,² as long as this is the most loving thing to do in the circumstance, "it is not excusably evil, it is positively good."³ In this way, situationism attempts to resolve the conflict and tension that are part of all ethical dilemmas.⁴

Non-Conflicting Absolutism

Norman Geisler has noted that non-conflicting absolutism is "perhaps the most influential and widely held view among Christians."⁵ Since this approach is "probably the most common position among traditional absolutists,"⁶ it is difficult to clearly ascertain its major twentieth-

¹Ibid., 65.

²See *ibid.*, 37-39, 74-75, 163-164, 164-165.

³Ibid., 65.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 55.

⁵Norman L. Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 43. Admittedly, Geisler refers to this method as "unqualified absolutism" in this book. However, in an earlier volume he labelled it "non-conflicting absolutism;" Norman L. Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 79.

⁶Robert V. Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," Criswell Theological Review 2 (Spring 1988): 244. Rakestraw (*ibid.*, 257) adds: "The very fact that it is so difficult to find any writer who has argued from a biblical and evangelical perspective, in a sustained manner, for the NCA [non-conflicting absolutist] position as a whole, may very well be because NCA is the viewpoint which most naturally commends itself to most Christians, and is simply assumed by them."

century spokesperson. While various scholars, such as Leo Tolstoy and John Howard Yoder,¹ have been associated with this type of absolutism, no attempt will be made here to discuss the ethical view of any individual thinker. Rather, the major tenets of non-conflicting absolutism as outlined by various writers, will be considered in relation to the question of conflicting moral obligations.

Non-conflicting absolutism can be defined as an ethical method that "maintains that there are many absolute moral norms, and that these norms never really conflict. God's absolutes are truly absolute; they admit of no exceptions."² In other words, "these universal, absolute

¹See Wogaman, Christian Moral Judgment, 108, 111. Others who may also be considered non-conflicting absolutists include Rakestraw, McQuilkin, and Murray (see John Murray, Principles of Conduct [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957]). While it has been suggested that the prima facie duty theory of W. D. Ross holds out for non-conflicting absolutes (see Judith Wagner DeCrew, "Moral Conflicts and Ethical Relativism," Ethics 101 [October 1990]: 30 [footnote #10]), Ross himself indicates that promises can be broken in a conflict situation (W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good [Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1930], 18), and that "there is a difference between prima facie duty and actual or absolute duty;" 28.

²Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 244-245. In speaking about ethical absolutism, Paul Lehmann caricatures an "absolute" as "a standard of conduct which can be and must be applied to all people in all situations in exactly the same way;" Paul L. Lehmann, Ethics in a Christian Context (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 125. Paul Ramsey critiques this description of Lehmann as a faulty assumption; Paul Ramsey, Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics, Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers, no. 11, eds. T. F. Torrance, and J. K. S. Reid (Edinburgh, Scotland: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 67.

moral laws should be kept at all times, regardless of the circumstances."¹ God will provide a way out.²

Furthermore, this position holds that "we are not to judge morality by calculating the consequences of an act. God has established the moral law; our responsibility is obedience. He must take care of the consequences."³ Obedience to these absolutes should flow from an acceptable inner attitude, from a love for God and His moral requirements which are rooted in His character.⁴

Scholars who espouse this view indicate that the way to resolve any apparent conflict is to determine what the Bible says and to define each moral absolute precisely.⁵ For instance, one writer suggests that, in addition to several other commandments, "certainly the Fourth Commandment (on the rest day) and the Sixth Commandment (against killing) have exceptions enunciated in

¹Lutzer, The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes, 74.

²See Kainer, 126; McQuilkin, 159; Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 261.

³Lutzer, The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes, 88. See also, Kainer, 104; Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 251, 266-267.

⁴Lutzer, The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes, 75, 80, 81, 85. See also, Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 255.

⁵See McQuilkin, 159; Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 249.

Scripture."¹ Thus, when close attention is paid to a more careful defining of a particular activity, it will be seen that "there will never be a situation in which obedience to one absolute will entail disobedience to or the setting-aside of another absolute."² In brief, non-conflicting absolutism maintains that, when properly defined and understood, universal biblical moral norms cannot and will not conflict under any circumstances.³

Conflicting Absolutism

A study of current ethical thinkers indicates that the work of Helmut Thielicke (1908-1986) perhaps best illustrates the perspective of conflicting absolutism.⁴ While the views of other conflicting absolutists, such as John Warwick Montgomery, will be taken into account as this ethical method is considered, Thielicke's view will be the primary emphasis here.

Fundamental to his ethical thought is his understanding of what he calls the "borderline situation."⁵

¹McQuilkin, 435.

²Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 248.

³McQuilkin, 13; Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 244-245, 266.

⁴See Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 98; Higginson, 129-134.

⁵See Helmut Thielicke, Theological Ethics, vol. 1, Foundations, ed. William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 578.

This is a predicament in which one is free to choose, but, because it is unavoidable, a person will "constantly fall into actual sin."¹ Montgomery has succinctly captured the essence of this ethical approach: "The individual is often at the point of violating a command of God, not because he wants to, but because he's damned if he does and damned if he doesn't."²

This ethical dilemma is not due to any inherent weakness, contradiction or "lack of clarity in the divine commandments themselves. It is due to the mists of this aeon, in which a clear beam of light becomes a diffused cloud of light."³ In a sinless world there would be no moral dilemmas.⁴ However, as Thieliicke notes, in these borderline situations, "whatever we do we incur guilt,"⁵ for we are living "in a world that is saturated with sin,"⁶

¹Ibid., 653. See also, Higginson, 130.

²Fletcher, and Montgomery, 64. Similarly, Lays says that there are times when we must fight, for "we are damned if we do; and we are damned if we don't;" Wayne A. R. Lays, Ethics and Social Policy (New York, NY: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1946), 272.

³Thieliicke, 1:611. See also, John Tape, "A Case for Conflicting Absolutism," 1990, TMs [photocopy], p. 7, a paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting, New Orleans, LA.

⁴See Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 99.

⁵Helmut Thieliicke, Theological Ethics, vol. 3, Sex, trans. John W. Doberstein (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 242.

⁶Ibid.

and "no one can pass through it without incurring guilt."¹ Because of this guilt and divine condemnation,² the person needs to repent.³ Montgomery concurs, noting that when one is forced to perform the lesser evil, this should drive "him continually to the Cross for forgiveness."⁴

By way of summary, it could be said that the central assumption of conflicting absolutism is that human beings live in a fallen world in which real moral conflicts occur. Because the lesser evil which must be chosen brings guilt, the person needs to confess and seek God's forgiveness.⁵

Hierarchicalism

A careful reading of current ethical and philosophical literature reveals that, other than Norman Geisler, whose ethical methodology will be analyzed in

¹Ibid.

²Tape, 12.

³Thielicke, 1:654. Others writers agree. See, Elton M. Eenigenburg, Biblical Foundations and a Method for Doing Christian Ethics (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 90; Vincent MacNamara, Love, Law and the Christian Life: Basic Attitudes of Christian Morality (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 148.

⁴John Warwick Montgomery, "The Christian View of the Fetus," in Birth Control and the Christian, A Protestant Symposium on the Control of Human Reproduction, eds. Walter O. Spitzer, and Carlyle L. Saylor (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1969), 85. Montgomery makes similar statements in Fletcher, and Montgomery, 47, 51. Packer (p. 164) concurs with this concept.

⁵See Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 68.

extensive detail in succeeding chapters, there are several contemporary Christian scholars whose writings evidence a hierarchical approach to ethics. While virtually none of these thinkers explicitly admit to being hierarchicalists, their works indicate that, both before and after Geisler formally articulated his method, they believed in and promoted this type of strategy primarily in an attempt to resolve conflicting moral obligations.

As far back as 1874 the French professor Paul Janet noted that "in case of conflict the best object should be chosen."¹ Around the same time period, the systematic theologian Charles Hodge enunciated "the principle that a higher obligation absolves from a lower."² In a practical sense, he indicated that a mother has the right to mislead a murderer so as to save her child. In this moral dilemma, the obligation to speak the truth is superseded by the higher obligation.³

Besides Geisler, of those twentieth-century scholars who address moral conflicts in a hierarchical fashion, one of the clearest expositions can be found in Richard Higginson's Dilemmas: A Christian Approach to Moral Decision

¹Janet, 245.

²Hodge, 3:442.

³Ibid. It is worthy of note that in his book Christian Ethics: Options and Issues (pp. 114-116), Geisler includes Hodge as one who "defends a form of graded absolutism [or hierarchicalism]," 114.

Making. While he argues against the "lesser of two evils" perspective of conflicting absolutism,¹ he explicitly promotes a "hierarchy of duties."² Like Geisler he believes that in this present world Christians face conflicts of moral obligations.³ In these situations, one needs to make choices based on hierarchical thinking. For example, when the duty to tell the truth comes into conflict with the duty to preserve life, "the latter duty overrides the former," because "the preservation of life comes higher up on the hierarchical scale."⁴ Millard Erickson similarly posits a "hierarchy of principles," in which "one ought to give the ethical right-of-way to principle A over principle B,"⁵ in the event of a conflict of obligations.⁶ Even though the higher obligation is to be followed, the other

¹Higginson, 129-146.

²Ibid., 201-227.

³See, for example, *ibid.*, 11-77.

⁴Ibid., 201.

⁵Erickson, 142.

⁶See also, Mott, who concurs with Geisler on prioritizing duties; Stephen Charles Mott, Biblical Ethics and Social Change (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), 157-159; and, Shaun J. Sullivan, O.F.M., Killing in Defense of Private Property: The Development of a Roman Catholic Moral Teaching, Thirteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, American Academy of Religion Dissertation Series, no. 15, ed. H. Ganse Little, Jr. (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 39.

duty does not lapse; it is merely temporarily suspended due to the moral conflict.¹

Scholars who support some form of hierarchicalism frequently assert that when one does the higher duty in conflict situations, this act is morally right and free from sin.² John Jefferson Davis holds, for example, that when Rahab "suspended the prima facie duty to tell the truth," "her course of action was acceptable to God."³ Her actions were not evil, but "were actually good."⁴ Philip Wogaman concurs, saying a higher duty is "an act of moral goodness, and therefore no sin."⁵ Moreover, this higher duty is not to cause guilt, even though there might be a sense of regret.⁶ As Richard McCormick states concerning killing in self-defense: "The agent may not simply choose the greater value and let it go at that. He must, for example, regret

¹See John Jefferson Davis, Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1985), 15-16; Stuart Hampshire, Morality and Conflict (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 116.

²See Davis, 14.

³Ibid., 16.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Wogaman, Christian Moral Judgment, 107.

⁶See Erickson, 144; Mott, 158.

taking the life of his assailant even as he does so."¹

Higginson captures the thinking behind this point well:

If one has made a well-informed, conscientious decision and believes that it is clearly the better alternative, I do not see why one ought to feel sinful about it. One has done the best one can, and should be able to rejoice in the presence of a kindly disposed God with a clear conscience--while naturally feeling regret that the action to which one has consented is in some respect "evil."²

In brief then, it can be said that those promoting ethical hierarchicalism believe that moral conflicts require that the higher obligation be carried out, while the lower duty is simply suspended at that point in time. This higher duty is a right and good action, and though the actual deed performed should be regretted, it should not cause guilt since it is not sinful.

The Principle of Double Effect³

Though there has been considerable discussion and debate over the years concerning the concept of "double effect,"⁴ this theory needs to be taken into account since

¹Richard A. McCormick, S.J., Notes on Moral Theology: 1965 Through 1980 (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 306-307.

²Higginson, 139.

³This is also sometimes referred to as the "doctrine," "rule" or "theory" of double effect.

⁴See, for example, Donagan, 157-171; Daniel F. Montaldi, "A Defense of St. Thomas and the Principle of Double Effect," Journal of Religious Ethics 14 (Spring 1986): 296-332; Cornelius J. van der Poel, "The Principle of Double Effect," in Absolutes in Moral Theology?, ed. Charles E. Curran (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1968), 186-210;

it has frequently been used in connection with moral conflicts. As one writer noted: "The principal tool within Catholic moral tradition for dealing with conflict-situations has been the principle of double effect."¹ In fact, another scholar has gone so far as to claim that the principle of double effect "is, in reality, the fundamental

John Martin Fischer, Mark Ravizza, and David Copp, "Quinn on Double Effect: The Problem of 'Closeness'," Ethics 103 (July 1993): 707-725; A. van den Beld, "Killing and the Principle of Double Effect," Scottish Journal of Theology 41 (May 1988): 93-116; Sanford S. Levy, "Paul Ramsey and the Rule of Double Effect," Journal of Religious Ethics 15 (Spring 1987): 59-71; Germain G. Grisez, Abortion: The Myths, the Realities, and the Arguments (New York, NY: Corpus Books, 1970), 321-346; John C. Dwyer, Foundations of Christian Ethics (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 152-162; Charles E. Curran, Ongoing Revision in Moral Theology (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1975), 173-209. Kemp suggests that part of the controversy comes "from those who do not admit any morally relevant distinction between intended and merely foreseen consequences, a distinction on which the Principle crucially depends;" Kenneth W. Kemp, "Just-War Theory & the Casuistry of Prima Facie Duties" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate School, University of Notre Dame, 1984), 275. Blasi (pp. 134-135), however, posits that the controversy is over the four part manualist doctrine which does not appear that clearly in Aquinas' words.

¹Albert R. DiIanni, S.M., "The Direct/Indirect Distinction in Morals," Thomist 41 (July 1977): 350. See also, Richard A. McCormick, S.J., "Ambiguity in Moral Choice," in Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations, eds. Richard A. McCormick, S.J., and Paul Ramsey (Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 1978), 38; McCormick (Notes on Moral Theology: 1965 Through 1980, 752), Curran (Ongoing Revision in Moral Theology, 182), and Dwyer (p. 153), who note that this principle was developed to deal with and resolve those cases in which there is a conflict of values. McCormick observes that, besides Paul Ramsey, Philippa Foot, and a few others, the principle of double effect has not been widely used outside the Catholic tradition; Richard A. McCormick, S.J., How Brave a New World? Dilemmas in Bioethics (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1981), 416.

principle of all morality,"¹ basically because it "provides the criterion for every moral judgment."² Moreover, it is felt that absolute moral rules can be retained if this theory is utilized.³

In his historical appraisal of this doctrine, Joseph Mangan notes that prior to the time of Thomas Aquinas there is no indication of a distinctly formulated principle of double effect.⁴ Mangan recognizes that it is not completely clear whether or not St. Thomas himself enunciated this principle as such;⁵ however, he concludes that Aquinas' discussion of killing in self-defense "is the historical beginning of the principle of double effect as a principle."⁶ Though this theory was elaborated on by some

¹Peter Knauer, S.J., "The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double Effect," in Curran, and McCormick, 1.

²Ibid., 2.

³J. L. Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1977), 162. Rakestraw, (p. 252) arguing for non-conflicting absolutism, says that the principle of double effect "can be helpful in the application of moral absolutes."

⁴Joseph T. Mangan, S.J., "An Historical Analysis of the Principle of Double Effect," Theological Studies 10 (March 1949): 42.

⁵Ibid., 43.

⁶Ibid., 61. Other scholars concur that in some manner this theory can be found in Aquinas. See, for example, Daniel Callahan, "The Roman Catholic Position," in Abortion: The Moral Issues, ed. Edward Batchelor, Jr. (New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1982), 69; Ramsey, War and the Christian Conscience, 39-40; May, "The Natural Law and Objective Morality," 188 (footnote #88); Kemp, 272.

commentators of St. Thomas' works during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the formulation most often cited by contemporary proponents of this principle is that of the nineteenth-century Jesuit priest, Joannes Gury.¹

The traditional formulation of the principle of double effect has four parts.² First, the action as distinguished from its effects, must itself be morally good or neutral, but not morally evil. Second, one must intend only its good direct effect; the indirect evil effect, though foreseen, must not be desired. Third, the bad effect is not to be a means to attain the good effect. And fourth, there must be a proportionate reason for tolerating the bad effect; that is, the good effect must be sufficiently desirable to compensate for allowing the evil effect.

Various writers have suggested that an illustration of how these conditions might be fulfilled can clearly be seen in the case of a pregnant woman who urgently needs a

¹Kemp, 273. See also, Blasi, 136. Unfortunately, a huge casuistry has built up over the centuries concerning the principle of double effect; Richard A. McCormick, S.J., "Double Effect, Principle of," Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics, ed. James F. Childress, and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986), 162. Rakestraw ("Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 253) notes that this principle has been used to justify even moral evils, such as, spreading the Christian gospel by the sword.

²See, for example, Neil Brown, The Worth of Persons: A Study in Christian Ethics, Faith and Culture Series, no. 7 (Sydney, Australia: Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1983), 101; Blasi, 135; Higginson, 93; Kemp, 273-274; Dwyer, 156-157; DiIanni, 350-351.

hysterectomy due to a fast spreading cancer of the uterus.¹ First, no moral objection can be raised against the operation in itself. Second, the death of the fetus is not the intention of the operation. Third, the "bad effect" of ending the life of the nonviable fetus is not the means for attaining the good effect of removing the cancerous tissue. And fourth, saving the life of the mother is at least as important a good as the continuation in life of the fetus.

In essence then, as Philippa Foot succinctly states, this doctrine "is based on a distinction between what a man foresees as a result of his voluntary action and what, in the strict sense, he intends."² In other words, "the principle of double-effect allows harm to be done to innocent people only as the indirect and unintended side-effect of an action which directly and for a proportionately serious reason intends a good effect."³ This resultant evil is considered by Catholic moral theologian Richard

¹See, for example, Dwyer, 157; Kemp, 275-276; Higginson, 93.

²Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect," in Moral Problems: A Collection of Philosophical Essays, 2nd ed., ed. James Rachels (New York, NY: Harper, & Row, Publishers, 1975), 60.

³John Madison Carville, "Love Transforming Justice in the Christian Ethics of Paul Ramsey" (S.T.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1973), 151.

McCormick an "unintended by-product" of the permissible action.¹

Admittedly, there are several scholars who feel that the principle of double effect has limitations, faults, and ambiguities.² Nevertheless, this theory, which promotes the doing of a good action which has a bad side effect, has been used for many years in an attempt to resolve conflicting moral obligations.³

Summary and Conclusions

The investigation of early Christian views on moral conflicts showed that, to some extent Augustine, yet more so Thomas Aquinas, believed that on certain issues God has permitted exceptions to absolute norms so as to avoid greater evils. The views of the two foremost Protestant Reformers were seen to be more divergent. While John Calvin held firmly to moral absolutes, Martin Luther pitted love

¹McCormick, "Double Effect, Principle of," 162. Higginson (p. 92) concurs saying: "Double effect really means side effect." McCormick posits that the two essential ingredients that led to the formulation of this principle were the necessity of a certain good act, and the inseparability of this good act from evil in the circumstances; McCormick, "Ambiguity in Moral Choice," 39.

²See, for example, Curran, Ongoing Revision in Moral Theology, 192; Higginson, 190; Dwyer, 159; Blasi, 138-139. Blasi (p. 139), who notes that the "principle of double effect seems to be faulty in several respects," gives this example of one of the problems: "The principle is altogether ambiguous with respect to what is to be understood from such terms as 'serious reason,' 'commensurate reason,' and 'proportionately grave reason.'"

³This is actually a kind of act utilitarianism.

against the law, and stated that the law must be suspended and ignored if someone might be hurt as a result of its being kept. A similar contrast of perspectives was observed between the two most renowned post-Reformation thinkers who addressed moral conflicts. On the one hand, Immanuel Kant held that moral conflicts are completely impossible, and that moral absolutes do not allow any exceptions. On the other hand, Søren Kierkegaard posited that there are times when obedience to God conflicts with ethical norms. On these occasions the norms should be suspended in view of the higher goal.

The literature considered above indicates that several thinkers discussed moral dilemmas in the twentieth century. Of the most notable ones, Emil Brunner maintained that these conflicts were only apparent and did not really exist. Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, however, asserting that moral conflicts are real, believed that exceptions from moral absolutes are permissible.

As was demonstrated, five different approaches to conflicting moral obligations have emerged over time. One of the earliest, utilitarianism, posits that there are no unchanging absolute moral norms. Thus, since whatever will produce the greatest good for the greatest number, is considered a right action, all conflicts can be resolved. While situationism does assert that conflicts between law and love can arise, it promptly eliminates the confrontation

by noting that whatever is the most loving action is the right thing to do. In contrast to the two above-mentioned relativistic theories, three approaches promoting moral absolutes were briefly outlined. The first of these, non-conflicting absolutism, holds that when correctly defined and comprehended, universal scriptural moral norms do not and cannot ever conflict. Conflicting absolutism, as the name implies, contends that in this fallen world moral absolutes do conflict. In these situations one is to do the lesser evil, recognize it as sin, and confess it to God seeking His pardon. Lastly, hierarchicalism, while it maintains that absolutes do conflict, suggests that in these circumstances the higher obligation should be followed. Since the lower duty is suspended at that point, this action is not sinful.

Finally, the principle of double effect was considered. This centuries-old theory can clearly be observed as an attempt to provide a formal and structured procedure for handling conflict situations. In essence, it claims that whenever there is a moral conflict, one may perform a morally good or morally neutral action which has an indirect and unintended evil side effect, as long as there is a sufficiently good reason for permitting this bad side effect. In this way, this strategy attempts to retain moral absolutes, as well as resolve ethical conflicts.

While the above study of the variety of ways in which moral conflicts have been and are being addressed is by no means exhaustive, it does provide both a broad outline of different approaches and methodologies related to ethical dilemmas, as well as a sufficient general background for the detailed investigation of the hierarchical ethics of Norman Geisler. Before undertaking the description, analysis and evaluation of Geisler's ethical methodology, however, it will be essential to consider his personal philosophical, theological and ethical evolution and development. This will provide a framework for a clearer understanding and a better appreciation of Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism.

CHAPTER III

NORMAN L. GEISLER: THE MAN AND HIS THOUGHT

In the mid-1960s the Protestant clergyman Joseph Fletcher suggested a novel method of approaching borderline cases in his book Situation Ethics: The New Morality.¹ As a young evangelical pastor, Norman L. Geisler was one of those who read Fletcher's volume and contemplated the perplexing ethical issues that were raised in it. Even before the reading of this publication, Geisler had already been deliberating on the various logical alternative methods of dealing with ethical problems in the contemporary Christian world. However, it was on reading Situation Ethics: The New Morality that, as Geisler puts it, "I was awakened from my dogmatic slumbers."² The type of predicaments discussed in Fletcher's book confirmed Geisler in his belief that real moral conflicts occur in this world. Then he looked at Bible stories and concluded that "there

¹Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics: The New Morality (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1966).

²Norman L. Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic," cassette (Lynchburg VA: Quest Productions, 1989). Geisler was here quoting the words of Immanuel Kant who reacted this way on reading David Hume.

are a lot of real conflicts right in the Bible."¹ Thus, Geisler's conviction that there are ethical dilemmas in both the real world and the Scriptures became the two most vital concepts that went into his thinking as he worked on formulating his method of hierarchical ethics.

Recognizing that many factors impact and form one's perspective, this chapter aims at elucidating the primary elements that have gone into the philosophical, theological and ethical development of Norman Geisler, so as to better understand his hierarchical approach to ethics. His formative training, shaping influences, major concerns, and the significance he personally attaches to his hierarchicalism are all appraised with a view to understanding how they relate to his overall approach to ethics.

The investigation of Geisler and his thought will proceed as follows. First, there is an introductory biographical sketch, tracing Norman Geisler's life from birth through to the present. Then, this chapter focuses on the formative influences that played a major part in Geisler's theological and philosophical pilgrimage. Next, this chapter attempts to demonstrate the significance and the extent of Geisler's voluminous and diverse concerns in the areas of theology, philosophy, and ethics. After an

¹Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

investigation of the importance that Geisler personally places on ethical hierarchicalism, a short summary and conclusion closes the chapter.

Biographical Sketch

Norman Leo Geisler was born on July 21, 1932, in Warren, Michigan, the son of a factory worker, Alphonsus Herbert, and Bertha Mae (Rottmann) Geisler.¹ His father, Alphonsus, was an ex-Roman Catholic, and his mother, Bertha, an ex-nominal Lutheran. Furthermore, Norman Geisler's favorite uncle, who was his role model when he was young, was an atheist. Thus, as Geisler puts it, from his family's side, his "religious training was nil."² At the age of nine someone took him to a Vacation Bible School, and thereafter to Sunday School every week up until he was 17 years old.

It was at this point in his life that Norman Geisler, on February 12, 1950, experienced a personal conversion. He recalls: "I came home from Sunday School, got down on my knees by my bed, committed my life to Christ, and immediately began serving Christ."³ Because his family

¹Who's Who in Religion, 2d ed. (Chicago, IL: Marquis Who's Who, Inc., 1977), 229; Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, ed. Hal May, and James G. Lesniak, (Detroit, MI: Book Tower, 1989), 182.

²Personal interview with Norman L. Geisler at Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, on December 31, 1990.

³Ibid.

was essentially non-Christian and very anti-God, they told him that he could not be a Christian, and that he "had to give up Christ."¹ Even though he loved his parents, Geisler chose to remain faithful to his commitment to God.² Right after his dedication to Christ, the youth directors of his church got him involved in many outreach activities. Within a short time Geisler began to feel called into the ministry, at which point he enrolled at William Tyndale College in the fall of 1950.³

Upon graduation from this college with a diploma in theology, Geisler married a pianist, Barbara Jean Cate, on June 24, 1955. Six children were born from this union: Ruth, David, Daniel, Rhoda, Paul, and Rachel.⁴ Over time several grandchildren have been added to Geisler's family as well.

¹Norman L. Geisler, "Love: A Responsible Attitude," in Practical Christianity, ed. LaVonne Neff, Ron Beers, Bruce Barton, Linda Taylor, Dave Veerman, and Jim Galvin (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1987), 226.

²Geisler (ibid., 226-227) notes: "I continued to love my folks by caring for them and by praying for them. Not long afterward, they realized I was sincere in dedicating and committing myself to Christ, so they asked me to pray at meals. Year [sic] later, I was able to lead my father to Christ when he was in the hospital. I shared John 3:16 with him and read his name into the verse. He responded."

³Personal Interview, 1990. This college was then known as Detroit Bible College.

⁴Who's Who in Religion, 229.

During the years of his ministry Geisler, a conservative evangelical Christian who votes Republican, has lectured and traveled widely. He has ministered in all 50 states of the United States of America, as well as in two dozen countries on six continents.¹ Even with all his commitments, Geisler has found time for his hobbies of collecting rocks and fossils, skiing, sailing, and woodworking.²

Geisler has been a pastor, educator, administrator, philosopher, theologian, and an ethicist. One day when asked how he measures his success, he responded: "I measure my own accomplishment by the standard of God's Word. In the final analysis, have I brought every thought captive to Christ? I am successful to the degree that I think and live Christocentrically and captivate every thought, whether it happens to be about politics or ethics or family, in the light of Christ and His revelation in His Word."³

Theological and Philosophical Pilgrimage

As mentioned above, Norman Geisler regularly attended Sunday School during his formative years. This religious community was very conservative in their views,

¹Norman L. Geisler, *Personal Vitae*, given to the writer of this research project.

²Contemporary Authors, 182.

³Angela Elwell Hunt, "Norm Geisler: The World Is His Classroom," Fundamentalist Journal, September, 1988, 21.

and over time evolved from an independent group, called the Calvary Community Church, into a Baptist church. As Geisler notes: "That's the church in which I got my initial training, and that's the church in which I was baptized and became a member."¹ The William Tyndale College, where he then went to study for the ministry, was a conservative evangelical Bible school. Geisler's conservative training continued when he later attended Wheaton College, where he received a B.A. in Philosophy in 1958, and then at Wheaton Graduate School, where he graduated with an M.A. in Theology in 1960.² He recalls that he "never seriously entertained the liberal or neo-orthodox views"³ as he was growing up and engaging in his training for the ministry.

Geisler, however, did not wait to complete his training before getting involved in ministry. As indicated above, as soon as he was baptized he became really active in his community church. While still working on his first college diploma he ministered as Christian Services Director for the Northeast Suburban Youth for Christ organization in Detroit from 1952-1954. On completion of his theology diploma, he pastored the Dayton Center Church in Silverwood, Michigan from 1955-1957. It was during this, his first fulltime pastorate, that Geisler was ordained to the

¹Personal Interview, 1990.

²Geisler, Personal Vitae.

³Personal Interview, 1990.

ministry in the Independent Church in 1956. Then, around the time he was at Wheaton in Illinois, he served as assistant pastor of the River Grove Bible Church from 1958-1959. Upon receiving his Master's degree he again pastored in Michigan, this time at the Memorial Baptist Church in Warren from 1960-1963.¹

It was while Geisler was working on his master's degree and while serving as pastor in Warren that he began to make the transition from pastoring to teaching. For, from 1959-1962 he served as a parttime instructor, and then from 1963-1966 as fulltime Assistant Professor in Bible and Apologetics at his alma mater, William Tyndale College.²

Following this, from 1967-1970 Geisler attended Loyola University in Chicago, where he worked on and completed a Ph.D. in Philosophy. By the time he graduated in 1970, Geisler had done study in philosophy at several other educational institutions: Wayne State University Graduate School in 1964; the University of Detroit Graduate School, from 1965-1966; and Northwestern University in 1968.³ Also, toward the end of his doctoral studies, Geisler was employed at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School as Visiting Professor of Religion from 1969-1970. The following year he worked fulltime as Associate Professor of

¹Who's Who in Religion, 229.

²Ibid.

³Geisler, *Personal Vitae*.

Philosophy at Trinity College. The same year he became Chairman of the Philosophy of Religion Department at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, a position he held through 1979. The next nine years, 1979-1988, he spent as Professor of Systematic Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary. Then, after a short stint, from 1989-1991, as Dean of Liberty Center for Research and Scholarship at Liberty University, he started up his own theological training center in Charlotte, North Carolina. Currently, Geisler is Dean and Chief Executive Officer of this institute, the Southern Evangelical Seminary.¹

Some have concluded that Geisler's thinking and philosophy were shaped when he attended Loyola University, a Jesuit Catholic educational institution.² For example, Gordon Clark has stated that a section of Geisler's Introduction to Philosophy has an "interpretation of Aquinas sponsored at Loyola University."³ Also, Guy Greenfield has observed that Geisler's Christian Ethics has a "Thomistic rationalistic style."⁴ Moreover, in reviewing Geisler's Christian Apologetics, Clark Pinnock observes that "to

¹Ibid.

²See Guy Greenfield, review of Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Southwestern Journal of Theology 33 (Summer 1991): 54.

³Gordon H. Clark, review of Introduction to Philosophy, by Norman L. Geisler, in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 24 (December 1981): 350.

⁴Ibid.

employ Geisler's system requires that one first be baptized into Thomistic thought."¹ Then, too, Kenneth Boa, in his doctoral dissertation which compared and analyzed four approaches to Christian apologetics, concluded that "Geisler's thinking has been greatly influenced by the work of Aquinas, and his apologetic system reflects a modified version of Thomistic philosophy."²

While his time at Loyola undoubtedly affected his thinking, Geisler himself indicates that his conversion to Thomism actually took place a decade earlier when he attended the University of Detroit, a Jesuit school, from 1956-1957. He reminisces: "I was required to take a minor in philosophy, and most Jesuit schools were heavily influenced at that time by Thomas Aquinas. My first course was one in the Theory of Knowledge. The second course was a most exciting course--The Metaphysics of Infinite Being. It was at this point that I became intellectually converted to Thomism. I saw it as the solution to the evangelical apologetic problem, as a solution to the evangelical view of God. I became especially interested in Aquinas' apologetics and theology proper."³

¹Clark H. Pinnock, review of Christian Apologetics, by Norman L. Geisler, in Christian Scholar's Review 8 (1979): 384-385.

²Kenneth D. Boa, "A Comparative Study of Four Christian Apologetic Systems," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1985), 152.

³Personal Interview, 1990.

Geisler openly credits Aquinas with "having the most influence on my life."¹ Believing that there are other Protestants who are "closet Thomists," Geisler has asserted that "there is really a strong but too often silent minority among us who are directly dependent on Aquinas for our basic theology, philosophy, and/or apologetics."² He states that he does not naively and uncritically accept everything that Aquinas has written.³ Yet, he has such a high regard for this thirteenth-century thinker, that he says: "I gladly confess that the highest compliment that could be paid to me as a Christian philosopher, apologist, and theologian is to call me 'Thomistic.'"⁴ And that is precisely what some

¹Hunt, 20. Geisler says that he chose Thomas Aquinas as his most admired hero because, "he was the most brilliant, most comprehensive, and most systematic of all Christian thinkers and perhaps of all thinkers of all time;" Hunt, 21.

²Norman L. Geisler, Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 14. See also the 1974 presentation on Thomas Aquinas, which Geisler later revised and published; Norman L. Geisler, "A New Look at the Relevance of Thomism for Evangelical Apologetics," Christian Scholar's Review 4 (1975): 192.

³For example, he does not agree with Aquinas' view on transubstantiation, infant baptism, the sacraments, his acceptance of the Apocrypha as part of the canon of Scripture, his acceptance of the divine authority of the Roman Catholic Church, etc.; Geisler, Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal, 177.

⁴Geisler, Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal, 14.

scholars¹ have classified him as. Other thinkers have labelled him a "Neo-Thomist".²

In his volume on Aquinas, Geisler posits that in their Reformation zeal, Protestants have erred in throwing out the Thomistic baby with the Romanistic bath water. He then makes this ecumenical appeal concerning Thomism: "Let us take it to our evangelical bosom, bathe it in a biblically based theology, and nourish it to its full strength."³

Even though he considers Thomas Aquinas his most admired hero,⁴ and one who has had the most influence on

¹See Richard Purdy, who says: "Norman Geisler is one contemporary dedicated to the renewal of Thomistic apologetics--a methodology long rejected by both Reformers and Evangelicals;" Richard Allan Purdy, "Carl Henry and Contemporary Apologetics: An Assessment of the Rational Apologetic Methodology of Carl F. H. Henry in the Context of the Current Impasse Between Reformed and Evangelical Apologetics" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1980), 10. See also, David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, eds., The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975), 43; Donald G. Bloesch, Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 181.

²See Winfried Corduan, "Neo-Thomism," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 758; Boa, 153; Purdy, 300.

³Geisler, Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal, 23. More than a decade before this book was published, Purdy (p. 158) suggested that Geisler was "attempting to bridge Protestant and Roman Catholic apologetics." This ecumenical approach is confirmed here.

⁴Hunt, 21.

his life,¹ Geisler maintains that Aquinas' perspectives on ethics "had no influence on me whatsoever."² He notes that he had no knowledge of, and never took any courses in Aquinas' ethics. Furthermore, he asserts that he only found out what Aquinas believed on ethics after he had developed his own method of hierarchical ethics, and after he had written his first book on ethics, which was published in 1971. He concludes that Aquinas' ethics "had absolutely nothing to do with the development of my view."³

Nevertheless, Geisler does admit that, while attending a philosophy class in the mid-1950s at the University of Detroit, he may have read about the principle of double effect, an ethical perspective promoted by Thomas Aquinas. As Geisler correctly recognizes, this concept has "similarities with ethical hierarchicalism."⁴ Though he states that "it had nothing to do, consciously, with the development of hierarchicalism,"⁵ it is quite likely that unconsciously this Thomistic ethical concept may have in some way shaped Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism.

¹Ibid., 20.

²Personal Interview, 1990.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid. Also, Geisler insists that, "the application of the principle of double effect to my hierarchicalism was an afterthought;" *ibid.*

In addition to being correctly classified as a Thomist or Neo-Thomist, Geisler's approach has been labelled "rationalistic" by some.¹ Geisler, however, emphatically denies that he is a rationalist.² Yet, if rationalism is defined as that which "emphasizes the use of logical criteria (e.g., the law of non-contradiction, cause-and-effect reasoning, self-consistency, comprehensiveness, [and] coherence) in the determination of the validity of competing religious philosophies,"³ then, as Kenneth Boa has concluded in his doctoral research, Geisler's apologetic methodology can rightly be described as "rationalistic apologetics."⁴ In addition, Geisler's philosophical perspective has been labelled "evangelical rationalism."⁵

¹See, for example, Boa, 158.

²Geisler says: "I am not a rationalist. . . . I do, of course, believe God has given and expects us to use our reason;" Norman L. Geisler, "Avoid All Contradictions: A Surrejoinder to John Dahms," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 22 (June 1979): 158.

³Boa, 55-56. Boa (p. 56) amplifies this, adding: "This form of apologetics uses these criteria to refute the truth claims of non-Christian world views and to establish a natural theology through theistic proofs. Rationalistic apologists have a confidence in the rationalistic abilities of the mind, believing that the Imago Dei in the area was not radically distorted by the fall of man."

⁴Boa (p. 118) writes: "Though he [Geisler] would not consider himself a rationalist, the apologetic method he has developed fits the definition and description of rationalistic apologetics."

⁵See J. W. Cooper, review of Introduction to Philosophy, by Norman L. Geisler, in Calvin Theological Journal 16 (April 1981): 89.

Moreover, his approach to ethics has also been considered "rationalistic."¹ A perusal of Geisler's ethical works appears to verify this as a valid characterization of his perspective.²

Overview of Geisler's Concerns

A scrutiny of the many audio cassettes, articles, and books produced by Dr. Norman Geisler over the years reveals that he has a wide variety of concerns. This breadth of interest can be well illustrated by an examination of the topics of many of his audio tapes.³ For example, he has produced several tapes on the history of philosophy, and on faith and reason, in which he deals with the thinking of people such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Karl Barth, Schleiermacher, etc. Other tapes of his address matters of philosophy (e.g., epistemology, metaphysics, etc.), and prolegomena (e.g., worldviews, methodology, etc.). He has engaged in debates with humanists, evolutionists, and atheists, and has attempted to respond to the major questions asked by skeptics concerning Christianity. He has

¹See, for example, Greenfield, 53.

²Chapter 5 that deals with a critical analysis of Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism will either validate or negate this characterization of Geisler's ethical approach.

³The information below comes from a promotional pamphlet, "Powerhouse," March 1994, produced by Powerhouse Christian Tapes and Books, P.O. Box 859, Clayton, CA.

lectured on information pertaining to the Bible, theology, apologetics, and religions and cults. In addition to several tapes on ethical principles and issues, he has discoursed on matters as divergent as civil disobedience, gambling, space technology, alcohol, logic, ecology, and even guidelines for Christian voting.

Moreover, Norman Geisler has published articles which have appeared in books, reference works, and periodicals, covering topics such as, Bible manuscripts,¹ biblical inerrancy,² hermeneutics,³ christology,⁴

¹See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "The Extent of the Old Testament Canon," in Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 31-46; Norman L. Geisler, "Bible Manuscripts," in Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, and John Rea (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1975), 1:248-257.

²See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "The Concept of Truth in the Contemporary Inerrancy Debate," in The Living and Active Word of God, ed. Morris Inch, and Ronald Youngblood (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 225-236; Norman L. Geisler, "Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy," in Inerrancy, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 305-324.

³See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "The Relation of Purpose and Meaning in Interpreting Scripture," Grace Theological Journal 5 (Fall 1984): 229-245; Norman L. Geisler, "Methodological Unorthodoxy," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 26 (March 1983): 87-94.

⁴See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "Current Chalcedonian Christological Challenges," Evangelical Review of Theology 12 (October 1988): 307-324; Norman L. Geisler, "The Significance of Christ's Physical Resurrection," Bibliotheca Sacra 146 (April-June 1989): 148-170.

creationism,¹ the New Age movement,² evangelism,³
 secularism,⁴ Christian standards,⁵ atheism,⁶ Thomism,⁷

¹See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "Creationism: A Case for Equal Time," Christianity Today 26 (19 March 1982): 26-29; Norman L. Geisler, "Creator in the Courtroom," Fundamentalist Journal 1 (December 1982): 21-23, 53, 64; Norman L. Geisler, "Is Creation-Science Science or Religion?" Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation 36 (September 1984): 149-155.

²See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "The New Age Movement," Bibliotheca Sacra 144 (January-March 1987): 79-104.

³See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "Excuses: A Testimony of Personal Evangelism," Fundamentalist Journal 3 (February 1984): 12-14; Norman L. Geisler, "Some Philosophical Perspectives on Missionary Dialogue," in Theology and Mission, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 241-257; Norman L. Geisler, "Ethical Aspects of Evangelism with Particular Reference to Patients," in Evangelism for the Medical & Dental Professions, ed. Leonard W. Ritzmann (Richardson, TX: Evangelism Commission of the Christian Medical Society, 1985), 23-44.

⁴See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, et al, "Is Baer Right? Christian Authorities on Secularism Respond," Christianity Today 28 (17 February 1984): 16-19.

⁵See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "A Christian Perspective on Wine-Drinking," Bibliotheca Sacra 139 (January-March 1982): 46-56; Norman L. Geisler, "The Christian as Pleasure-Seeker," Christianity Today 19 (26 September 1975): 8, 11, 12; Norman L. Geisler, "Let's Drop Unbiblical Rules for Church Membership," Christianity Today 13 (31 January 1969): 393-394.

⁶See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "The Collapse of Modern Atheism," in The Intellectuals Speak about God, ed. Roy Abraham Varghese (Chicago, IL: Regnery Gateway, 1984), 129-152.

⁷See, for example, Geisler, "A New Look at the Relevance of Thomism for Evangelical Apologetics," 189-200; Norman L. Geisler, "Thomas Aquinas," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 1091-1092.

predestination,¹ philosophy,² process theology,³
 dispensationalism and ethics,⁴ legislating morality,⁵ the

¹See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "God Knows All Things," in Predestination & Free Will, ed. David Basinger, and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 63-84; Norman L. Geisler, "Man's Destiny: Free or Forced," Christian Scholar's Review 9 (1979): 99-109; Norman L. Geisler, "Freedom, Free Will, and Determinism," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 428-430; Norman L. Geisler, "Is Inerrancy Incompatible with the Free Will Defense?" Evangelical Quarterly 42 (April 1990): 175-178.

²See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "Philosophy: The Roots of Vain Deceit," Christianity Today 21 (20 May 1977): 8-12; Norman L. Geisler, "Analogy: The Only Answer to the Problem of Religious Language," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 16 (Summer 1973): 167-179; Norman L. Geisler, "The Missing Premise in the Ontological Argument," Religious Studies 9 (1973): 289-296.

³See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "Process Theology," in Tensions in Contemporary Theology, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, and Alan F. Johnson (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1976), 237-284; Norman L. Geisler, "Process Theology and Inerrancy," in Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response, ed. Gordon Lewis, and Bruce Demarest (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984), 247-284; Norman L. Geisler, "Process Theology: A Survey and an Appraisal," Themelios 12 (September 1986): 15-22.

⁴See, for example, "The Use of the Bible in Social Ethics VI: Dispensationalism and Ethics," Transformation 6 (January/March 1989): 7-14; Personal Interview, 1990.

⁵See, for example, "Church and State: Wall of Separation or Bridge of Cooperation," Cornerstone 16: 10-12; Norman L. Geisler, "A Premillennial View of Law and Government," Moody 86 (October 1985): 129-131; Norman L. Geisler, "A Premillennial View of Law and Government," Bibliotheca Sacra 142 (July-September 1985): 250-266; Norman L. Geisler, "A Biblical View of Government," Rutherford Institute 2 (January/February 1985): 8, 9, 12; Norman L. Geisler, "Should We Legislate Morality?" Fundamentalist Journal 7 (July/August 1988): 16, 17, 64.

sanctity of life,¹ and biblical absolutes and moral conflicts.²

Over a period of 25 years Geisler has authored or coauthored dozens of books on a variety of subjects, which have been produced by several publishing houses. He has written many volumes on apologetics,³ and several books

¹See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "Sanctity of Human Life," in Applying the Scriptures, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 139-160; Norman L. Geisler, "The Bible, Abortion, and Common Sense," Fundamentalist Journal 4 (May 1985): 24-27; Norman L. Geisler, "The Arguments for Abortion Are Strong, If . . . ," Moody 87 (September 1986): 89-90; Norman L. Geisler, "Animal Rights or Human Wrongs," Fundamentalist Journal 8 (October 1989): 66; "Three Evangelicals Ponder the 'Right to Die'," Evangelical Newsletter 3 (7 May 1976).

²See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society 2 (1979); Norman L. Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," Trinity Journal 4 (September 1975): 82-87; Norman L. Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," Bibliotheca Sacra 131 (July-September 1974): 219-228.

³See, for example, Norman L. Geisler Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976). Michael Hill (p. 88) classifies the work in this volume as "a fundamentally sound overall approach to Christian apologetics;" Michael Hill, review of Christian Apologetics, by Norman L. Geisler, in Reformed Theological Review 36 (September-December 1977): 87-88; Norman L. Geisler, The Roots of Evil, Christian Free University Curriculum Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978). F. R. Howe (p. 375) says this book is "well-outlined and carefully organized" and "merits a wide and careful reading;" F. R. Howe, review of The Roots of Evil, by Norman L. Geisler, in Bibliotheca Sacra 137 (October-December 1980): 375; Norman L. Geisler, Miracles and Modern Thought, Christian Free University Curriculum Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982); Norman L. Geisler, and Ronald M. Brooks, Christianity Under Attack (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Publications, 1985); Norman L. Geisler, The Battle for the Resurrection (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989); David K. Clark, and Norman L. Geisler, Apologetics in

dealing with the study of the Bible.¹ Besides some publications addressing issues of current religious interest,² Geisler has produced three volumes on creationism.³ He has also authored texts dealing with

the New Age (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990); Norman L. Geisler, and Ronald M. Brooks, When Skeptics Ask (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990); Norman L. Geisler, In Defense of the Resurrection (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Publications, 1991); Geisler, Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal; Norman L. Geisler, Miracles and the Modern Mind: A Defense of Biblical Miracles (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991); Norman L. Geisler, and Thomas A. Howe, When Critics Ask: A Handbook on Bible Difficulties (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992); Norman L. Geisler, and Abdul Saleeb, Answering Islam (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993).

¹See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, and William E. Nix, A General Introduction to the Bible (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968; rev. ed., 1986); Norman L. Geisler, Christ, the Theme of the Bible (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968); Norman L. Geisler, and William E. Nix, From God to Us (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974); Norman L. Geisler, A Popular Survey of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977); Norman L. Geisler, To Understand the Bible--Look for Jesus (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979); Norman L. Geisler, Decide for Yourself: How History Views the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982).

²See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, Cosmos: Carl Sagan's Religion for the Scientific Mind (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Publications, 1983); Norman L. Geisler, and J. Yutaka Amano, The Religion of the Force (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Publications, 1983); Norman L. Geisler, Signs and Wonders (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1988); Norman L. Geisler, and J. Yutaka Amano, The Infiltration of the New Age (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989).

³See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, A. F. Brooke II, and Mark J. Keough, The Creator in the Classroom--Scopes II (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982); Norman L. Geisler, and J. Kerby Anderson, Origin Science: A Proposal for the Creation-Evolution Controversy (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987). Russ Bush (p. 75) notes that this book contains "a good proposal, one that has intellectual and philosophical merit;" L. Russ Bush, review of Origin Science: A Proposal for the Creation-Evolution Controversy, by Norman L. Geisler, and J. Kerby Anderson, in Southwestern

philosophy.¹ In addition to all of this, Geisler has drafted several books on ethical issues,² as well as four

Journal of Theology 30 (Spring 1988): 75; Norman L. Geisler, Knowing the Truth about Creation: How It Happened and What It Means (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Press, 1989).

¹See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, Philosophy of Religion (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974). J. A. Witmer (p. 185) called the first edition "an excellent treatise," and one that "will unquestioningly serve as the standard textbook for courses in the philosophy of religion in evangelical colleges and seminaries for many years to come;" J. A. Witmer, review of Philosophy of Religion, by Norman L. Geisler, in Bibliotheca Sacra 139 (April-June 1982): 184-185; Norman L. Geisler, and Winfried Corduan, Philosophy of Religion, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988). Russ Bush (p. 61) calls the second edition "an essential introductory work;" L. Russ Bush, review of Philosophy of Religion, by Norman L. Geisler, and Winfried Corduan, in Southwestern Journal of Theology 32 (Fall 1989): 61; Norman L. Geisler, and Paul D. Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980). Russ Bush (p. 87) calls this "a competent volume;" L. Russ Bush, review of Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, by Norman L. Geisler, and Paul D. Feinberg, in Southwestern Journal of Theology 24 (Spring 1982): 86-87; Norman L. Geisler, Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983). Bradley Hayton (p. 48) refers to this book as "a truly academically respectable evaluation of humanism;" Bradley P. Hayton, review of Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism, in Christianity Today 28 (17 February 1984): 48-49; Norman L. Geisler, and William D. Watkins, Perspectives: Understanding and Evaluating Today's World Views (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1984); Norman L. Geisler, and J. Yutaka Amano, The Reincarnation Sensation (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986); Norman L. Geisler, Worlds Apart: A Handbook on World Views (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989); Norman L. Geisler, Come Let Us Reason: An Introduction to Logical Thinking (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990).

²See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, To Drink or Not to Drink: A Sober Look at the Problem (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Publications, 1984); J. P. Moreland, and Norman L. Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time (New York, NY: Praeger, 1990); Norman L. Geisler, and Thomas A. Howe, Gambling: A Bad Bet (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H.

volumes that are primarily devoted to an elaboration of his method of ethical hierarchicalism.¹

The above enumeration of the concerns of Geisler aptly illustrates the broad scope of his interests, particularly in the areas of philosophy, theology, and ethics. This interest in the field of ethics, especially the significance that Geisler himself attaches to his own ethical methodology, will now be explored.

The Importance of Ethical Hierarchicalism

The measure of relevance and import that Norman Geisler attaches to the method of ethical hierarchicalism can be assessed in various ways. Most vital to this

Revell, 1990); Norman L. Geisler, Civil Disobedience: When Is It Right? Should Christians Ever Break the Law? (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Publications, 1990); Francis J. Beckwith, and Norman L. Geisler, Matters of Life and Death: Calm Answers to Tough Questions about Abortion and Euthanasia (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).

¹Norman L. Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971). Harold Kuhn (p. 96) says that this book "is a valuable contribution to Evangelical literature in general, and to the ethical endeavors of evangelicals in particular;" Harold B. Kuhn, review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 16 (Spring 1973): 95-96; Norman L. Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973); Norman L. Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981); Norman L. Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989). James Grier (p. 258) notes that this book "is worthy of careful consideration as a textbook in ethics for both graduate and undergraduate schools of Christian education;" James M. Grier, review of Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Grace Theological Journal 10 (Fall 1989): 257-258.

appraisal are the actual statements as well as direct implications made by Geisler in his own works. In his first major volume on ethics, Geisler outlined what he considers the "six basic approaches to ethics."¹ In a subsequent notable revision of this work, Geisler, in the opening chapter titled, "All the Options," restates his view even more unequivocally, noting that "there are only six major ethical systems."² Of these six methods, Geisler rejects three--antinomianism, situationism, and generalism--as unacceptable and inadequate for Christians since they are "non-absolutisms" and since they are not "firmly rooted in the unchanging moral character of God."³ Geisler then outlines the other three approaches, all of which are ethical absolutisms: non-conflicting absolutism, conflicting absolutism, and hierarchicalism.⁴ After delineating and evaluating non-conflicting and conflicting absolutism, he asserts that these views have "serious problems."⁵ Then, claiming that these two views are inadequate for Christians,

¹Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 13.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 25 (emphasis added).

³Ibid., 29.

⁴Ibid., 79-132. These three approaches are also referred to respectively as "unqualified absolutism" or the "third-alternative view," "ideal absolutism" or the "lesser-evil view," and "graded absolutism" or the "greater-good view."

⁵Ibid., 113. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 114.

Geisler notes that "some kind of greater good view must be true."¹ He concludes: "Hierarchicalism is the best synthesis of the tendencies and emphases of the other positions."² Not only does ethical hierarchicalism appear to Geisler as "the most adequate"³ approach, in his thinking it is "the only adequate view."⁴

A decade after his first volume on ethics, Geisler came out with Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, written specifically with the evangelical Christian in mind. By means of this book on hierarchical ethics Geisler hoped to provide a "biblical, comprehensive, and consistent"⁵ approach for ethical decision-making in the twentieth century.⁶ In this book he posits that "graded absolutism [i.e., hierarchicalism] seems to be the only viable

¹Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 136.

³Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 75.

⁴Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 427 (emphasis added). Pack (pp. 44-45) says that Geisler believes his approach, "proven to be the only philosophical and the only ethical approach to which men are led intuitively, is unveiled in all of its splendor biblically;" Rolland W. Pack, "An Examination of Norman L. Geisler's Ethic of Hierarchy" (M.A. thesis, Harding College, 1979).

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 8.

⁶Ibid.

option."¹ Noting that his method is not merely for conflicting situations, Geisler posits that hierarchicalism is a way of thinking "that covers 100 percent of life's situations."² Believing that his ethical methodology "is not only consistent with biblical Christianity, but also provides a viable answer to many problems in both Scripture and society,"³ Geisler expressed the hope "that evangelicals will increasingly see the value of graded absolutism [i.e., hierarchicalism]."⁴

That Geisler believes his hierarchical ethics is crucial and vitally important can be observed from the fact that, over the years, he has produced audio cassettes,⁵ and several journal and magazine articles championing it, either directly or indirectly.⁶ In addition, in books devoted to

¹Ibid., 101 (emphasis added).

²Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

³Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 114.

⁴Ibid.

⁵See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "How to Resolve Moral Conflicts," cassette (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Productions, 1989); Norman L. Geisler, "Is Lying Ever Right?" cassette (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Productions, 1989); Norman L. Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

⁶See, for example, Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics;" Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism;" Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts;" Norman L. Geisler, "Morality: The New and the True," Pastor's Quarterly 2 (Spring 1969); Norman L. Geisler, "Any Chance for Morality? Part 2," The Standard, 15 February 1973, 20-

specific ethical issues Geisler has promoted a hierarchical approach.¹ Furthermore, even in volumes not dealing with ethics, he has introduced material fostering his ethical methodology.²

Several Christian thinkers have recognized that Norman Geisler is the leading exponent of ethical hierarchicalism.³ His work is considered significant and thought-provoking,⁴ systematic,⁵ based on a sound biblical

22; Norman L. Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," Evangelical Journal 4 (Fall 1986): 82-87.

¹See, for example, Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 16-18, 151-153; Beckwith, and Geisler, Matters of Life and Death: Calm Answers to Tough Questions about Abortion and Euthanasia, 77-79, 156, 157.

²See, for example, Geisler, "Love: A Responsible Attitude;" Norman L. Geisler, "Ethical Aspects of Evangelism with Particular Reference to Patients;" Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy, 408-427; Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 282-288.

³See, for example, C. Gordon Olson, "Norman Geisler's Hierarchical Ethics Revisited," Evangelical Journal 4 (Spring 1986): 4; William F. Luck, "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics: A Second Look at the Salvaging Operations," Grace Theological Journal 8 (Spring 1987): 20; Robert V. Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," Criswell Theological Review 2 (Spring 1988): 246 (footnote #14).

⁴Robert V. Rakestraw, "Graded Absolutism: An Analysis of Norman Geisler's Ethics," 1983, TMs [photocopy], p. 2, a paper presented at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Langhorne, PA.

⁵Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 242.

theology,¹ and as the best way of explaining several dilemmatic situations recorded in the Scriptures.²

The significance of hierarchicalism is perhaps best articulated by Rolland Pack who wrote his master's thesis on Geisler's ethical method. In his concluding chapter Pack notes: "It is clear that Norman Geisler believes that hierarchicalism is the only true ethical system. He believes that anyone accepting God's revealed ethic must espouse the ethic of hierarchy. Consequently, his explanation and defense of hierarchicalism is momentous."³

Summary and Conclusions

Even though he was raised in a non-Christian family and in an environment somewhat hostile to God, Norman Geisler, through the interest and concern of others, was able to attend church regularly for several years as a child and young man. After making a personal commitment to Christ when he was 17 years old, he went to train to be a pastor.

Both the church he attended in his youth as well as the colleges where he obtained his ministerial training helped to mold him into a conservative evangelical

¹Louis Goldberg, review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Moody 73 (September 1972): 58.

²Joseph S. Wang, review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Asbury Seminarian 26 (July 1972): 44.

³Pack, 151 (emphasis added).

Christian. He pastored for several years in Michigan and Illinois, and then began to move into the area of lecturing.

He did graduate work in philosophy at four universities, completing his doctorate in 1970 at Loyola University, a Roman Catholic institution. While it is likely that his study at Loyola did affect his thinking, Geisler maintains that he was intellectually converted to Thomism more than a decade earlier. He credits Thomas Aquinas with having the most influence on his life, and considers it the highest compliment to be called a "Thomist." Though Geisler asserts that Aquinas' ethical thinking had no conscious influence on his own ethical methodology, the similarities between Aquinas' principle of double effect and his own hierarchicalism suggest that his view may have been unconsciously shaped by Aquinas. Geisler has also been labelled a "rationalist," a characterization that he strongly disputes.

As a scholar, lecturer, and author, Geisler has been producing a prolific amount of material. He has put out literally hundreds of audio cassettes, scores of articles which have appeared in journals, collections, and reference works, and dozens of books. A perusal of this material indicates the broad range of Geisler's thinking and interests, covering topics such as, epistemology, worldviews, philosophy, humanism, evolution, atheism, cults,

civil disobedience, logic, biblical inerrancy, theodicy, hermeneutics, ethical theory, and the New Age Movement.

Geisler himself attaches great significance to his theory of ethical hierarchicalism. In his major volumes on ethical theory he has outlined and evaluated what he considers the only six approaches to ethics. He discards the three non-absolutistic methodologies as unacceptable for Christians, and then posits that non-conflicting and conflicting absolutism have such serious problems that they are also inadequate for Bible believers. Geisler thus concludes that hierarchicalism is the best and only adequate ethical view to hold. He maintains that this method is comprehensive, consistent, and biblical--the only true ethical approach for Christians.

Clearly Norman Geisler has already lived a full and eventful life. His participation in scholarly activities is of a scale unequaled by many. Yet, as he himself has noted, he gauges his success by the standard of the Word of God. Recognizing the importance and significance that Geisler personally places on his hierarchicalism, the following chapter will undertake an extended and intense investigation and elaboration of this ethical perspective.

CHAPTER IV

DESCRIPTIVE OUTLINE OF ETHICAL HIERARCHICALISM

Even though he had briefly mentioned his approach to moral conflicts in a 1969 article,¹ Geisler's first full-length treatment of this ethical methodology was published in 1971 in his Ethics: Alternatives and Issues.² In this book he proposed his personally formulated strategy of resolving the moral conflicts he perceived in the real world and in the Bible. Over the decades that he has written on this topic, Geisler has referred to his method by a variety of names. While in his first book on ethics, he mainly called it "ethical hierarchicalism,"³ Geisler has also used the terms "hierarchial ethics,"⁴ and "hierarchical

¹Norman L. Geisler, "Morality: The New and the True," Pastor's Quarterly 2 (Spring 1969).

²Norman L. Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971). Speaking about ethical hierarchicalism, Geisler himself says: "I first proposed this view in 1971 in Ethics: Alternatives and Issues;" Norman L. Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 92 (footnote #12).

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 114-136.

⁴See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchial Ethics," Trinity Journal 4 (September 1975): 82-87.

ethics"¹ to describe his ethical methodology. Furthermore, Geisler has labeled his ethical approach the "greater love position,"² the "greater-good view,"³ or the "greater good ethic,"⁴ as well as the "greatest good view."⁵ More recently, however, it appears that Geisler has been using the designation "graded absolutism."⁶ Since the labels "hierarchical ethics," "ethical hierarchicalism," or simply

¹See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic," cassette (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Productions, 1989); Norman L. Geisler, and J. Yutaka Amano, The Reincarnation Sensation (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986), 117. He also used this label in his first book, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 193.

²See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," Bibliotheca Sacra 131 (July-September 1974): 226-228.

³See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, and Paul D. Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 424-427.

⁴See, for example, Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic." See also, Norman L. Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 74-75.

⁵See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, review of The Morality Gap, by Erwin W. Lutzer, in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 16 (Spring 1973): 97-101; Norman L. Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 1977, TMs [photocopy], p. 6, Center for Research and Scholarship, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA.

⁶See, for example, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 81-114; Norman L. Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," Evangelical Journal 4 (Fall 1986): 82-87; Norman L. Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 113-132.

"hierarchicalism,"¹ were originally used by Geisler in his first book on ethics, and since it appears to best describe his method, wherever possible, these terms will be used throughout the rest of this research document.

While it is clear that Geisler has utilized a variety of labels for his ethical theory, a careful examination of his work indicates that, besides some shifts in emphasis, his basic approach has undergone no significant development or transformation over time.² Thus, rather than chronologically recounting Geisler's method as he has described it over the years, an attempt will be made to schematically trace his ethical hierarchicalism as it emerges from his various works on ethics.

This chapter will elaborate on hierarchical ethics in the following manner. To begin with, the fundamental presuppositions of Geisler's view of ethics are considered. Second, the basic elements of hierarchicalism are outlined. Third, the evidence that Geisler adduces in support of a hierarchy of values, as well as a further explication of this hierarchical strategy is then delineated. Finally, an overall summary and brief conclusion end the chapter.

¹See, for example, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 114-136.

²In 1986 Geisler himself stated: "I am more firmly convinced of the basic principles of Graded Absolutism (Hierarchicalism) than when I proposed the idea 15 years ago;" "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," 86.

Fundamental Presuppositions

As in every ethical method, Geisler's view of ethics has certain essential concepts that are foundational to it. Thus, before dealing with the basic principles of ethical hierarchicalism itself, it will be essential to consider the factors that Geisler sees as fundamental presuppositions of morality as a whole, and of Christian ethics in particular.

The Nature of Morality¹

Geisler's discussion of the basic essence of what is obviously a theistic perspective of morality occurs primarily in connection with his critiques of other systems of belief or ethical methodologies. For example, in Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics Geisler asserts that "the evangelical has a decided advantage over the non-Christian humanist on the question of the nature of morality."² He then proceeds to outline the following four indispensable characteristics of morality.

¹Since Geisler's emphasis in the area of ethics has been to concentrate on Christian views, he has not written extensively and systematically on the nature of morality as such. Even when he has done so, it has clearly been from a theistic viewpoint. Besides the few pages that address this issue in Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics (pp. 34-37), some brief comments have been located in a few of Geisler's other works.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 34. While, on the whole, Geisler disagrees with humanism, he does commend humanist Paul Kurtz for his belief in objective moral principles; Norman L. Geisler, review of Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism, by Paul Kurtz, in Christian Research Journal, Fall 1988, 28.

Objective, Not Subjective

In demonstrating that morality is objective, Geisler notes that issues such as racism and cruelty "are wrong because by their very nature these things ought not be done."¹ Indeed, if there were no objective standard for action, then there could be no moral disagreements as to what is right or wrong, there could be no wrong moral decisions, and there would be no reason to apologize for violating any moral law.² Reflecting on the fundamental necessity of objective moral norms, Geisler concludes that "a purely subjectivistic ethic is like a game without rules or a civilization without codes. Ultimately, it is really no ethic at all. It is a normless subjectivism in which each man feels and does his own 'thing.'"³ In brief then, as Geisler states: "Moral values are objective."⁴

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 35.

²Norman L. Geisler, Knowing the Truth about Creation: How It Happened and What It Means for Us (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1989), 76.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 44. Incidentally, in his doctoral dissertation, Geisler uses the argument of an objective moral law to prove the existence of a Moral Law-Giver beyond mankind; Norman L. Geisler, "Religious Transcendence: Some Criteria" (Ph.D. dissertation, Loyola University, 1970), 154[b].

⁴Francis J. Beckwith, and Norman L. Geisler, Matters of Life and Death: Calm Answers to Tough Questions about Abortion and Euthanasia (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 77.

Absolute, Not Relative

Geisler posits that "morality has an absolute basis."¹ He maintains that a belief in moral absolutes is indeed unavoidable.² This is because relative norms do not stand alone. They must be relative to something which is absolute.³ In his contrast of absolutism and relativism, Geisler notes that absolutism "offers a means for measuring all men and all societies which is not subject to change by them. This absolute value standard beyond the world makes ultimate sense out of behavior and moral judgments in the world, a factor that relative value judgments lack."⁴ In other words, there is "an absolute basis for morality."⁵

Normative, Not Utilitarian

In connection with moral issues, Geisler explains that some decide what one ought to do on the basis of what they believe will result in the greatest happiness for the

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 35.

²Geisler, review of Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism, 28. In Ethics: Alternatives and Issues (p. 45) Geisler states that "there must be an absolute to which all the conflicting relatives can be related and by which they may be resolved."

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 59.

⁴Norman L. Geisler, and William D. Watkins, Perspectives: Understanding and Evaluating Today's World Views (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1984), 38.

⁵Ibid.

greatest number of people in the long run.¹ The problem with this reasoning, as Geisler notes, is that "anything beyond the immediate present is outside of the human purview. Only God knows the future."² So, appealing to long-range results as the basis for determining what rules to follow is futile. Put simply, "the end never justifies the means."³ Furthermore, if it were possible to determine the future, a normative approach would nevertheless be mandatory, for "there must be some norm by which one is able to evaluate the consequences,"⁴ since there is really no way to know if the result is "better" unless there is a standard of "best" by which it can be appraised.⁵ Thus, it can be concluded that a normative approach to morality is "both inescapable and essential for a meaningful ethic."⁶

Discovered, Not Created by Humans

In his book, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, which was specifically aimed at reaching

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 36.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 77.

³Ibid., 75.

⁴Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 26.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 27. This statement of Geisler's is a summary of his discussion, "Why a Normative Approach?". While he outlines several reasons for his belief in the necessity of a normative approach, only the basic concepts essential for this research study have been mentioned above.

secular university students, Geisler addresses the issue of how to make moral decisions.¹ Maintaining that all ethical decisions fall into either the deontological or the utilitarian category,² Geisler asserts that "ultimately, basic values are discovered, not created."³ In an earlier volume, written specifically with the evangelical Christian in mind, Geisler notes that it is God who determines ethical values.⁴ Moreover, these God-given values are such that even "the non-Christian finds it difficult--if not impossible--to live without."⁵ Thus, morality is not originated but merely discovered by human beings.

In summary then, Geisler contends that there are four defining features of the nature of morality from a theistic standpoint: an objective standard, an absolute basis, a normative approach, and a divine origin.

¹See J. P. Moreland, and Norman L. Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time (New York, NY: Praeger, 1990), 143-155.

²Ibid., 143.

³Ibid., 145.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 37. For essentially the same sentiments, see Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 367. Looking at this issue from the opposite perspective, Geisler says that "if humans were not created by God, then they have no moral duty to Him. There are no absolute values to discover; there are only relative values to create;" Geisler, Knowing the Truth about Creation: How It Happened and What It Means for Us, 115.

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 37.

The Christian View of Ethics

A study of Geisler's material reveals that his theistic view of morality in general can be seen as the foundation for his understanding of Christian ethics in particular. However, according to Geisler, Christian ethics tends to interpret these features more specifically. Moreover, he asserts that Christian ethics has additional aspects that further distinguish it. The following seven attributes characterize the Christian view of ethics.¹

The Revelation of God--Its Basis

As mentioned above, Geisler holds that morality in general is determined by God, but only discovered by humans. In connection with Christian ethics, Geisler asserts that it is based on general and special revelation from God.² He says: "General revelation [in nature] contains God's commands for all people. Special revelation [in Scripture] declares his will for believers. But in either case, the basis of human ethical responsibility is divine revelation."³ God has expressed Himself in the Bible which

¹Five of these seven characteristics are taken from Geisler's explanation of "A Christian View of Ethics," in Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 22-25. While this book has some overlap with concepts in Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 37-41, Geisler gives two additional aspects of Christian ethics in the latter volume.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 23.

³Ibid.

gives Christians the basis for moral obligations.¹ This "written Word of God is love manifested in propositional form."² Expanding on this idea, Geisler affirms that "the Scriptures are definitive and specific in the declaration of God's moral will for the lives of men."³ Thus, fundamental to Christian ethics is the belief that "the Bible provides an objective knowable reference point for discovering the will of the immutably loving and just God."⁴

The Character of God--Its Source

Geisler states: "The Christian ethic is anchored ultimately in the unchanging nature of a God of perfect love and justice."⁵ More specifically, "the moral law is rooted in God's good and loving nature,"⁶ and is "a reflection of His unchanging character."⁷ And since "it is impossible

¹Norman L. Geisler, "Ethical Aspects of Evangelism with Particular Reference to Patients," in Evangelism for the Medical & Dental Professions, ed. Leonard W. Ritzmann (Richardson, TX: Evangelism Commission of the Christian Medical Society, 1985), 26.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 40.

³Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 366.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 25-26.

⁶Norman L. Geisler, and Ronald M. Brooks, When Skeptics Ask (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 30.

⁷Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 23.

for God to will something that is not in accordance with His nature,"¹ it is clear that all "the ethical imperatives that God gives are in accord with his unchangeable moral character."² One of the examples Geisler cites as proof of this point deals with the truthfulness of God. Geisler first quotes the biblical passage that says, "'it is impossible for God to lie,'"³ and then deduces that since God cannot lie, "we should not lie either."⁴ Geisler concludes: "In brief, Christian ethics is based on God's will, but God never wills anything contrary to his unchanging moral character."⁵ This is the ultimate source of Christian ethics.⁶

Christ's Life--Its Best Manifestation

Recognizing the decisive impact of a model, Geisler declares: "When it comes to knowing and doing what is right there is no substitute for a living example. Christ was

¹Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 30.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 22.

³Ibid. He was here referring to the New International Version's rendering of Hebrews 6:18.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 22.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 368. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 37-38, where he notes: "If the Christian claim [concerning God] is correct, then the ultimate source of its morality (in the character of God) is infinitely superior to any mere humanistic ethic."

that example."¹ He came to live on this earth where He showed people how to live.² Thus, Christ "not only taught the moral law of God but He lived it to perfection."³ Since His life personified all the moral precepts of Scripture,⁴ "Christ is our complete moral example."⁵ In view of this, Geisler attests that Christian ethics "is not a mere legalistic assent to a written code; it is a dynamic relation to a living Person. The essence of morality is not the love of abstract laws; it is the love of a person, Jesus Christ, and through Him and by Him the love of all persons."⁶

The Love of Christ--Its Motivation

Geisler notes that, while humanism might hold some correct laws, it cannot generate the motivation from within itself to keep those laws.⁷ By contrast, for Christian ethics, "the value of Christ's example of love is

¹Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 53.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 39.

³Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 53.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 39.

⁶Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 369. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 39.

⁷Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 40.

inestimable."¹ For, the love of Christ becomes the motivating factor in keeping the moral laws of God.² Geisler recognizes that many of the great social movements that set out to help suffering humanity were started by Christians activated by the love of Christ. These were "men and women who said in essence, 'The love of Christ controls us.'"³ For the Christian then, "Christ's love is more than a pattern for our life; it is the very possibility and power enabling us to live a life of perfect love."⁴ Truly, it is the love of Christ that inspires and influences the Christian to live in accord with God's moral laws.⁵

Prescriptive, Not Descriptive

From a Christian perspective, according to Geisler, "a purely descriptive ethic is no ethic at all."⁶ The function of describing human behavior is the realm of

¹Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 60.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 40.

³Ibid., 41. Geisler was here quoting the Revised Standard Version's rendering of 2 Corinthians 5:14.

⁴Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 61.

⁵See Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 369, where Geisler states: "The Christian view of right entails a superior motivation--the love of Christ." In The Christian Ethic of Love (pp. 96-97), Geisler adds that the Holy Spirit motivates one to ethical action, but always in accord with Scripture.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 23.

sociology, while that of prescribing human behavior is the province of morality.¹ In other words, "what people actually do is not the basis for what they ought to do. If it were, then people ought to lie, cheat, steal, and murder, since these things are done all the time."² Thus, "morality is not determined by what men do but by what they ought to do."³ This moral rightness that people are expected to do is prescribed by a moral God, and hence Christian ethics is prescriptive.⁴ Approaching this point from a slightly different angle, Geisler warns that the moral law is not to be identified with the laws of nature, because the latter are descriptive, and not prescriptive, as moral laws are.⁵ In other words, "morality is imperative, not just declarative."⁶ Indeed, "Christian ethics is by its very nature prescriptive, not descriptive."⁷

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., 24.

³Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 12.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 23.

⁵Geisler, Knowing the Truth about Creation: How It Happened and What It Means for Us, 77. See also, Geisler, and Watkins, Perspectives: Understanding and Evaluating Today's World Views, 37.

⁶Geisler, review of Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism, 28.

⁷Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 23. Geisler has also phrased this concept thus: "A moral duty is an 'ought' not an 'is'. A moral duty is a prescription, not a description;" Geisler, "Ethical Aspects of Evangelism with Particular Reference to Patients," 23.

Deontological, Not Teleological

Geisler maintains that "ethical systems can be broadly divided into two categories, deontological (duty-centered) and teleological (end-centered)."¹ Then he states: "Christian ethics is deontological."² In other words, it is the Christian's obligation to follow the moral law whatever the outcome, since "right is right no matter how painful the consequences may be."³ This categorical statement, however, is qualified and clarified by Geisler when he notes that, while long-range results cannot really be known, short-range or near-view results are not to be completely ignored.⁴ Using various illustrations from the physical world,⁵ Geisler concludes that deontologists "should generally be content with acting for short-range results. Since we do not know the future, we should allow the long range to take care of itself."⁶ He asserts that,

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 24.

²Ibid.

³Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 145.

⁴Ibid., 144-146.

⁵See *ibid.*, 146-147, where Geisler mentions issues such as inoculation for better health. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 25, where, among other illustrations, Geisler notes that a Christian should calculate the results of the "direction a gun is pointing before he pulls the trigger."

⁶Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 147.

"in Christian ethics these [immediate] results are all calculated within rules or norms."¹ What this means is that projected remote consequences are not to be the basis of an ethical action, and should not be used to determine what is right.² Furthermore, "no anticipated result as such can be used as a justification for breaking any God-given moral law."³ The predicted "end may justify the use of good means, but it does not justify the use of any means, certainly not evil ones."⁴ Thus, since moral laws are intrinsically right,⁵ and since no results ever justify the use of wrong methods, the ethical approach maintained by the Christian is certainly deontological.

Absolute Moral Obligations Affirmed

In agreement with one of the features of the nature of morality in general, "Christian ethics is firmly absolutist."⁶ Explaining more in detail, Geisler adds: "It is based on the character of an unchanging God 'who cannot lie' (Titus 1:2, NEB). It is manifest in God's law which

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 25.

²Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 145.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 25.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 16.

⁶Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 9.

'cannot be broken' (John 10:35, NIV) and in the person of Jesus Christ who 'is the same yesterday, today and forever' (Heb. 13:8, NEB)."¹ In other words, since God's moral character does not change, it follows that moral obligations flowing from His nature are absolute.² That is, "they are always binding everywhere on everyone."³ For instance, people are commanded not to murder because human beings are created in God's image. Thus, murder is wrong at all times and all places for all people.⁴ In brief, Christian ethics maintains a belief in absolute moral duties, which "are binding on all people at all times and in all places."⁵

By way of summary, it can be said that Geisler holds that there are seven essential characteristics of the Christian ethic: the revelation of God as expressed in the Bible is its basis; the unchanging character of God is its

¹Ibid.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 22.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 23.

⁵Ibid. This view of Geisler's concerning the meaning of "absolute" does appear to be defined somewhat differently in connection with ethical hierarchicalism. For example, while Geisler says that the universal commands in Scripture against adultery, murder, lying, etc., "are absolute, and these are binding on all men at all times and all places" (Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 123), he admits that hierarchicalism "may be called qualified absolutism or contextual absolutism" (ibid., 124), for he maintains that "not all absolutes are absolutely absolute. Some are only relatively absolute;" Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

source; it is best exemplified in the life of Christ; it is motivated and activated by the love of Christ; it is prescriptive in that it shows people what they ought to do; it is deontological, thus requiring that the moral law be obeyed irrespective of projected consequences; and, it holds that there are absolute moral obligations which all people everywhere need to follow at all times.

Now that Geisler's fundamental presuppositions on the nature of a theistic view of morality and the essential features of Christian ethics have been outlined, his personal method of hierarchical ethics will be delineated.

Basic Elements of Ethical Hierarchicalism

In most of his major books on ethical approaches Geisler critically evaluates the various ethical methodologies that he considers to be logically possible. Since these analyses include both the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, from Geisler's perspective, a brief summary of his conclusions of the procedures other than ethical hierarchicalism will serve to illustrate some of the primary features of his own ethical methodology.

The antinomian approach contends that there are no objective, timeless, God-given moral laws.¹ The values of this view are that it stresses personal relations and individual responsibility, recognizes an emotive element,

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 33-34.

and accents the human perspective of ethics.¹ Geisler considers this approach as unacceptable because it is self-defeating, ineffective, irrational, too subjective, too individualistic,² and too relativistic.³

Generalism, which posits that there are many ethical norms of general but not universal application, is illustrated in the various utilitarian approaches.⁴

Geisler asserts that, while generalism recognizes the need for norms and proposes a solution to conflicting norms, it is inadequate because of its lack of universal and absolute norms, and because these acts have no intrinsic value.⁵

Situationism holds that love, the one universal absolute, is placed above law as the only intrinsically good ruling norm.⁶ For Geisler situationism is valuable because it is a normative position, an absolutism, it resolves the issue of conflicting norms, gives due value to differing

¹Ibid., 34-35. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 43-44.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 39-41.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 45.

⁴Ibid., 47-56. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 63-73.

⁵Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 58-59. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 75-77.

⁶See Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 60-71; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 43-54; Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 63-66.

circumstances, and stresses love and the value of persons.¹ His criticisms are that one norm is too general, that the situation does not determine the meaning of love, that many universal norms are possible, that a different universal norm is viable, and that a many-norm ethic is defensible.²

Non-conflicting absolutism affirms that there are many absolute norms which never really conflict.³ According to Geisler, there is much to be commended in this position, including its biblical orientation, its search for third alternatives to breaking any moral law, its strong belief in the providence of God, its attempt to maintain moral absolutes,⁴ its belief that there is always a way to avoid sinning, its deontological emphasis that the rule determines the result,⁵ its desire to reconcile conflicting moral principles, and its recognition of the need to define norms more precisely.⁶ Geisler's criticisms of this approach are that it is based on some false premises, that it holds false and unsuccessful qualifications, that it

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 54-57; Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 71-74.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 74-77; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 57-60.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 79.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 54.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 87-88.

⁶Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 92-93.

depends too much on providence, that third alternatives are not always available, that some moral conflicts are inevitable, that it tends to legalism,¹ that it has a naive acceptance of absolutes, that it fails to show the interrelation of absolutes, that it does not resolve the conflicts of norms, and that it fails to recognize the priority of some norms over others.²

Conflicting absolutism claims that there are many absolute norms and that it is wrong to break any of them. Ideally these absolute norms do not conflict, but conflicts are unavoidable in this fallen world. In this method "ought" does not imply "can," and the inevitable duty to choose the lesser of two evils is excusable, and forgivable when confessed.³ Geisler asserts that the positive contributions of this strategy include its desire to preserve many exceptionless absolutes, a perspective on the nature of responsibility and grace,⁴ a realistic recognition of moral dilemmas, and an acknowledgment that moral dilemmas are rooted in the moral depravity of human

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 88-95. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 54-64.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 93-95.

³Ibid., 98-106; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 100-102. See also, Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 70-71; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 68-70.

⁴Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 108-109.

beings.¹ However, Geisler criticizes conflicting absolutism for having a tendency to legalism, a misapplication of the doctrine of depravity since it holds that humans must sin, a misunderstanding of moral responsibility since it maintains that one is responsible for what is unavoidable, and a serious christological problem since it implies that Jesus must have sinned.²

The above outlining of Geisler's evaluation of these ethical approaches reveals, by means of comparison and contrast, several vital facets of ethical hierarchicalism. The fundamental characteristics of this approach, as Geisler delineates and explains them, will now be considered.

The Sources of Hierarchical Ethics

Investigation of Geisler's works shows that he proposes essentially two basic sources for hierarchicalism.

Intuitively-Known Natural Law

Geisler posits that human beings know what is right and wrong by their "own natural intuitions."³ Moreover, a

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 102-103; Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 71-72.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 109-112; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 103-110; Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 72-73; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 70-80.

³Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 148. See also, Beckwith, and Geisler, Matters of Life and Death: Calm Answers to Tough Questions about Abortion and Euthanasia, 77-78. Geisler cautions that the use of intuitions in ethical deliberation

hierarchy of values is known intuitively.¹ For example, "rational and moral creatures know intuitively that love is to be preferred to hate and that some forms of love are higher than other forms."² Geisler takes this concept further, and states that human beings "know intuitively that it is better to love God than man and better to save many lives than one."³ The reason for this is that the natural law is written in everyone's heart.⁴ "God knew that not all men would have access to the truths of Scripture at all times, so He inscribed a law upon their hearts."⁵ Thus, Geisler concludes that one of the bases of ethical hierarchicalism is the intuitively-known natural law.

Divine Revelation in the Bible

The Christian Scriptures, according to Geisler, are yet another basis for hierarchical ethics.⁶ As a second

should not be identified with "Intuitionism" as advocated by G. E. Moore, A. C. Ewing, and others; *ibid.*, 20 (endnote #6).

¹Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, 125.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, 126.

⁴Norman L. Geisler, "Natural Law and Business Ethics," in *Biblical Principles & Business: The Foundations*, Christians in the Marketplace Series, vol. 1, ed. Richard C. Chewning (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1989), 164-165.

⁵Geisler, and Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective*, 362.

⁶Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, 127.

source, the Bible does not contradict the natural law, but rather complements and supplements it. "The same God whose moral nature is reflected in natural law has expressed His moral character in biblical commands to believers. Or to be more explicit, the eternal moral principles reflecting God's nature that are embodied in the Second Table of the Mosaic Law are the same as those expressed in natural law."¹ A revelational approach, however, is preferred since it is much more definitive, and less subject to misunderstanding than human intuition.² Also, Geisler claims that the Bible has "a hierarchical arrangement of norms."³ Christians are not to decide for themselves what the ethical priorities are. Rather, "it is God who established the pyramid of values in accordance with His own nature."⁴ Thus, Geisler concludes that his ethic of "hierarchy is objective and determined by God,"⁵ and is inscripturated in the Bible.

¹Geisler, "Natural Law and Business Ethics," 172.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 127; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 33-34.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 127. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 116; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 81-82. This hierarchy will be outlined later in this chapter.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124; Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 83.

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94.

Now that the two basic sources of hierarchical ethics--natural intuition and biblical revelation--have been traced, the other features of this method will be examined.

A Plurality of Absolute Duties

In contrast to situationism, which maintains that there is "only one absolute,"¹ and in agreement with one of the tenets of conflicting absolutism, Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism insists that there are "many moral absolutes."² Furthermore, while situationism does not hold any absolutes with substantive content, hierarchicalism does.³ In other words, Geisler asserts that, according to ethical hierarchicalism, "the universal commands of Scripture such as the prohibitions against blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, murder, lying, and so forth are absolute, and these are binding on all men at all times and all places."⁴

However, the clear and unequivocal declaration that certain biblical commands "are absolutely binding on all men

¹Ibid., 93. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 123; Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 82.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 27; Norman L. Geisler, review of The Morality Gap, 97. See also, Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 16.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 123. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 93; Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 82.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 123.

at all times and all places,"¹ is somewhat tempered by other of Geisler's statements. For instance, Geisler says that "adultery is always wrong as such. Murder is never right in itself. Lying is universally culpable in and of itself."² Even though he holds that these absolute biblical commands have "no exceptions,"³ Geisler notes that "when a conflict occurs, the greater duty is to fulfill the higher law."⁴ In other words, "one's duty to the lower may be suspended in view of his responsibility to do the higher."⁵ For example, Geisler posits that "murder is never right as such."⁶ However, he contends that "what is absolutely binding as such in a simple relation is not necessarily the right course of action in a complex situation where one must decide between two commands as conflicting."⁷ Geisler observes that his ethical theory

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 93. See also, Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 82.

²Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 74. See also, Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 226.

³Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 75. See also, Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 286.

⁴Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 286-287. See also, Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 741; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 226.

⁵Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 74.

⁶Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 226 (emphasis added).

⁷*Ibid.*, 227.

raises the question, namely, "in what sense is this view absolute when it allows that one is not obligated to follow some (lower) ethical laws when they are in conflict with higher ones?"¹

Geisler responds that "there are three ways in which hierarchicalism is an absolutism."² It is first of all absolute in its source, since it holds that all norms are based in the absoluteness of God. God does not change, and moral principles based on His nature are likewise unchanging.³ "Second, each particular command is absolute as such,"⁴ "and should be obeyed absolutely,"⁵ unless there is a conflict between these absolutes, at which point the hierarchy is used to determine which is the higher relationship that takes precedence.⁶ And third, the very hierarchy of values by which the conflicts are resolved is

¹Ibid.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94. See also, Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 227; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94; Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 288; Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 83.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94.

⁵Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 288.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94; Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 288; Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 83.

absolute.¹ By way of example, Geisler notes that "it is absolutely established in accordance with the nature of God that in an unavoidable conflict between God and parent one must put God first."² Thus, "whenever there is a conflict in God's commands due to our finite-fallen world it is our absolute duty to follow the higher command as revealed by God in Scripture."³ In brief then, hierarchical ethics holds that moral laws are absolute in their source, absolute in their sphere when they do not conflict, and absolute in their sequence of priority.⁴

Even though Geisler has propounded the above ideas to prove that hierarchicalism is an absolutism, he is nonetheless aware of the criticism that "it seems contradictory to claim that a moral principle is absolute when it can sometimes be broken. For what has exceptions is

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94; Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 288; Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 83.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124.

³Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 17.

⁴Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic;" Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124. Referring to his view of absolutes, Geisler notes: "If people say, 'Well that's not an absolute,' then we're talking semantics;" "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

not universal, and what is broken is not absolute."¹ Geisler replies to this objection, in three ways. First, he says that the lower command is not really "broken" when the higher command is obeyed. Rather, the overriding duty to keep the higher obligation simply renders it unnecessary for one to perform the demands of the lesser law.² Second, "the command remains absolute even when it is not followed, for its absoluteness is based in the nature of God that does not change,"³ and "not in its performance by man."⁴ While God never ceases to manifest absolutely what is absolutely right, He does not demand obedience to lower laws in unavoidable clashes.⁵ And third, since even one exception to a law means that it is not absolute or universal,⁶ Geisler holds that hierarchicalism does not allow any

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 129. Geisler does not provide the source of this criticism, but merely mentions and responds to it in a section dealing with objections to hierarchicalism.

²Ibid.; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 99-100. Geisler illustrates this point by referring to a magnet (a higher law) which attracts a nail without breaking the law of gravity (a lower law). This issue will be discussed later in chapter 5.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 129.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 100.

⁵Ibid.; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 129.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 127; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 98. See also, Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 426.

exceptions.¹ However, he maintains that in unavoidable conflicts in which the individual is to follow the higher duty, God Himself exempts one from fulfilling the lower law,² from the culpability for not performing it,³ and "from the moral consequences of disobeying this law."⁴ In brief then, Geisler posits that "God knows we cannot actually do opposites, so he exempts us from doing the lower duty, even though we ought to do it."⁵

All of the above information demonstrates that ethical hierarchicalism has a somewhat moderated view of moral absolutes. It is not simply a moral law that is

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 127.

²Ibid., 27, 130; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 426. See also, Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 74.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 128.

⁴Ibid. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 98.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 130. Geisler explains that "the 'ought' is universally binding, even when one cannot do it because he is performing his higher obligation;" Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," 84. While this view might appear to stand in tension with the statement that "'ought' does imply that one 'can' by the grace of God always avoid sinning" (Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 424), it must be noted that for Geisler, the way to avoid sinning is to do the higher obligation. When it comes to the question of human freedom, Geisler states: "Ought does imply can; responsibility does imply the ability to respond;" Norman L. Geisler, "Man's Destiny: Free or Forced," Christian Scholar's Review 9 (1979): 108. For Geisler, that means one can keep the law in normal times, and the higher law in times of conflict.

"absolutely binding on all men at all times and all places,"¹ as Geisler has stated. Geisler himself recognizes that:

If lower ethical norms can be transcended by higher ones without incurring guilt for not following the lower ones, then it follows that these lower norms are not universal in the broadest sense of the word. They are universal only in their context. They cover everything in their area. That is, lower ethical norms cannot be universally universal but only locally universal. They are valid on their particular relationship but not on all relationships. There are no legitimate exceptions to an ethical absolute, but not all absolutes are absolutely absolute. Some are only relatively absolute, i.e., absolute relative to their particular area.²

Hence, for ethical hierarchicalism, a more accurate definition of a moral absolute would be: "An ethical duty that has the highest degree of incumbency possible in that context and cannot be overridden by any other duty."³ All the norms that flow from God's character are thus considered "absolute in a given context."⁴ Accordingly, Geisler admits that ethical hierarchicalism may be called "qualified

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 93. See also, Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 82.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

³Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 157.

⁴Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

absolutism or contextual absolutism."¹ Nevertheless, he insists that hierarchicalism "is not really a relativism."²

A Duty-Centered Procedure

As noted earlier, Geisler posits that ethical methods can be broadly separated into either deontological or teleological categories.³ While utilitarianism is an example of a teleological ethic, Christian ethics is deontological.⁴

Referring to his own approach, Geisler declares: "Ethical hierarchicalism is not a utilitarian ethic; it is a deontological ethic built on intrinsic values."⁵ What this means is that "hierarchicalism does not resolve ethical conflicts by an appeal to an extrinsic end (what will bring the greatest good to the greatest number), but to a higher intrinsic norm as revealed by God."⁶ Furthermore, when hierarchicalists speak of performing the "'greater good'

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

²Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 426.

³See "Deontological, Not Teleological," under the section "The Christian View of Ethics."

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 24.

⁵Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 131.

⁶Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 97.

they do not mean greater results but the higher rule,"¹ which is based on the pyramid of values that God has established.² In other words, the basis for their action is not future consequences but present commands.³ Thus, ethical hierarchicalism is a duty-centered procedure, which holds that the Christian's obligation is to follow the divinely-established moral duties, and to comply with the hierarchy of values in unavoidable conflicts.⁴

In connection with this duty-centered strategy, it should be noted that Geisler periodically underscores the importance of the concept of obedience to God's command. Geisler says: "It is always right to obey His commands."⁵ He asserts that any "divine command is one which one ought to obey."⁶ Thus, he concludes that "whatever God commands his children to do--whether to love their neighbors or offer sacrifices--demands moral obedience."⁷ It is the Christian's moral responsibility to obey God's commands.

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 127.

²Ibid., 124; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 127.

⁴See, *ibid.*, 124, 127; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94, 97.

⁵Norman L. Geisler, "God, Evil and Dispensations," in Walvoord: A Tribute, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1982), 104.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117.

⁷Ibid.

Concepts Based on Bible Narratives

Although he acknowledges that "what people actually do is not the basis for what they ought to do,"¹ and "that the Bible records things that it does not approve,"² Geisler nevertheless places great value on concepts that he derives from several scriptural accounts. Throughout his works on ethical method and ethical issues, Geisler refers to many Bible stories.³ He uses these cases to establish primarily two notions that are vital to hierarchical ethics, namely, the existence of genuine ethical conflicts, and the prioritizing of values so as to resolve the problem.

¹Ibid., 24. Geisler also states that "morality is not determined by what men do but by what they ought to do;" Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 12. Geisler notes that "the 'is/ought' fallacy holds that because people are doing it, therefore, they ought to do it;" "Ethical Aspects of Evangelism with Particular Reference to Patients," 23. This issue will be addressed in chapter 5.

²Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 166.

³See, for example, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 121-123; Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 77-86; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84-88, 90-91; Geisler, Christian Ethics; Options and Issues, 117-122; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417, 423; Norman L. Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society 2 (1979): 6; Norman L. Geisler, "Any Chance for Morality? Part 2," The Standard, 15 February 1973, 22.

The Existence of Moral Conflicts

In order to prove that "unavoidable moral conflicts exist,"¹ Geisler argues that "the Abraham and Isaac story (Gen. 22) contains a real moral conflict. 'Thou shalt not kill' is a divine moral command, and yet God commanded Abraham to kill his son, Isaac."² Besides this "classic example of a conflict of moral principles,"³ Geisler refers to the stories of Rahab's lie to save life,⁴ Samson's "divinely approved suicide,"⁵ Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter,⁶ David's "'stealing' of the showbread,"⁷ Daniel's disobedience of the government,⁸ and others, as evidence of his theory that inevitable ethical dilemmas do exist.⁹ Thus, Geisler concludes that there are many

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84.

²Ibid. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 416.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 121.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 118.

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 85.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 118.

⁷Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 6.

⁸Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119.

⁹See, for example, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 118-119; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84-87. These stories and the way in which Geisler has interpreted them will be appraised later in chapter 5.

"biblical examples of genuine, unavoidable moral conflicts."¹

The Prioritizing of Moral Values

To illustrate his theory that there is a certain hierarchy of values to be used to resolve moral conflicts, Geisler frequently refers to the issue of lying to save life. On the one hand, he recognizes that "deception and lying are repeatedly condemned in Scripture."² Yet, he alleges that, "the Bible indicates that there are occasions when intentionally falsifying (lying) is justifiable."³

Geisler posits that "there are numerous cases in Scripture where God (implicitly or explicitly) commended the faith of those involved in intentional deception in order to save lives."⁴ In support of this, Geisler mentions Obadiah's "deceptive activity"⁵ to save the lives of one hundred prophets of God, Elisha's deception of his would-be captors in order to save his own life, Rahab's act of "justifiable"⁶ lying to save the spies, and the Hebrew

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119.

²Ibid., 122.

³Ibid.

⁴Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417.

⁵Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 79.

⁶Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 91.

midwives' "divinely approved lying"¹ to the king in order to save the male babies.² Geisler comments that "since all things in the Old Testament are 'for us' (Rom. 15:4) and happened 'for our example' (I Cor. 10:11), it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that these were God-approved examples of how He wants us to behave in similar moral conflicts."³ He deduces that "in the real conflict situations recorded in Scripture there is no condemnation of those who did the greater good."⁴

In addition to using biblical stories to establish the priority of "mercy over veracity,"⁵ Geisler employs this strategy to show that one should place "love for God over love for man,"⁶ and must "obey God over government."⁷ He concludes that "the Bible includes many examples of

¹Ibid.

²Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 91; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122; Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 78-79; Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 122-123. These stories and the manner in which Geisler has interpreted them will be discussed later in chapter 5.

³Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417.

⁴Ibid., 425.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 121.

⁶See Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 77.

⁷Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 121; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 90.

persons who were praised by God for following their highest duty in situations of conflict."¹ Based on his personal understanding of several Scripture stories, Geisler says that "in each case there was not only no divine condemnation for the moral law they did not keep. There was, rather, evident divine approval."² Thus, he maintains that ethical hierarchicalism teaches that "whenever we face a situation where there is a higher and a lower principle in unavoidable conflict, it's our obligation to do the higher."³

An Intention-Motive-Means Complex

If, as Geisler maintains, ethical hierarchicalism is based on natural law and special revelation, it advocates an absolutist and duty-centered approach, and holds that Bible stories show that moral dilemmas exist and that one should obey the higher duty in these conflict situations, then the question naturally arises: What components are indispensable for any human endeavor to be considered morally correct?

Over the years, as Geisler has been producing materials on ethical methodology, he has frequently considered this issue. While at first glance it might

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120.

²Ibid.

³Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic." In his earliest volume on ethics, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 123, Geisler states that these biblical stories "illustrate the general hypothesis that lower principles (of whatever kind) ought to be 'broken' when it is necessary to keep higher ones."

appear as though Geisler is contradictory in his thinking, careful investigation reveals much consistency in his view, even though there has been some clarification of concepts, different shifts in emphases at various points in time, a more precise defining of terminology, and a slight refinement of perspective.

Crucial to ethical hierarchicalism is the belief that "the ethic complex must be thought of as a whole."¹ As Geisler notes: "Good intentions alone are not sufficient to make an act morally right."² For example, Hitler may have intended to produce a better world by attempting the genocide of the Jews, but this would not have justified his actions.³ By contrast, "an act as such apart from its motive or intention is not necessarily good."⁴ For instance, those who give to the poor so as to receive human praise are not to be morally commended.⁵ Thus Geisler

¹Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 4.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid. From the context of this statement it appears that Geisler basically equates "motive" with "intention." This can be seen from the fact that he repeatedly refers to the "intention-act complex," with no other reference to "motive;" see *ibid.* This can also be seen from the way he discusses "intentions" and "acts" throughout the rest of his works until 1990, when he coauthored The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, with J. P. Moreland. In this volume (pp. 67-68) Geisler speaks of a tripartite intention-motive-means complex, which will be discussed later in this sub-section.

⁵Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 4.

states: "To do something with a bad motive is bad. However, to do something with a good motive does not automatically make it good."¹

At times Geisler has stressed the importance of one's "intention," or "motive" to the virtual exclusion of the action involved. He asserts: "Jesus taught morality is a matter of intent."² Also, he notes that "it is really the component of intent that defines the essence of a moral act."³ By way of illustration, Geisler states that sex outside of marriage is the "greatest good," and therefore morally right, if that were the only thing one could do in order to save a life.⁴ Then too, he says: "Masturbation is not necessarily immoral. In fact, when the motive is not lust but self-control, masturbation can be a moral act."⁵ Geisler himself recognizes that "much of the discussion on these issues hinges around the question of whether an act of

¹Geisler, "Ethical Aspects of Evangelism with Particular Reference to Patients," 41.

²Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 223. As support for this concept, Geisler notes Matthew 5: 22, 28.

³Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 75. In The Christian Ethic of Love (p. 95), Geisler goes so far as to say that "God judges an act to be intrinsically good if it was intended to be in compliance with His commands;" (emphasis added).

⁴Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 208.

⁵Ibid., 200. Geisler holds that "if it is used as a limited, temporary program of self-control to avoid lust before marriage," then masturbation "can be done to the glory of God;" *ibid.*

itself is intrinsically good or evil."¹ He concludes that there is no such thing.²

Yet, Geisler repeatedly emphasizes the fact that "the end never justifies the means."³ For instance, forced infanticide of all children known to be carriers of genetic "impurities" is not justified by the goal of a purified genetic stock.⁴ "That is to say, an act is not automatically good simply because it has a good goal. The means to achieve it must be judged good by some objective standard of good."⁵ Only good methods are to be used for good ends.⁶ In other words, "something is not good because the intentions underlying it are good; it is good only if the actions are also good,"⁷ i.e., if "the intentions are in accord with what is intrinsically right (namely, a law or divine command)."⁸ Two examples illustrate this point. In connection with taking one's own life, Geisler posits:

¹Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 4.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 109. See also, Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 4.

³See, for example, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 37, 75, 162, 178, 188, 191; Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 131.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 37.

⁵Ibid., 75.

⁶Ibid., 191.

⁷Ibid., 75.

⁸Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 13.

"Whatever the motive, suicide is wrong because God alone is sovereign over human life, and he has commanded us to respect his authority over us and his image within us."¹ Similarly, in relation to abortion, Geisler says: "Killing the unborn is murder, whether it is done maliciously or with good motives, for good motives do not justify murder."²

The resolution to these seemingly contradictory concepts lay in other statements by Geisler that qualify and restrict what on the surface sounds like assertions in favor of an unequivocal position on intrinsically right actions.

Geisler explains:

Actions always associated with evil (for example, rape, killing one's children) are evil because the motive was always evil, not because the act as such was evil. If actions were evil apart from human intentions, then animals or imbeciles who performed the same actions would also be morally culpable. It is not an action as such which is evil but an intention-action complex.³

In other words, the previously mentioned examples of infanticide, suicide, and abortion are morally wrong, not because they are intrinsically evil, but because they are

¹Norman L. Geisler, "Sanctity of Human Life," in Applying the Scriptures, Papers from ICBI Summit III, ed., Kenneth S. Kantzer (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 147. Incidentally, though Geisler sometimes refers to self-sacrificial acts as suicide (see, for example, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 239-240), he does admit that strictly speaking such acts are not suicide, but rather evidence of the greatest love; *ibid.*, 148-149; Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 103.

²Geisler, "Sanctity of Human Life," 149. This is because "the end does not justify an evil means;" *ibid.*

³Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 109-110.

always associated with evil. As Geisler notes: "Simply because a given action is usually associated with evil does not mean that the same action performed for a different purpose (that is, in obedience to a higher moral law) cannot sometimes be morally good."¹ Thus, in hierarchicalism, the killing of innocent children would be morally acceptable, if there were no way to avoid destroying them in a just war against an evil aggressor.² Also, if a soldier were to throw himself on a hand grenade in order to save his friends, this would be a morally justifiable "sacrificial suicide."³ Then too, if a woman's life were threatened by her fetus, Geisler holds that it would be morally right to terminate the pregnancy.⁴ Based on this reasoning, Geisler cautions that "Christians should be very careful in calling the actions of another person evil simply because those actions are often (even usually) associated with evil."⁵ In short, ethical hierarchicalism contends that "mere human

¹Ibid., 109.

²See, for example, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 225-237.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 239-240. For Geisler, the morally unacceptable form of suicide is a "selfish suicide;" *ibid.*, 236.

⁴Geisler, "Sanctity of Human Life," 150; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 152. However, Geisler prefers not to call this an abortion, since he sees it as basically killing in self-defense; *ibid.*

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 111.

actions as such are not intrinsically good or evil."¹ It all depends "on the purpose for which they are performed."²

In his attempt to further clarify the issue concerning the nature of human actions, Geisler points out that hierarchicalism "does not proclaim that the evil is a good thing to do, but rather that the highest obligation in the conflict is the good thing to do."³ He elaborates:

For example, in falsifying to save a life, it is not the falsehood that is good (a lie as such is always wrong), but it is the act of mercy to save a life that is good--despite the fact that intentional falsification was necessary to accomplish this good. In other words, it is unfortunately true that what is called "evil" sometimes accompanies the performance of good acts.⁴ In these cases God does not consider a man culpable for the concomitant "evil" in view of the performance of the greater good.⁵

Geisler admits that, in this respect, ethical hierarchicalism "is similar to the principle of double effect, which states that when two results--a good result and an evil result--emerge from one act, the individual is held responsible only for the good one he intended and not

¹Ibid., 109. See also, Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 4.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 109.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 126.

⁴Ibid. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96.

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 127.

for the evil one which necessarily resulted from the good intention."¹

This principle of double effect illuminates a further refinement of the intention-action complex of ethical hierarchicalism described above. While in virtually all of his works it appears that Geisler uses the terms "intention" and "motive" practically interchangeably, in The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time Geisler clearly separates these two concepts. He now explains that, in addition to intentions and actions (or means), motives are pertinent in evaluating morality.² These three terms are defined as follows: (a) Motive: "An inducement that stimulates a person to perform an act;"³ (b) Intention:

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 126-127. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96-97. In the book he coauthored with Moreland, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 67, Geisler explains that this principle of double effect states that "when an action has good and bad consequences, then the action may be performed under the following circumstances:

1. The act is good or at least indifferent regarding the end that one directly intends.
2. The good and evil effects follow immediately from the act; that is, the good effect is not obtained by means of the evil effect.
3. One only intends the good effect but merely tolerates the bad effect, even if that bad effect was foreseen prior to the act.
4. There is a proportion between the good and bad effects; that is, the good must be at least equal to the bad."

²Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 68.

³Ibid., 161.

"What one intends to bring about;"¹ and, (c) Means-to-End: "The way an act is carried out."² In brief, "a motive is why one acts, an intent is what one is intending to do, and a means is how one acts, that is, the steps one takes to accomplish one's intent."³ Geisler therefore concludes that, "motives, intents, and means to ends are relevant in assessing the moral worth of an action."⁴

None of this, however, should be construed to imply that actions in and of themselves can be considered intrinsically right or wrong. Geisler maintains that specific actions, apart from the motive or intention of the one performing them, cannot be identified as evil.⁵ He declares that ethical hierarchicalism rigorously maintains that an act "changes its moral value (from evil to good) when used for a good purpose or in a good context."⁶

In summarizing Geisler's perspective concerning what constitutes morally acceptable human undertakings, the following may be said. While his emphasis has changed over time, he has consistently held that one's motives or

¹Ibid., 160.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 68.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 113.

⁶Ibid.

intentions are the indispensable elements of morality. Specific actions in and of themselves are not intrinsically right or wrong. As long as one has proper motives and intentions, and follows one's highest obligation, the means utilized are then considered morally good. In brief then, as noted previously, "mere human actions as such are not intrinsically good or evil;"¹ it all depends on "the motive or purpose of the one performing them."²

In concluding this section concerning the basic elements of ethical hierarchicalism, the following should be noted. Geisler holds that his ethical approach is based on intuitively-known natural law and biblical revelation, it advocates a moderated absolutist and duty-centered approach of obedience to God's commands, it posits that Scripture stories prove both that real moral dilemmas exist and that one ought to follow the higher obligation in such conflict situations, and it holds that, while no actions are intrinsically right or wrong, correct motives and intentions must be used in order for human endeavors to be considered moral. Now that the essential aspects of hierarchicalism have been outlined, the concept of a hierarchy of values will be considered.

¹Ibid., 109.

²Ibid., 113.

A Hierarchy of Values

Geisler contends that "historically, there have been many examples of hierarchically ordered values,"¹ most of them springing from the Neo-Platonic fountainhead, Plotinus.² The basic premise common to all hierarchicalism is that things are ordered on a scale of good, ranging from least good to most good.³

This type of hierarchy of virtue, Geisler finds in the writings of other Christian theologians. For example, according to Geisler, Augustine held "there is a hierarchy of sins, some being worse than others. Since Augustine's ethic is centered in love, he sees an ordered priority in the things we are to love:"⁴ God, then humans, then things.⁵ Moreover, Geisler says Augustine believed that when moral duties conflict "the believer is exempt from his duty to the lower by virtue of his obedience to the higher. In this sense, Augustine is a precursor to the graded absolutist [or hierarchicalist]."⁶ Providing another

¹Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 115.

²Ibid. Geisler refers to "the neo-plotinian fountainhead," but apparently means "the neo-platonic fountainhead;" see Frederick Copleston, S.J., A History of Philosophy, 9 vols. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1:463-475.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 115.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 114.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

historical source for hierarchicalism, Geisler notes that Charles Hodge, the twentieth-century systematic theologian whose writings preceded his own by about two decades, also promoted a similar view of hierarchical ethics.¹

In addition to this historical background, Geisler posits that the theory of a hierarchy of values is firmly founded on Scripture. Before addressing this issue, however, it will be instructive to briefly consider how Geisler defines and describes what a "moral conflict" is, and how he relates to the question of the "real world" in which human decisions need to be made.

Definition of Moral Conflicts

Throughout virtually all of his works on ethics Geisler does not take time to meticulously define the concept of conflicting moral obligations. This is probably due to the fact that he spends so much effort on dealing with a variety of examples of what he considers to be ethical dilemmas. Hence, by simply reading through his materials one can come to an understanding of how he understands this concept. However, in a few places Geisler does provide specific statements that assist in revealing his basic definition of moral conflicts.

In discussing conflicting moral duties, Geisler asks: "What should one do when two or more moral principles

¹Ibid., 114-116.

come into unavoidable conflict?"¹ In other words, for Geisler, a moral conflict is when at least "two commands come into direct and unavoidable conflict and both cannot be performed."² Illustrating this point, Geisler mentions the problem of lying to save life: "If one does not lie, then he does not do all he can to protect the innocent life. And if he does lie, then he has not kept the command to be truthful at all times."³ Geisler is aware of the fact that there are some people who disagree with him on this issue because they believe that their only obligation is to tell the truth, while the other duty is the responsibility of the person threatening to do the killing.⁴ Consequently, Geisler responds: "Is there not also a duty upon me to save innocent lives (that is, to show mercy)?"⁵ The real conflict here is between truth-telling and mercy-showing.⁶ Then he concludes: "In other words, the choice is really between an act of commission and one of omission. And would

¹Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 411. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 67; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 97.

²Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 6.

³Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 411.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 56.

⁵Ibid., 56-57.

⁶Ibid., 57.

not a sin of omission be just as much a sin as a sin of commission?"¹

Therefore, according to Geisler, hierarchical ethics holds that a moral conflict can be defined as a time when one is confronted with two moral obligations, only one of which can be performed. Moreover, this type of situation can also arise when one is faced with a conflict between an act of commission and one of omission.

The Ideal Versus the Real World

In his critique of non-conflicting absolutism, Geisler observes that, "while it is no doubt true that moral conflicts are not God's ideal, it is also a fact that this is not an ideal world. It is a real and fallen world."² He adds: "There are no moral conflicts in God,"³ for "there is perfect harmony in heaven between the Lover, the Beloved Son, and the Spirit of Love."⁴ But, "when love comes to earth some of these duties conflict. Responsibilities overlap and we are torn between two absolute commands."⁵

¹Ibid.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 96. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 64-65.

³Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," 84.

⁴Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 282.

⁵Ibid. As can be seen from this statement, Geisler believes that "the very law itself is an expression of His love;" Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 44.

Illustrating his point from the world of nature, Geisler says: "It's God's attributes shining through the spectrum of this finite world that give us a whole spray of colors from top to bottom that overlap."¹ And it is here, in the fallen finite world, that the conflicts occur.²

Geisler provides various examples to substantiate his view. For instance, "ideally God designed one husband for one wife, but because this is a fallen world, He allowed polygamy on a limited basis for a certain time."³ Also, while war is undesirable, it is nevertheless unavoidable because of the fallen world in which force will always be necessary to stop sinful people.⁴ Force is also used by police, although ideally these killings should not be necessary.⁵ "But this is not an ideal world; it is an evil world."⁶ Thus, while Geisler believes that "there are no conflicts in God's essence nor did he design his laws to

¹Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

²Ibid.

³Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 410.

⁴J. Yutaka Amano, and Norman L. Geisler, The Infiltration of the New Age (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989), 138.

⁵Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 134.

⁶Ibid.

conflict,"¹ he maintains that "this ideal is not fully realized in this fallen world."² In brief then, "ideally, moral duties do not conflict, but this is not an ideal world. In the real world there are moral tragedies."³

Biblical Support for a Scale of Values

One of the major innovations of Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism is the hypothesis that there is a scale of values arising from the biblical text itself.⁴ Geisler suggests that whenever moral duties come into conflict, there is at least one principle that indicates which is the highest obligation to follow.⁵ Again illustrating by means of a prism, but this time in a somewhat different manner, Geisler states: "The pyramid of principles emerges as the light of God's love passes through the prism of human experience thereby casting a spectrum or order of God's laws."⁶ In brief, "God has set up the hierarchy in His

¹Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 18.

²Ibid.

³Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 153.

⁴See, for example, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 81-84; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 116-117; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 223, 227.

⁵Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 76.

⁶Ibid. In his earlier works, Geisler promoted a seven-part scale: (a) Love for God versus love for man; (b) Life-saving versus truth-telling; (c) Love for persons versus love for things; (d) Love for many persons versus

Word."¹ The biblical evidence that Geisler cites in support of this scale of values will now be outlined.

Weightier Matters of the Law

Hierarchicalism posits that not all moral laws are of equal weight. For instance, "Jesus spoke of the 'weightier' matters of the law (Matt. 23:23) and of the 'least' (Matt. 5:19) and the 'greatest' commandment (Matt. 22:36)."² Furthermore, the Bible speaks of the "greatest" virtue (1 Cor. 13:13), and also of "greater" acts of a given virtue (John 15:13).³ By way of example, Geisler notes: "Justice and mercy have greater weight on the scale of God's

love for few persons; (e) Love for the actual versus love for the potential; (f) Potential persons versus actual persons; and (g) Complete persons versus incomplete persons; Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 76-87. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 115-121, where he has a slightly different order, and where (p. 120) he has the concept that "personal acts which promote personhood are better than those which do not," in place of "life-saving versus truth-telling." Because Geisler has not promoted the above seven-part scale since 1973, and since he now uses a three-part strategy for making decisions in conflicting conditions, this seven-part scale will not be discussed further. The three-part scheme will be considered later in this chapter under "Criteria for Conflict Decision-Making."

¹Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 116. See also, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 82; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 424; Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 283; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 223; Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 7.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 116. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 82.

values than does tithing, although the law required both (Matt. 23:23)."¹ Also, Geisler states that "helping a human being in need was of more importance to Jesus than 'profaning the sabbath' (Matt. 12:5)."² Then too, Geisler says that "Jesus most emphatically taught that it is greater to love God than man. It is the 'first' and the 'great' commandment as opposed to the 'second' (Matt. 22:38, 39)."³ Thus, ethical hierarchicalism holds that "several lines of evidence indicate that not all moral matters are weighed equally by God."⁴

The Inequality of Sins

Approaching this idea of a scale of values from a different vantage point, Geisler asserts that "all sins are sin, but not all sins are equally sinful."⁵ The belief that "all sins aren't equal"⁶ is primarily based on the idea that people "will be judged according to the degree of evil they have performed."⁷ For example, Geisler remarks that the following statement of Jesus shows that there are

¹Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 88.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 89.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 91.

⁶Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

⁷Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 90-91.

at least three levels of sins with their corresponding judgments:¹ "'Everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to the judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" shall be liable to the "hell of fire"' (Matt. 5:22)."² Another example of this gradation of sin is found in the text where "Jesus declared to Pilate, 'he who delivered me to you has the greatest sin' (John 19:11)."³ Geisler adds: "The fact that some Christian sins call for excommunication (1 Cor. 5) and others for death (1 Cor. 11:30) also supports the general biblical pattern that all sins are not equal in weight. In fact, there is one sin so great as to be unforgivable (Mark 3:29)."⁴

Graded Levels of Biblical Commands

Based on the above evidence that not all sins are equal,⁵ and that there are "higher and lower moral laws,"⁶ Geisler observes: "The real question, then, is this: Are the

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 116.

²Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 91.

³Ibid.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 116. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 82-83; Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 7; Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117.

⁶Ibid.

moral laws hierarchically graded?"¹ He answers in the affirmative, and suggests three reasons in support of a gradation of laws.

First, Geisler posits that "all ethical obligations are moral laws."² He explains that Christians have an ethical obligation to obey civil laws, not simply as a civil duty, but rather as a moral duty, "since such obedience is enjoined by the moral law Giver (God) for 'conscience's sake' (Rom. 13:5)."³ Yet, these "moral laws" are clearly lower on the scale than other moral obligations, as seen from the many cases in Scripture where people rightly disobeyed the government in view of a higher moral law.⁴

Second, even the commands to "perform ceremonial duties are divine commands and, as such, involve a moral duty."⁵ In other words, "by its very nature, a divine command is one which one ought to obey; it is an ethical

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 83.

⁴See Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119, 121.

⁵Ibid., 117. Geisler does admit though, that "not every command in the Bible is absolute. That is, not all moral injunctions are for all men and for all times;" Geisler, "Any Chance for Morality? Part 2," 20. For example, he notes that the ceremonial laws concerning animal sacrifices "are clearly not binding on Christians today;" *ibid.* This apparent discrepancy of view will be addressed later in chapter 5.

responsibility."¹ Yet, the very fact that "Jesus said that God desired mercy more than animal sacrifices,"² shows a scale of laws. In connection with the above two points, Geisler asserts that "the distinctions between civil, ceremonial, and moral laws are not rigid (if maintainable at all)."³ This is so because, "whatever God commands his children to do--whether to love their neighbors or offer sacrifices--demands moral obedience."⁴

And third, even for those who believe that moral law is distinct from civil and ceremonial regulations, Geisler maintains that there are times when two of these moral laws clearly conflict.⁵ As an example of this, Geisler refers to the story of the Hebrew midwives who lied to save life.⁶ Thus, once again, a scale of values can be seen. From the

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 123.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 416. Geisler contends that "the whole division of commands into civil, ceremonial, and moral is postbiblical, questionable, and probably of late Christian origin (possibly the thirteenth century);" Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 92. Geisler himself recognizes, however, that not all laws are binding in a universal sense. He says that the ceremonial and civil laws "are binding in a more limited sense;" Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 410. This issue will be examined in chapter 5.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 117-122.

three reasons given here, Geisler therefore deduces, "that there are graded levels of moral commands in Scripture."¹

Based on this view of "greater and lesser goods,"² and "levels of evil,"³ Geisler draws these conclusions:

First, it is evident that there are degrees of good and evil. Some acts are better and some are worse than others. Good and evil are ranked in a pyramid with the best at the top and the worst on the bottom and varying degrees of good and evil in between. Second, some single moral acts are more vicious than numerous other acts of evil. For example, one brutal act of murder can be more evil than a hundred little lies. Third, whenever there is a conflict among good alternatives or between good and evil, then the morally right course of action is always the greatest good or the most loving thing to do.⁴

In brief then, it should be noted that ethical hierarchicalism maintains that all biblical moral laws are hierarchically graded. Furthermore, hierarchical ethics emphasizes that, in view of the relative values of different moral acts, it is incumbent upon the Christian to carefully assess the alternatives for appropriate action, even though this is not always easy to do.⁵ This appraisal of options should, however, not be established on a human basis, for ethical hierarchicalism holds that "the Christian does not

¹Ibid., 117.

²Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 88.

³Ibid., 91.

⁴Ibid., 92.

⁵Ibid.

decide for himself what the ethical priorities are."¹

Rather, "each believer must be informed by Scripture of the divine scale of values and make his ethical decisions accordingly."²

No Guilt for Doing the Unavoidable

One of the most frequently recurring convictions of Geisler is that a person is not held morally accountable for doing what is unavoidable when faced with a genuine moral conflict.³ In critiquing conflicting absolutism, he notes that this approach maintains that in conflict situations, "one should do the lesser evil, for which he is guilty."⁴ By contrast, in hierarchicalism "the focus is on doing the greatest good, and you can't be guilty for doing good. In the former, man is condemned for doing what was unavoidable; but here man is praised for doing his best."⁵

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124.

²Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 93.

³See, for example, *ibid.*, 75; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119-120; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 87-89; Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 136; Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 286; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 424-425; Geisler, and Amano, The Reincarnation Sensation, 117; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 224-225; Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 86-87; Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 3; Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 6-7; Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

⁴Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 286.

⁵*Ibid.*

Geisler maintains that there are a number of factors that indicate the "truth of this point."¹ First, he states that "logic dictates that a just God will not hold a person responsible for doing what is actually impossible."² In other words, "it does not seem consistent with the nature of the God of Scripture to set up absolute but unavoidable conflicting commands and then impute individual guilt to men because they had to break them, even though they did their moral best."³ Thus, Geisler concludes that "the tragic moral act is guiltless,"⁴ for "God does not blame a man for what he cannot avoid."⁵

Second, a person "is not morally culpable if he fails to keep an obligation he could not possibly keep

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119.

²Ibid., 119-120.

³Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 225. In connection with the idea that it is God who set up unavoidable moral conflicts, it should be noted that Geisler holds that "only a moral world where evil actually occurs is one where the greatest moral good is achievable. For the highest moral perfection is dependent on the presence of evil obstacles;" Norman L. Geisler, Philosophy of Religion (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 373-374. When challenged on this (see John V. Dahms, "How Reliable Is Logic?" Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 21 [December 1974]: 372), Geisler, using somewhat circular reasoning, stated: "I believe this evil world to be the best way God can produce the best world achievable, granted the sinfulness of man;" Norman L. Geisler, "Avoid All Contradictions: A Surrejoinder to John Dahms," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 22 (June 1979): 159.

⁴Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 3.

⁵Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 6.

without breaking a higher obligation."¹ By way of illustration, Geisler notes that a man is not morally blameworthy for breaking a promise to meet his wife for dinner at a specific time if he has been delayed by helping to save a life.² In fact, "the praiseworthy and exemplary conduct of keeping the higher obligation absolves one of any responsibility to the lower duty."³ According to Geisler, "God simply intervenes in love and exempts a man from the demands of a command which cannot be kept without breaking a higher command."⁴ For Geisler, this is the "way of escape" promised in the Bible,⁵ so that one can "by the grace of God always avoid sinning."⁶ In brief, "there is always a way out of real conflicts without sinning (1 Cor 10:13). The way out is through keeping the higher command."⁷

Third, Geisler posits that there are many examples in the Bible "of persons who were praised by God for

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 87.

⁵Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 424. Here, Geisler makes reference to 1 Corinthians 10:13, as he interprets this verse.

⁶Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 424.

⁷Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 6-7.

following their highest duty in situations of conflict."¹
 He asserts that Abraham was rewarded and "commended of God for his willingness to sacrifice (kill) his son Isaac."²
 Likewise, Daniel and his three companions "received divine approval for their disobedience of human government."³
 Similarly, "the Hebrew midwives who lied and disobeyed the king were blessed by God and given families as a reward."⁴
 Also, "David and his men who broke into the temple and stole the consecrated bread were declared guiltless by Christ."⁵

In addition to these examples from the lives of Bible characters, Geisler notes: "Neither does the Scripture hold guilty those who kill in self-defense (Exod. 22:2)."⁶
 Referring to the Scripture stories, Geisler concludes that "in each case there was not only no divine condemnation for

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 88; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120.

³Ibid.

⁴Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120.

⁶Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425. This passage, together with the above examples, will be considered later in chapter 5.

the moral law they did not keep. There was, rather, evident divine approval."¹

No Repentance for Ignoring Lower Laws

Closely allied to the concept that "there is no guilt for what is unavoidable,"² because "God will not hold a man guilty for doing his best,"³ is the belief that a person does not need to repent for not keeping lower laws. This view is apparently based on at least the following two factors.

First, Geisler claims that, "technically speaking the lower command is not really broken when the higher command is followed; it is merely not kept in favor of keeping the higher obligation."⁴ Since, "the overriding duty to do the greater value simply renders it unnecessary

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 136; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 227. Earlier, in his 1981 volume, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 88, Geisler phrased the above concept slightly differently, stating that "they 'broke' (or better, did not follow)" the moral law. The word "broke" is no longer utilized in this context in his more recent works that discuss ethical hierarchicalism.

²Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

³Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 75.

⁴Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 87.

for us to perform the demands of the lesser command,"¹
there is no guilt or personal culpability involved.²

Second, ethical hierarchicalism declares that because a person is considered innocent of having "broken" any law, there is obviously no need for repentance.³ Geisler explains: "It is true that unavoidable moral conflicts often involve unpleasant activities."⁴ For instance, killing in self-defense may be "necessary."⁵ However, Geisler adds, "while one may surely regret what is necessary to do in order to obey the higher command, surely he need not repent of it. Keeping the higher law is not an evil; it is the greatest good."⁶

Criteria for Conflict Decision-Making

According to ethical hierarchicalism, there are biblical precedents for every moral conflict that anyone

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Ibid; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425.

⁴Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425.

⁵Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 136.

⁶Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425. See also, Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 3. In Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 136, Geisler similarly emphasized the word regret in this context. But here in this book he stated: "He need not repent," thus highlighting this term also.

will face.¹ Geisler states that "the basic priority of values is as follows: (1) God comes before persons (Matt. 10:37); (2) one's family comes before others (I Tim. 5:8); (3) persons come before things (Mark 8:36)."² While Geisler has made some adjustments to his basic list over time,³ he has quite consistently advocated the following three concepts as criteria for decision-making in conflict situations.

Love for God over Love for Man

Geisler maintains that "the most obvious and basic of all divisions or levels of duty is between the command to love God and the command to love one's neighbor. The former always take precedence over the latter."⁴ This idea is supported by the clear statements of Jesus that love to God must be "first" and "greatest."⁵ Geisler notes that "one implication of this is that if parents teach a child to hate God, the child must disobey the parents in order to obey

¹Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 427.

²Ibid.

³See, for example, the longer and slightly different lists in Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 76-87, and Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 115-121. These lists are footnoted above under "Biblical Support for a Scale of Values."

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120.

⁵Ibid., 121.

God."¹ Furthermore, Geisler finds grounds for this view in the example of Abraham, whose "love for God took precedence over his love for his son."² Thus, hierarchicalism affirms that, "whenever there is a conflict between divine and human values, 'we must obey God rather than men.'"³

Obey God over Government

Rather unequivocally, Geisler claims that "God ordained human government and commands the Christian to 'submit' to and 'obey' those in authority, even if they are evil men (Rom. 13:1-2; Titus 3:1)."⁴ Hence, "it is clear that Christians are commanded of God to obey government."⁵

However, Geisler posits that there are several biblical instances in which God approved of disobedience to rulers. For example, Daniel prayed to God when forbidden to do so by a king. His three Hebrew companions refused to worship an idol when required by civil law. The apostles continued to proclaim the gospel even when the authorities outlawed this. And, the Hebrew midwives disobeyed the king

¹Ibid.

²Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 287. See also, Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 77; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 227.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 117.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 121.

⁵Ibid.

when he ordered them to murder innocent children.¹ These cases show that "the moral obligation to pray, worship God, preach the gospel, and so forth, is a higher duty than the one to obey the government."² In a nutshell, "love for God always outweighs our duty to the government."³

Mercy over Veracity

Perceptively, Geisler notes that not all conflicts involve a choice between loving God and loving people.⁴ He states: "Sometimes the choice is among two spheres in which human love operates. For example, should one lie to save a life?"⁵ Noting some clear scriptural texts, Geisler says: "There is no question that the Bible commands Christians to not 'give false testimony' (Exod. 20:16)."⁶ He concedes that "deception and lying are repeatedly condemned in Scripture."⁷ However, he insists that "the Bible indicates that there are occasions when lying is justifiable."⁸

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 287. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 90-91; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 227.

⁴Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 79.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 121.

⁷Ibid., 122.

⁸Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 91.

This assertion of Geisler is based on certain Bible narratives. For instance, Rahab intentionally deceived in order to save the lives of the Israelite spies and she "was immortalized in the spiritual 'hall of fame' (Heb. 11)."¹ Geisler says that "it appears that her lie was actually an expression of her faith in God."² And, "it seems that God blessed her because of it, not in spite of it."³

A second example is the story of the Hebrew midwives who lied to the king to cover up their disobedience to his command to kill the baby boys at birth.⁴ Based on the text which states that, "because the midwives feared God he gave them families,"⁵ Geisler says that this is "an even clearer case of divinely approved lying to save a life."⁶ Thus, he proposes: "In view of the biblical examples one is forced to conclude that lying to save life is justifiable."⁷

In brief then, Geisler maintains that in conflict situations, one must love God more than people, obey God rather than the government, and place mercy over veracity.

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122.

²Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 79.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122.

⁴Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 79.

⁵Geisler was here referring to the Revised Standard Version's rendering of Exodus 1:21.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122.

⁷Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 78.

Summary and Conclusion

As a method of dealing with moral issues, ethical hierarchicalism was first proposed by Norman Geisler in 1971. He personally formulated this strategy in order to resolve the conflicts of moral obligations that he perceived both in the real world as well as in the Scriptures. Though he has used several terms to designate this approach, his basic ethical methodology has not undergone any serious change over the years.

Foundational to Geisler's view of hierarchicalism is his understanding of both the nature of theistic morality in general, and of Christian ethics in particular. He posits that morality is defined by four essential features: an objective standard, an absolute basis, a normative approach, and a divine derivation. Christian ethics, while building on this foundation, is characterized as a prescriptive, absolute, deontological approach, with the Bible as its basis, God's character as its source, the life of Christ as its best manifestation, and the love of Christ as its activating force.

The description and analysis that Geisler has done of the ethical strategies of antinomianism, generalism, situationism, non-conflicting absolutism, and conflicting absolutism serve to highlight some of the aspects that Geisler feels are imperative for a valid and useful Christian ethical method. For Geisler the positive elements

from these approaches include, an emphasis on love and the value of persons, a stress on personal relations and individual responsibility, an appreciation of differing circumstances, a recognition of an emotive element, an accent on the human perspective of ethics, an acknowledgment of the need to define norms more precisely, an ambition to reconcile conflicting moral rules, a commitment to finding ways to obey moral laws, a perspective on the nature of grace, and a belief in the providence of God.

According to Geisler, ethical hierarchicalism has certain essential elements. First, the two sources of intuitively-known natural law and biblical revelation are said to reveal both what is morally right as well as what the hierarchy of values consists of. Second, though rightly considered a qualified absolutism, hierarchicalism maintains that moral laws are absolute in their source, absolute in their sphere when they do not conflict, and absolute in their sequence of priority. Third, it is a duty-centered approach of obedience to God's commands, which calls for faithfulness to the rules irrespective of results, as well as compliance with the hierarchy of norms in conflicting situations. Fourth, it posits that Scripture stories reveal that genuine moral conflicts do exist, and that Bible characters resolved these problems by means of a priority of moral values. And fifth, it asserts that, since no human actions as such are intrinsically right or wrong, morality

is to be gauged by the motives and intentions of the one performing them.

Geisler has expended considerable effort on his concept of a hierarchy of values. He maintains that, historically, there have been several examples of hierarchically ordered values, including those proposed by Plotinus, Augustine, and most recently, Charles Hodge. Claiming that life in the real world includes moral conflicts in which only one command can be obeyed, Geisler suggests that the Bible provides a scale of values by which these dilemmas may be resolved. He states that the Bible indicates there are higher and lower moral laws, different degrees of sin, and graded levels of moral commands. Thus, if a person loyally follows the biblical hierarchy, being sure to do the greatest good in conflict situations, there is no guilt involved, but rather praise for doing one's best. Furthermore, while there may be cause for regret, since it may be necessary to do something as drastic as killing in self-defense, there is no need to repent, since keeping the higher law is good and not evil. Finally, in order to better facilitate decision-making in times of crisis, Geisler holds that the Bible teaches that one love God more than people, obey God over the government, and place mercy above veracity.

Unquestionably, Norman Geisler has invested much in the formulation of his theory of ethical hierarchicalism.

The following chapter will firstly critically analyze this ethical method by comparing the fundamental presuppositions of theistic morality and Christian ethics as propounded by Geisler, with his own ethical hierarchicalism. Then, his hierarchicalism will be appraised by examining the concepts that conflict within this approach, as well as by addressing other problematic issues in this strategy.

CHAPTER V

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ETHICAL HIERARCHICALISM

In his evaluation of antinomianism, Norman Geisler submits that "antinomianists make a contribution to ethics by stressing the relative dimension."¹ What this means is that "finite man does not have an infinite understanding of the infinite."² Even though "the basic ethical principles are absolute,"³ human beings do "not have an absolute understanding of God's absolutes."⁴ Geisler observes that "our understanding of God's perfect law is imperfect,"⁵ yet he insists that, despite the fact that it is not omniscient, "our understanding is adequate and sufficient."⁶

To a certain degree Geisler himself recognizes that even his own ethical approach is subject to this finite

¹Norman L. Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 35.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Norman L. Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 23.

⁵Ibid., 24.

⁶Ibid.

dimension. For instance, in the preface to his Christian Ethics: Options and Issues he acknowledges that this book was made necessary by, among other factors, changes in approach to certain topics, and even "a shift of viewpoint from earlier works on such issues as abortion."¹ With this knowledge in mind, it would clearly be unfair to arbitrarily charge Geisler with holding what would otherwise appear as contradictory views on these issues. Nevertheless, an examination of ethical hierarchicalism in Geisler's works does appear to indicate serious problems in relation to several significant matters. While it is true that, as Erwin Lutzer noted in connection with Joseph Fletcher's situationism, "perhaps every author should be permitted at least a few contradictions,"² it is also true that issues crucial to any ethical method must be both coherent and consistent if the approach is to be of any practical use.

Recognizing the indispensability of the coherence, self-consistency, and non-contradiction of any moral scheme, this chapter will set out to evaluate hierarchical ethics as proposed by Norman Geisler. First, ethical hierarchicalism is compared and contrasted both with what Geisler himself maintains are the essential components of the nature of morality from a theistic viewpoint, and with the defining

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 13.

²Erwin W. Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972), 60.

characteristics of the Christian perspective of ethics. Then, several concepts vital to hierarchicalism are examined with a view to illuminating the tensions that appear among the various points made by Geisler. Next, additional problematic issues are considered, especially in light of what other scholars have noted in connection with hierarchical ethics. To close the chapter, a brief synopsis and conclusion are made.

Fundamental Presuppositions and Hierarchicalism

The previous chapter of this research document outlined what Geisler has proposed as the factors that he considers fundamental for both theistic morality as a whole and Christian ethics in particular. In addition, the essential features of ethical hierarchicalism were noted. The question naturally arises as to whether or not Geisler's hierarchicalism harmonizes with these foundational concepts.

Nature of Morality

A careful comparison of ethical hierarchicalism with Geisler's view of the basic nature of theistic morality reveals both accord and discord.

Areas of Agreement

Geisler rigorously holds that morality must contain objective moral norms. For, "a purely subjectivistic ethic is like a game without rules or a civilization without

codes. Ultimately, it is really no ethic at all."¹ While it is clear that ethical hierarchicalism subscribes to the importance of objective moral standards for the ordinary circumstances of life, questions have been raised concerning the issue of subjectivism in relation to the exceptional situations in which hierarchicalism calls for following the higher obligation. It has been asked: "Doesn't each person have to decide for himself what is the greatest good? And doesn't this amount to subjectivism?"² Geisler responds, saying that believers are not to decide for themselves what the ethical priorities are, for it is God who establishes the pyramid of values in harmony with His own nature.³ Geisler notes: "The priority of values is objective and determined by God; the only subjective factor is our understanding and acceptance of God's values."⁴

¹Norman L. Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 44.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 123. This a question that Geisler himself raises and then responds to in a section addressing objections to hierarchicalism.

³Ibid., 124. Whether or not the Bible supports this concept of the pyramid of values will be addressed below.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124. While Geisler admits there is a "subjective factor" involved here, he notes that "this is a limitation shared by the other Christian views [of ethics] as well;" *ibid.* His point here is that, in contrast to subjectivistic approaches such as situationism in which "someone makes up his own hierarchy of values based on his own subjective choices" (*ibid.*, 123), for ethical hierarchicalism "these [values] are recorded in Scripture and, hence, they are no more subjective than is anything else revealed in Scripture;" *ibid.*, 124. Geisler

A second area in which there appears to be concord between Geisler's basic presuppositions of morality and his own ethical strategy occurs in relation to the question of origins. As noted earlier,¹ Geisler states that one of the defining characteristics of the nature of theistic morality is that human beings do not create basic ethical values; they merely discover them.² "It is God who determines ethical values."³ Similarly, Geisler notes that for hierarchical ethics, "something is right or wrong because God has declared it,"⁴ while "situational factors only help one to discover what God has determined that we should do."⁵

Thus, it appears that ethical hierarchicalism is firmly grounded in these two major spheres. Just as theistic morality is objective rather than subjective, and just as it is based on a divine rather than a human origin, so is hierarchicalism. On these two counts Geisler's own

(ibid., 123) would apparently view the "universal commands of Scripture" against murder, adultery, etc., as objective, even though they are subjectively understood and accepted.

¹See "Discovered, Not Created by Humans," under "The Nature of Morality" in chapter 4.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 37.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 93.

⁵Ibid.

ethical scheme satisfies the criteria he establishes for an authentic moral methodology.

Factors That Diverge

According to Geisler, morality is absolute and not relative. As opposed to relative expectations, absolute moral obligations "are always binding everywhere on everyone."¹ By way of illustration, Geisler notes that ethical hierarchicalism espouses that "the universal commands of Scripture such as the prohibitions against blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, murder, lying, and so forth are absolute, and these are binding on all men at all times and all places."²

Despite lucid and categorical statements such as these, Geisler indicates that hierarchicalism posits that "not all absolutes are absolutely absolute. Some are only relatively absolute."³ Plainly, this equivocation of Geisler stands in stark contrast to his other unconditional statements on the meaning of absolute. Various scholars concur with Geisler on his earlier unqualified definitions of the term "absolute." For instance, an ethical absolute is described as something "that maintains its validity under

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 22.

²Ibid., 123. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 93.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

any and every circumstance, no matter what;"¹ it is an "ethical standard applicable to everyone everywhere,"² one which is "unqualified,"³ and "always binding, irrespective of situation."⁴ To his credit, Geisler acknowledges that hierarchicalism "is not an unqualified absolutism."⁵ Admitting that, for hierarchical ethics "each moral principle is absolute [only] in its context,"⁶ Geisler suggests that his method may be called "qualified absolutism."⁷ This term, however, is just as paradoxical as the idea that some absolutes are only "relatively absolute."⁸ In the final analysis, even though Geisler

¹John E. Smith, "Absolutes, Ethical," in Dictionary of Christian Ethics, ed. John Macquarrie (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967), 2.

²John H. Serembus, "Absolutes and Absolutism," in Ethics, vol. 1, ed. John K. Roth (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, Inc., 1994), 6-7.

³"Absolute," New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (United States of America: Delair Publishing Company, Inc., 1984).

⁴Millard J. Erickson, "Absolutes, Moral," in Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 3.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124.

⁶Personal interview with Norman L. Geisler at Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, on December 31, 1990. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

⁷Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124.

⁸See Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

insists that his approach "is not really a relativism,"¹ it is evident that according to the established normal and regular understanding and usage of the terms "absolute" and "relative," ethical hierarchicalism is indeed a relativistic strategy.

In his first volume dealing with moral methods and problems, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, Geisler outlined several reasons for his belief in the necessity of a normative approach to ethics. Contrary to the utilitarian calculus that the conduct that is right is that which will produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people,² Geisler points out that "the end never justifies the means."³ Considering his own strategy to be a normative approach, Geisler says: "Ethical hierarchicalism is not a utilitarian ethic."⁴

Further investigation, nevertheless, raises doubts about this assertion. For instance, Geisler creates a radical dichotomy between so-called long-range and short-

¹Norman L. Geisler, and Paul D. Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 426.

²See, for example, Jeremy Bentham, "The Principle of Utility," in Moral Philosophy: An Introduction, ed. Jack Glickman (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 528; Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 411; Frederick Copleston, S.J., A History of Philosophy, 9 vols. (New York, NY: Image Books, 1985), 8:9-10.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 75.

⁴Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 131.

range results. Thus, while hierarchicalism states that one should "leave the long-range consequences to God,"¹ since they are "out of the range of humans,"² it holds that "all ethical decisions are made, or ought to be made, with immediate results in view."³ This statement is interesting in view of Geisler's own incisive critique of whether one can know what is best for the future. He queries: "But how long is 'long'? A few years? A lifetime? Eternity?"⁴ Then he declares: "Anything beyond the immediate present is outside of the human purview. Only God knows the future."⁵ Lutzer concurs, noting that "we cannot predict even the next five minutes, much less the future."⁶ Clearly, this division between distant and direct results is an erroneous

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 127.

²Ibid., 77. See also, Norman L. Geisler, review of Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism, by Paul Kurtz, in Christian Research Journal, Fall 1988, 28.

³J. P. Moreland, and Norman L. Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time (New York, NY: Praeger, 1990), 147. Geisler clearly articulated this concept at least as long ago as 1973, when he noted: "In the Christian ethic of love the long range results are left to God. Man is responsible only for the intended immediate results of choices;" Norman L. Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 95.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 76-77.

⁵Ibid., 77.

⁶Erwin W. Lutzer, The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes, Christian Free University Curriculum Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 75.

dichotomy. As Anthony Blasi has stated: "It does not matter whether the consequence is a proximate objective or a remote end."¹ Thus, even though Geisler contends that his method is a normative technique, Lutzer is correct that, due to the concept of the need to act in view of the greater good, "hierarchicalism and utilitarianism cannot be separated."²

The above evidence, therefore, indicates that Geisler's hierarchical ethics diverges in these principal domains. Rather than being an authentic absolutism, hierarchicalism turns out to be a relativistic ethic. Moreover, instead of being a normative method, it ends up utilitarian, by operating in view of projected results.³ On these two matters Geisler's scheme contradicts the criteria he establishes for a legitimate ethical procedure.

Christian View of Ethics

Meticulous comparison of ethical hierarchicalism with what Geisler holds as the defining elements of the Christian view of ethics discloses areas in which there is correspondence as well as spheres of deviation. Since

¹Anthony J. Blasi, Moral Conflict and Christian Religion, American University Studies Series VII, Theology and Religion, vol. 35 (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1988), 134.

²Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 104 (footnote).

³Williams observes that when one is "'acting for the best'" in a conflict situation, this is actually a form of utilitarianism; Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," in Essays on Moral Realism, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 56.

Geisler's theistic view of morality in general forms the foundation for his Christian perspective of ethics, there will naturally be some noticeable overlap between this critique and the foregoing. Nevertheless, this analysis is essential since it will consider the additional aspects that further distinguish general morality from Christian ethics.

Elements That Harmonize

For Geisler, Christian ethics is based on both general and special revelation. He asserts: "General revelation [in nature] contains God's commands for all people. Special revelation [in Scripture] declares his will for believers. But in either case, the basis of human ethical responsibility is divine revelation."¹ In basic agreement with this position, hierarchical ethics maintains that it is also founded on natural law and the Bible.² Geisler explains that God knew that everyone would not have access to the Scripture, "so He inscribed a law upon their hearts."³ Furthermore, "the same God whose moral nature is reflected in natural law has expressed His moral character

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 23.

²See, for example, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 125-130.

³Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 362.

in biblical commands to believers."¹ Just as in the Christian view of ethics, hierarchicalism posits that a revelational approach to ethics is preferred since it is much more definitive and less subject to misunderstanding than human intuition.²

Another area of confluence between the main features of Christian ethics and hierarchicalism is that which is related to the life of Jesus Christ. For Christian ethics, Jesus' life is a vital model: "When it comes to knowing and doing what is right there is no substitute for a living example. Christ was that example."³ He came to live on this earth where He showed people how to live.⁴ Similarly, hierarchicalism often appeals to the example of Jesus in support of its claims.⁵ For example, Geisler says that the death of Jesus on the cross shows that ethical conflicts

¹Norman L. Geisler, "Natural Law and Business Ethics," in Biblical Principles & Business: The Foundations, Christians in the Marketplace Series, vol. 1, ed. Richard C. Chewning (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1989), 172.

²See Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 366; Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 127; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 33-34.

³Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 53.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 39.

⁵Whether the interpretation of these incidents is contextually accurate according to the biblical evidence or not will be addressed later on in this chapter.

exist.¹ Also, he states that Jesus faced moral conflicts, such as the choice between obeying parents or God, without ever sinning.² Thus, according to hierarchical ethics Jesus Christ "is our complete moral example."³

This brief comparison shows that in two primary spheres hierarchicalism is fully compatible with Christian ethics as defined by Geisler. Both approaches are based on natural law and the Bible, with an emphasis on the latter since it is a clearer revelation of God's will. Likewise, both hold that ethics is best exemplified in the life of Christ. Thus, on these two issues Geisler's own ethical method measures up to the standard he establishes for a genuine Christian approach to morality.

Points of Tension

Geisler observes that "the Christian ethic is anchored ultimately in the unchanging nature of a God of perfect love and justice."⁴ In other words, all "the ethical imperatives that God gives are in accord with his unchangeable moral character."⁵ For example, since "it is

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119.

²Ibid., 125.

³Ibid.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 25-26.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 22.

impossible for God to lie,"¹ "we should not lie either."² Geisler concludes: "In brief, Christian ethics is based on God's will, but God never wills anything contrary to his unchanging moral character."³

Hierarchicalism, however, contends that lying is sometimes ethically right.⁴ In attempting to explain this issue, Geisler states that "even though lying to save a life cannot be based in God as true, nevertheless, it can be based in God as merciful."⁵ For instance, when truth and mercy conflict as in a life or death emergency, lying "finds its basis in God's nature as merciful."⁶ Therefore, ethical hierarchicalism alleges that "justifiable lies are not based in God's truthfulness but in his mercy."⁷ When this assertion is contrasted with Geisler's previous unambiguous remark that all ethical commands are in harmony with God's unchangeable moral character, it becomes clear that hierarchicalism here draws an illegitimate disjunction between God's attributes of mercy and truth. Moreover, by

¹Ibid. Geisler was here referring to the New International Version's rendering of Hebrews 6:18.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 22.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 121-122.

⁵Ibid., 129.

⁶Ibid., 130.

⁷Ibid.

positioning mercy and truth as conflicting traits, ethical hierarchicalism seems to imply that God's character is discordant and chaotic.¹ In evaluating this notion of justified lying being based on the nature of God as merciful, Donald Bloesch concludes that Geisler can "be accused of drawing a bifurcation within God."² Then Bloesch forcefully adds: "But surely there must be a unity between God's attributes!"³

A second point of tension appears in connection with the question as to what it is that provides the impetus for Christian ethics. Geisler observes that, for Christian ethics, "the value of Christ's example of love is inestimable."⁴ For, the love of Christ becomes the motivating factor in keeping the moral laws of God.⁵

In outlining hierarchicalism, Geisler never mentions that the motivating power behind his own ethical strategy is the love of Christ. In fact, discussion of the love of

¹See Rakestraw, who notes that "the character of God as perfect and consistent within his own moral nature appears to be jeopardized by any view which holds that God's absolutes genuinely conflict;" Robert V. Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," Criswell Theological Review 2 (Spring 1988), 255.

²Donald G. Bloesch, Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 183.

³Ibid.

⁴Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 60.

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 40.

Christ as motivator is completely nonexistent. However, in just one place he concisely explains that it is the Holy Spirit who enables the Christian to act ethically: "Without the Spirit revealed principles for action and the Spirit empowered motivation to perform what is right there can be no truly Christian ethic."¹ Thus, in contrast to his emphasis on the indispensability of the love of Christ as the energizing force in the Christian view of ethics, Geisler's own ethic is devoid of this factor, while it only briefly suggests that the Holy Spirit does this motivating.

A third concern deals with the very nature of ethical methods. Geisler warns that "morality is not determined by what men do but by what they ought to do."² If morality were based on what human beings did, "then people ought to lie, cheat, steal, and murder, since these things are done all the time."³ The function of describing human behavior is the realm of sociology, while that of prescribing human behavior is the province of morality.⁴ Indeed, as Geisler notes, "Christian ethics is by its very nature prescriptive, not descriptive."⁵

¹Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 96.

²Ibid., 12.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 24.

⁴Ibid., 23.

⁵Ibid.

While Geisler acknowledges that "the Bible records things that it does not approve,"¹ he nonetheless uses concepts derived from various scriptural accounts to establish two notions that are vital to hierarchical ethics. To prove that unavoidable moral conflicts exist,² Geisler refers to the story where God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and labels this a "classic example of a conflict of moral principles."³ Also, based on his interpretation of the deceptive actions of various Bible characters,⁴ Geisler concludes that these are "God-approved examples of how He wants us to behave in similar moral conflicts."⁵ This descriptive approach taken by ethical hierarchicalism, however, is in direct contradiction to Geisler's initial

¹Norman L. Geisler, and Ronald M. Brooks, When Skeptics Ask (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 166.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 121.

⁴See, for example, *ibid.*, 123; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 91; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122.

⁵Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417. Whether or not these are indeed "God-approved examples" will be addressed below in the section dealing with the "Interpretation of Vital Bible Passages." In the interim, it should be noted that Geisler personally acknowledges that "God sometimes blesses us in spite of ourselves and He is able to bring good out of evil;" *ibid.*, 397. In view of these factors, extreme caution needs to be taken in drawing conclusions concerning how God is viewed as relating to human actions.

observations that Christian ethics is prescriptive, and not descriptive.¹

A fourth factor that includes considerable ambiguity relates to the specific focus of the moral method. Geisler holds that "ethical systems can be broadly divided into two categories, deontological (duty-centered) and teleological (end-centered)."² These are "mutually exclusive groups."³ As William Frankena states in agreement: "Deontological theories deny what teleological theories affirm."⁴ Geisler notes that the deontological approach is "an ethic of principle which is concerned with one's duty to do what is intrinsically right apart from foreseeable consequences."⁵

¹As indicated in chapter 4 above, in the section labeled "Prescriptive, Not Descriptive," Geisler maintains that "morality is not determined by what men do but by what they ought to do;" Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 12. Also, concerning the Christian view of ethics, he notes that "moral rightness is prescribed by a moral God;" Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 23. For Christian ethics, these prescriptions include the command not to lie; *ibid.*, 24. In contradistinction to the Christian view of ethics, hierarchicalism, based on its descriptive approach, contends that it is sometimes right to lie; see, for example, *ibid.*, 121-122, 130.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 24.

³Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 9. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 11, and Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 312, 314, where he notes that a deontological approach is "opposed" to a teleological one.

⁴William K. Frankena, Ethics, 2d ed., Foundations of Philosophy Series, ed. Elizabeth and Monroe Beardsley (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 15.

⁵Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 20.

Concurring with Geisler, other scholars maintain that the deontological method "considers actions to be intrinsically right or wrong regardless of their consequences."¹ In other words, it is the Christian's obligation to follow the moral law whatever the outcome.² Geisler then declares: "Christian ethics is deontological."³

However, as noted in the previous chapter, the above categorical statements are later moderated by Geisler himself, as when he posits that deontologists "should generally be content with acting for short-range results. Since we do not know the future, we should allow the long range to take care of itself."⁴ This equivocation by Geisler is evidently necessary since his own hierarchical approach is heavily dependent on projected results. To prove the validity of hierarchicalism, Geisler provides these illustrations: "Sometimes no one will jump off an overcrowded lifeboat, and either all will sink or some must be pushed off. . . . There are times when either the would-

¹Richard A. Spinello, "Deontological Ethics," in Ethics, vol. 1, ed. John K. Roth (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, Inc., 1994), 219. See also, Richard M. Gula, S.S., What Are They Saying about Moral Norms? (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1981), 87; Neil Brown, "Teleology or Deontology?" The Irish Theological Quarterly 53 (1987): 36.

²See Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 144-145.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 24.

⁴Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 147.

be murderer is killed or else his victim(s) will die."¹ As is manifest, hierarchical ethics operates in view of the so-called short-range intended outcome. In brief then, ethical hierarchicalism shows "a strong teleological influence,"² in its actual outworking, and is not a truly deontological approach.

A final component that exhibits some ambivalence relates to the question of absolute moral obligations. To begin with, Geisler attests that "Christian ethics is firmly absolutist."³ He explains: "Since God's moral character does not change (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17), it follows that moral obligations flowing from his nature are absolute. That is, they are always binding everywhere on everyone."⁴ Murder and lying are two examples of these absolute

¹Ibid., 153. See also, "Three Evangelicals Ponder the 'Right to Die'," Evangelical Newsletter, 7 May 1976; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96.

²Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 252. See also, Luck (p. 26, footnote #22), who notes that Geisler's hierarchicalism "claims to be a pure deontology (duty centered ethics), but it seems actually to be a crypto-teleology (consequence ethics);" William F. Luck, "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics: A Second Look at the Salvaging Operations," Grace Theological Journal 8 (1987). Interestingly, Schuller comments that "a teleological ethics is not ethics but pure praxeology;" Bruno Schuller, Wholly Human: Essays on the Theory and Language of Morality, trans. Peter Heinegg (Dublin, Ireland: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 176.

³Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 9.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 22.

duties.¹ In brief, Christian ethics maintains a belief in absolute moral duties, which "are binding on all people at all times and in all places."² As previously noted, this is the proper standard definition of the term "absolute."³

In connection with ethical hierarchicalism, however, Geisler appears to modify these explicit statements on the meaning of "absolute." For instance, in discussing moral conflicts, he contends that "what is absolutely binding as such in a simple relation is not necessarily the right course of action in a complex situation where one must decide between two commands as conflicting."⁴ As an example of this, Geisler notes that "lying as such is always wrong."⁵ But, "while lying as such is never justified, lying to save a life is."⁶ Geisler recognizes that his

¹See, for example, *ibid.*, 23; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 9.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 23. See also, Norman L. Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," Trinity Journal 4 (September 1975): 82, where Geisler notes: "The universal commands of Scripture, e.g., are absolutely binding on all men at all time [*sic*] and all places."

³See the above section on "Factors That Diverge" under "Nature of Morality."

⁴Norman L. Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," Bibliotheca Sacra 131 (July-September 1974): 227.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 127. See also, Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 11; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 226.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 129.

ethical theory raises the query as to how hierarchicalism can profess to affirm absolute moral obligations when it permits people to ignore certain ethical laws in conflict situations. He answers that "there are three ways in which hierarchicalism is an absolutism."¹ It is first of all absolute in its source, since it holds that all norms are based in the absoluteness of God.² "Second, each particular command is absolute as such,"³ and must be obeyed, unless there is a moral conflict, at which point the higher law must be followed.⁴ And third, the very hierarchy by which the conflicts are resolved is absolute.⁵

This conclusion, that hierarchicalism is absolute only in its source, its sphere, and its sequence, flies in the face of Geisler's own statements that actual absolute moral obligations, such as the specific acts of lying and

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94. See also, Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 227; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124.

³Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 94.

⁴Ibid. Luck (p. 25, footnote #20) observes: "The obligation to follow the higher law is a rule-governing rule. The fact that the rule-governing rule is absolute does not in the slightest make any of the rules that it governs absolutes."

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 124. Luck (p. 25, footnote #20) notes: "The fact that the order is absolute does not make each rule absolute."

murder, "are always binding everywhere on everyone."¹ Also, it conflicts with the notion of the inherent evil of such acts in and of themselves.² As William Luck, in his critique of this idea of absolutism has correctly noted: "None of these arguments establishes that lower laws are absolutes."³ Or, as Lutzer has observed: "If absolutes are only absolutes in certain situations, then of course they are not absolutes."⁴ Perhaps the final word on this issue should be from Geisler himself, where he provides a rather muted redefinition of the meaning of an absolute duty. He claims that an absolute is "an ethical duty that has the highest degree of incumbency possible in that context and cannot be overridden by any other duty."⁵ Thus it can be seen that, while Geisler holds that Christian ethics affirms a belief in absolute moral obligations, hierarchical ethics posits a fairly different view.

By way of summary then, it can be said that a comparison of five of the characteristics that Geisler considers essential for the Christian view of ethics with

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 22.

²See, for example, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 20, where he speaks of acts that are "inherently right," and of "an intrinsic good in the act itself."

³Luck, 25 (footnote #20).

⁴Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 103.

⁵Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 157.

his own position of ethical hierarchicalism reveals some major points of tension. First, while Christian ethics is based on the immutable character of a God who, for example, cannot lie, hierarchicalism says that justifiable lies find their basis in God's nature as merciful. Second, while the love of Christ is for Christian ethics the motivating factor in obeying moral laws, Geisler's own ethic lacks this component, and only briefly submits that the Holy Spirit does this activating. Third, while Christian ethics is by its very character prescriptive and not descriptive, to some degree ethical hierarchicalism assumes a descriptive stance, especially in relation to the issue of moral conflicts. Fourth, while Christian ethics adopts a deontological approach in which one does what is intrinsically right irrespective of consequences, hierarchicalism often depends upon projected results in order to determine what to do. And fifth, while Christian ethics maintains a belief in absolute moral duties, which are always binding everywhere on everyone, hierarchical ethics ends up with no absolute moral duties, but merely with a perfect source, a proscribed sphere, and a precise sequence of obligations. In short, based on these five defining characteristics of Christian ethics as identified and elucidated by Geisler himself, the approach of ethical hierarchicalism would have to be rejected and considered unacceptable as a method of morality for Bible-believing Christians.

Conflicting Concepts in Hierarchical Ethics

In addition to the numerous divergent factors between Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism and what he considers the basic features of both theistic morality and Christian ethics, there appear to be other elements in the method of hierarchicalism that do not synchronize suitably.

A Plurality of Absolutes or Not

In the outline of Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism in the preceding chapter, it was noted that this approach claims a belief in "many moral absolutes."¹ Specifically, as Geisler puts it, "the universal commands of Scripture such as the prohibitions against blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, murder, lying, and so forth are absolute, and these are binding on all men at all times and all places."² He categorically states: "God's law is absolute, and there are absolutely no occasions when it is morally justifiable to break it."³ In other words, "the commandments of Christ do spell out the meaning of love for the Christian. Each

¹See "A Plurality of Absolute Duties" in chapter 4. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 101; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 102, 123.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 123.

³Ibid., 102. Geisler made this statement when outlining what he considers the positive contributions of conflicting absolutism.

commandment indicates clearly what love means in a given human relationship."¹

Despite these emphatic comments in support of a belief in a plurality of substantive moral absolutes, other statements made by Geisler seriously undermine this entire notion. For example, according to hierarchicalism, lying, adultery, and murder,² are morally wrong only when in a simple relation, while they could be right "in a complex situation where one must decide between two [conflicting] commands."³ When there is this conflict, Geisler maintains that "it is our absolute duty to follow the higher command as revealed by God in Scripture."⁴ Geisler recognizes that "it seems contradictory to claim that a moral principle is absolute when it can sometimes be broken."⁵ He contends, however, that the lower command is not really "broken" when the higher command is obeyed.⁶ This is because, in genuine unavoidable conflicts, the keeping of the higher obligation "renders it unnecessary for us to perform the demands of the

¹Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 222.

²Ibid., 226.

³Ibid., 227.

⁴Norman L. Geisler, "Ethical Conflicts," 1977, TMs [photocopy], p. 17, Center for Research and Scholarship, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 129.

⁶Ibid.

lesser command."¹ Also, under these circumstances, "God does not demand obedience to lower laws."²

In the discussion of his limited understanding of absolute moral norms, where he propounds that "not all absolutes are absolutely absolute,"³ Geisler confesses that in ethical hierarchicalism, "there can be only one thing [sic] which is absolute in the full and final sense of that word (viz., God)."⁴ In essence, Geisler ends up with only one "absolute" in his ethical strategy. As Luck correctly observes: "Since in the hierarchicalist system all laws lower than the highest law are laws subject to an exempting process, only one law in the hierarchicalist system can be an absolute."⁵ Similarly, Stanley Grenz notes that ethical hierarchicalism "claims to include a plurality of universal norms. But in actuality it contains only one norm, that which stands at the top of the hierarchy."⁶ Luck concludes that, due to this, hierarchicalism "is unacceptable to

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

⁴Ibid. In a more recent work, Geisler makes a similar statement, by saying that "only one thing can be loved supremely, not many;" Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 133.

⁵Luck, 25.

⁶Stanley J. Grenz, "The Flight from God: Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling and Universal Ethical Systems," Perspectives in Religious Studies 14 (Summer 1987): 158.

Evangelicals who find that Scripture teaches the plurality of absolutes."¹ Furthermore, by suggesting that the only ultimate "absolute" is God, hierarchical ethics winds up with an "absolute" that has no specifically defined content. Hence, as Geisler has perceptively deduced in his analysis of situationism, "a single but contentless absolute is the same as no absolute at all."² In brief then, though ethical hierarchicalism claims to believe in many substantive moral absolutes, in its actual application it ends up with only one contentless "absolute," which is really no absolute at all. Therefore, in the final analysis the ethical hierarchicalism of Geisler "reduces to antinomianism."³

¹Ibid.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 21. See also, Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 221-222, where he notes that, "to tell a man to 'love' in all situations without spelling out what this means is like telling him to do 'X' or to 'zirkle' when he faces a conflict. None of these symbols has any meaning unless it is defined with specific content."

³Geisler makes this comment about situationism; see Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 21. Since, as has been demonstrated above, situationism and hierarchicalism both end up with one contentless "absolute," it does not appear inappropriate to conclude that Geisler's assessment of situationism is also fitting for his own ethical methodology. Note that, in the above concluding paragraph regarding "Points of Tension" under "Christian View of Ethics," it was similarly deduced that "hierarchical ethics ends up with no absolute moral duties." Hence, Geisler's critique of the generalist is appropriate here also. He notes: "Since he has no absolute moral principles, his view tends to be reducible to antinomianism;" Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 77.

Intentions Versus Ends to Justify Means

A thorough perusal of Geisler's works reveals that he repeatedly underscores the point that "the end never justifies the means."¹ For instance, in his penetrating critique of utilitarianism, Geisler states at length:

Utilitarianism believes that the end justifies the means. But this is clearly wrong. Hitler's goal to have a more perfect race was good, but his means of attaining it were evil. President Nixon's goal of national security was a noble one, but the criminal and unethical activity of Watergate was not justified to reach it. The end never justifies the means; the means must justify themselves. That is to say, an act is not automatically good simply because it has a good goal. The means to achieve it must be judged good by some objective standard of good. The road to destruction is paved with good intentions (Prov. 14:12).²

Geisler provides several additional examples in support of the dictum that "the end never justifies the means." He notes that "forced infanticide of all children thought to be carriers of genetic 'impurities' is not justified by the goal of a purified genetic stock."³ Similarly, it would be wrong to kill AIDS patients in order to curb the spread of this deadly disease, or to eliminate political dissenters for the sake of national harmony.⁴ In his negative assessment of the actions of pro-life people

¹See, for example, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 37, 75, 162, 178, 188, 191; Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 131.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 75.

³Ibid., 37.

⁴Ibid., 179, 178.

who commit civil disobedience in order to stop abortion, Geisler says: "The good end (saving babies) is being used to justify the illegal means (breaking the law). But the end never justifies the means."¹ Then he adds: "Even in the saving of a life the Christian cannot use wrong means to accomplish this good end. God gives life and ultimately He is responsible to punish those who take it."² Geisler explains that "it is never right to correct a wrong by doing a wrong,"³ since "two wrongs do not make a right, and the end does not justify the means. Such reasoning is humanistic and situational, not Christian and biblical."⁴ In brief, "evil means are not justified by good ends. Only good means are to be used for good ends."⁵

The frequent use, by Geisler, of such concepts as, "evil means" or "unethical activity" versus "good means" or "good acts" might on the surface appear to sustain a belief in the intrinsic value of human actions. As has been

¹Norman L. Geisler, Civil Disobedience: When Is It Right? Should Christians Ever Break the Law? (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Productions, 1990), 18. Though this section is listed as having been compiled by Douglas Van Gordon, Geisler, in an interview on August 29, 1990, indicated that this section accurately reflects his own views.

²Geisler, Civil Disobedience: When Is It Right? Should Christians Ever Break the Law?, 18.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 180.

⁴Norman L. Geisler, "A Biblical View of Government," Rutherford Institute 2 (January/February 1985): 12.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 191.

recorded in the foregoing chapter, Geisler is completely cognizant of the fact that "much of the discussion on these issues hinges around the question of whether an act of itself is intrinsically good or evil."¹ He avers that there is no such thing.² To prove his point, he posits that "if some acts were intrinsically good or evil, then an act of killing committed by an animal or an imbecile would have to be considered morally wrong."³ Thus, Geisler concludes that, "mere human actions as such are not intrinsically good or evil;"⁴ it all depends on "the motive or purpose of the one performing them."⁵ For instance,

¹Norman L. Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society 2 (1979): 4. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 74; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 106.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 109. See also, Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 4; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 106.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 89. In an earlier work, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 109, Geisler similarly argued that "if actions were evil apart from human intentions, then animals or imbeciles who performed the same actions would also be morally culpable." For Geisler (see, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 89), moral culpability is a prerequisite for being considered human. However, this would mean that a newborn infant is not human, since it has not yet developed any moral sensitivity, and cannot be morally culpable. Even though an imbecile or an animal would not be considered morally culpable for killing someone, the act in itself would surely not be considered good or neutral as such, but still evil.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 109.

⁵Ibid., 113.

ethical hierarchicalism holds that, in lying to save a life, it is not the lie that is good, "but it is the intent and action to save a life that is good--despite the fact that intentional falsification was necessary to accomplish this good."¹

Clearly, what matters most for Geisler is the element of intent. Though he recognizes that "intention is only one aspect of an ethical action,"² and that "good intentions alone are not sufficient to make an act morally right,"³ Geisler asserts that "it is really the component of intent that defines the essence of a moral act."⁴ In other words, hierarchicalism posits that an act "is right if it is done with good intentions and wrong if it is done with bad intentions."⁵ However, in the same book where this statement is made, Geisler keenly critiques utilitarianism,

¹Ibid., 96. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 126. In stating this belief in the justifiability of lying to save life, Geisler indisputably contradicts his own view noted above, where he states: "Even in the saving of a life the Christian cannot use wrong means to accomplish this good end. God gives life and ultimately He is responsible to punish those who take it;" Geisler, Civil Disobedience: When Is It Right? Should Christians Ever Break the Law?, 18.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 13.

³Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 4. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 13.

⁴Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 75.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 312.

categorically insisting that "something is not good because the intentions underlying it are good; it is good only if the actions are also good."¹ Therefore, using Geisler's own reasoning, ethical hierarchicalism can be seen to have the same inadequacy as utilitarianism on this point. Hence, similar to Geisler's conclusion on generalism, it seems that hierarchicalism "tends to be reducible to antinomianism."²

In the glossary of one of Geisler's later works on ethical issues, an intention is defined more precisely as, "the end that constitutes the nature of a given act and specifies what kind of action it is; what one intends to bring about."³ This concept, that the "intention" and the "end" one seeks to accomplish are in reality identical, is echoed by James Gustafson: "Moral action is governed in part by the intentions of the actor, by his thought about the purposes he is seeking to fulfill, the ends he is seeking to achieve."⁴

If, as rightly recognized by both Geisler and Gustafson, there is no real difference between an intention and an "end," and if, as Geisler holds, all actions in and of themselves are morally neutral, then it becomes clear

¹Ibid., 75.

²Ibid., 77.

³Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 160.

⁴James M. Gustafson, Christ and the Moral Life (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 256.

that, notwithstanding Geisler's vehement denial that "ethical hierarchicalism is not a utilitarian ethic,"¹ his moral methodology does in reality promote the belief that "the end justifies the means." Geisler's own critique of this concept is thus appropriate: "Such reasoning is humanistic and situational, not Christian and biblical."²

Moral, Civil, and Ceremonial Laws

The very first of the three essential premises in the biblical argument for ethical hierarchicalism asserts that there are higher and lower moral laws.³ According to Geisler, the basic evidence for this contention that moral laws are hierarchically graded is the belief that "the distinction between civil, ceremonial, and moral laws are not rigid (if maintainable at all)."⁴ Certainly, Geisler is aware of the fact that "it has been common among theologians to distinguish between the moral law, the civil law, and the ceremonial law in the Mosaic legislation."⁵ However, he says that "nowhere does the Bible divide the law

¹Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 131.

²Geisler, "A Biblical View of Government," 12.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 116; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 81-82.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117.

⁵Norman L. Geisler, "The Use of the Bible in Social Ethics, VI: Dispensationalism and Ethics," Transformation 6 (January/March 1989), 7.

into distinct ceremonial, civil, and moral categories."¹ In fact, he holds that "the whole division of commands into civil, ceremonial, and moral is postbiblical, questionable, and probably of late Christian origin."² The view, that "the law of God is unified"³ in this sense, is crucial for hierarchicalism. For, if civil, ceremonial, and moral laws are all part of the "ethical obligations"⁴ incumbent on Christians, then it is clear that there are several events in the Bible where conflicts of these obligations occur.⁵ And if this is the case, then a hierarchy may be needed.

Interestingly though, over the years Geisler himself has maintained that there is a distinct difference between these laws. For instance, in utilizing conflict situations to illustrate hierarchicalism in his earliest work on

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 205. Some writers concur with Geisler, noting that this distinction is not a very fruitful way of discovering the ethical relevance of the law. See, for example, Terrance Tiessen, "Toward a Hermeneutic for Discerning Universal Moral Absolutes," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 36 (June 1993): 193; Christopher J. H. Wright, An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 153.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 92. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 61. He says that "this distinction has been around since at least the time of Aquinas (d. 1274);" Geisler, "The Use of the Bible in Social Ethics, VI: Dispensationalism and Ethics," 14 (footnote #3).

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

ethical approaches in 1971, he concedes that "not all of these are conflicts between two absolute moral laws (some of them being civil laws)."¹ He has also noted that "the law (torah) of Moses has three major aspects, the moral law (e.g., the Ten Commandments), the civil law (personal and property rights, etc.) and the ceremonial law (dealing with sacrifices and feasts)."² Recognizing the differences between these laws, Geisler states that, in contrast to universally binding ethical duties, "there are other things that are binding in a more limited sense. These are based on the will of God for a particular people and/or time."³ Then he illustrates this, by saying: "The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament (such as offering sacrifices or undergoing circumcision) fit into this category."⁴ As Geisler acknowledges in his 1990 book on ethics: "The ceremonial laws of Moses are not binding today."⁵ Similarly, the

¹Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 123. See also, Norman L. Geisler, "Any Chance for Morality? Part 2," The Standard, 15 February 1973, 20; Norman L. Geisler, A Popular Survey of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 58-60.

²Norman L. Geisler, "Ceremonial Law," nd, TMs [photocopy], Center for Research and Scholarship, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA.

³Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 410.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 110. Years earlier (in 1973) he noted that these laws "are clearly not binding on Christians today;" Geisler, "Any Chance for Morality? Part 2," 20.

"obligation to obey civil governments"¹ is also limited. Thus, "it is certainly true that Christians are not under either the ceremonies (Heb. 8-10) or the curses of the Mosaic law (Gal. 3:13)."²

The differentiation between these three law codes is recognized by other scholars as well. For example, Old Testament theologian, Walter Kaiser, maintains that "the notion that there is some type of division within the law is not a concept that has been imposed on it from the outside."³ That this categorization is fair to the biblical text, Kaiser shows by indicating that the civil statutes in the Covenant Code of Exodus 21-23 had a heading that referred to its laws as "judgments" to be used as precedents.⁴ While "the Decalogue carried no socially recognizable setting with its laws,"⁵ thus implying its permanency, the ceremonial regulations, from Exodus 25 through at least Leviticus 7, "had an expressed word of built-in obsolescence when it noted several times over that

¹Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 410. See also, Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 110.

²Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 43.

³Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "God's Promise Plan and His Gracious Law," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 33 (September 1990): 291.

⁴Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward Old Testament Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 46.

⁵Ibid.

what was to be built was only a model."¹ Not only is this division demonstrated in the Old Testament, but even "Jesus appealed to just such a distinction."² Kaiser concludes that "the law can and must be viewed as being divided into various components."³

In what appears to be a specific reference to Geisler's hierarchical approach, Kaiser states that this "threefold distinction was an attempt to avoid this type of arbitrariness in deciding which commands were or were not to be observed by Christians."⁴ While the civil and ceremonial laws are clearly of limited significance, "the moral law is the foundational aspect of the whole law, and its address is to all persons in all times."⁵ Gordon Olson, in his critical analysis of hierarchicalism, similarly proposes that ethical norms be divided into the two major categories of absolute and limited norms.⁶ While

¹Ibid.

²Kaiser, "God's Promise Plan and His Gracious Law," 299 (footnote #24).

³Ibid., 300.

⁴Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics, 46.

⁵Kaiser, "God's Promise Plan and His Gracious Law," 301.

⁶C. Gordon Olson, "Norman Geisler's Hierarchical Ethics Revisited," Evangelical Journal 4 (Spring 1986): 4. In a rebuttal to Olson, Geisler claims that his ethic does distinguish between two levels of norms; Norman L. Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," Evangelical Journal 4 (Fall 1986): 84. As evidence of this, he says that "the very title of one of the chapters

moral absolutes are "those norms whose applicability is nowhere limited in Scripture,"¹ things such as obedience to civil governments, and ceremonial commands "are clearly limited in their applicability."² Thus, since "all the examples of Geisler's exemption principle have to do with conflict between these two kinds of norms,"³ Geisler's main thesis, that absolute moral laws conflict and that therefore a hierarchical gradation of laws is necessitated, is invalidated.⁴

defending Graded Absolutism [i.e., ethical hierarchicalism] is 'Loving on Two Levels;' (Christian Ethic of Love, ch. 3);" *ibid.* Even though it is technically correct for Geisler to say this, there is a radical difference between Olson's two-tiered structure of absolute and limited norms, and Geisler's concept of two levels of love based on his interpretation of the Ten Commandments.

¹Olson, 5.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, 4. In his response to Olson's article, Geisler asserts that there are "real moral conflicts between two absolutes;" Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," 85. Careful scrutiny of Geisler's examples of "conflicts between two absolutes" disproves this notion. Instead of his "absolutes" being prescriptive moral laws, they are either merely descriptive attributes of God which are wrongly turned into conflicting commands (see, for example, "Points of Tension" in the "Christian View of Ethics" above, and "The Existence of Moral Conflicts" in the "Interpretation of Vital Bible Passages" below), cases of falsely assumed responsibilities (see, for example, the sections below on "Sins of Commission or Omission," "Assumed Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," and "The Existence of Moral Conflicts" in the "Interpretation of Vital Bible Passages"), or questionable interpretations of biblical data (see, for example, the section below dealing with the "Interpretation of Vital Bible Passages").

⁴See Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics, 46; Olson, 4-8, 10-12.

The above information shows that Geisler holds two mutually exclusive views on the unity of or differentiation between the civil, ceremonial, and moral laws. While the concept of the unity of these codes is indispensable to Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism, he himself separates them, claiming that the moral law is universally binding, whereas civil and ceremonial laws are not. Thus, his view of the distinction between these laws concurs with other scholars who have demonstrated that no hierarchical method is necessitated when norms are properly divided into absolute laws and limited obligations. Hence, hierarchical ethics is to a large degree undermined and negated.

Biblical Accounts and Approval of Actions

Geisler recognizes that "the Bible records things that it does not approve."¹ For example, David's sins, Solomon's polygamy, and Satan's lie in Genesis 3, are all recorded without being approved.² "Morality is not determined by what men do but by what they ought to do."³ In other words, while "the 'is/ought' fallacy holds that because people are doing it, therefore, they ought to do

¹Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 166. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 280-281.

²Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 166.

³Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 12.

it,"¹ Geisler opposes this theory, noting that "what people do is not the basis for what they ought to do. If it were, then people ought to lie, cheat, steal, and murder, since these things are done all the time."² In contradistinction to this "is/ought" ideology, Geisler correctly points out that "the task of the [Bible] interpreter is to determine whether the passage is approving or merely reporting what is said."³ Hence, one "is not to imply that everything contained in the Bible is being taught by the Bible."⁴

Nevertheless, while Geisler has frequently and repeatedly cautioned that "the Bible does not approve of every thing it records,"⁵ he has used Bible stories to establish two concepts vital to ethical hierarchicalism. The first of these is the belief that unavoidable moral conflicts exist. To prove this, Geisler refers to stories such as God's command that Abraham offer up Isaac as a

¹Norman L. Geisler, "Ethical Aspects of Evangelism with Particular Reference to Patients," in Evangelism for the Medical & Dental Professions, ed. Leonard W. Ritzmann (Richardson, TX: Evangelism Commission of the Christian Medical Society, 1985), 23.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 24.

³Norman L. Geisler, "Theological Method and Inerrancy: A Reply to Professor Holmes," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 11 (Summer 1968): 144.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 280.

sacrifice,¹ Rahab's deception to save the lives of the spies,² Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter,³ and Daniel's disobedience of civil law.⁴ Based on his interpretation of these incidents,⁵ Geisler concludes that these are some of the many "biblical examples of genuine, unavoidable moral conflicts."⁶ The second concept crucial to hierarchicalism, which Geisler establishes on his own interpretation of scriptural accounts, is the so-called hierarchy of values which is to resolve moral conflicts. For instance, Geisler claims that there are many cases in Scripture where God "commended the faith of those involved in intentional deception in order to save lives."⁷ Included in these are, Rahab's act of "justifiable" deception,⁸ and the Hebrew midwives' "divinely approved

¹Ibid., 117-118; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 118.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 119.

⁵Geisler's interpretation of these passages will be carefully compared below with the actual biblical data.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119.

⁷Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417.

⁸Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 91.

lying."¹ In a similar manner, Geisler employs Bible stories to show that one ought to place "love for God over love for man,"² and "obey God over government."³ These narratives are thus understood as "examples of persons who were praised by God for following their highest duty in situations of conflict."⁴

In alluding to the chronicles of those who lied to save life, Geisler asserts: "Since all things in the Old Testament are 'for us' (Rom. 15:4) and happened 'for our example' (I Cor. 10:11), it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that these were God-approved examples of how He wants us to behave in similar moral conflicts."⁵ This is a rather paradoxical deduction in view of Geisler's own adamant conviction recorded three years prior to his first book on ethics, that one "is not to imply that everything

¹Ibid. It appears that Geisler bases his conclusion as to whether or not these lies are justifiable, on both the intentions and the consequences of the acts. These passages dealing with lying, as well as the others that Geisler uses, will be considered below in the "Interpretation of Vital Bible Passages."

²See Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 77.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 121.

⁴Ibid., 120.

⁵Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417. Though Geisler recognizes that the Bible does not approve everything it records, it appears that he needs this interpretation of Paul's statement in order to support his hierarchical ethics.

contained in the Bible is being taught by the Bible."¹ Additionally, this conclusion challenges Geisler's more recent statement, which cautions that "one cannot derive a prescriptive ought statement from a mere descriptive is statement."² That is, the actions of any Bible characters are not necessarily normative for the believer. As Kaiser has explained: "Reporting or narrating an event in Scripture is not to be equated with approving, recommending, or making that action or characteristic normative for emulation by all subsequent readers."³ In fact, Geisler has himself noted that "the Bible contains many references to lies, sins and falsehoods that it in no way approves or teaches."⁴

Furthermore, even the bestowal of God's grace upon the person is no necessary proof of heavenly approbation. John Murray refers to the belief that God's blessings are evidence of divine approval of people's behavior as "poor theology and worse theodicy."⁵ He fittingly observes that

¹Geisler, "Theological Method and Inerrancy: A Reply to Professor Holmes," 144. This article was published in 1968.

²Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 20 (footnote #1; emphasis added). This book was published in 1990.

³Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics, 283.

⁴Norman L. Geisler, review of The Debate about the Bible, by Stephen Davis, in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 21 (September 1978): 264.

⁵John Murray, Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 137.

"we know little of biblical theology if we do not recognize that God fulfils his determined purpose of grace and promise notwithstanding the unworthy actions of those who are the beneficiaries of that grace."¹ As Kaiser suitably remarks: "Commendation of a person or notable action need not imply commendation of every element of the men and women cited."² Rather, Kaiser insists that everyone must constantly distinguish, on the basis of explicit statements, and the immediate and larger contexts, between what the Bible teaches and what it merely reports in order to describe how far the people of God departed from the standard of the holiness of His person and the requirements of His law.³ Thus, as John Jefferson Davis affirms: "The precepts and commands of Scripture have priority over the narrative passages in discerning the moral law."⁴ In other words, the only time the example of Scripture characters should be followed is when they themselves acted in a manner consistent with the absolute moral laws of God as clearly revealed in the Bible.

By way of summary the following can be said. On the one hand, Geisler declares that biblical morality is not

¹Ibid.

²Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics, 283.

³Ibid.

⁴John Jefferson Davis, Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1985), 78.

determined by what people do. Yet, on the other hand, he bases some tenets indispensable to hierarchicalism on his personal interpretation of Bible stories. Likewise, while Geisler acknowledges that the Bible includes many references to deception without approving any, he contends that those who lied to save life are to be emulated. Thus, Geisler's hierarchicalism denies the basic principles that he himself lays down concerning how to correctly understand and interpret the biblical accounts.

Problematic Issues in Ethical Hierarchicalism

Besides the above mentioned conflicting concepts, further scrutiny of ethical hierarchicalism indicates that there are additional problematic issues that need to be considered, especially in light of what other scholars have noted with regard to Geisler's ethical approach.

Sins of Commission or Omission

Over the years that Geisler has been writing on ethics, he has consistently held that "not resisting evil is a sin of omission, and sins of omission can be just as evil as sins of commission."¹ For example, he states: "To permit a murder when one could have prevented it is morally wrong. To allow a rape when one could have hindered it is an evil. To watch an act of cruelty toward children without

¹Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 174.

trying to intervene is morally inexcusable."¹ Geisler asserts that this concept is based on James 4:17: "'Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.'"²

In discussing the "preservation of life principle," Geisler posits that "we have a moral duty to preserve and protect human life whenever possible."³ It appears that Geisler builds this belief on the sixth commandment, for he says that "the command 'You shall not murder' (Exod. 20:13) implies that we should help prevent the unnatural death of innocent people as well."⁴ In response to the view that committing murder is distinct from not saving a life, Geisler contends: "What significant moral difference is there between a sin of commission (which takes an innocent life), and one of omission (which willfully allows an

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 232. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 174.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 232.

³Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 18.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 183. Geisler apparently utilizes the word "innocent" here since he believes in capital punishment (see *ibid.*, 209-213) for the guilty. The term "unnatural" is presumably used here since, in connection with one form of euthanasia in which one allows natural death to occur, Geisler does believe that there is a difference between "taking a life and letting one die;" Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 232. See also, *ibid.*, 124-125; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 167; Geisler, "Ethical Aspects of Evangelism with Particular Reference to Patients," 43; Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 80.

innocent life to be taken)? Human life made in God's image has the same intrinsic value no matter which way one contributes to its demise."¹ Thus, since "it is morally unjustifiable not to resist evil,"² "failing to prevent such a death is as culpable as actually causing it."³

All of the above reasoning is significant in Geisler's argument for ethical hierarchicalism, as can be observed for instance, in his negative assessment of the beliefs of non-conflicting absolutists. In discussing their position that there is no real dilemma in the case of lying or permitting a murder, Geisler states:

¹Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," 83. In connection with the issue of war, Holmes similarly holds: "To fight is to take human life. Not to fight is to let human life be unjustly taken;" Arthur F. Holmes, Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions, Contours of Christian Philosophy Series, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 55.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 174.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 183. That Geisler sees absolutely no significant moral difference between intentionally killing and permitting the death of an innocent human being, can be observed from the way he discusses the case of a pregnancy in which the mother's life is in significant danger unless she gets an abortion. While he does note that in an abortion the unborn is "killed," he also simply says that in this case the fetus will "die." If the mother does not have the abortion, he states that "she will forfeit her own life." However, he states that as a result of this choice two lives may be "snuffed out;" Francis J. Beckwith, and Norman L. Geisler, Matters of Life and Death: Calm Answers to Tough Questions about Abortion and Euthanasia (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 78-79. This fluid use of language confirms that, for Geisler, to kill is morally the same as to allow an innocent person to die.

They believe there is really only one moral obligation in this situation--to tell the truth. The only other duty, they say, belongs to the person threatening to do the killing. He is responsible for what he does with the truth we give him. But is this overlooking the fact that there is also a duty to save innocent lives, to show mercy? In short, is there a real conflict between truthfulness and mercifulness? In other words, the choice is really between an act of commission and one of omission. And a sin of omission can be just as much a sin as a sin of commission (James 4:17).¹

Thus, for Geisler, the fact that one is at times faced with either a sin of omission or one of commission becomes weighty additional evidence that in this real and fallen world, inevitable and unavoidable conflicts of moral obligations will occur.²

This notion that there is no morally relevant difference between intentionally committing an act and merely allowing one is seriously challenged by numerous scholars. For instance, in discussing the principle of double effect, Vincent MacNamara contends that "there is a difference between aiming at something and permitting it."³

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 89-90. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 56-57. Incidentally, Geisler is not here arguing for the conflicting absolutist position that one sometimes lands in positions of having to choose between two sins. Since, as shown previously, he holds that in these situations the lower duty is suspended in view of the higher, it is clear that Geisler would not consider it a sin to tell a lie in this context.

²See Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 96, 232.

³Vincent MacNamara, Love, Law and Christian Life: Basic Attitudes of Christian Morality (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 146.

It is true that if an impersonal viewpoint is taken, the end result becomes the only morally relevant factor.¹ However, if one rejects this utilitarian view and adopts a personal moral perspective, it becomes important, as Neil Brown notes, to distinguish for instance, "'acts intentionally designed to kill' from deaths that are brought about in other ways through the interventions or non-interventions of human agency."² This moral distinction between killing and permitting death is recognized by several thinkers.³ Approaching this essential difference from an intuitional perspective, Carla Kary says at length:

Suppose one lets a drowning man die because he believes saving him would result in his own death. Or again, suppose that in order to secure medicine necessary to save the life of her mother, a woman must submit to a rape. The woman may well choose to let her mother die to avoid being raped.⁴

Now the intuition for these cases is that it would not be correct to judge either of the acts of letting die immoral. In the first case, one ought not be blamed for refusing to save if doing so puts one's own life at risk. And similarly in the second, one ought not be blamed for refusing to save if doing so requires one to submit to total degradation. The intuition is simply

¹Neil Brown, "Teleology or Deontology?" 48.

²Ibid.

³See, for example, Olson, 11-12; Richard L. Trammell, "The Nonequivalency of Saving Life and Not Taking Life," Journal of Medicine and Philosophy 4 (September 1979): 251-262; Carla Kary, "A Moral Distinction Between Killing and Letting Die," Journal of Medicine and Philosophy 5 (December 1980): 326-332.

⁴Though Kary uses the word "rape" here, it would be more accurate to refer to this action as a form of "prostitution," since it would be a case of sexual intercourse in order to secure economic gain.

that no person ought to be blamed for refusing to suffer violation to either his body or his spirit for the sake of saving someone whose impending death he did not cause.¹

Considering this issue from a biblical perspective, Lutzer comes to analogous conclusions. Recognizing that the Scriptures teach that a man should provide for his family, Lutzer asks what he should do if crippled for life in an accident. He reasons that in such a case the man is not morally responsible for not fulfilling his obligations.² Next, Lutzer discusses the story of a woman who decides to commit adultery so as to be released from prison in order to be able to care for her family. He observes that, "since the Scriptures clearly forbid doing evil that good might come, she is not free to commit adultery without incurring guilt. Through a situation beyond her control she was placed in a position where she could not fulfill the duty to her family. She is not therefore in a position where she must sin."³ Thus, when one is either physically or morally restricted, one is not morally culpable for permitting an

¹Kary, 328-329. Pack perceptively notes that the "bad consequences that appear to come from a given action may be due to the evil action of another moral agent;" Rolland W. Pack, "An Examination of Norman L. Geisler's Ethic of Hierarchy," (M.A. thesis, Harding College, 1979), 87-88.

²Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 108.

³Ibid., 109.

undesirable situation to occur or to exist. Put simply: "He is not accountable for a tragedy beyond his control."¹

An example of this can be seen in the illustration of an obstetrician who, in the process of delivering a baby, finds himself in the situation of being able to save either the life of the mother or that of the child. While it is true that there will be a death in either case, there is a qualitative difference, as noted above, between the two acts. As Carla Kary appropriately explains: "He can choose to save the mother by killing the child,"² or "he can choose to let the mother die because he refuses to kill the child."³ Commenting on just such a pathological birth, Josef Fuchs points out that "there is in fact no commandment to save the mother at all costs. There is only an obligation to save her in a morally permissible way."⁴ Consequently, as Kary notes, it is morally right to allow the mother to die, since "the doctor does not want to commit what he (reasonably) believes is an immoral act."⁵ Since the physician is unable to save the mother without killing the child, he is not responsible for this tragedy. As Kary

¹Ibid., 97.

²Kary, 330.

³Ibid.

⁴Josef Fuchs, S.J., Natural Law: A Theological Investigation, trans. Helmut Reckter, and John A. Dowling (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 131.

⁵Kary, 331. See also, Fuchs, 131.

succinctly concludes: "In a significant sense, his choices, drastic though they are, become easy to make. He is no longer thrust into the position of a god [and of having to decide who should live or die] and then confronted with the impermissibility of acting like one."¹

By way of recapitulation, the following should be noted. Geisler alleges that there is no significant moral difference between acts of commission and those of omission. This theory provides additional support for his view that moral conflicts exist. However, the work of more careful scholarship reveals a distinct contrast between these two acts, and indicates that, while one is responsible for committing an evil act, one is not culpable for actions that one cannot prevent due to physical or moral restrictions. Hence, the choice is simplified in these situations, for one needs to merely do that which is morally required, without attempting to forestall the evil actions of another person.

Assumed Absolutes and Moral Conflicts

As already noted in the foregoing chapter, Geisler rarely explains what he means by the term "moral conflict." Based on the numerous examples he cites as well as the few brief explanations he gives, it has been concluded that, in Geisler's understanding, a moral conflict can be defined as

¹Kary, 332.

an occasion when one is faced with two moral obligations, only one of which it is possible to perform.¹

Unfortunately, a similar vagueness in definition appears to surround the question of identifying what the actual moral absolutes or universal norms are that need to be followed. For example, on the first page of his earliest volume on ethics, Geisler asks in relation to universal norms: "If there are more than one, what ought one to do if they conflict?"² Then he says: "Is it ever right to lie in order to save life? The question poses a conflict in ethical norms."³ Here Geisler evidently believes that truth-telling and life-saving are both moral absolutes. This kind of assumption can be seen throughout much of Geisler's work.⁴

An illustration of this is observed in Geisler's evaluation of non-conflicting absolutism. In discussing this method's belief that there are many absolute non-overlapping moral norms, Geisler states:

This assumption, however, is very difficult to reconcile with a wholistic view of human experience. That is, it seems to assume (contrary to fact) that the various

¹See "Definition of Moral Conflicts," in chapter 4.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 11.

³Ibid., 13.

⁴See, for example, *ibid.*, 94; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 67; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 26; Norman L. Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic," cassette (Lynchburg, VA: Quest Productions, 1989).

relationships and spheres of human activity are entirely isolated from each other. This compartmentalization of the several areas of human responsibility makes a neat theory, but it does not accord well with the brute realities of life. Like many other idealistic positions, non-conflicting pluralistic absolutism is a beautiful theory which is destroyed by a brutal gang of facts.¹

Clearly, for Geisler, the facts or experiences of life provide the evidence that absolute norms conflict. Yet, even though it is clear that the one who believes in the existence of conflicting moral norms can only do so based on an understanding as to what these moral absolutes actually are, nowhere in his works does Geisler take the time to exegetically establish or systematically outline what the fundamental moral absolutes are that are required of all Christians. All along he proceeds on unexpressed assumptions as to what these universal moral norms are. Consequently, based on his personal interpretation as to what these absolutes are, Geisler concludes that these obligations conflict in the real world and in the Bible.

In view of this type of phenomenological approach to ethics, Helmut Thielicke says: "Many theological ethicists allow the development of their work to be controlled, not by theological enquiry, but by the law of that phenomenology of life."² Thielicke rightly acknowledges that, even the most

¹Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 94 (emphasis added).

²Helmut Thielicke, Theological Ethics, vol. 1, Foundations, ed. William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 461.

unsuspecting visual act, "even what appears to be the most objective and natural human understanding of that which is observed, is not really without its prior assumptions."¹ Indeed, "it contains in fact an act of evaluation which precedes the observation, an act which itself presupposes a scale of values and therefore a particular view of things."²

Thielicke's astute analysis of the phenomenological approach to ethics exposes a fateful flaw of Geisler's method. Despite Geisler's repeated declarations that the experiences or "facts" of life prove that moral absolutes conflict, it is clear that these conflicts are due to his own interpretation of the so-called "facts." By way of illustration, Geisler considers the problem of lying to save life to be a conflict of moral absolutes. As noted above, this is because he considers it a moral absolute to prevent innocent life from being taken. However, as Gordon Olson, in his biblical critique of ethical hierarchicalism has countered, "it is an absolute not to commit murder; but it is not an absolute to save a life."³ In other words, as David Gill has so perceptively remarked: "Geisler's dilemmas

¹Ibid., 1:462.

²Ibid.

³Olson, 12.

are often false dilemmas arising from his imposition of worldly definitions of truth on the Bible."¹

Ironically, it is Geisler himself who has sounded a warning about the dangers of interpreting the Bible based on personal experience. He observes: "Reevaluation of the Bible based on our experience often ends in reinterpreting the Bible by our experience, rather than interpreting our experience by the Bible. The Bible is our final authority, not our experience."² In addition, he cautions that "the critical thinker must constantly be on guard against the naive acceptance of a multitude of universal norms for which there is provided no adequate justification."³ Then he adds: "Especially should one be defensive about the naive acceptance of so-called absolutes which conflict with each other."⁴ It appears that, unfortunately, Geisler has not

¹David W. Gill, review of Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, by Norman L. Geisler, in Transformation 1 (October/December 1984): 28.

²Norman L. Geisler, Signs and Wonders (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1988), 110.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 94.

⁴Ibid. While it is not the purpose of this research to deal with whether or not real moral conflicts exist, it should be noted that several scholars challenge this notion. See, for example, Fuchs, 131; Tiessen, 200; Luck, 28; Pack, 97; Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 255; Edmund N. Santurri, Perplexity in the Moral Life: Philosophical and Theological Considerations, Studies in Religion and Culture, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 116, 124, 156, 202, 211. As Olson (p. 9) notes: "The attributes of God cannot be in conflict since he is perfection."

heeded his own counsel on these matters. Since ethical hierarchicalism is based partly on Geisler's assumed absolutes that conflict in the "facts" of human experience, it is an unacceptable method of moral reasoning. Rather, as Geisler has personally noted, "for a Christian, all of life must be interpreted by the final authority of the Bible."¹

The Laws of Nature and Moral Theory

On various occasions Geisler has referred to the laws of nature or physical phenomena to illustrate or support different tenets of ethical hierarchicalism.² For instance, in positing that this is a real and not an ideal world in which life must be lived, Geisler suggests that when God's perfect laws are applied here, "responsibilities overlap and we are torn between two absolute commands."³ Elucidating this concept by a law of nature, Geisler says: "It's God's attributes shining through the spectrum of this finite world that give us a whole spray of colors from top to bottom that overlap."⁴ And it is here, in this fallen

¹Geisler, Signs and Wonders, 110.

²In addition to these natural laws, Geisler claims that his concept of "exemption" functions somewhat like an ethical "right of way" law--when two cars simultaneously reach an intersection without signals or signs, the car on the right has the right of way; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 89; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120.

³Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 282.

⁴Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic."

world, that these moral conflicts occur.¹ In a more scientifically accurate explanation, Luck counters Geisler, noting that "God's love and harmonious rules pass through the prism of finitude and form a spectrum of laws that, like the colors of the spectrum, do not overlap or conflict."²

Plainly, the more vital illustration from the world of nature that Geisler utilizes relates to the claim of ethical hierarchicalism that a moral law can be absolute, yet not need to be kept. For example, Geisler posits that it is sometimes necessary to appear to "break" the fifth commandment so as to keep the first.³ However, the one who does this is not really breaking the lower law; "rather, he is merely transcending it by his obedience to the higher commandment."⁴ Referring to the laws of physics, Geisler asserts: "The law of magnetism does not destroy the law of gravity when a magnet picks up a nail; it merely overpowers it."⁵ Similarly, he claims that when one obeys the first commandment over against the fifth commandment, "it is not a

¹Ibid. See also, Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 76, where he says that "the pyramid of principles emerges as the light of God's love passes through the prism of human experience thereby casting a spectrum or order of God's laws."

²Luck, 28 (footnote #27).

³Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 31-32.

⁴Ibid., 32.

⁵Ibid. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 19.

transgression but a suspension of the lower law of love for the higher law of love."¹ In his later works on ethics, Geisler notes that "just as a magnet does not break the law of gravity in attracting a nail, killing in self-defense does not violate the law of respect and preservation of human beings."² Thus, "the overriding duty to keep the higher law simply renders it unnecessary for us to perform the demands of the lesser command."³

In responding to this comparison, John Tape discerningly notes:

The analogy with the magnet falls short because the point of comparison lies in the nail, not in the magnet. When the nail is attracted upward by a magnet the nail certainly is breaking or violating (i.e., failing to conform to) the law of gravity. Likewise whenever God's laws are violated, or when man fails to conform to them, they are broken.⁴

William Luck argues further, that the magnet is a poor analogy that leads hierarchicalism astray. For, "the

¹Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 32. Interestingly, Thomas Aquinas, whom Geisler credits with having had the most influence on his life, compared the dispensations from natural law precepts that he claimed God allowed, to miracles in the physical order; John F. Dedek, "Intrinsically Evil Acts: An Historical Study of the Mind of St. Thomas," Thomist 43 (July 1979): 410.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 129. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 99.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 129.

⁴John Tape, "A Case for Conflicting Absolutism," 1990, TMs [photocopy], p. 6, a paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting, New Orleans, LA.

force of gravity is measurable, but moral obligation is not."¹ In other words, "a rule either obliges or it does not. There are no degrees of obligation."² Luck then charges that, even if there were such a thing as a stronger law conflicting with a weaker, and "if the weaker law is binding in the situation at all, then for it to be ignored is for it to have been disobeyed."³

Paradoxically, it is Geisler himself who provides a strong caution in connection with using the laws of nature as analogous to moral law. He maintains that "the moral law is not to be identified with the laws of nature because the latter is descriptive (simply is), not prescriptive (ought) as moral laws are."⁴ Likewise, Geisler observes that, "by definition, physics deals with what is and morality with what ought to be."⁵

¹Luck, 23. Furthermore, as any astronaut will attest, the force of gravity is virtually non-existent in space, and is not an absolute law. Since this natural law is clearly limited and operable only under certain specific conditions, it cannot therefore legitimately be used as a true analogy of God's eternal absolute moral laws.

²Luck, 23.

³Ibid.

⁴Norman L. Geisler, Knowing the Truth about Creation: How It Happened and What It Means for Us (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1989), 77.

⁵David Basinger, and Randall Basinger, eds., Predestination & Free Will (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 75. In another place Geisler admonishes that "animal behavior is not normative for humans," since "animals are not rationally and morally responsible creatures;" Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues,

In brief then, while Geisler has used illustrations from the world of nature to support some of the tenets of ethical hierarchicalism, some intellectuals have seriously questioned the validity of these analogies. It has been pointed out, for instance, that the magnet illustration actually counters Geisler's point, by showing that the law of gravity is violated or broken in this instance. Perhaps it would have been fortuitous had Geisler complied with his own warning against associating descriptive natural law with prescriptive moral law. As Luck states: "Moral obligation is not like the obligation of nature's laws. One cannot have a rule that obliges but from which one is immune."¹

Principle of Double Effect and Teleology

It has been reiterated more than once that ethical hierarchicalism contends that "mere human actions as such are not intrinsically good or evil."² In an effort to elucidate his view concerning the nature of human actions, Geisler points out that hierarchicalism "does not proclaim that the evil is a good thing to do, but rather that the

267. Humans need to be concerned with moral law, not animal behavior, or the laws of physics.

¹Luck, 31.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 109. See also, "Conflicting Absolutism," 4.

highest obligation in the conflict is the good thing to do."¹ He explains:

For example, in falsifying to save a life, it is not the falsehood that is good (a lie as such is always wrong), but it is the act of mercy to save a life that is good--despite the fact that intentional falsification was necessary to accomplish this good. In other words, it is unfortunately true that what is called "evil" sometimes accompanies the performance of good acts.² In these cases God does not consider a man culpable for the concomitant "evil" in view of the performance of the greater good.³

Geisler claims that, in this regard, ethical hierarchicalism "is similar to the principle of double effect, which states that when two results--a good result and an evil result--emerge from one act, the individual is held responsible only for the good one he intended and not for the evil one which necessarily resulted from the good intention."⁴ Elaborating further on his interpretation of the doctrine of double effect, Geisler says that, "when an action has good and bad consequences, then the action may be performed under the following circumstances:"⁵

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 126.

²Ibid. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96.

³Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 127.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 126-127. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96-97; Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 85.

⁵Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 67.

1. The act is good or at least indifferent regarding the end that one directly intends.
2. The good and evil effects follow immediately from the act; that is, the good effect is not obtained by means of the evil effect.
3. One only intends the good effect but merely tolerates the bad effect, even if that bad effect was foreseen prior to the act.
4. There is a proportion between the good and bad effects; that is, the good must be at least equal to the bad.¹

While Geisler observes that this "principle of double effect expresses the importance of intentions and means to ends in moral actions,"² it is evident, as John Tape concludes, that ethical hierarchicalism "uses the principle of double effect in an attempt to pronounce the Christian inculpable for breaking the lesser command."³

Over the years there has been much discussion and debate concerning the concept of "double effect."⁴ The

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Tape, 4. See, Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 85; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96-97; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 126-127.

⁴See, for example, Daniel F. Montaldi, "A Defense of St. Thomas and the Principle of Double Effect," Journal of Religious Ethics 14 (Spring 1986): 296-332; Cornelius J. van der Poel, "The Principle of Double Effect," in Absolutes in Moral Theology?, ed. Charles E. Curran (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1968), 186-210; John Martin Fischer, Mark Ravizza, and David Copp, "Quinn on Double Effect: The Problem of 'Closeness'," Ethics 103 (July 1993): 707-725; A. van den Beld, "Killing and the Principle of Double Effect," Scottish Journal of Theology 41 (May 1988): 93-116; Sanford S. Levy, "Paul Ramsey and the Rule of Double Effect," Journal of Religious Ethics 15 (Spring 1987): 59-71. For further references, see the appropriate footnote under "The Principle of Double Effect" in chapter 2.

traditional formulation of the theory of double effect has four parts.¹ When these four parts are compared with the above explanation of Geisler, it becomes apparent that, while the last three premises are essentially the same, the very first proposition differs in a significant manner. Geisler says simply that this first premise maintains that, "the act is good or at least indifferent regarding the end that one directly intends."² For him, the principle of double effect relates to two results that emerge from an act that is in itself undefined, but is good only in relation to the end it intends to bring about.³

This perspective, however, contradicts what the principle of double effect teaches. For instance, Neil Brown notes that "the agent was permitted to perform the action provided that the act itself was not classed as

¹See, for example, Neil Brown, The Worth of Persons: A Study in Christian Ethics (Sydney, Australia: Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1983), 101; Albert R. DiIanni, S.M., "The Direct/Indirect Distinction in Morals," Thomist 41 (July 1977): 350-351. MacNamara (p. 140) says: "It is important to realise that the principle [of double effect] is not of divine origin but is a rule of thumb thought up by theologians of the past to deal with complex cases where there seems to be a clash of values."

²Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 67.

³See Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 126-127; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96-97; Geisler, "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," 85; Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 67.

intrinsically evil."¹ Other scholars concur that this action "is not in itself bad,"² is itself "not morally evil."³ Since this concept, that acts in themselves have intrinsic value, is negated by Geisler, it becomes manifestly plain that in a crucial manner, ethical hierarchicalism conflicts with the principle of double effect.

Moreover, the principle as used by Geisler, can be seen to have additional difficulties. To begin with, while disregarding the nature of the action in itself, Geisler focuses on the results or consequences that emerge from the action. In this sense, he uses the principle of double effect in a utilitarian or teleological manner.

Furthermore, there are numerous scholars who feel that the principle of double effect has limitations and ambiguities.⁴ For example, Anthony Blasi, noting that this rule "seems to be faulty in several respects,"⁵ argues that

¹Neil Brown, The Worth of Persons: A Study in Christian Ethics, 101 (emphasis added).

²John C. Dwyer, Foundations of Christian Ethics (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 156.

³Richard A. McCormick, S.J., "Double Effect, Principle of," in Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics, ed. James F. Childress, and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986), 162. See also, van den Beld, 95.

⁴See, for example, Charles E. Curran, Ongoing Revision in Moral Theology, (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1975), 192; Dwyer, 159; Blasi, 138-139.

⁵Blasi, 139.

"the principle is altogether ambiguous with respect to what is to be understood from such terms as 'serious reason,' 'commensurate reason,' and 'proportionately grave reason.'"¹

Finally, the very illustration of lying to save life that Geisler uses as an example of the principle of double effect, is called into question by Charles Fried:

There is no way in which one's own lie can be a mere side effect of some other intention that is pursued. One can only lie intentionally--it is not possible to lie inadvertently or as the known but unwanted side effect of some other purpose. To be sure, it is possible to create erroneous impressions as a side effect or inadvertently, but then one is not lying. Thus the lie is always an end in itself or a means, a chosen means, or it is not a lie at all.²

In summary, the following should be noted. Though Geisler alleges that ethical hierarchicalism is similar to the principle of double effect, his modified version of this doctrine contradicts an essential component of the standard formulation of it. In reality, Geisler utilizes this rule in a teleological way, focusing on consequences, since he does not believe in the intrinsic value of human actions. Besides some additional problems associated with this ideology, it was shown how that the precise illustration utilized by Geisler, turns out to be an illegitimate interpretation of the principle of double effect.

¹Ibid.

²Charles Fried, Right and Wrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 55.

Interpretation of Vital Bible Passages¹

Since Geisler is a Christian ethicist who seeks to construct a biblical approach to ethics,² he refers to and discusses many narratives and texts from the Scriptures. He holds that "Christian ethics originates with God and is based on His Word."³ For Geisler, the Bible is "an authority"⁴ which furnishes the Christian believer with "an inscripturated revelation."⁵ Maintaining that the "written Word of God is love manifest in propositional form,"⁶ he declares that "the Bible provides an objectively knowable referent point for discovering the will of the immutably loving and just God."⁷ Based on statements such as these, as well as on the manner in which he uses the Scriptures in his works on ethics, it becomes clear that, for Geisler, the Bible supplies the propositional and conceptual content for ethical decision making. Given Geisler's hermeneutical

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all passages of Scripture will be from the New King James Version (NKJV).

²See Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 8; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 13-14.

³Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 25.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 17.

⁵Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 33.

⁶Ibid., 40.

⁷Ibid., 34.

approach, there does, however, appear to be significant contradictions and inconsistencies in his utilization of the Scriptures, a matter which will be the focus of this section.¹

Naturally, it is beyond the scope of this research project to consider every scriptural reference Geisler has used.² Thus, only the stories and passages crucial to ethical hierarchicalism will be examined.³ These passages have been classified under four different areas, even though it must be recognized that Geisler has at times used these texts to support more than one of these concepts. Therefore, as appropriate, some of these pivotal passages will be discussed in more than one setting. While the investigation of these vital biblical texts is not intended to provide an indepth and definitive exegesis of every verse, this study hopes to shed light on the meaning of

¹Note that the scholars used in this critique of Geisler's interpretation of vital Bible passages, ascribe to essentially the same hermeneutical approach to Scripture espoused by Geisler.

²In Appendix III of his master's thesis, Pack (pp. 165-166) provides a brief diagrammatic analysis of the Bible passages cited by Geisler in support of hierarchicalism, together with the principles essential to disproving Geisler's claims.

³Since all the passages vital to hierarchicalism appear to have been interpreted in a problematic manner, this section includes no Bible texts supporting Geisler's view.

these passages in their specific contexts, as well as their practical application for ethics, as needed.¹

Justifiable Deception to Save Life

To elucidate his belief that there is a certain hierarchy of values to be used to resolve moral conflicts, Geisler often refers to the matter of lying to save life. On the one hand, he acknowledges that "deception and lying are repeatedly condemned in Scripture."² Yet, he claims that "the Bible indicates that there are occasions when intentionally falsifying (lying) is justifiable."³ He draws this distinction, for he claims that, "while lying as such is never justified, lying to save a life is."⁴ He posits that there are many incidents in the Scriptures where God "commended the faith of those involved in intentional deception in order to save lives."⁵ Thus he declares: "In

¹At times Geisler makes rather inaccurate statements relating to the contents of specific passages. For example, in attempting to demonstrate the existence of moral conflicts, Geisler rhetorically asks: "If a man fears for the safety of his wife, should he lie to protect her? (Gen. 20:12);" Geisler, and Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, 282. According to the biblical account, Abraham lied to save his own life, and not his wife's life; (Gen 20:2, 11-12).

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122. Dedek (p. 407) mentions that, for Thomas Aquinas, "every lie is a sin no matter how good the reason might be."

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122.

⁴Ibid., 129.

⁵Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417.

view of the biblical examples one is forced to conclude that lying to save life is justifiable."¹

Perhaps the most often cited case is the story of Rahab, as found in Joshua 2. Geisler explains at length:

Rahab intentionally deceived to save the lives of Israel's spies and was immortalized in the spiritual "hall of fame" (Heb. 11). It should be noted that first, nowhere does the Bible condemn her for this deception; second, her falsehood was an integral part of the act of mercy she showed in saving the spies' lives; and third, the Bible says, "Rahab . . . shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent" (Josh. 6:17). But the real concealment was accomplished by deceiving the authorities at her door. It seems that God blessed her because of it, not in spite of it. Hence, her "lie" was an integral part of her faith for which she was commended of God (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25).²

Each of the above points needs to be looked at carefully. First, while it is true that the Bible nowhere condemns her for this deception, it is also true, as Pack properly points out, that throughout the Bible "her lie is never commended."³ A lack of any direct commendation or condemnation of actions in Scripture is no indication of the rightness or wrongness of the deeds performed.⁴ For example, nowhere is there any condemnation of the rape and

¹Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 78.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 123; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 91; Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 78-79; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 220; Geisler, "Any Chance for Morality? Part 2," 22.

³Pack, 123.

⁴For instance, no comment, either positive or negative, is made about Rahab's practice of prostitution.

incest of the daughters of Lot with their father, as recorded in Genesis 19. Since the oldest daughter had a son named Moab, who became the ancestor of Ruth, and thus eventually of Jesus,¹ should one conclude that this incestuous rape was actually a good thing? Obviously, just as in this case, so Rahab's deception "violates a clear commandment of God,"² and needs to be judged on this basis and not on either immediate or remote consequences.³

Second, does the Bible demonstrate that Rahab's "falsehood was an integral part of the act of mercy she showed in saving the spies' lives,"⁴ as Geisler claims? A reading of the biblical chronicle indicates that several acts and discussions took place between Rahab and the spies, and Rahab and the men of Jericho. To merely lump all of these activities together under the rubric of an "act of mercy," thereby justifying every action, is essentially the same as vindicating all of David's deeds, including adultery and murder, because God called him "a man after His own

¹Compare Gen 19:37, Ruth 1:4, 4:13-22, and Matt 1:5, 16.

²Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Hard Sayings of the Old Testament (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 97.

³Furthermore, Olson (p. 7), suggesting that Rahab was not morally culpable due to ignorance of God's moral law, says: "When we remember that she was at this point a new convert who knew nothing of the Mosaic Law just given, can we expect her to follow the moral standards of God's people Israel at this point? She did what her culture informed her to do."

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122.

heart,"¹ and one "who kept My commandments and followed me with all his heart."² Evidently, a general commendation does not necessarily mean endorsement of each individual action. As Walter Kaiser aptly notes regarding Rahab: "Her case is but another dramatic witness to the principle that divine approval of an individual in one situation is no guarantee of divine approval in any or all other cases."³

Third, while the Bible says Rahab was to be spared because she hid the spies, Geisler claims that Rahab's "real concealment was accomplished by deceiving the authorities at her door."⁴ In other words, "the lie was the key to the hiding of the spies."⁵ The scriptural record indicates otherwise. According to Joshua 2:6, prior to the arrival of the authorities, Rahab had taken the two spies up to the flat roof of her house and had hidden them under some piles of flax plants. It was only subsequent to this, and in a different action that Rahab chose to lie about the men. As Kaiser insightfully remarks: "Her lying was an unnecessary

¹1 Sam 13:14.

²1 Kgs 14:8.

³Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics, 272.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122.

⁵Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 79.

accoutrement,"¹ to the separate act of hiding the two men.²

Geisler concludes that Rahab's lie "was an integral part of her faith for which she was commended of God (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25)."³ While Hebrews 11:31 does commend Rahab's faith and her act of hospitality, James 2:25 specifically states that she was "justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way." Commenting on this text, Geisler insists that "only the lie made this possible. It would follow then that the lie was what enabled her to justify her faith in God."⁴ Is this so? In examining this passage, John Murray observes: "It should not go unnoticed that the New Testament Scriptures which commend Rahab for her faith and works make allusion solely to the fact that she received the spies and sent them out another way."⁵ Then Murray observes that the approval of these actions does not logically likewise endorse the specific act of deception. He concludes: "It is strange

¹Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics, 272.

²If Rahab had told the truth to the king's messengers it cannot be merely assumed that they would certainly have found the Israelite men. While it is probable that they would have searched the roof, there is no guarantee that they would have discovered the men. Also, it must not be forgotten that the Lord God might have performed a miracle to protect His people, as He did at the Red Sea.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122.

⁴Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 79.

⁵Murray, 138 (emphasis added).

theology that will insist that the approval of her faith and works in receiving the spies and helping them to escape must embrace the approval of all the actions associated with her praiseworthy conduct."¹ Pack similarly recognizes that, while James commends her work of faith, "he never even hints that Rahab's lie became right because of circumstantial difficulties."²

Finally, in connection with Rahab's lie, Geisler says: "It seems that God blessed her because of it, not in spite of it."³ This statement is controverted by Geisler himself, where he recognizes the biblical truth that "God sometimes blesses us in spite of ourselves and He is able to bring good out of evil (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28)."⁴

Regarding Rahab's actions Kaiser notes: "Romans 3:8 warns us not to say, 'Let us do evil that good may result.' Neither should we argue, especially from a descriptive or a narrative passage, that a text validates deceit under certain conditions."⁵ He contends that to argue in favor of deception in this manner would be "poor exegesis and

¹Ibid.

²Pack, 123.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122.

⁴Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 397.

⁵Kaiser, Hard Sayings of the Old Testament, 96.

theology."¹ Then, in a rather transparent reference to both conflicting absolutism and ethical hierarchicalism, Kaiser says:

We cannot say that protecting innocent lives is a greater good than the demand always to tell the truth. Scripture nowhere advocates or allows for such hierarchy. To do so would pit part of God's nature against other parts of his nature. To say that lying is a lesser evil than being involuntarily implicated in murder is again an artificial and subjective construct. We need to follow all of God's Word and that Word involves respect for both life and truth.²

Further, Kaiser admonishes that "we must not form our own subjective hierarchies or personal priorities in assigning what we believe is the greater good or lesser evil."³ Rather, it must be recognized that, according to the written Word of God, truth-telling "is a universal responsibility for all times, all peoples, in all places."⁴

In addition to the story of Rahab, a second case frequently mentioned in Geisler's works is that of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, as found in Exodus 1. Geisler declares: "In the story of the Hebrew midwives we have an even clearer case of divinely approved lying to save a life."⁵ He notes that these women "lied to the king

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., 97.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 122. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 86; Geisler, "Any Chance for Morality? Part 2," 22.

(Exod. 1:19) in order to save the male babies."¹ Then he adds: "In this case, the text says clearly and unequivocally that 'God blessed them and gave them families' as a result of what they did."² Geisler reasons that, since "the text explicitly says following their deception that 'because the midwives feared God, then He [God] established households for them,'"³ and since all things in the Old Testament happened as examples for us, "it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that these were God-approved examples of how He wants us to behave in similar moral conflicts."⁴

Acknowledging that these women did lie to the king, Kaiser queries: "But does the text give us warrant to speak an untruth under the proper conditions?"⁵ He frankly admits that the juxtaposition of their lie in Exodus 1:19 with the statement that God treated them well in verse 20

¹Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417. Since the text does not explicitly state why the midwives said what they did to the king, it can be debated as to whether these women lied in an attempt to save the baby boys or in order to try and preserve their own lives. Irrespective of whose lives they were more concerned about at this point in time, this passage still needs to be addressed since it does appear as a clear case of lying to save life.

²Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417.

³Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," 85.

⁴Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417.

⁵Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics, 273.

might appear to endorse their deception. Looking at the actual passage, Kaiser then explains: "But this suspicion cannot be sustained in the text, for twice it attributes the reason for God's blessing them to the fact that they feared ('believed') God (vv. 17 and 21)."¹ Pack rightly attests that "nowhere in the text is their conversation with Pharaoh endorsed."² Rather, as Murray articulates: "The midwives feared God in disobeying the king and it is because they feared God that the Lord blessed them."³ Thus, contrary to Geisler's assertion, there is no evidence in this pericope of divine approbation for using deception to avert death.

On occasion Geisler considers the story of Obadiah. As part of the biblical proof that lying to save life is right, Geisler states: "No doubt Obadiah the prophet engaged in some deceptive activity to save the lives of one hundred prophets of God (1 Kings 18:13)."⁴ In an effort to support the notion of moral conflicts, he rhetorically asks: "Should Obadiah have deceived the king in hiding the prophets of God who had been condemned to death (1 Kings 18)?"⁵

Thorough investigation of the entire biblical record indicates that there is no evidence whatsoever that Obadiah

¹Ibid.

²Pack, 122.

³Murray, 141.

⁴Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 79.

⁵Geisler, "Any Chance for Morality? Part 2," 22.

was involved in any "deceptive activity," as Geisler alleges.¹ The text merely reports that during the time that Jezebel was massacring the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah "'hid one hundred men of the Lord's prophets, fifty to a cave, and fed them with bread and water.'"² If one is to assume, as does Geisler, that Obadiah doubtless engaged in some type of deception in order to protect the lives of these men, then one could also surmise that he most likely stole the food and water for these people, since commodities were certainly in short supply during the famine. But all of this groundless speculation beyond the textual evidence is a reading into the text one's own suppositions, rather than accepting the passage just as it reads. This type of eisegesis seems to be a desperate bid to find support for a theory vital to hierarchicalism.

One of the incidents in the life of the prophet Elisha is also included by Geisler as confirmation of the view that there is "divine approval of falsification for

¹Moreover, there is no textual evidence that Obadiah was a "prophet," as Geisler states. It appears as though Geisler refers to Obadiah as a "prophet" in an attempt to further bolster his case about the supposed rightness of lying to save life.

²1 Kgs 18:13. While the issue considered above is whether or not it is ever right to lie, it must be noted that Obadiah's action can be seen as an act of disobedience to the king's order. The question of civil disobedience will be discussed below in the sub-section dealing with "The Existence of Moral Conflicts."

life-saving."¹ Based on his interpretation of the pericope in 2 Kings 6, Geisler charges that "Elisha deceived his would-be captors in order to save his life."²

While on the surface it might appear that Elisha was involved in deception, the question must be asked as to what the actual text records. In brief, though the reader of the story knows that the Arameans had changed their plans and were now out to capture Elisha instead of the Israelite king as previously, there is no evidence that Elisha was aware of this. Thus, fearless of the foe, and with confidence in his Creator's protection, Elisha asked God to temporarily blind these military forces so he could take them to the capital, present them to the king, and treat them with incredible hospitality. If the story is interpreted on the weight of internal evidence, Elisha stands out in this incident as a man of truthfulness; as one who operated non-deceptively within the limits and boundaries of the information at his disposal. There is no proof at all that Elisha deceived his foes in order to save his own life.³

¹Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 417.

²Ibid.

³In fact, when one studies the entire story and realizes how close to God Elisha was and how much he trusted in His divine power and protection, it seems rather unreasonable to assume that Elisha knew the enemy were after him and that therefore he stooped to using deception to protect himself. Furthermore, Elisha showed that he believed in loving and doing good to his enemies (Luke 6:27, 28). Solomon put it this way: "If your enemy is hungry,

In summary then, several points should be noted. Geisler claims that "the Bible indicates that there are occasions when lying is justifiable."¹ In support of this thesis, he has referred to the stories of Rahab, the Hebrew midwives, Obadiah, and Elisha when they were all caught up in life or death dramas. As the above textual study has demonstrated, there is no evidence that either Obadiah or the prophet Elisha engaged in deceit to save life. While it is incontrovertible that Rahab practiced deception in an effort to protect the spies, there is nothing either in this story or in other parts of the Bible that displays divine approval of her lying. Similarly, in connection with the

feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink. Doing this will be like pouring burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you" (Prov 25:21, 22; New Century Version). However, if one insists on assuming that Elisha did know that the Aramean king was now after him, and that he therefore actually did lie, this still does not "prove" that deception is acceptable to God. What it would show is that, even after God had provided superior supernatural forces to protect him, and after God had miraculously blinded the enemy, Elisha's faith somehow faltered when facing a blinded and essentially conquered foe. Obviously this does not make much sense at all. But, if this is what happened, it must be remembered that no human being is to be held up as an example. The only example to be unquestioningly followed is Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:21). Other biblical characters are to be emulated only as they imitated Jesus, and acted in faithfulness and loving loyalty to God's clearly revealed will in Scripture. As Paul states: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1; New Century Version). For those who contend that we do not know whether or not Elisha knew that the Arameans were now after him, the most that can then be concluded from this incident is nothing about truth-telling or deception, but rather that kindness is a more powerful weapon than the sword.

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 91.

midwives, though God blessed them because they believed in Him, there is no endorsement of the falsehoods they told. In short, none of Geisler's examples establishes that it is justifiable to lie to save life. Rather, the Scriptures teach that it is a universal absolute moral obligation to be truthful, irrespective of present circumstances or projected possible consequences.

The Existence of Moral Conflicts

Geisler categorically holds that "unavoidable moral conflicts exist in which the individual cannot obey both commands."¹ As part of the foundation for this concept he refers to several "biblical examples of genuine, unavoidable moral conflicts."²

As a "classic example of a conflict of moral principles,"³ Geisler argues that "the story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22) contains a real moral conflict. 'Thou shalt not kill' is a divine moral command (Exod. 20:13), and yet God commanded Abraham to kill his son, Isaac."⁴ According

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117.

²Ibid., 119.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 121.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 117. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84-85.

to Geisler, here is a case in which "two laws are in genuine conflict."¹

The question must be asked: Is there any evidence that Abraham perceived these as two conflicting commands, only one of which he could obey? To begin with, a brief look at the actual terms used sheds some light on this issue. It is noteworthy that, in this command by God to Abraham, He calls on him to 'olah ("offer" or "sacrifice") Isaac.² This word, which appears hundreds of times in the Old Testament, always refers to a burnt offering, which Isaac was called to be. Significantly, the term *ratsach*,³ which is found in the sixth commandment, is completely absent from this pericope. In other words, it appears that Abraham did not find himself faced with two conflicting commands; for while one command said he should not *ratsach*, the other said that he must 'olah.⁴

Furthermore, the textual evidence implies that, rather than being two commands in conflict, the vital issue

¹Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 118.

²See Gen 22:2.

³See Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17.

⁴Incidentally, Geisler himself recognizes that, "only God has the right to demand the sacrifice of human lives, for God alone is the Author and Owner of all life;" Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 188. Magno concurs, noting: "If God is author of life and death--and there is certainly nothing to prevent our assuming as much--it follows that God may give and take life sans injustice;" Joseph A. Magno, "How Ethical Is Abraham's 'Suspension of the Ethical'?" Faith and Philosophy 2 (January 1985): 59.

at stake here was regarding Abraham's love and loyalty. Abraham's great fondness for Isaac is indicated in the words spoken by God: "'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love.'"¹ Isaac, the son of promise, was extremely precious in his father's sight. The real test therefore appears to have been whether Abraham loved God more than he loved Isaac. By his obedience Abraham showed that he had supreme love for God.

Hence, since these two commands of God were distinct and different, Abraham did not find himself in a conflict of moral obligations. Rather, the issue for Abraham was whether or not the principal object of his affection and devotion was the living God, or his cherished son Isaac.

A second account that Geisler uses to substantiate his belief in the existence of moral conflicts, is that of Samson, just prior to his death. Geisler posits that "this story contains a conflict of two divine commands."² He explains: "Samson committed a divinely approved suicide (Judg. 16:30) despite the moral prohibition against killing a human being, including oneself."³ Concerning this case, Geisler states: "Both commands were divine and moral (first, Do not kill, and second, Take your life); yet, when there

¹Gen 22:2 (emphasis added).

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 118.

³Ibid.

was a real conflict between them, God apparently approved of disregarding one in order to obey the other."¹

While Geisler is correct in pointing out that, "since suicide is also a form of homicide, it too comes under the prohibition against murder,"² the pivotal question is whether or not Samson's death was a suicide. A study of Geisler's works indicates that the major problem here has to do with the definition of suicide. For instance, in his first book on ethics he posits that "not all suicide is wrong."³ Then he adds: "The real proof for the Christian that sacrificial suicide is morally right is the death of Jesus Christ."⁴ Aware that some may object to the use of the term "suicide" in this way, Geisler responds: "Whatever it is called, it is a self-initiated act to save other lives by sacrificing one's own life. It is an intentional but justifiable relinquishing of one's own life.

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 85.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 165.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 239.

⁴Ibid. At least until 1986 Geisler still maintained that Jesus' death was a suicide. He noted: "Christ chose to suspend the lower moral mandate, which says that we should not commit suicide, in order to fulfill the higher moral law of saving the lives of others;" Norman L. Geisler, and J. Yutaka Amano, The Reincarnation Sensation (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986), 117.

In view of this it seems appropriate to call it a 'sacrificial suicide.'¹

More recently, Geisler has begun to carefully define the term "suicide." On the one hand, he declares that "whatever the motive, suicide is wrong because God alone is sovereign over human life, and he has commanded us to respect his authority over us and his image within us."² On the other hand, Geisler grants that "it is not wrong to give one's life for others."³ After citing a few examples of those willing to lay down their lives for others, Geisler concludes: "In each of these cases it is not suicide--the taking of one's life. Rather it is a loving sacrifice of one's life. And 'greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.'⁴ Most importantly for this discussion is the fact that Geisler uses Samson as the very first example to prove that willingly laying down one's life is not suicide. He says: "Samson sacrificed his life to avenge the Philistines (Judg. 16:28)."⁵ Thus, by Geisler's own admission, Samson's death was not a suicide.

¹Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 240.

²Norman L. Geisler, "Sanctity of Human Life," in Applying the Scriptures, Papers from ICBI Summit III, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 147.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 148. Geisler was here quoting the New American Standard Bible's rendering of John 15:13.

⁵Geisler, "Sanctity of Human Life," 147.

This conclusion is consistent with the biblical data which indicates that Samson, who had been called by God to be judge and deliverer, ruled over Israel for twenty years, destroying more of the enemies of God's people by his self-sacrificial death than during his life.¹ Therefore, since "an act of martyrdom or sacrifice for the lives of others is not a suicide,"² as Geisler admits, it becomes plain that Samson's death was not a suicide. Hence, this narrative does not support the view that real moral conflicts exist.

Geisler locates a third narrative that includes a clash of obligations also in the book of Judges:

The passage detailing Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter (Judg. 11) shows a real moral conflict between a vow to God (which is inviolate [Eccles. 5:1-4]) and the command not to kill an innocent life. The usual answer of unqualified [or non-conflicting] absolutists, that one is not obligated to keep a vow that necessarily involves sin, will not work here. According to that explanation, Jephthah should not have kept his vow to kill his daughter. But the Scripture appears to approve of Jephthah keeping the oath to kill.³

Unfortunately, Geisler provides no biblical verification for his pronouncement that "the Scripture appears to approve of Jephthah keeping the oath to kill."⁴ It may be that he is alluding to Hebrews 11:32, which includes Jephthah among the heroes of faith. However, as is

¹See Judg 13:1-16:31.

²Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 87.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 118.

⁴Ibid.

obvious from the context of this chapter in Hebrews, and as noted above, it is clear that not all the actions of all the characters of Scripture are to be emulated by the believer.

Analysis of the chronicle of Jephthah provides no hint that his sacrifice of his daughter is approved. While no direct statement is made vis-a-vis this action of his, it must be remembered that the entire context of this book is summed up in the last verse: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."¹ Instead of approval, the context implies censure.

Moreover, by the time of these judges, it was a well-established regulation that only "clean animals" were acceptable as sacrifices,² and that God was against this type of human sacrifice.³ Hence, since this kind of offering was unacceptable to God, Jephthah should have repented of his hasty pledge, as did David when he had made a similarly impulsive oath.⁴ That illegitimate promises are not inviolate is further evidenced in Ezra's divinely-sanctioned termination of the unlawful marriages between Israelites and non-believers.⁵ Though not an acknowledged expert on this issue, Ellen White's perspective seems rather

¹Judg 21:25.

²See, for example, Gen 8:20; Lev 27:11.

³See, for example, Lev 18:21; Deut 12:31.

⁴See 1 Sam 25.

⁵See Ezra 9-10.

fitting: "The obligation to which one's word is pledged--if it do[es] not bind him to perform a wrong act--should be held sacred."¹

Thus, there is no biblical support for the notion that this act of Jephthah's was approved by Scripture. On the contrary, his imprudent vow was unacceptable to God, and he should have repented of it since he was not bound by it. There is no proof here of any conflict of moral absolutes.

For Geisler, a fourth example of the reality of moral conflicts can be observed in the "cases in Scripture in which there is a real conflict between obeying God's command to submit to civil government and keeping one's duty to some other higher moral law."² In illustrating this, Geisler refers to the story in Daniel 3 of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who disregarded king Nebuchadnezzar's command to worship the golden image, and also to the account of Daniel, who disobeyed the command of Darius to pray only to him, the king.³ Geisler concludes: "In each case there was plainly no other alternative; those involved had to follow one or the other of the two commandments."⁴

¹Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1913), 506. See also, Prov 6:1-3 (Contemporary English Version), which corroborates this concept.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119.

³Ibid. See Dan 6.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119.

In the foregoing evaluation of Geisler's view concerning moral, civil, and ceremonial laws,¹ it was demonstrated that, over the years Geisler himself has maintained that there is a difference between these laws. For instance, in his earliest text on ethics in 1971, he notes the dissimilarity between absolute moral laws and civil laws.² A comparable distinction is evident in his 1990 volume on ethics.³ Similar to other scholars, Geisler separates these laws, claiming that the moral law is universally binding, whereas civil and ceremonial laws are not. Thus, as Geisler observes: "One should always obey government when it takes its rightful place under God, but one should never obey government when it takes the place of God."⁴ When this biblical principle is fully recognized and properly understood,⁵ it becomes plain that the problem in the above-mentioned cases from the book of Daniel does not involve a moral conflict, but rather an illegitimate use of power by governing forces. Thus, the choice is between

¹See "Moral, Civil, and Ceremonial Laws," above in this chapter.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 123. See also, Geisler, "Any Chance for Morality? Part 2," 20; Geisler, A Popular Survey of the Old Testament, 58-60.

³Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 110. See also, Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 410.

⁴Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 188.

⁵See Acts 5:29.

complying with a civil authority which has usurped the place of God, and therefore has forfeited the right to obedience, and God's absolute moral commands. Since only one law is absolute in this case, no moral conflict exists here.

As a fifth evidence for his belief in the existence of moral conflicts, Geisler points to the life of Christ.¹ He poses the question: "Did Jesus really face moral dilemmas in which two or more commands of God came into unavoidable conflict?"² Suggesting that there are many illustrations of this situation in the Gospels,³ Geisler elaborates: "Specific examples in Jesus' life are the moral conflicts between obedience toward parents and God (Luke 2), Sabbath regulations and healing (Mark 2), and government and God (Matt 22)."⁴ Then he adds: "The greatest moral conflict that Jesus faced, however, was his trial and cross, where mercy and justice came into direct and unavoidable conflict. Should he speak in defense of the innocent (himself) as the law demanded (Lev. 5:1), or should he show mercy to the many (mankind)?"⁵

¹See, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 109, 119, 125-126; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 75-80, 86-87, 95-96.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 109.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 125.

⁵Ibid., 109.

Since it has just been shown that civil authority holds only a delegated and limited position under God, Geisler's suggestion, that Jesus faced a moral conflict between obedience to government and God, must be considered a moot point. The other proposed illustrations, though, need to be examined individually.

Geisler states that "at age twelve Jesus faced a conflict between his earthly parents and his heavenly Father. Although he later submitted to his earthly parents, initially he left them in order to fulfill God's will."¹ Geisler apparently bases this concept on "the fact that the Bible enjoins children to be obedient to parents in all things (Col. 3:20)."² Yet, Geisler acknowledges that the parallel passage in Ephesians 6:1 adds "in the Lord," thus placing "filial duty on a lower level, under the duty to love and obey God."³ Clearly then, analogous to the delegated authority of civil powers, obedience to parents is not a moral absolute. Since filial duty is required only when appropriately exercised under divine authority, there is no conflict of absolute moral obligations in this case.

Geisler posits that Jesus faced a conflict "between showing mercy and keeping the Sabbath (Mark 2:27)."⁴ He

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., 121.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 90.

says: "Even though it was wrong for a Jew to work on the Sabbath, Jesus approved of working to get one's ox out of the ditch on the Sabbath."¹ Further, "He chose to heal a man on the Sabbath. When challenged He said the law of the Sabbath should be subordinated to man; not vice versa."²

Lutzer earnestly challenges Geisler, noting that "there is no scriptural evidence that Christ broke or 'transcended' any of the commandments."³ Referring to the biblical data, Lutzer states: "Since Christ's own testimony was always that of obedience to commandments, it is difficult to suppose that He sometimes 'transcended' them for one reason or another (Jn 12:49, 15:10)."⁴ Olson concurs, saying, "I see no basis for accusing our Lord of ever breaking the Sabbath."⁵ Then Olson explains: "He went out of his way to break the traditions of the elders, but he never broke the Mosaic Law itself in any detail."⁶ Ironically, in one of his self-published booklets, Geisler has expressed this very concept with clarity: "The law which the Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking was a law which already had provisions for

¹Ibid., 288.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 79.

³Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 111.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Olson, 10.

⁶Ibid.

doing good on the Sabbath. Jesus was simply not following their false interpretation of it."¹ Thus once again, it can be seen that this was not a case of conflicting moral laws.

As observed, Geisler suggests that "the greatest moral conflict that Jesus faced, however, was his trial and cross, where mercy and justice came into direct and unavoidable conflict."² In another place, Geisler says that the "two moral principles [in conflict] are that the innocent should not be punished for sins he never committed, but Christ was punished for our sins (Isa. 53; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:15; 2 Cor. 5:21)."³

In regard to the "mercy/justice" conflict the following should be noted. Neither mercy nor justice is an absolute moral law. These are not prescriptive commands, but rather descriptive attributes of God, and as such cannot rightly be construed as conflicting absolute obligations. Moreover, as Robert Rakestraw properly notes, "the character

¹Geisler, Civil Disobedience: When Is It Right? Should Christians Ever Break the Law?, 19.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 109. Geisler (ibid.) maintains that the conflict revolved around the "defense of the innocent (himself) as the law demanded (Lev. 5:1), or should he show mercy to the many (mankind)?" It does not appear that Lev 5:1 says that one is required to defend oneself. However, since the precise interpretation of this passage is not the issue in contention here, it will not be examined. Instead, the real matter of the concept of the conflict between mercy and justice will be discussed.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119.

of God as perfect and consistent within his own moral nature appears to be jeopardized by any view which holds that God's absolutes genuinely conflict."¹ Also, Jesus voluntarily laid down His life for humanity,² and was therefore not forced into any unavoidable moral conflict. His death was the epitome of self-sacrificial love.³ Analogously, it should be observed that, while the Bible indicates that it is morally wrong to force an innocent person to accept punishment for the guilty,⁴ it is not unethical for someone to freely elect to pay someone else's debt or to assume another's punishment. This is the essence of the gospel,⁵ and in no way includes a so-called conflict of moral laws.

A sixth reason for Geisler's belief in the reality of moral conflicts is related to his view of James 4:17, which reads: "Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." He maintains that this fact, that one is at times faced with either a sin of omission or one of commission, is weighty evidence that in

¹Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 255.

²See John 10:15-18.

³See John 15:13.

⁴The basic thrust of passages such as Deut 24:16 and 2 Kings 14:6 appears to be that it is wrong to coerce or pressure innocent people into being penalized for the sins of others. No prohibition is placed on those who freely choose to substitute for others.

⁵See passages such as John 10:15-18, 15:13 and Rom 5:6-8.

this real and fallen world, inevitable and unavoidable conflicts of moral obligations will occur.¹ In explaining this idea, Geisler states: "To permit a murder when one could have prevented it is morally wrong."² It seems that Geisler builds this belief on the sixth commandment, for he says that "the command 'You shall not murder' (Exod. 20:13) implies that we should help prevent the unnatural death of innocent people as well."³ He elaborates: "Human life made in God's image has the same intrinsic value no matter which way one contributes to its demise."⁴ Thus, since "it is morally unjustifiable not to resist evil,"⁵ "failing to prevent such a death is as culpable as actually causing it."⁶ Thus once again, one is faced with a moral conflict.

The pivotal issue here has to do with responsibility and culpability. Nowhere in the Ten Commandments is it either directly stated or implied that these absolute moral laws may or should be inverted, from negative prohibitions

¹See Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 96, 232.

²Ibid., 232. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 174.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 183.

⁴Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," 83.

⁵Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 174.

⁶Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 183.

("You shall not kill"),¹ to positive limitless obligations ("You must prevent innocent people from being killed"). Logically, if "failing to prevent such a death is as culpable as actually causing it,"² then not deterring those who, for example, choose to commit adultery, steal, or lie, would of necessity make one guilty of violating those commandments as well. Clearly, the moral law must be read as given by God, and not transmuted into propositions that place counterfeit responsibilities on people. For, read as they are recorded in the Bible, these moral laws of God do not conflict.

Geisler's interpretation of James 4:17 also needs to be considered. For him this text shows that one is at times faced with either a sin of omission or one of commission.³

¹Exod 20:13 (New Jerusalem Bible).

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 183.

³Geisler holds contradictory views on the practical application of this theory of "sins of omission." Consider, for example, his view relating to the fetus, abortion, and civil disobedience to stop abortions. To begin with, he maintains that the "Scripture texts leave no doubt that an unborn child is just as much a person in God's image as a little child or an adult is. They are created in God's image from the very moment of conception, and their prenatal life is precious in God's eyes and protected by his prohibition against murder;" Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 148. Logically, one would therefore expect that Geisler's view, that a person is guilty of murder for not preventing the death of innocent people, would require him to agree with civil disobedience to prevent abortions. Yet, he disagrees with this view, and, when questioned as to whether or not this would amount to a sin of omission if one does not help to protect the innocent, he merely says that Christians ought to do all they can to "change the laws. But, beyond this, we must

However, the text says that the one "who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin."¹ Naturally, the question is: What is "good"? Geisler himself recognizes that "good is what God wills is good."² Then Geisler adds: "But God never wills anything contrary to his unchanging moral character."³ Thus, the moral absolutes that God gives must be recognized as the "good" that needs to be carried out. Clearly, James 4:17 does not place one in the so-called dilemma of having to choose either a sin of omission or commission. Rather, it merely says that it is a sin not to do good, i.e., not to follow the will of God.

Finally, as further support for a belief in the actuality of moral conflicts, Geisler says: "There are several biblical illustrations in which individuals had to choose between lying and not helping to save a life (that is, not showing mercy). The Hebrew midwives (Exod. 1) and Rahab (Josh. 2) will suffice as examples."⁴ As a clinching statement, Geisler then adds: "Regardless of whether they were right or wrong in lying, the point here is that the

leave it in the hands of a loving, sovereign God who controls all things and will cause even the wrath of men to praise His name;" Geisler, Civil Disobedience: When Is It Right? Should Christians Ever Break the Law?, 21.

¹Jas 4:17 (emphasis added).

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 21.

³Ibid., 22.

⁴Ibid., 118.

conflict was genuine and both obligations were moral ones."¹

As indicated above, it is only when God's eternal moral laws are illicitly altered from what He has given in His Word that one ends up with the falsely assumed burden of having to prevent the killing of innocent people at all costs. Since this concept is not a moral law, the women in the above cases were not faced with any moral conflicts.

By way of summary, the above study casts doubt on the validity of Geisler's hypothesis that genuine moral conflicts exist.² If these conclusions are valid, no need would exist for Geisler's hierarchical approach to ethics.

A Hierarchy of Sins and Virtues

One of the principal original proposals of Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism is the postulation that there is a scale of values emerging from the biblical text itself.³

¹Ibid.

²Naturally, for the one who insists that real moral conflicts exist, the issues of freedom and responsibility are directly related to this entire question. For, only when one is free to choose can one be held morally culpable. Thus, if an individual were to be forced to choose between two absolutes, that person could not legitimately be held responsible for not keeping both requirements. However, as noted above, this critique of Geisler's moral methodology challenges the authenticity of the existence of genuine conflicts of divinely-established moral obligations.

³See, for example, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 81-84; Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 116-117; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 223, 227.

Geisler maintains that when moral obligations conflict, there is at least one principle that indicates which is the highest duty to follow.¹ He asserts that not all moral laws are of equal weight, and provides several passages of Scripture in support of this proposal. Geisler explains:

Not all moral laws are of equal weight. Jesus spoke of the "weightier" matters of the law (Matt. 23:23) and of the "least" (Matt. 5:19) and the "greatest" commandment (Matt. 22:36). He told Pilate that Judas had committed the "greater sin" (John 19:11). Despite a rather widespread evangelical distaste for a hierarchy of sins (and virtues), the Bible does speak of the "greatest" virtue (1 Cor. 13:13) and even the "greater" acts of a given virtue (John 15:13).²

Elaborating further, Geisler says that Jesus held "there are at least three levels of sins with corresponding judgments ([Matt] 5:22)."³ Geisler notes: "In fact, there is one sin so great as to be unforgivable (Mark 3:29)."⁴ Then, expanding on a previously mentioned biblical passage, he adds: "Perhaps the clearest indication of higher and lower moral laws comes in Jesus' answer to the lawyer's question about the 'greatest commandment' (Matt. 22:34-35). Jesus clearly affirms that the 'first' and 'greatest' is over the 'second,' that loving God is of supreme importance, and then beneath that comes loving one's neighbor."⁵

¹Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 76.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 116.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

Not only does Geisler refer to these specific texts to prove a hierarchy of sins and virtues, but he contends that "the Scriptures give ample illustrations of the principle that higher commands take precedence over lower commands."¹ For example:

Jesus said that love for God is more important than love for parents, even though both are commands of God (Matt. 10:37). Peter made it clear that the command to obey human government was not higher than the one to preach the Gospel (Acts 4). The Hebrew midwives (Exod. 1) and the three Hebrew children (Dan 3) were all commended for disobeying human government when it conflicted with a higher ethical command. Abraham's intent to kill Isaac was morally right only because it was put in irresolvable conflict with his direct obedience to God's higher command to obey Him (Gen. 22).²

Geisler says: "In view of all the Bible teaches on greater and lesser evils the myth that all sins are equal is untenable."³ "We conclude that there are indeed graded levels of moral commands in Scripture,"⁴ and that "in real, unavoidable moral conflicts, God does not hold a person guilty for not keeping a lower moral law so long as he keeps the higher."⁵

These biblical passages need to be considered in order to establish if they actually do manifest such a

¹Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 227.

²Ibid.

³Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 91.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120.

hierarchy, as Geisler alleges. The prescriptive statements will be examined first. Geisler is correct that these passages do point out the varying degrees of sin and virtue. However, he has neglected to emphasize a factor integrally connected with all of these texts. For instance, careful study shows that when Jesus spoke of the "weightier matters of the law" as compared with the less important, He said, "These you ought to have done, without leaving the other undone."¹ While Geisler posits that texts such as these provide evidence of a hierarchy of laws, so that one can know how to keep the higher in a conflict situation, the biblical passages indicate that one is to keep both laws. As Luck puts it: "The very same passages in Scripture that talk of hierarchy also caution against the thought that the keeping of the lower removes obligation to the higher or that the keeping of the higher removes the necessity of following the lower."² Kaiser concurs: "Matt 23:23 does not argue that the assessment of priorities requires that we do the 'weightier' and leave (if necessary or if forced) the 'lighter' and the 'least' undone."³

¹Matt 23:23.

²Luck, 34.

³Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Weightier and Lighter Matters of the Law: Moses, Jesus and Paul," in Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation, Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney, Presented by His Former Students, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 185 (footnote #32).

Similarly, when Jesus referred to the "greater sin"¹ of Judas, He was implying that Pilate too was guilty of sin. In other words, as Geisler correctly recognizes, "all sin is sin."² Lutzer agrees: "Sins remain sins and the virtues remain virtues."³ After referring to Matt 5:19, 23:23, Gal 3:10, and James 2:10, John Tape concludes that "these passages show that every single moral law of God is important, no matter how small or trivial it may appear to be from human perspective."⁴ Then he says: "There is never any situation wherein the breaking of a commandment ceases to be a sin."⁵ As Luck, alluding to Matt 5:19 and 23:23, says: "The Scripture rejects any attempt to excuse non-compliance with lower rules on the basis of higher rules."⁶ Chris Brown, who has done an exegetical study of the most crucial passages Geisler uses to sustain the idea of a hierarchy in Scripture, concludes that hierarchical ethics "has been shown to be wanting in Biblical support."⁷

¹John 19:11.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 128. See also, Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 91.

³Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 102.

⁴Tape, 10.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Luck, 26 (footnote #22).

⁷Chris Brown, "A Brief Analysis of Geisler's Hierarchical Proof Texts," 1985, TMs [photocopy], p. 26, Center for Research and Scholarship, Liberty University,

He observes that "all of God's commands are to be done, not set aside."¹

The cases from Scripture that Geisler provides in order to illustrate the principle that higher commands take precedence over lower commands also need evaluation. Already the stories of the Hebrew midwives, the three Hebrew youth, and Abraham have been considered above, and been shown to exclude conflicts of absolute moral obligations. Since the narrative of Peter deals with the limited duty to obey human government, this is also not a moral conflict. Likewise, the statement that love for God is above love for parents does not involve an ethical conflict. In brief, none of the examples given by Geisler entails a conflict of absolute moral laws. Rather, they all deal with times when delegated control is misapplied. Notice Pack's lengthy but apt remarks regarding the supposed suspension of lower laws:

Since the authority of God is the foundation of governmental authority, the limits of any government's ordained representation of him are necessarily defined by its agreement with his will. Any reference to suspension of the obligation to government is not actually accurate. The authority is neither suspended, transcended, nor superceded. Delegated authority never exceeds the right to do that which was originally delegated. [For example,] the authority never existed for a king to limit prayer, demand idolatry, or forbid proclamation of God's message. Consequently, these servants of God were not exempted from the apparent responsibilities. The responsibilities never existed.

Lynchburg, VA.

¹Ibid., 27.

The men were faced with a challenge to their faith, not a conflict of their norms.¹

Thus, these illustrations do not promote the idea that higher laws take precedence over lower ones. What these cases appear to show is that when commissioned authority is misused it is to be ignored. However, when appointed guides or overseers are operating in strict accordance with the Moral Lawgiver, they ought to be obeyed, for then such obedience will accord with God's will.

Guiltless Suspension of Lower Laws

Geisler propounds that "God does not hold the individual responsible for personally unavoidable moral conflicts, provided he keeps the higher law."² As evidence of this view, he says that "the Bible includes many examples of persons who were praised by God for following their highest duty in situations of conflict."³ As noted in the previous chapter, Geisler asserts that Abraham was rewarded and "commended of God for his willingness to sacrifice (kill) his son Isaac."⁴ Likewise, Daniel and his three companions "received divine approval for their disobedience

¹Pack, 128.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 119.

³Ibid., 120. See also, Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 88; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120.

of human government."¹ Similarly, "the Hebrew midwives who lied and disobeyed the king were blessed by God and given families as a reward."² Also, "David and his men who broke into the temple and stole the consecrated bread were declared guiltless by Christ."³ In addition to these case studies, Geisler notes: "Neither does the Scripture hold guilty those who kill in self-defense (Exod. 22:2)."⁴ Referring to the Scripture stories, Geisler concludes that "in each case there was not only no divine condemnation for the moral law they did not keep. There was, rather, evident divine approval."⁵ Thus, one is guiltless, and "not morally culpable if he fails to keep an obligation he could not possibly keep without breaking a higher obligation."⁶

To begin with, a brief comment needs to be made in connection with Geisler's assertion that the Bible has "many examples" of people praised by God for following their highest duty in conflict situations. John Tape says that

¹Ibid.

²Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120.

⁴Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120. See also, Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 136; Geisler, "Biblical Absolutes and Moral Conflicts," 227.

⁶Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 88.

the phrase "many examples" is certainly an overstatement. He correctly notes that there are actually few such cases, and cautions that "these few examples would make a very precarious foundation on which to build an entire system of moral theology."¹ Nevertheless, these incidents ought to be considered.

In the cases of Abraham, Daniel, his three companions, and the Hebrew midwives, the above critical evaluation has provided sufficient evidence to challenge Geisler's assertion that these accounts sustain the notion of a guiltless suspension of lower moral laws. The case of David and the consecrated bread, as well as killing in self-defense need to be examined.

More than once, Geisler refers to the narrative in which "David and his men who broke into the temple and stole the consecrated bread were declared guiltless by Christ (Matt. 12:3-4)."² He explains: "Perhaps 'stealing' bread from the temple (that is, taking it without permission of the proper authority) is not morally wrong when starvation of God's servant is the other alternative."³ The original story, as located in 1 Samuel 21, illuminates the brief

¹Tape, 18 (footnote #10).

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 120. See also, *ibid.*, 109; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 78-79, 88; Geisler, "Conflicting Absolutism," 6.

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 107.

comment made by Jesus. David had been fleeing for his life from Saul, when he arrived at Nob. Hungry, he asked the priest, Ahimelech, for some food. Even though the only available food was the consecrated bread that was to be eaten by the priests exclusively, David requested this bread for himself and his men. Ahimelech, after receiving guidance from God,¹ decided to give them the bread because they were ceremonially clean, in that they had abstained from sexual relations.

In the entire story, as recorded in both Old and New Testaments, there is no indication that David "broke into the temple," as Geisler alleges. Rather, as Jesus says, "he entered the house of God."² Moreover, according to the biblical account, there is no evidence that David "stole the consecrated bread," as Geisler accuses. Instead, he was given the bread by the priest who had consulted God on the matter. Clearly, Geisler has inaccurately cast David in the role of one who "broke" into God's temple to "steal" food in order to survive. Then, Geisler submits that this breaking in and stealing was "declared guiltless by Christ." The scriptural record does not substantiate any such data. On the contrary, as Chris Brown observes, this "is a ceremonial law which is overturned by Christ showing it is not absolute

¹See 1 Sam 22:10.

²Matt 12:4.

in application."¹ As Palmer Robertson recognizes: "In the instance of David and his men, a ritualistic law was being violated for the sake of maintaining human life. These laws of the cultus obviously were temporal in nature."² Hence, as Lutzer concludes, "this incident cannot be used to show that Christ approved of breaking Old Testament laws because of expediency."³ Accordingly, this incident cannot rightly be used to sustain the charge that so-called lower moral laws can be broken without any moral culpability.

One of the texts more frequently referred to by Geisler in the Old Testament is that of Exodus 22:2.⁴ Based on his interpretation of this passage, Geisler states: "Killing in self-defense is not a personally culpable act according to the law of God."⁵ In connection with the issue of war, the entire verse is quoted by Geisler: "'If a

¹Chris Brown, 15.

²O. Palmer Robertson, "Reflections on the New Testament Testimony Concerning Civil Disobedience," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 33 (September 1990): 334.

³Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 77.

⁴See, for example, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 109, 128, 152, 230, 231, 234; Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 78; Geisler, and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective, 425; Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 123.

⁵Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 109.

thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed."¹

While it is technically correct that this verse provides the above data, a closer look at the context indicates that verse 2 is actually only the first part of a legal ruling that is completed in the following verse: "But if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed."² The New Living Translation has captured the sense of this law: "If a thief is caught in the act of breaking into a house and is killed in the process, the person who killed the thief is not guilty. But if it happens in daylight, the one who killed the thief is guilty of murder."

When Exodus 22:2 is studied in context, and when its full meaning is taken into account as expanded in verse 3, Geisler's interpretation of this passage becomes rather problematic. To begin with, if verse 2 teaches that "killing in self-defense is justified,"³ then how is one to understand verse 3, which says one "is guilty of murder" if one kills the same person under the same conditions in the same place, but just at a different time, namely, during the day? This interpretation would mean that killing in self-defense is only justified at night, and not during the day.

¹Ibid., 231.

²Exod 22:3 (New International Version--this is the same translation as used for verse 2, by Geisler).

³Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 234.

An additional problem arises when one studies the law corpus in the Old Testament. Throughout the Hebrew legal system a distinct difference was made between property and people. Never was one to forfeit life for merely stealing property. While appropriate restitution was to be made,¹ no one was to be executed for being a thief.² If, therefore, this were indeed a regulation permitting one to kill a thief guiltlessly, it would be out of harmony with the consistently high value that God's laws placed on life as over against material goods. In other words, the punishment would be out of proportion to the crime.

Alan Cole seems to be closer to the true meaning of the text when he indicates that this death of the thief "may even have been accidental, in the blundering fight in the darkness."³ Other scholars feel similarly that the life of

¹See, for example, Exod 22:1, 3b, 4, 7-13.

²Several commentators and others suggest that killing in self-defense is permitted here because of the thief's possibly "murderous intentions." This is merely an assumption, since nowhere does the text say or imply that. It would be circular reasoning to suggest that that is why self-defensive killing is permitted here. Further, it should be remembered that this person is called a "thief," and not a potential murderer. This type of reasoning, that suggests a thief (or potential murderer) should be killed contradicts the rest of the just and fair laws of Scripture. For, according to Old Testament law, one was to be punished only after a crime was committed, and that for actual evil deeds, not for evil intentions, and much less so for merely assumed evil intentions.

³Alan R. Cole, Exodus, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 171.

a thief "caught in the dark is not protected by blood vengeance, because in this case deliberate murder cannot be proved."¹ This type of reasoning concurs with other biblical laws concerning intentional and accidental killing of human beings.² The Contemporary English Version aptly captures the sense of this interpretation when it renders Exodus 22:2, 3 as follows: "If you happen to kill a burglar who breaks into your home after dark, you are not guilty. But if you kill someone who breaks in during the day, you are guilty of murder."³ Thus, instead of supporting the idea of killing in self-defense, and sustaining Geisler's theory that one can guiltlessly disregard so-called lower moral duties, this law is more likely an exoneration of accidental homicide.⁴

¹Reginald C. Fuller, ed., A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture (London, England: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1969), 219. Moreover, it is possible that the fear and uncertainty one may experience under cover of darkness could result in a stronger reaction than when one can see clearly what is taking place.

²See, for example, Exod 21:12-14.

³Emphasis added. See also, the New Living Translation rendering given above.

⁴Compare Deut 19:4-6. Interestingly, in one place Geisler himself expresses a concept that stands in tension with his belief in self-defensive killing. He basically argues against the legitimacy of preemptive strikes, but then adds: "Of course, if the first blow is known to be a lethal one, the situation may call for nonlethal preemptive action;" Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 136 (emphasis added).

This extended appraisal of the biblical basis that Geisler provides for ethical hierarchicalism has raised serious misgivings concerning Geisler's interpretation and utilization of these passages. First, it was demonstrated that none of Geisler's examples establishes that it is justifiable to lie to save life. Rather, the Bible teaches that it is an absolute moral obligation to be truthful, regardless of the situation or foreseeable consequences. Second, since this study suggests that none of the passages Geisler cites as evidence for the reality of moral conflicts can sustain the charge, it casts considerable suspicion on the validity of Geisler's thesis that authentic conflicts of moral obligations do exist. If these findings are valid, there would be no need for Geisler's hierarchical approach to ethics. Third, none of the illustrations given by Geisler promotes the idea that higher moral laws take precedence over lower ones. What these cases do indicate is that only when delegated authority operates in harmony with eternal moral law ought they to be followed, for then such obedience will accord with God's will. And fourth, this research shows that none of the instances of so-called guiltless suspension of lower laws supports Geisler's view that God does not hold people responsible for ignoring lower moral laws provided they keep the higher in conflict cases. Therefore, as Pack suitably notes in his own critique of

hierarchicalism, "not even one of the Scriptures cited by Geisler actually demands a hierarchy of norms."¹

Bifurcation of the Decalogue

In discussing the concept of "loving on two levels," Geisler states: "Love must be manifest on two levels, the love for God and love for one's neighbor."² Geisler explains: "The two tables of Moses' law are divided by these two directions of love. The first table of the law expresses the vertical love for God."³ Then he lists the first four commandments of the decalogue. Following this, Geisler says: "The second table of the law expresses one's love for his neighbor."⁴ Then he enumerates the last six commandments. Referring to Jesus' statement about the two great commandments, Geisler concludes that "the ten commandments merely spell out what the two commandments summarize. If one loves God he will do the first four and to show his love for other men he must do the last six."⁵

Geisler raises the question as to "what to do when the two levels conflict."⁶ He says that "in terms of the

¹Pack, 129.

²Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 26.

³Ibid., 27.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 28.

Ten Commandments, it is sometimes necessary to appear to 'break' the fifth commandment in order to keep the first commandment."¹ In other words, "love for God may necessitate 'disobedience' toward men."² Analogously, Martin Luther held that "obedience to the First Table of the Decalogue may require the breach of the Second Table."³

This type of division between the first four commandments and the last six can be seen in another more sensational illustration by Geisler. In expounding on the issue of fornication and a hierarchy of duty, Geisler asserts: "One may be obliged to engage in sexual intercourse outside of his own marriage in order to save a life. Such would be the greatest good in that situation. Surely the refusal to save a life (or lives) by way of sex would not be right."⁴ While Geisler places a high value on preserving human life, this is not his ultimate value. For he notes: "I would not deny God if someone threatened my wife's life."⁵ In other words, in a life or death emergency,

¹Ibid., 31-32.

²Ibid., 32.

³See David Wright, "The Ethical Use of the Old Testament in Luther and Calvin: A Comparison," Scottish Journal of Theology 36 (December 1983): 466.

⁴Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 208. He adds (ibid., 208-209): "Of course, one would want to explore all other possible alternatives before he assumed there was really no other way to save a life."

⁵See Pack, 159, in Appendix I.

Geisler feels free to disregard one of the precepts of the second table of the decalogue, yet he believes he must respect the first table even at the cost of his wife's life.

This view, that the precepts of the first table must be kept while those of the second are expendable, is similar to the position of Thomas Aquinas. John Dedek says Aquinas held that "God cannot dispense from the precepts of the first tablet of the decalogue which order men immediately to God but he can dispense from the precepts of the second tablet which order men immediately to other men."¹ This dividing up of the decalogue needs further attention.

In his tome on personal ethics, Carl Henry states that "the Ten Words enunciated on Sinai contain the essential principles of a righteousness that truly mirrors the pure character of the holy God."² He notes that these ten commandments "are valid for all men in all places and at all times."³ Similar views are expressed by Lutzer, where he observes that "the moral laws of God are basically a reflection of His own character,"⁴ which "are to be kept at

¹Dedek, 401.

²Carl F. H. Henry, Christian Personal Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 269.

³Ibid.

⁴Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 87.

all times, regardless of the circumstances."¹ Likewise, for Olson, the moral laws "are a reflection of God's own nature."² Recognizing this integral connection between God's laws and God's character, Olson says: "The attributes of God cannot be in conflict since he is perfection."³

Walter Kaiser, in referring to the hypothesis of the hierarchical ethicist, that protecting innocent lives is a greater good than telling the truth, says, "Scripture nowhere advocates or allows for such hierarchy."⁴ Then, obviously recognizing that divine moral laws are a transcript of God's character, Kaiser charges that to place one moral law against another in this way, would be to "pit part of God's nature against other parts of his nature."⁵ Rejecting this procedure, Kaiser calls on believers "to follow all of God's Word."⁶ In a parallel fashion, Donald Bloesch critiques the hierarchicalist's dichotomy between mercy and truth, insisting, "surely there must a unity between God's attributes!"⁷

¹Ibid., 88-89.

²Olson, 9.

³Ibid.

⁴Kaiser, Hard Sayings of the Old Testament, 97.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Bloesch, 183.

The sentiments of these thinkers can be applied to Geisler's disjunctive view of the decalogue. Rakestraw says: "If God has given numerous moral absolutes, some of which genuinely conflict at times, it appears that there is conflict within the mind and moral will of God."¹ He adds: "The character of God as perfect and consistent within his own moral nature appears to be jeopardized by any view that holds that God's absolutes genuinely conflict."²

In brief, even though Geisler himself agrees that God's moral laws, "which He designed not to conflict,"³ are "a reflection of His unchanging character,"⁴ he insists that the laws concerning one's relation to God must always be kept, while those pertaining to people can be disregarded in conflict situations. Bloesch's charge, that Geisler can "be accused of drawing a bifurcation within God,"⁵ is thus appropriate in this setting as well.

Substantive Semantic Matters

Questions have been raised about Geisler's use of terminology. For instance, it has been asked: "Is not the

¹Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 255.

²Ibid.

³Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 100.

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 23.

⁵Bloesch, 183. He was here referring to Geisler's dichotomy between mercy and truth.

alleged distinction between an exemption and an exception, used to support graded absolutism [or hierarchicalism], merely a semantical and not a real difference?"¹ As has already been noted, in some respects Geisler does use certain terms in a way different from the normal patterns. For example, as indicated, unlike the standard definition in which an absolute is applied to everyone at all times everywhere, Geisler holds that "not all absolutes are absolutely absolute. Some are only relatively absolute."² Whenever any writer uses language in a manner distinct from the norm, careful study of the terms is necessitated.

Evil Called Good

Geisler acknowledges that the "Scriptures pronounce condemnation on those who 'call evil good, and good, evil' (Isa. 5:20)."³ Since ethical hierarchicalism holds that moral conflicts exist, the question has been asked: "How can a lesser evil ever be the good thing to do? Is this nothing more than pronouncing evil good?"⁴ Geisler responds: "The

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 97-98. This statement is one of a number of objections raised by others in connection with hierarchicalism. Without citing the sources, Geisler mentions several criticisms and then responds to them.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

³Norman L. Geisler, "God, Evil and Dispensations," in Walvoord: A Tribute, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1982), 111 (footnote #7).

⁴Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 96.

hierarchicalist does not proclaim that the evil is a good thing to do, but asserts that the highest obligation in the conflict is the good thing to do."¹ In illustrating this point, Geisler notes that in the case of lying to save a life, "it is not the lie that is good (a lie as such is always wrong), but it is the intent and action to save a life that is good--despite the fact that intentional falsification was necessary to accomplish this good."² Geisler mentions that "what is called 'evil' sometimes accompanies the performance of good acts."³

It is true that Geisler frequently expresses himself in language that gives the impression that hierarchicalism is an absolutism in the standard definition of the term. For instance, Geisler posits that hierarchicalism "stands firm on moral principles based in the absolute, unchanging character of God."⁴ He maintains that these moral principles "are objective, propositional, and substantive in content."⁵ As concrete examples, Geisler says that the universal commands of Scripture, "such as the prohibitions against blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, murder, lying, and so forth, are absolutely binding on all men at all times and

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 131.

⁵Ibid.

all places."¹ However, Geisler frankly admits that in ethical hierarchicalism "mere human actions as such are not intrinsically good or evil."² He propounds that an act "changes its moral value (from evil to good) when used for a good purpose or in a good context."³

In a nutshell, for Geisler there is no such thing as an intrinsically or inherently evil act. This can be observed in his discussion of the differing degrees of sins and virtues. As part of the conclusions from his study about good and evil, Geisler says: "Good and evil are ranked in a pyramid with the best at the top and worst at the bottom and varying degrees of good and evil in between."⁴ Thus, for Geisler, both good and evil are in the same pyramidal structure; there is no clear demarcation between them. Therefore, "the lesser good is really an evil," and "the lesser evil equals the greatest good."⁵

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 93. See also, Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 123.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 109.

³Ibid., 113.

⁴Geisler, The Christian Ethic of Love, 92.

⁵Geisler, "The Origins and Implications of the Greater Good Ethic." Quoting Aristotle approvingly, Geisler notes that for him, "the so-called lesser evil is really the greater good;" Moreland, and Geisler, The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time, 153.

In contradistinction to Geisler's view, a study of Scripture indicates that absolute moral norms are clearly separated into two distinct groups, good and evil.¹ Pack observes that biblically "there is an absolute, intrinsic, and unchangeable difference between good and evil."² As Lutzer notes concerning the scriptural perception of evil and good: "The sins remain sins and the virtues remain virtues."³ Because there is a distinct and immutable disparity between good and evil, Geisler's assertion, that an act "changes its moral value (from evil to good) when used for a good purpose or in a good context,"⁴ would therefore appear to come under the condemnation of Isaiah 5:20: "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil."

Since Geisler holds that no acts have any intrinsic value, hierarchicalism is subject to criticisms akin to that of situationism.⁵ For instance, John Warwick Montgomery's comment that, "in situationism lesser evils are transmuted from being in the class of evils and placed into the class

¹See, for example, Isa 5:20; Ezek 44:23; Gal 5:19-23.

²Pack, 140.

³Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 102.

⁴Ibid., 113.

⁵See, for example, Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 58-59.

of goods, is also relevant to hierarchicalism."¹ In fact, a similar such conclusion could be drawn from Geisler's own words. In a published debate, Geisler spoke of the necessity of the law of noncontradiction. After quoting Isaiah 5:20, he stated: "Unless one begins with the premise that A is not non-A (all that is good is not nongood), how could he ever be anything but a total ethical relativist? If logic does not apply to all ethical statements, then when the Bible commands 'love' it could mean 'hate.'"² This is precisely where ethical hierarchicalism ends up since it holds that an act "changes its moral value (from evil to good) when used for a good purpose."³ Realizing this, Pack indicts ethical hierarchicalism as a "chameleon morality," since it has the potential to change in every situation.⁴ Geisler himself warns that "no absolutes are possible if the law of noncontradiction does not apply. For then if logic does not hold, any moral command could mean its exact opposite."⁵ This statement certainly applies to Geisler's approach, for in its actual outworking, hierarchicalism at

¹See Tape, 20 (footnote #24).

²Norman L. Geisler, "'Avoid . . . Contradictions'" (1 Timothy 6:20): A Reply to John Dahms," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 22 (March 1979): 61.

³Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 113.

⁴Pack, 144.

⁵Geisler, "'Avoid . . . Contradictions'" (1 Timothy 6:20): A Reply to John Dahms," 64.

times requires the performance of specific acts such as lying or adultery, which are prohibited by God in the Bible. In Geisler's words, "if we give up logic in the area of ethics, then anything goes. Total antinomianism follows."¹

Exemptions or Exceptions

Due to its position that absolute laws can at times be ignored, the following question has been raised regarding ethical hierarchicalism: "How can a norm such as truth-telling be unbreakable if it is sometimes to be broken in order to save a life?"² Recognizing that "unbreakable norms which can be broken" is a contradiction in terms, Geisler explains:

When one obeys a higher norm in favor of a lower and opposing one, he is not really breaking the lower one but transcending it. He is not making an exception to the lower norm but getting an exemption from it in view of a superior obligation. And even when it is transcended, the lower norm remains intact as a universal. . . . When a lower principle or norm is

¹Ibid. This unintentional self-criticism of ethical hierarchicalism is confirmed by what Geisler says in relation to Nietzsche, whom Geisler terms an antinomianist. Geisler notes that the title of Nietzsche's book, "Beyond Good and Evil," could also be rendered "'on the other side of good and evil,'" indicating that "good and evil are on the same side of morality;" Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 32 (footnote #20). Thus, while Nietzsche places good and evil on the same side of morality, Geisler places good and evil in the same pyramid. In both hierarchicalism and antinomianism there is no separation between good and evil.

²Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 130. This is one of the questions Geisler addresses in a section called, "Hierarchicalism Criticized." Without citing any source for this objection, Geisler simply poses the question and then responds to it.

suspended, it is not really broken. The higher dethrones the lower but it does not destroy it. . . . One is exempt if and only if there is a higher, overriding responsibility which temporarily excuses him from his lower duty. The lower duty is still there, and there are no exceptions to it.¹

Elaborating further, Geisler says that ethical hierarchicalism "does not believe there are any exceptions to absolute laws, only exemptions."² He maintains that the difference is more than verbal. "An exception would violate the universality and absoluteness of a moral law, whereas an exemption does not."³ For when an exemption is made, the law is still binding.⁴ Thus, even though an exemption does not make the action right in the conflict situation,⁵ it "eliminates the individual's culpability in not performing the demands of that lower law."⁶

A look at Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical" reveals that there is some similarity between his concept and hierarchicalism.⁷ Geisler states, however, that Kierkegaard's view that the religious transcends the

¹Ibid., 130-131. See also, Geisler, The Christian Ethic Of Love, 32.

²Geisler, Christian Ethics: Options and Issues, 127.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 128.

⁷See Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans. Alastair Hannay (London, England: Penguin Books, 1985); Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 121-122.

ethical is unacceptable to evangelicals.¹ He charges that, besides incorrectly separating between the Lawgiver and His law, Kierkegaard's view "wrongly assumes that there can be a non-propositional, personal revelation to the individual which transcends all universal, rational, and propositional categories."² Despite Geisler's sharp critique of Kierkegaard's ethical perspective, Stanley Grenz posits that "Geisler is in fundamental agreement with Kierkegaard, insofar as he admits that at times certain ethical norms must be suspended for the sake of a higher goal."³ Since in Geisler's thinking the single norm which must stand at the top of his hierarchy is obedience to God, in this "he is in fundamental agreement with Kierkegaard."⁴ Grenz notes that, since Kierkegaard accepts the Kantian understanding that norms are universally binding, Geisler parts company with him in this, because hierarchical ethics holds that absolutes are merely relative.⁵

Deliberating on this relativizing of absolutes, Grenz observes: "In defining ethical terms in this non-

¹Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84 (footnote #6); Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 121-122.

²Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 84 (footnote #6).

³Grenz, 157.

⁴Ibid., 158.

⁵Ibid., 157.

traditional way Geisler appears to be playing a semantic game in which universals are not universally applicable and absolutes are relative."¹ Grenz recognizes that "this game continues as he seeks to differentiate between an exception to a norm (which is always disallowed) and an exemption from a lower norm (which is granted each time a higher norm is obeyed at the cost of a lower one)."² John Tape points out that this attempt at distinguishing between exceptions and exemptions does not solve the problem concerning the absolute nature of the moral law.³ For, "whether one allows a moral law to be suspended by an exception or an exemption, it is still suspended and such allowance is contradictory to the absolute nature of God's laws."⁴ As Luck expresses it: "Exemption and exception are two sides of the same coin."⁵

¹Ibid. Moreover, as noted in chapter 1 of this research study, Barber suggests that Geisler, by merely changing the terminology, is actually trying to make situation ethics acceptable to evangelicals; Cyril J. Barber, The Minister's Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 233-234.

²Grenz, 157.

³Tape, 6.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Luck, 25. Other scholars similarly hold that there is no real difference between an exemption and an exception. See, for example, Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," 249; Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 103; Kurt Baier, The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics, Contemporary Philosophy Series, ed. Max Black (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958), 192, 193. Using these

In considering the term "exemption" and the other words Geisler uses to describe the occasion when a lower law is disregarded, Lutzer comments that "to substitute one set of terms for another hardly solves the problem."¹ Lutzer correctly contends that "if one is guilty of violating a universal norm, we must conclude that he has broken the universal and has not merely been exempted from it."² For to merely substitute "exemption" for "exception" and then to claim that the law is still absolutely binding, even though it does not need to be kept in the conflict situation, is to play a semantic game.³ As Grenz suitably concludes: "This relativising of absolutes calls hierarchicalism into question as an ethical system."⁴

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter began with a comparison of the essential features of theistic morality, as defined by Geisler, with his own method of ethical hierarchicalism. In this study it was shown that, similar to theistic morality, hierarchicalism claims to subscribe to objective moral

terms interchangeably, Baier (p. 192) refers to a policeman who "is not granting exemption to (making an exception in favor of)" a motorist.

¹Lutzer, The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics, 103.

²Ibid.

³Grenz, 157-158.

⁴Ibid., 158.

standards which are based on a divine origin. However, while theistic morality holds to an absolutist, normative approach, hierarchicalism turns out to be a relativistic ethical scheme that operates in a utilitarian way. As such it contradicts some of the criteria that Geisler has himself established for an authentic moral methodology.

Following this, a comparison was made between ethical hierarchicalism and Christian ethics as described by Geisler. It was demonstrated that both approaches are based on natural law and on the Bible, with an emphasis on the latter. Likewise, both hold that ethics is best exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, a comparative investigation of five additional vital characteristics of Christian ethics with ethical hierarchicalism revealed some major points of tension. These include the basis of the ethic as well as its motivating factor. Since, hierarchical ethics includes a descriptive approach, a teleological focus, and a non-absolutistic perspective, it fails to measure up to the standard that Geisler has delineated for a genuine Christian approach to ethics.

The following section of this chapter dealt with conflicting concepts within hierarchical ethics itself. It was revealed that, while ethical hierarchicalism claims to believe in many substantive moral absolutes, in its actual application it ends up with only one contentless "absolute,"

which is really no absolute at all. Therefore, in the final analysis hierarchicalism reduces to antinomianism.

This study indicated that, for hierarchicalism, there is no real difference between an intention and an "end." Thus, if as Geisler holds, all actions in and of themselves are morally neutral, then it becomes clear that his moral methodology does in reality promote the belief that "the end justifies the means." As Geisler himself notes in connection with this thinking: "Such reasoning is humanistic and situational, not Christian and biblical."¹

This research has disclosed that Geisler holds two mutually exclusive views on the unity of or differentiation between the civil, ceremonial, and moral laws. While the concept of the unity of these codes is indispensable to Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism, he himself separates them, claiming that the moral law is universally binding, whereas civil and ceremonial laws are not. Thus, when norms are properly divided into absolute laws and limited duties, it can be seen that no hierarchical method is necessitated.

It was manifested that, on the one hand, Geisler recognizes the fact that biblical morality is not determined by what people do. Yet, it was observed that he bases some tenets fundamental to hierarchicalism on his personal interpretation of Bible stories. Thus, Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism denies the rudimentary principles that he

¹Geisler, "A Biblical View of Government," 12.

himself lays down concerning how to correctly discern and interpret the biblical accounts.

The next major portion of this chapter dealt with additional problematic issues in ethical hierarchicalism. Concerning acts of omission and commission it was seen that for Geisler there is no significant moral difference between them. This theory gives supplementary support to his view that moral conflicts exist. However, careful scholarship reveals a distinct dissimilarity between these two acts, and indicates that, while one is responsible for committing an evil act, one is not culpable for actions that one cannot prevent. Thus, the individual is freed from falsely assumed obligations and responsibilities incorrectly foisted on one.

In connection with the issue of assumed absolutes, it was noticed that, unfortunately, Geisler has not heeded his own counsel regarding the importance of interpreting one's experience by the Bible rather than reevaluating the Bible on the basis of personal experience. Since ethical hierarchicalism is based partly on Geisler's individually perceived "facts" of human experience instead of on the final authority of the Scriptures, it is an unacceptable method of moral reasoning.

Time was spent examining Geisler's illustrations from the world of nature that were used to support some of the tenets of ethical hierarchicalism. It would have been advantageous had Geisler followed his own admonition against

connecting natural law with moral law. For, as observed, while the former merely describes a situation, the latter prescribes how things ought to be. Thus, it appears illegitimate to use nature's laws to establish morality.

It was noted that, though Geisler alleges that ethical hierarchicalism is similar to the principle of double effect, his modified interpretation of this doctrine contradicts an integral component of the conventional formulation of it. In reality, Geisler operates this rule in a teleological way, focusing on consequences, since he does not believe in the intrinsic value of human actions.

The prolonged evaluation of the vital biblical basis that Geisler provides for ethical hierarchicalism raised serious misgivings concerning Geisler's interpretation and use of various passages. First, it was shown that none of Geisler's examples substantiates that it is justifiable to lie to save life. Second, since this study suggests that none of the passages Geisler cites as evidence for the actuality of moral conflicts can sustain the charge, it casts ample suspicion on the validity of Geisler's thesis that real conflicts of moral obligations do exist. Third, it was seen that none of the illustrations given by Geisler promotes the idea that higher moral laws take precedence over lower ones. And fourth, this research has demonstrated that none of the instances of so-called guiltless suspension of lower laws, supports Geisler's view that God does not

hold people responsible for ignoring lower moral laws provided they keep the higher in conflict cases. Therefore, as Pack notes, "not even one of the Scriptures cited by Geisler actually demands a hierarchy of norms."¹

The analysis done above showed that, even though Geisler himself agrees that God's moral laws, which He designed not to conflict, are a reflection of His unchanging character, he insists that these laws do conflict. In this situation, the laws concerning one's relation to God must always be kept, while those pertaining to people can be disregarded. Thus, ethical hierarchicalism holds to a dichotomy in the law of God, and by extension this methodology implies that there is a "bifurcation within God."²

Finally, this appraisal considered two crucial semantic issues. On the matter of calling evil good, it was observed that Geisler places both good and evil in the same pyramid, with no clear differentiation between them. Since hierarchicalism holds that, depending on the context or purpose, actions change their moral value from evil to good, this ethical strategy comes under biblical condemnation. Furthermore, Geisler posits that his methodology does not grant any exceptions to moral absolutes, but does permit exemptions from lower norms when there is a conflict.

¹Pack, 129.

²Bloesch, 183.

However, as has been shown, regardless of the terms used, to disregard an absolute moral law is to break it.

In a paper presented at an evangelical conference on ethics, Geisler personally confronted the subject of the use of semantics by biblical scholars.¹ In referring to what was then "the current resurrection debate," he noted: "New definitions of terms are being invented that bluff the reader into thinking they are the real ones. The net effect, of course, is bewildering. It entices the readers into thinking that an unorthodox view is really orthodox."² Geisler then accused another theologian of a "world-class semantical somersault," due to the fact that his "arbitrary redefinition of the word 'essential' to mean 'customary' gives it virtually the opposite meaning."³

This admonition seems applicable to the very manner in which Geisler has used language in promoting ethical hierarchicalism. Take, for example, Geisler's statements which appear midway through his first volume on ethics. Here, contrary to the standard dictionary definition of these terms, he claims that some "universals" are "only

¹See Norman L. Geisler, "Bible Balderdash: The Games Exegetes Play," 1990, TMs [photocopy], a paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting, New Orleans, LA.

²Ibid., 1.

³Ibid., 5.

locally universal,"¹ and "not all absolutes are absolutely absolute," since "some are only relatively absolute."² The same type of "semantic game"³ is seen throughout Geisler's elaboration of his ethical strategy. For, while he claims that hierarchicalism is an absolutist ethic, it is clearly relativistic; while he asserts that his scheme is normative, it is indeed utilitarian; while he maintains his method is prescriptive, it actually includes descriptive perspectives; while he alleges it is deontological, in practice it proves to be teleological; while he professes it to be biblically based, it turns out to be naturalistic; while he argues that it promotes good deeds, it ends up justifying evil acts; and while he insists that ethical hierarchicalism champions a plurality of substantive absolute moral norms, it concludes with only one contentless norm.

Geisler's critique of those who redefine terms in order to "make their views sound as orthodox as possible,"⁴ therefore appears applicable to his own method of ethical hierarchicalism. He is absolutely correct in noting that "meanings have ranges and scopes, but they are not putty."⁵

¹Geisler, Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, 132.

²Ibid.

³Grenz (p. 157) uses this term to describe Geisler's misuse of words.

⁴Geisler, "Bible Balderdash: The Games Exegetes Play," 13.

⁵Ibid., 7.

Therefore, as he appropriately concludes, "an author has an ethical obligation to use words in the customary way."¹

For, "language is not a private affair. It is a medium of public communication, and an author has a moral obligation to use words in the ordinary sense in which his intended audience will understand them."² Indeed, "inventing one's own meanings for terms," is "simply unacceptable."³

The preceding critical analysis of Norman Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism does not purport to cover every aspect of his approach to moral decision-making. Moreover, this appraisal does not claim to be an exhaustive evaluation of Geisler's ethical strategy. However, it is anticipated that this assessment has elucidated certain crucial elements and yielded definitive insights that will be of benefit in the search for a more consistent and coherent procedure for addressing the difficult decisions of daily life. By noting the positive contributions of ethical hierarchicalism, and by providing a synopsis of the entire research project, the final chapter will attempt to contribute to that end.

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 15.

CHAPTER VI

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Now that a critical analysis of ethical hierarchicalism has been conducted, it must be noted that there are also some beneficial attributes of this approach to ethics. These points are briefly outlined below. Following that, a short synopsis of the whole research project is provided. Recognizing that not every issue pertaining to ethical hierarchicalism has been addressed in this study, several recommendations for further research are then proposed. Finally, to end the chapter, a short, yet definitive conclusion is made.

Positive Aspects of Ethical Hierarchicalism

Michael Andrus, in his 1973 review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, offered high praise for the way in which Geisler had broken the near-total evangelical silence on the urgent ethical concerns of the current century.¹ Andrus also expressed his pleasure at Geisler for attempting something more than merely quoting "pious platitudes" and

¹Michael P. Andrus, review of Ethics: Alternatives and Issues, by Norman L. Geisler, in Calvary Review (Summer 1973).

giving "nineteenth century answers."¹ He noted that, even if one rejects the answers given by Geisler, "he cannot help but admit that the author has grappled with the issues in an original, relevant, and challenging manner."²

In his assessment of Geisler's hierarchical ethics, William Luck observed that the hierarchy of love's laws "may well make one more sensitive to those weightier matters of the law (the inward moral virtues) that need constant attention lest mere outward obedience of the ceremonial elements crowd them out."³ Luck notes that "there is also a need to consider the hierarchy of sins--that some actions are worse than others--in order that one may exercise special care not to practice that which is abominable to God."⁴ Echoing a similar appreciation, Gordon Olson says that "we should note that his [i.e., Geisler's] proofs, supporting the contention that not all sins are equal, are solid and helpful."⁵ Olson continues: "Although it is

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³William F. Luck, "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics: A Second Look at the Salvaging Operations," Grace Theological Journal 8 (Spring 1987): 33.

⁴Ibid., 34. However, Luck (ibid.) adds that a "hierarchy does not imply conflicts. [For,] the very same passages in Scripture that talk of hierarchy also caution against the thought that the keeping of the lower removes the obligation to the higher or that the keeping of the higher removes the necessity of following the lower."

⁵C. Gordon Olson, "Norman Geisler's Hierarchical Ethics Revisited," Evangelical Journal 4 (Spring 1986): 4.

widely held by naive Christians that all sins are equal, it is important to relieve them of this potentially harmful notion."¹ With regard to the concept of a hierarchy, Luck recognizes one more positive value. He says: "Evangelicals need to think on the hierarchy of good consequences so that within the bounds of the (deontological) rules they may strive to produce the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of neighbors."²

Robert Rakestraw enumerates additional strengths that can be observed in Geisler's work. To begin with, Rakestraw notes that one ought to appreciate Geisler's "devotion to the scriptures,"³ and his "attempts to be biblically based."⁴ He adds: "Also admirable is his sincere attempt to relate Christian faith to the rather harsh realities of everyday life."⁵ Rakestraw says "another strength is the stressing of individual

¹Ibid.

²Luck, 34.

³Robert V. Rakestraw, "Graded Absolutism: An Analysis of Norman Geisler's Ethics," 1983, TMs [photocopy], p. 14, a paper presented at the eastern regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Langhorne, PA.

⁴Robert V. Rakestraw, "The Hierarchical Christian Ethics of Norman L. Geisler," 1980, TMs [photocopy], p. 45, a paper presented for the class Basic Motifs in Christian Ethics, Drew University; available from the author, Bethel Theological Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

⁵Rakestraw, "Graded Absolutism: An Analysis of Norman Geisler's Ethics," 14.

responsibility in one's life and decision-making."¹ The Christian is expected to do some thinking, and then to turn that thought into action. The individual believer needs to study the Bible and the life of Jesus so that the will of God may be determined and performed.² Moreover, ethical hierarchicalism "emphasizes the value of personhood."³ That is, persons, more than utilitarian ends, are to be respected as beings created in God's image.⁴ Finally, ethical hierarchicalism "offers release from the false guilt that often plagues the sincere Christian."⁵ Geisler explains that "guilt is a major problem for the human psyche."⁶ Thus, in cases such as unavoidable divorce, the Christian is not blamed and called a sinner.⁷ In this manner, hierarchicalism helps to relieve one from the erroneous guilt that sometimes plagues the believer.⁸

¹Rakestraw, "The Hierarchical Christian Ethics of Norman L. Geisler," 45.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 45-46.

⁵Ibid., 46.

⁶Norman L. Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 107.

⁷Rakestraw, "The Hierarchical Christian Ethics of Norman L. Geisler," 46.

⁸Ibid.

Synopsis of the Research Project

In chapter 1 it was demonstrated that, at least from the time of Augustine, reflective Christians have been cogitating on the matter of moral conflicts. Since the mid-1960s this issue of conflicting moral obligations has become the focus of attention for several Christian scholars, as they have attempted to formulate and develop a theory of ethics that would be adequate to deal with not just the ordinary concerns of daily life but also the problem cases, such as those arising in times of life or death emergencies. One of these thinkers is Norman L. Geisler, who originated and devised ethical hierarchicalism, a strategy that promotes doing the greatest good in conflict situations. Since Geisler has been the most articulate and prolific proponent of this ethical methodology, and since his works are taken seriously by numerous influential Christians, his approach to ethics was selected as the focus of this research.

In order to provide the necessary foundation and background for a detailed examination of Geisler's ethical position, chapter 2 covered a broad outline of different techniques and methodologies related to ethical dilemmas. The brief survey of the contrasting ways in which prominent early Christians, Reformation leaders, post-Reformation thinkers, and twentieth-century scholars dealt with conflicts of moral obligations revealed that, while some

held firmly to non-conflicting moral absolutes, others believed that exceptions from ethical universals are at times permissible. Following this, the relativistic theories of utilitarianism and situationism, and the absolutistic views of non-conflicting absolutism, conflicting absolutism, and hierarchicalism, other than that of Geisler, were looked at to observe their respective approaches to moral conflicts. In connection with the non-relativistic methods it was shown that, while non-conflicting absolutism maintains that no universal scriptural moral absolutes can ever conflict, the other two strategies assert that these conflicts do occur, in which case conflicting absolutism constrains one to sin and then seek for forgiveness for doing the lesser evil, whereas hierarchicalism calls for the performance of the guiltless greater good. Finally, research into the principle of double effect indicated that, in the event of a conflict of obligations, this procedure allows one to perform a morally good or neutral action, with an indirect and unintentional, yet adequately justifiable, evil side effect.

To furnish a framework for a clearer understanding and a better appreciation of Geisler's hierarchical approach to ethics, chapter 3 traced his philosophical, theological, and ethical development over the years. It was noted that, though raised in a non-Christian family, Norman Geisler felt called to the ministry after making a personal commitment to

Christ in his late teens. As a conservative scholar, who was trained in both Catholic and Protestant educational systems, he has pastored, lectured, and administered for many years at various Christian institutions. While he considers it the greatest compliment to be labeled a "Thomist," after Thomas Aquinas who has had the most influence on his life, Geisler denies that Aquinas' thinking has had any conscious influence on his own ethical method. A productive author on a vast variety of topics, Geisler has attached immense importance to his ethical hierarchicalism. He asserts that this procedure is comprehensive, consistent, and biblical--the only true ethical method for Christians.

Chapter 4 outlined and explained the teachings of ethical hierarchicalism, as described in Geisler's works. It was shown that for Geisler, theistic morality consists of an objective standard, an absolute basis, a normative approach, and a divine origin. Furthermore, he views Christian ethics, which builds on this groundwork, as a prescriptive, absolute, deontological strategy, with the Bible as its basis, God's character as its source, Christ's life as its best manifestation, and Christ's love as its motivating power. While Geisler recognizes some valuable insights in other ethical theories, he expends considerable effort to explain and defend his own viewpoint. First, natural law and the Bible are the two sources of ethical hierarchicalism. Second, as a qualified absolutism, this

theory declares that its moral laws are absolute in their source, their sphere, and their sequence of priority.

Third, it is a duty-centered ethic of obedience to God's commands, including the hierarchy for conflict situations.

Fourth, it posits that Scripture stories prove the existence of moral conflicts as well as the priority of values with

which to solve these dilemmas. And fifth, based on its

allegation that human actions have no intrinsic value, it contends that morality must be measured by the motives and intentions of those doing the acts. In addition to these

five basic traits, it was demonstrated that hierarchicalism

claims that the Bible itself supplies one with a scale of values by which to resolve moral conflicts. The one who

does the greatest good in conflict situations, should not feel guilty for keeping the higher law, even though the

action taken might leave cause for regret. Lastly, ethical

hierarchicalism holds that, in times of crisis, decision-

making can be facilitated from a biblical perspective by

maintaining a love for God over people, obedience to God

over the government, and by putting mercy above veracity.

Based partially on Geisler's own views of theistic morality, Christian ethics, and ethical hierarchicalism, and partly on the views of other scholars, chapter 5 critically analyzed ethical hierarchicalism. On the one hand, it was demonstrated that this approach of Geisler's maintained a belief in divinely-derived objective moral norms, as based

on natural law and the Bible, and as best manifested in the life of Christ. However, since ethical hierarchicalism was shown to embrace relativistic, utilitarian, descriptive, and teleological components, it can be seen to contradict many of the essential characteristics of theistic morality in general and Christian ethics in particular as specified by Geisler himself. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that, since this scheme ends up with one contentless "absolute," it is really an antinomianism. Because for Geisler, the end truly does justify the means, hierarchicalism reduces to situationism. Moreover, ethical hierarchicalism denies the rudimentary principles that Geisler lays down concerning how to correctly interpret the scriptural accounts. Rather than being based on a biblical foundation, it was revealed that many of the so-called moral conflicts arise as a result of falsely assumed responsibilities, inaccurately specified absolutes, and naturalistic definitions. Additionally, none of the scriptural passages that Geisler appeals to supports his perspective that lying to save life is justifiable, that real moral conflicts exist, that higher laws take precedence over lower ones, and that one can guiltlessly ignore lower laws. Also, Geisler holds to a dichotomy in the law of God, and by extension a disjunction within God Himself. Finally, this chapter showed that Geisler uses unacceptable semantic strategies in order to promote his method. For all of the

above reasons ethical hierarchicalism must be rejected as an authentic Christian approach to moral decision-making.

Recommendations for Further Research

Norman Geisler has been a remarkably prolific writer, especially in the areas of ethical theory and moral issues. Obviously, this research project has addressed only some of the questions and concerns relevant to hierarchical ethics. Several matters need further investigation.

The relationship between the use of natural law in Aquinas' thought and Geisler's hierarchicalism deserves attention. This study would need to take into account the way in which Geisler's hierarchicalism is related to his views concerning christology, revelation and inspiration, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of the nature of humanity, and the problem of determinism, freedom and evil.

In addition, the connection between Geisler's ethical approach, his exegetical methodology, his theological beliefs, and his philosophical presuppositions should be determined in order to better understand and evaluate the soundness of ethical hierarchicalism from a biblical perspective. Specifically, the Bible passages analyzed in the previous chapter, which Geisler utilizes in support of his method could undergo further and deeper analysis. Also, texts not addressed here may be examined.

Furthermore, since the real evidence of the true value of any ethical strategy is its practical workability,

indepth research needs to be done to ascertain whether or not ethical hierarchicalism is actually able to provide sound and suitable solutions to the dilemmas of daily life.

Final Conclusion

Even though Geisler's ethical hierarchicalism has made some positive contributions in the realm of moral reasoning, this technique of ethical decision-making must be considered an unacceptable method for ethics because it is individualistic, naturalistic, humanistic, situational,¹ relativistic, utilitarian, and antinomian. Since Geisler's method is incoherent,² inconsistent, self-contradictory,³ and unscriptural,⁴ it fails to satisfy the basic criteria

¹Luck (p. 19) concurs that Geisler's method shows a "failure to avoid situationalism." Similarly, Pack says it "entails a contextual or situational approach to ethics;" Rolland W. Pack, "An Examination of Norman L. Geisler's Ethic of Hierarchy" (M.A. thesis, Harding College, 1979), v. Likewise, Andrus notes it "appears to be little more than a conservative situationism." McQuilkin agrees that it "has some similarities to situationism in method and outcome;" Robertson McQuilkin, An Introduction to Biblical Ethics (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989), 162.

²In basic agreement, Luck (p. 19) refers to Geisler's method as one of the "incoherent ethical systems."

³Likewise, referring to ethical hierarchicalism, Luck (p. 26) says that "the system is self-contradictory."

⁴This conclusion conflicts with Geisler's ambitions for his ethical method: "My hope is that evangelicals will increasingly see the value of graded absolutism [i.e., hierarchicalism]. It is not only consistent with biblical Christianity, but also provides a viable answer to many problems in both Scripture and society;" Geisler, Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, 114.

for a valid ethical methodology for Bible believers.¹
Christians seeking for a more Christ-centered, dependable,
biblical strategy will need to look elsewhere.²

¹Similarly, in reviewing Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, Gill notes that Geisler's "own approach falls short of satisfying the three criteria he affirms, i.e., 'biblical, comprehensive, and consistent';" David W. Gill, review of Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics, by Norman L. Geisler, in Transformation 1 (October/December 1984): 27.

²Geisler admits his limitations, noting that "God will reveal other areas where finitude has failed us;" Norman L. Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," Evangelical Journal 4 (Fall 1986): 86.

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