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The Root of Moral Epistemology
Dispensationalism's Relevance in Establishing Moral Truth in a Relativistic World
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Introduction

Western societies were once strongly rooted in the Judeo-Christian values that emanated from the religious foundation of their culture. Beginning with the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century, these cultures began to shift away from the proclamations of the Bible, preferring to root themselves in the ever-evolving promises of science. This affirmation of science as the sole basis of fact became the cornerstone of modernist philosophy and had significant epistemological implications for questions of ethics and morality. Whereas the Scriptures were once seen by the masses as the authority on moral conduct, the scientific revolution seemingly dismantled this claim. The concept of moral relativity has pervaded modern academic institutions and has become a predominant viewpoint of secular Americans. This trend has increased as the secularists replaced the hard sciences with the social sciences as the means of developing their epistemology. This fact is demonstrated by a study conducted by philosopher Thomas Pölzer and psychologist Jennifer Wright, which concluded that 64% of participants in their study identified moral questions as entirely subjective with divergent ethical positions being identified neither as right nor wrong regardless of the respondent's personal stance on the subject.¹

Now much of the Church exists within the confines of moral relativism as many traditional protestant denominations have affirmed the social tenants of postmodernism through their acceptance of biblically untenable positions that align with the social whims of secularists. The justifications for these amoral positions are typically based upon a faulty hermeneutical process. Moreover, the hermeneutical framework employed to derive these unscriptural conclusions reveals a deeper philosophical flaw influenced deeply by the moral relativism of modern and postmodern belief systems. Specifically, these philosophies reject the Bible's authority on epistemological matters, instead looking towards the advances of the hard science and social sciences to form the nucleus around which Scripture is understood. Dispensational theology stands the best chance of combating these shifting cultural paradigms within the Church. This paper will examine dispensationalism's relevance in combating moral relativism in the twenty-first century Church through reviewing postmodern positions of the mainstream denominations and defining a dispensational moral epistemology based upon the literal-historical-grammatical hermeneutic.

¹ Thomas Pölzer, "Is Moral Relativism Really a Problem? Psychological Research Suggests it is Not", *Scientific American*, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/is-moral-relativism-really-a-problem/>.

Moral Relativism in the Church

That moral relativism is a popular position within secular society is no surprise because the Scriptures have warned Christians that those that live while rejecting the Lord will be unable to discern the truth despite it being made evident to them (Rom 1:18-20). Paul reiterates this fact in his instructions to Timothy, as he predicts the coming time when people would seek out teachers that simply affirm their internal desires with a complete disregard for the truth (2 Tim 4:3-4). The roots of moral relativism within the body of Christ are found through both an understanding of the principles of moral relativism and in the hermeneutical principles which underly this philosophy. The pervasiveness of moral relativism within the Church has given way to the affirmation of sinful positions within mainline protestant denominations with justification found in the faulty application of Scripture.

Philosopher J. David Velleman essentially defines moral relativism as the inability to determine a universal understanding of morality on the basis that people devise rules around common themes that vary between communities due to cultural differences and share so little in common, they cannot be rightly invalidated.² Thus, based upon Velleman's definition, ethical relativity exists regardless of the claims of exclusivity by certain peoples regarding a moral theme. Ironically a claim to an objective truth within itself. Further, it would appear based upon Velleman's argument that the incongruency of the subjects deemed moral by these different groups is the reason truth cannot be objectively determined. Therefore, moral relativism finds its foundation within the supposed inability to discredit the norms of a people based on apparent cultural differences in practical ethics. To this point, the moral relativists, such as Velleman, regard culture as the lynch pin of morality. They claim culture is a concept defined by the external environment be it either political, social, or even historical which underlie the validation of local beliefs.³ It is through the moral relativists' concept of culture, that many of denominations affirm the words of Scripture within their cultural-historical position, while maintaining that they are no longer applicable to the modern Church.⁴

Moral relativism within the Church found justification through the hermeneutical practices of theologians and religious philosophers. Merold Westphal, a graduate of Wheaton College, adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, and guest lecturer at the Harvard Divinity School is a strong supporter of the idea of the validity of several moral interpretations to Scripture's ethical teachings. The basis of his position is the dismissal of a plain interpretation of the biblical text due the supposed inability of this hermeneutic to capture the spiritual meanings of the Word.⁵ In his book, *Whose Community? Whose Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*, part of a series entitled *The Church and Postmodernism*, Westphal sought to undermine the concept of objectivity in Biblical interpretation by turning the reader

² J. David Velleman, *Foundations for Moral Relativism: Second Expanded Edition* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 1-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁴ Anna-Marie Lockard, "Homosexuality: Legally Permissible or Spiritually Misguided?" *Conspectus* 05:1 (Mar 2008), 156.

⁵ Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 17-18.

towards a hermeneutic that understands the meaning of Scripture as being derived from the cooperative effort of the author and the reader in a contemporary context.⁶ Westphal notes that this position is strongly influenced by the hermeneutical practices of Hans-Georg Gadamer, both of who sought a philosophical interpretation of Scripture.⁷

There are severe epistemological consequences associated with relativism. Relativist positions require the disavowal of the possibility of objective truth, specifically in the areas of morality and ethics.⁸ Postmodernists even deny the ability to affirm objective truth derived from history and the hard sciences, instead believing that the historical and scientific narratives are in fact constructs from individual perceptions and therefore malleable.⁹ Thus, on the surface this type of philosophy would be wholly incompatible with the Christian worldview, as Christianity requires the acknowledgement of specific facts that are objectively chronicled in the historical record such as the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. The Apostle Paul summed up the importance of the affirming these historical facts to the faith in 1 Corinthians 15:14 by stating, “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (NIV).

Despite the apparent conflict with these philosophies and the Christian worldview, they have been synthesized in the progressive moral positions of many mainline protestant denominations. The language of moral relativism is made apparent in the proclamations of these denominational groups regarding such topics as same-sex marriage and transgenderism. For example, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) declared in their doctrinal summary on sexuality, “By its actions the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has decided that strongly differing convictions about sexuality and faithful sexual relationships are granted equal standing within this denomination...”¹⁰ Thus, the Presbyterian Churches in the United States have taken an official stance on sexuality that affirms any position to be equally valid. This stands in stark contrast to a plain interpretation of Scriptural teachings on the subject such as Paul’s admonition against homosexual practices in 1 Corinthians 6:9, Romans 1:26-27, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. Likewise, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in their 2009 social statement entitled “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust”, which it claims to be their denominational guidelines on this social issue, affirmed four opposing positions on homosexuality under the guise of being unable to faithfully discern the moral imperatives from Scripture alone.¹¹ This is particularly alarming because a plain interpretation of the Scriptures would make God’s position on the matter evident.

Besides showing a common philosophical framework for the decision to affirm diametrically opposed positions within the same denomination, neither the Presbyterian Church

⁶ Nathan D. Shannon, “His Community, His Interpretation: A Review of Merold Westphal’s ‘Whose Community? Which Interpretation?’”, *Westminster Theological Journal* 72:2 (Fall 2010), 423-424.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ted Cabal, “An Introduction to Postmodernity: Where are we, how did we get Here, and Can we get Home?”, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 05:2 (Summer 2001), 9.

⁹ Rick C. Shrader, “Postmodernism,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 03:1 (Spring 1999), 26-27.

¹⁰ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “Sexuality and Same-Gender Relationships,” accessed August 24, 2022. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/sexuality-and-same-gender-relationships/>

¹¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” (Minneapolis, MN: ELCA, 2009), 18-21.

(U.S.A.) nor ECLA cite any Scripture in support of their position. While not directly stated, the Scriptural justification for ECLA's position appear in a 2004 article in the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* entitled "The Church and Homosexuality." Within this article, the author cites a hermeneutical process through which Scripture should be interpreted weighing Jesus' personal statements over all claims within the Bible and evaluated within the purview of twenty-first century western culture.¹² Likewise, the article's author claims that because Christ rejected certain aspects of the Levitical Law, an application of Jesus' ethic "can never produce universal rules."¹³ The example of the acceptance of homosexuality, an act condemned as sinful throughout the Old and New Testament, is but one example of flawed hermeneutics hinging upon contemporary sensibilities lead to the affirmation of moral relativity within the body of Christ.

Ultimately, moral relativism undermines the authentic witness of God's Word to His Church. This has severe philosophical ramifications for traditional Biblical doctrines such as the concept of Scripture's inspiration and inerrancy. Judging the biblical text within the confines of modern philosophical and scientific frameworks which appear to refute the scriptural narrative would negate God's inspiration of the text, thus making the Scriptures merely the work of fallen man susceptible to moral, historical, and scientific errors. This further undermines the doctrine of inerrancy. The negation of the doctrine of inerrancy opens the Bible to legitimate criticism regarding its reliability and authority.¹⁴ The evidence of the mainline protestant denominations refusing to remain steadfast to Scripturally supported moral beliefs demonstrates the necessity of the church to reject any philosophical or hermeneutical doctrine that apparently rejects God's authority on ethical matters. Therefore, a hermeneutical system from which a valid Christian philosophy can be derived which affirms Scripture as the root of moral epistemology is required.

Epistemological Implications of Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism is rooted in its hermeneutical process which treats the biblical text as communication between God and His creation. Thus, dispensationalism maintains Scripture has a concrete meaning that is derived from the literal interpretation of the Word within its historical context while accounting for the grammatical nuances of the original languages.¹⁵ Due to its focus on developing the interpretation of Scripture entirely from exegesis, a sound Christian philosophy emerges from the application of the dispensational hermeneutical framework. Moreover, dispensationalism's philosophical principles stand in stark contrast to those employed by Christian moral relativists because they are being extracted from biblical doctrine and not being read into biblical doctrine. The two most important philosophical conclusions from a dispensational interpretation of Scripture are that truth emanates from God's essence and that truth is objective. Thus, this position eliminates the moral relativists' reliance of self-perception

¹² John Wickham, "The Church and Homosexuality," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 4:8 (August 2004).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Letters: The Works of Saint Augustine*, trans. Roland Teske (New York, NY: New City Press, 2001), 92-93.

¹⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1999), 155-156.

for discerning and validating multiple versions of “truths.” Moreover, it squashes the possibility of truth’s malleability which would be a rational conclusion of conservative Christian theologies that rely on a spiritual or allegorical interpretation of portions of Scripture.

Epistemology is the “theory of knowledge,” and within the philosophical realm it refers to the concepts that determine that which can be known and through which modes it can be discovered.¹⁶ The foundation of epistemology is the concept of “knowing” and experiencing knowledge in its concrete sense. Moral relativists, particularly of the postmodern variety, willingly assert a logical fallacy by claiming that truth cannot be known, as that is in and of itself a specific claim to objective truth. This points, on a philosophical level, to the necessity of objective knowledge. The implication of this for the Christian is the necessity of being able to receive and discern this knowledge from an authoritative source. Scripture teaches clearly that this knowledge is revealed to man through God’s written revelation and has also been made apparent through nature itself which was created by God thereby infused with His essence (2 Tim 3:16-17; Rom 1:18-21).

The categorization of something as objective versus subjective is that its existence is not contingent upon or influenced by internal sources.¹⁷ Christian Philosopher, J. P. Moreland would further classify objectivity in truth as the understanding of knowledge that remains factual regardless of its perception.¹⁸ A simple example of this objectivity in truth is found in mathematics which would maintain the sum of two and two is four. Therefore, a person’s inability to conduct the arithmetic function of addition does not affect the mathematical fact. Given that objective truth is not contingent upon or influenced by internal sources, it must be bore through the process of exegesis. Moreover, given that objective facts cannot be influenced by internal processes, it would bear to reason that the source of these facts must exist outside of those same internal forces. Moreover, objective truth cannot be formed based upon the external influences of the environment, which effect one’s internal perception of physical phenomena and understanding of metaphysical experiences. Only one entity exists outside of the influence of time and space and that is the three persons of the Holy Trinity.¹⁹ Thus, because any objective truth must be determined from a source that is uninfluenced by these internal processes, including the external environmental factors which affect internal perceptions, and there is but one entity that exists entirely free of these factors, that entity must therefore be the source from which truth is derived.

In general, objective epistemology rests on the existence of God and is revealed through His attributes. One of God’s attributes is aseity. God’s aseity means that He exists only from

¹⁶ “Epistemology,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/>.

¹⁷ Scott Newman, “The Appeal of God’s Truth to the Mind: Theological and Exegetical Answers to Post-Modern Trends within Evangelical Thought,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 01:2 (Aug 1997), 145.

¹⁸ J. P. Moreland, “Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48:1 (Mar 2005), 78.

¹⁹ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2001), 241-242.

Himself and His fullness is due to nothing outside of Himself.²⁰ This necessitates that God exists outside of any cause, but it also requires that God be unmoved by external forces. The most apparent evidence for God's claim to aseity is in John 5:25-27. As Jesus replies to the Jewish leaders, He affirms that God has "life in himself" which reflects His independence of existence outside of other factors (Jn 5:26). Moreover, because the Father has life in Himself and has given the life within Himself to the Son, they alone have the power to give life to the dead, which shows they are givers of life to whom they please (Jn 5:21, 26-27).²¹ The Father's and Son's giving of life to whom they please reflects on the will of God being solely from within Himself. This is further made apparent by God's creation of the world and everything in it making Him the origin of all things including objective truth (Acts 17:24-27).

While nearly all Christians agree on God's aseity, the appearance of moral relativism within the Church makes it evident that segments of the body of Christ do not understand the connection between this divine attribute and epistemology. This disconnect appears to be hermeneutically based. Even the theological frameworks employed by other conservative Christians, such as covenantal theologians, fall short in being able to fully connect the absoluteness of God to general objective epistemology. Specifically, covenant theology requires a certain level of eisegesis by reading into the Scriptures covenants that are not expressed within the text. One example of this is the overarching concept of the covenant of redemption which is maintained as the umbrella under which God shaped human history, including the incarnation of Christ. It further states that this covenant was made in eternity past, thus prior to the creation of man with whom the covenant was made.²² The concept of a covenant of redemption would negate the idea of aseity because it would make man a necessary player in God's redemptive plan because any covenant made with man in eternity past would then require fulfillment otherwise it would discredit God's righteousness. The imposition of man as a necessary element of God's essence thus lays further groundwork for moral relativism by allowing humankind to classify God's righteousness as being contingent on His creation.

Because God is the author of truth and it is objective, man's discernment of that truth is reliant upon the evidence of the consistency of His attributes. Covenantal theology undermines one of God's core attributes, specifically that of reliability. For example, in the case of the Abrahamic Covenant, covenant theology, in both its amillennial and premillennial varieties, disregards the fulfillment of this covenant in the literal sense as recorded in the Old Testament.²³ This subverts a tenant of biblically derived epistemology because it gives God the ability to amend or ignore the terms of unconditional covenants, thus making Him unreliable. Being that epistemology emanates from God's essence, and its objectivity is rooted in God's immutability, any evidence against the reliability of God would also point to the idea that truth would be malleable. However, God's reliability is well accounted for in both the Old and New Testaments, with Paul specifically citing God's faithfulness to His covenants in 2 Thessalonians 3:3.

²⁰ John Piper, "I Believer in God's Self-Sufficiency: A Response to Thomas McCall," *Trinity Journal* 29:2 (Fall 2008), 227.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

²² Ernest Pickering, "The Nature of Covenant Theology," *Central Bible Quarterly* 03:4 (Winter 1960), 7.

²³ Gary R. Gromacki, "The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 18:2 (Fall 2014), 99 & 107.

Just as truth is found in God's essence, so is objective morality. In his dialogue, *Euthyphro*, Socrates, as recorded by Plato, introduces a moral dilemma, "... whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy or is holy because it is beloved by the gods."²⁴ This discourse in *Euthyphro* is centered around the morality of specific actions and assumes within the confines of the Greek pantheon that these are the only two viable perspectives from which to understand the questions of ethics. However, Scripture reveals a different nature of morality than that which could be conceived through Euthyphro's dilemma. Morality is neither an arbitrary value placed on a particular action nor is it simply a preference of God as suggested within Euthyphro but is instead the reflection of a righteous God.²⁵ Thus, Christian morality is objectively derived solely from the character of God, which is the basis upon which believers are called to live holy lives (Lev 11:44, 19:2; Heb 12:14; 1 Pet 1:16; 1 Thes 4:7).

Because morality is based in the essence of God, it is revealed through both nature and in God's self-revelation to mankind through His Word. In this latter respect, dispensationalism emerges as the most reliable means through which assertions of the truth of universal, objective morality can be made. The literal-historical-grammatical hermeneutic correctly places the emphasis on the unity of God's Word through His character while recognizing distinctions between God's peoples. The most prominent example of this is the relationship of the decalogue and the Church. Dispensationalism recognizes the Mosaic Law as being bestowed specifically upon Israel during that age, while also understanding that the Law was merely a tool for Israel to understand morality rooted in God's character.²⁶ This is reflected in Romans 7:7-25, in which Paul cites the value of the law for helping him to understand the moral will of God, but the universal fact of righteousness being credited to a person by faith.²⁷ Thus, in the tradition of Paul, the dispensationalist recognizes the Law as a series of ordinances that were given specifically to Israel which reveal God's moral will, while also maintaining that the law was fulfilled in Christ, thus not applicable in its legal sense to the Church. Further, dispensational theology recognizes that adherence to the law prior to the incarnation of Christ and adherence to the moral imperatives stated by Christ, which summarize the law, were only possible through a faithful relationship to the Lord (Mat 22:35-50; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28).

Therefore, dispensationalism is the only viable theological framework which fully espouses an epistemology that affirms objective truth. From the literal-historical-grammatical hermeneutic of dispensationalism, God's essence is understood to the extent of man's ability to comprehend an infinite being leading to a sound biblical epistemology.²⁸ Specifically,

²⁴ Through this dialogue, Socrates demonstrates that the basis for the dilemma is the inability to understand a universal morality due to the disagreements and wars that occur among the gods of the Greek pantheon. Thus, from this cultural perspective, this is a legitimate proposition, but it falls short from the perspective of monotheism. Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett (South Bend, IN: Infomotions Inc, 2000), 8.

²⁵ Larry D. Pettegrew, "Theological Basis of Ethics," *Master's Seminary Journal* 11:2 (Fall 2000), 149.

²⁶ Roy L. Aldrich, "A New Look at Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120:477 (Jan 1963), 47.

²⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2020). Olive Tree Bible Study Software.

²⁸ Christopher Cone, "Presuppositional Dispensationalism," *Conservative Theological Journal* 10:29 (May 2006), 93-94.

dispensationalism recognizes that all truth is derived from God and is authoritative as revealed in Scripture. This further provides the foundation for understanding morality as existing as a reflection of God's character that is likewise objective, immutable, and discernable through various means of revelation. Thus, it is from the dispensational perspective that a biblical moral epistemology can be ascertained.

Conclusion: Dispensationalism's Twenty-First Century Relevance

In the midst of the growing popularity of moral relativism within secular society and mainstream protestant churches, dispensationalism has found its greatest practical relevance. Specifically, moral relativism within the Church is dismantling long understood moral truths to be deemed as socially acceptable to contemporary secular culture. This is the single greatest threat to conservative Christianity and requires proper redress. Dispensationalism provides that redress because it applies a hermeneutical process that recognizes God as the eternal and absolute source of authority on ethical matters.²⁹ Thus, it characterizes truth as being immutable and discernable by mankind through various modes of revelation. Dispensationalism does this by consistently applying the literal-historical-grammatical hermeneutic, affirming doctrine that has been outlined in God's Word, and properly recognizing God's self-glorification as the primary goal of His purpose for His involvement in history.

Moral relativistic positions within the Church are wantonly justified through the misapplication or omission of Scripture.³⁰ Therefore, dispensationalism provides the soundest foundation upon which strong moral doctrine can be determined from God's self-revelation. With its emphasis on a faithful and consistent interpretation of Scripture through the literal-historical-grammatical framework, man is more able to understand the character of God to the extent of his finite capabilities. This requires faithful servants of the Lord to live in humility to recognize their limitations in understanding the eternal, righteous God while remaining steadfast to the truths that can be rightfully discerned from Scripture. This becomes increasingly important as the Christian educational system becomes increasingly liberal in its theology, molding preachers and theologians in a relativist framework which then mold the nature of Christian philosophy for generations.

Moreover, the theological framework of dispensationalism recognizes God's primary purpose is His own glorification, rightly placing man subordinate to Him as opposed to the soteriological focus of other theological motifs which place man as a necessary element of God's purpose.³¹ As local churches become entrenched in affirming sinful lifestyles as a means of appeasing a small portion of society (that likely would not affirm the Church's teaching regardless of its stance on contemporary social issues), they place humanity on a theological pedestal. By justifying homosexuality, transgenderism, abortion-on-demand, or any other amoral social issue through Scripture, these churches have allowed man to dictate morality for the purposes of defining a God whose primary purpose is the salvation of a fallen humanity. This is antithetical to the teaching of Scripture and seeks to glorify man, akin the humanism, instead of

²⁹ Philip Heideman, "Dispensational Theology," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 04:3 (Jul 1998), 39-40.

³⁰ Nickolaus Kurtaneck, "Excellencies of Dispensationalism," *Grace Journal* 03:2 (Spring 1962), 9.

³¹ Douglas Brown, "The Glory of God and Dispensationalism: Revisiting the 'Sine Qua Non' of Dispensationalism," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 22:1 (Spring 2018), 35.

properly recognizing the primary motivation of God as His own glorification. Thus, dispensationalists have a responsibility to preach and teach that man's purpose is to glorify the Lord. One of the ways this is done is through the reliance on the indwelling Holy Spirit to live a life in accordance with the moral will of God, best discernable through a dispensational interpretation of the Bible.

Society bears the marks of moral relativism as the inhabitants of a broken and fallen world continually embrace positions that promote unethical behavior through the rejection of objective moral truths. That these positions have also become prominent in the Church compounds the cultural decay, as God's elect have seemed to selectively reject aspects of God's self-revelation to appease contemporary western sensitivities. The Church needs to be called back to a normal interpretation of Scripture which affirms the objective truth of God's morality. Moreover, the Church needs to understand that it has been called to glorify God by presenting itself as the faithful, holy bride of Christ (Eph 5:25-27; Rev 19:7-9). This can only be achieved by recognizing the authority and purpose of God within history and shedding light on the fallacies of secular philosophy's undue influence upon the Church.

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