

## **Relationship vs. Rules in Biblical Morality**

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In chapter 7 of their book *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible*, E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien outline how the rise in scientific discovery during the Enlightenment led to a change in thinking about God, with people less often thinking of God as actively involved in creation and an increase in the number of those embracing a deistic god who set the universe in motion but has since left it alone.<sup>1</sup> People see the universe governed by laws that "must apply 100 percent of the time" and therefore assume that God's promises must likewise have universal application in order to be "fair."<sup>2</sup>

The authors claim, however, that when this type of thought is imposed upon the Bible it results in a misreading of the scriptures. Specifically, "[i]n contrast to the modern Western worldview, in ancient worldviews it went without saying that relationships (not rules) define reality."<sup>3</sup> This is evident, for example, in the way many Westerners understand the biblical patron/client relationship. We often view this relationship similar to a contractual one with rigid rules. However, Richards and O'Brien state it was more familial.<sup>4</sup>

The rules for patrons and clients were not written down. They were ingrained in the culture and went without saying.<sup>5</sup> A patron would do favors for his client, things the client lacked the power or influence to do for himself. In return, the client was expected to show

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<sup>1</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 157-60.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 163-64.

loyalty to the patron and do favors in return as requested.<sup>6</sup> The authors suggest this may explain why Paul was hesitant to accept gifts and instead described the support he received from the Philippians as a gift to God rather than to him individually. He did not want to be indebted to the Philippians as a client to a patron.<sup>7</sup>

In an attempt to illustrate the difference between rules and relationship, the authors argue that “[i]n the ancient world, rules were not expected to apply 100 percent of the time.”<sup>8</sup> They give the example of someone driving down a road with ditches on both sides. If she is working her way dangerously close to the ditch on the left, then an instruction to “veer right” would make sense. However, that same instruction would be dangerous if given to someone already close to the ditch on the right.<sup>9</sup> In similar fashion, the instructions given to a believer veering toward lawlessness would be very different from those given to someone prone to legalism.<sup>10</sup>

However, the author’s illustration may not truly demonstrate their point. After all, the ultimate goal for both drivers is the same: to drive along the middle of the road. The specific instructions given to the drivers may differ as to how best to reach that goal, but the goal remains the same. Similarly, people may dance on different sides of a moral rule, so the actions required of them to live in accordance with that rule may differ. But that does not mean the rule itself changes.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 164-65.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 167-68.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 168.

Christians have adopted various forms of moral absolutism throughout the history of the church. Norman Geisler explains three variations: “unqualified absolutism,” “conflicting absolutism” and “graded absolutism.” “Unqualified absolutism” holds that “all moral conflicts are only apparent; they are not real.”<sup>11</sup> This was the view held by Augustine and Kant.<sup>12</sup> “Conflicting absolutism” holds that moral conflicts are real and that “man is morally responsible to both duties.”<sup>13</sup> In those situations we must do whichever action is the lesser evil, confess our sin to God and ask for his forgiveness.<sup>14</sup> Finally, “graded absolutism” holds that “God does not hold a person guilty for not keeping a lower moral law so long as he keeps the higher.”<sup>15</sup>

It seems that Richards and O’Brien may have improperly equated the way ancient cultures viewed morality with the way God views morality. It may be true that ancient cultures may have been more familiar with relationship than they were with rules. But God could incorporate both. After all, a good father can have a relationship with his child but have rules at the same time. God may speak through relationship in order to teach rules. The mere fact that ancient cultures leaned more toward relationship does not warrant the conclusion that God’s laws cannot be viewed as absolute rules in accordance with one of the models outlined by Geisler.

This issue is further illustrated by a question posed in the authors’ conclusion, “does relationship ever trump *theology*?”<sup>16</sup> Richards and O’Brien seem to suggest the answer to this

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<sup>11</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1989), 79.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 173 (emphasis in original).

question is “yes.” But isn’t that in itself a theological question? Don’t they need to conduct a theological examination of God’s word in order to answer the question they themselves have posed? If the question itself requires the use of theology to answer, then that would seem to dictate what the answer must be.

The questions the authors posed at the end of the chapter also highlighted some of these issues with their argument. For example, they state, “Historically, Christians have opted to keep Old Testament law, except for the ones we didn’t like ... Isn’t it arbitrary to suggest to Christians that one may pick and choose laws based upon cultural preferences?”<sup>17</sup> However, the mere fact that most modern Christians believe only some Old Testament laws apply to them does not in and of itself support the conclusion that those distinctions are made based upon cultural preferences. There could be another basis for their conclusion.

In fact, in Richards and O’Brien’s discussion about God’s promises in chapter 9, they acknowledge that modern readers have a tendency to “ignore the context,”<sup>18</sup> often assuming a passage applies to them specifically when it was never intended to be read in that manner. The same observation they made in regard to God’s promises can also apply to his laws. Context is important. Not all commands of God were intended to apply to all people, in all places, at all times. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson explain that scripture must be interpreted based upon its “historical setting,” “literary context,” and “theological message.”<sup>19</sup> A

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>19</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011), 78-79.

distinction based upon these factors is not one that is arbitrary or based upon cultural preferences.

Thus, as has often been the case during the course of this text, Richards and O'Brien uncover the seed of an important truth to be considered in biblical interpretation, but they sometimes take their conclusions a bit further than the evidence warrants.