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Hays, Richard B.

***The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A
Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics***

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Richard Hays's most recent book is a disappointment. Attempts to make the NT relevant for Christian ethics are needed, but Hays neglects the most important issues of interpretation and epistemology, ignores the most relevant philosophy, theology, and critical theory, and summarily (in one sentence) dismisses the most fundamental theoretical challenges to his position. But the most glaring deficiency of *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* is Hays's lack of self-critical awareness that might alert him to the contradictions plaguing his work.

Hays argues that Christian ethics must be based on the foundation of the NT read through the interpretive "lenses" of "community, cross, and new creation." At the same time, Scripture (the "norming norm"), may be supplemented by appeals to "tradition," "reason," and "experience." After surveying the major NT documents (pp. 16-185), Hays explains his own method in comparison with the work of selected writers (Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; pp. 187-312). The book concludes with Hays's application of his method to five particular issues: violence, divorce, homosexuality, anti-Judaism, and abortion.

The fundamental weakness of Hays's book lies in its uncritical foundationalism. Though admitting that Christians must imaginatively apply the Scripture's "vision" to contemporary problems, Hays treats the NT as an agent who--independent of "culture" or the interpreter--"speaks." The first task of the Christian is merely to "listen." Hays's reification of the NT as an agent is never acknowledged, much less defended-- either theoretically or theologically. Furthermore, although Hays admits that Christians, after "hearing" the text correctly, must enter the vagaries of interpretation in application, he offers his method as a way of controlling those vagaries and constraining human self-interest or cultural misreading of the "real" witness of the NT. Thus, both the NT and the

method are treated as Archimedean fulcra *extra nos* that, at least potentially, control their own application.

Hays's inattention to recent critical debates about modernism and interpretation causes all sorts of self-contradictions. He continually, for example, invokes "Christ-against-Culture" rhetoric (as if the church is not part of "culture"), insisting that the church's values must be "countercultural" and that Christians must reject the presuppositions of the Enlightenment and modern liberalism. Yet he fails to see that his entire project is one of the Enlightenment, completely implicated in its presuppositions. His foundationalism--the attempt to find an epistemologically secure source outside the contingency of human activity or "culture," whether in a text, a method, or "human experience"--is understandable only as an Enlightenment concern. Furthermore, Hays assumes (again with no theoretical or theological defense) that the Bible *must* be interpreted by means of historical criticism. He never acknowledges that this turn to history to secure correct interpretation is a practice of modernism.

Even Hays's application of historical criticism is inconsistent. He rejects the presuppositions of modernist historicism when he argues that the historical Jesus is unimportant for Christian theology or ethics (p. 160), and he sometimes appeals to the "canonical context" to offset "speculative" historical constructions of the original meaning of a text (pp. 324, 328, 307). But elsewhere he appeals to authorial intention or the original community's understanding (historical constructions themselves) to counter someone else's interpretation (e.g., pp. 188, 235, 323). His entire project is organized around the presuppositions of historicism (that the different NT "witnesses" must be treated independently, that allegory is not permitted, that the historical contexts of the various writings exclude all sorts of readings, that "anachronism" is always wrong) even though historicism can hardly be defended by means of his own interpretive theory (that our values must be grounded in the NT itself and its "worldview"). Some awareness of recent criticisms of modernist historicism might have alerted Hays that his arguments would necessarily be seen as self-contradictory by many readers.

The fact that "method" cannot manufacture reliable ethical "norms" is revealed in Hays's application of his own method. He uses the different norms (Scripture, tradition, reason, experience) inconsistently, appropriating whichever is most convenient for the conclusions he desires. Pacifism is defended by appeal to the (supposedly "univocal") witness of the NT in the face of strong counter-witnesses in "tradition," "reason," and the experiences and beliefs of the majority of Christians. (Incidentally, it is difficult to see how pacifist or nonviolent it is to project onto God's agency the destruction one would like to see meted out to one's enemies--cf. Matthew and Revelation. This is but one example of Hays's selective "listening" to the NT.) When it comes to divorce, the unanimous NT teaching prohibiting divorce (*possibly* with one exception) is admitted, but reason and experience enter to allow divorce and remarriage in more cases than the NT allows. In the case of homosexuality, "reason" and "experience" are rejected as

reliable norms by appeal to the NT, and tradition and majority opinion carry the greatest weight in Hays's final condemnation of the practice. In the case of anti-Judaism, Scripture is ambivalent, tradition is unhelpful, reason is unreliable, so experience becomes the deciding factor.

In short, Hays does not seem to recognize that his method is not what engenders his results. In each case a different conclusion would result from a slight tweaking here or there of the different factors in interpretation: a bit more Scripture here, a bit more tradition there; a bit less "reason" here, a bit less "experience" there. An emphasis on "community" might be used to mitigate a harsh appeal to the "cross," or an appeal to "new creation" might elsewhere be used to argue for a radically new social formation--against alternative appeals to the "cross." This malleability--combined with the fact that the NT never does control its own interpretation and thus exegesis is always more variable (legitimately!) than Hays is willing to admit--demonstrates that neither the *text* nor the *method* renders the normative conclusions. *Hays* renders the conclusions. The method is too malleable to serve as *prescriptive* practice.

Sometimes Hays's tendency to self-contradiction verges on the hypocritical. At first, he insists that "the cross should not be used by those who hold power in order to ensure the acquiescent suffering of the powerless" (p. 197). But is this not what Hays himself does when he, as a heterosexual man in a relatively powerful position, invokes the "cross" to insist that teenage girls must reject abortion (pp. 453, 460), that gay people must reject physical intimacy (pp. 402-3), and that peasants must reject armed struggle against a fascist regime (pp. 338-43). In each case, Hays appeals to the cross "to ensure the acquiescent suffering of the powerless."

What Hays presents is not the NT's vision. Whether it is moral or not must be answered by other criteria. Perhaps a generation ago, writers could get away with hiding their own interpretive agency behind the mythological agency of the "text itself" or a "method." But in the current intellectual climate, such a rhetorical stance must be seen as an attempt to mask the interpretive agency of contingent human beings-- surely a morally questionable practice. Thus the publication of Hays's book provokes not only disappointment but sadness as well. For one thing, it will only abet the tendency of many to hide their own oppression of others behind the Bible. But more broadly, it represents a missed opportunity to move the debate about Scripture and Christian ethics beyond Biblicism.