

The Gospel, Narrative, and Culture: A Response to Douglas J. Moo and Judith Gundry-Volf

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First, I would like to express my thanks to the IBR for the invitation to engage in this conversation about my work, and to Douglas Moo and Judy Gundry-Volf for their careful and gracious responses. Not all responses to my book have been either so careful or so kind. Alongside several appreciative reviews, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* has received harsh criticism from some of the moral revisionists whose voices are so insistent in the church today. (See, for example, the polemical and wildly inaccurate review by Dale Martin in *JBL* 117 [1998] 358-60.) By contrast, I feel very much that I am here among friends, among brothers and sisters in Christ, and I expect a fruitful conversation about the matters that my respondents have raised. *Moral Vision* does not pretend to be a definitive statement about the issues it addresses. It is, rather, an attempt to start a conversation and to propose a framework within which moral debate in the church can fruitfully proceed. The critiques offered here by Doug and Judy are precisely the sort of responses that my book seeks to elicit. So, with appreciation for their questions, I turn to the substantive matters at hand.

RESPONSE TO DOUGLAS MOO

It is my understanding that the IBR program committee intended for this session to focus on issues of sexual ethics as treated in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. Douglas Moo, however, has offered a more wide-ranging discussion of various aspects of the book. Thus, my response to Moo's critique will follow the four rubrics of his outline.

(1) *Exegesis*. I appreciate Moo's affirmation of my *exegesis* in *Moral Vision*. The book is first of all an exegetical study of NT texts. Many readers of the book, however, will no doubt be tempted to turn immediately to Part IV, where I discuss selected controversial moral issues (homosexuality, abortion, etc.), without first working through my *readings* of the texts. (Martin's *JBL* review is a glaring example of

this omission: despite his vilification of the book, he never bothers to dispute—or even to acknowledge—any of its exegesis.) This approach defeats the aim of the book. Thus, I am pleased that Moo emphasizes the *exegetical* grounding of my arguments and gratified that he finds it generally solid and persuasive.

(2) *Canon*. The first problem here is the issue of intracanoncial tensions. Moo joins me in acknowledging the existence of such tensions but believes it necessary to work more persistently than I have done to overcome them. He thinks we should "devote more energy to the work of *creating* underlying theological structures that might unify the witness of the NT on some of these challenging issues" (p. 273, emphasis mine). Moo has chosen his language carefully here, noting that we do the creating of such "underlying structures," for they are not explicitly present within the canonical texts. I am wary of this procedure. My concern is that we may sometimes be so eager to protect our doctrines about the authority of the Bible that we superimpose on the Bible explanatory theories that keep us from hearing what the individual NT witnesses are saying. (This sort of mistake is committed wherever, for example, the notes in the Scofield Bible are treated as a canonical Rule of Faith!) I am concerned about our tendency to shift authority subtly from the text of Scripture to secondary explanatory structures. So when I say, "let the tensions stand," it is a way of insisting on the primacy of Scripture; it is a way of insisting that we return again and again to hear the voices of the NT witnesses themselves.

Second, when Moo urges me to pay more attention to the OT, I feel a bit as Paul must have felt when the Jerusalem apostles exhorted him to remember the poor. He could respond only by saying, "Yes—which very thing I was eager to do"! Some of you who know my other work will recognize that the role of the OT in the New is a major concern of mine (see R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989]). The present debate concerns how the OT functions in the formation of Christian norms and character. The issue is focused, for purposes of our discussion here, on the question of violence. Moo observes that the NT overrules or transforms OT teaching on circumcision and dietary laws, but he attributes this to a "change in covenant," while proposing that violence "does not seem to have such a covenantal context." Thus, if I understand him correctly, various OT precedents and paradigms for the use of violence by God's covenant people remain valid for Christians in the present time.

In response to this line of argument, I would offer two responses. First, consider the analogy of divorce. Everyone acknowledges that the Torah permits divorce (Deut 24:1), while Jesus forbids it for his dis-

principles (Mark 10:2-12 and parallels). Does Moo think that divorce is a positive covenantal prescription of the OT, analogous to circumcision and food laws? Surely he would not take such a view. How, then, does he account for the fact that Jesus' teaching calls his disciples to renounce a prerogative given to husbands in the OT? One cannot argue that it is only matters of ritual law that are overruled and transformed by the NT. I would contend that violence, like divorce, belongs to a category of options no longer open to those who are Jesus' disciples. The shape of obedience undergoes a transformation in the NT.

The deeper reason for this transformation, however—and this is my second response to Moo's critique—is christological. The NT's narrative of the death of Jesus does place the renunciation of violence at the very heart of the New Covenant (see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997]). I think that Moo does not sufficiently recognize the extent to which the "change in covenant" signaled by the NT narrative is given its definition by Jesus' own example. Because New Covenant obedience is given its central definition by Jesus' own rejection of the way of violence, the cross (not the sword) becomes the paradigm for our life in God's new covenant community. I argued all this at length in *Moral Vision* (pp. 317–46).

The third issue that Moo raises under the rubric of canon is a challenge to my use of the concept of "trajectories" of NT moral teaching, leaving open, for example, the possibility that the church might discern legitimate grounds for divorce beyond the exceptional cases explicitly mentioned in the NT. Moo wonders whether I am taking the canon seriously enough. I would say that I am taking it very seriously, indeed: the canon models for us the process of moral discernment in new circumstances. I believe that the church, acting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, cannot avoid the responsibility of continuing that process in our own time, informed by the models given us in the NT. This is an urgent methodological question when it comes to the matter of gender roles. Clearly, the roles of men and women in late-twentieth-century Western culture have changed far beyond the NT's vision of possibility. In such a situation, do we merely quote the discernments of the NT writers and try to reprimatinate their social world, or do we take these discernments as metaphorical models for our own task of discernment? My book clearly opts for the latter, admittedly risky, course.

(3) *Narrative*. Moo defends the hermeneutical dictum that didactic passages must be used to interpret narrative passages, and he rightly recognizes that this strategy stands in opposition to my emphasis on moral discernment as metaphor-making that looks particularly to narrative paradigms for guidance. This is indeed a crucial methodological difference between us. My approach seeks to open up

ever-new imaginative reenactments of the NT paradigms, while Moo wants to limit such enactments by appeal to didactic texts that place constraints on imaginative freedom. I join Doug in recognizing that the difference between us here is one of emphasis, but, as the ensuing discussion will show, the different emphases have enormous consequences for moral reasoning in the church.

Returning to the issue of violence, Moo contends that the death of Jesus is not a determinative example that requires us to renounce violence, because Jesus had a unique mission to suffer redemptively; thus, at this point, we are not called to imitate him. But I find the argument here puzzling. Is Moo saying that Jesus' suffering and death are not paradigmatic for us? In that case, I would call to witness numerous (didactic!) passages in the NT that suggest otherwise, starting with Mark 8:34-35; 10:42-45; 2 Cor 4:7-12; and 1 Pet 2:18-25. Or, on the other hand, is Moo saying that one cannot derive a general prohibition of violence from Jesus' example because it is "historical"—that is, because it narrates a specific event in the past rather than a timeless archetype? I must confess that I am not completely confident that I understand Moo's objection. I would say that it is precisely because the Gospel narratives are historical—because they tell the story of a real flesh-and-blood-human life—that they present us with a practical and normative pattern for life within the real world of historical contingency. This is a point that demands further discussion and clarification.

To bring the discussion back to issues regarding the ethics of sex and gender roles—the topic that the IBR program committee has asked us to discuss here—it seems to me that Moo's method of allowing the didactic passages hermeneutical control would have the result of making isolated rule-statements such as 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-15 determinative for the roles of women in the church. Have I understood this correctly? My approach, on the other hand, would take Phoebe, Prisca, the Samaritan woman, and numerous other female characters in the NT as *paradigms* who open up a trajectory that leads beyond the patriarchal rule-statements and suggests broader possibilities for women in the ministry of the church. This example demonstrates clearly what is at stake in the methodological difference that Moo has identified. I hope that we can explore this issue in our discussion.

(4) *Community*. Finally, Moo protests that by emphasizing community so strongly, I pay too little attention to the salvation and transformation of the individual believer, which he says happens in a "personal and ultimately quite private act of faith." Further, Moo suggests that my focus on community rather than the individual may reflect "postmodern" influences. I find this very puzzling indeed. In

fact, I would argue that the emphasis on community is emphatically premodern. It is modernity that has bequeathed us an obsession with the individual—particularly with the experience of the individual. Indeed, this is one of the ways that American evangelical Christianity often falls unwittingly into the trap of modernist epistemology. One might contrast this with the way that Paul envisions the transformation of believers:

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies (somata, plural) as a living sacrifice (*thysian*, singular), holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

Paul envisions the members of the community offering their bodies as a single corporate sacrifice and undergoing thereby a transformation that enables them not only to discern God's will but also to live as "one body in Christ" (see Rom 12:3-8).

I have just finished writing a commentary on 1 Corinthians. One way to sum up the overall pastoral message of that letter is as follows: the Corinthians think they can attain spiritual perfection as autonomous individuals; Paul urges them again and again to see themselves as a body of believers bound together in a unified calling and destiny—and he summons them to act accordingly.

If we ask what it means to live in obedience to the text, the NT insists repeatedly that our vocation is to enact in community the obedience of faith. As Nicholas Lash has suggested, this kind of "performance" of scripture is no more possible for the isolated individual than the performance of a Beethoven quartet or a Shakespeare tragedy (*Theology on the Way to Emmaus* [London: SCM, 1986] 43). We need each other. Only corporately can we fulfill our commission to be the people of God, a sign of hope in a broken world.

RESPONSE TO JUDITH GUNDRY-VOLF

First, I am pleased that Judy Gundry-Volf chooses to take up the question of gender roles in Paul. I suggest in *Moral Vision* that "the unity of men and women in Christ" is one the major problems that NT ethics must address in our time (p. 313; see also p. 316 n. 1), though I do not develop a normative argument on this matter in Part IV. Judy's response has focused on a brief eleven-page section in Part I of *Moral Vision* (pp. 46-56). Thus, her engagement with my treatment of Paul provides a jumping-off place for going on beyond what I have written.

Second, I am gratified by her highlighting of eschatology as a major issue in interpreting Paul's ethics, and in NT ethics more generally. I would, however, want to clarify one point in her account of my position. Gundry-Volf seems to suggest that I describe Paul as operating with two different eschatologies, an apocalyptic eschatology and a dialectical eschatology. I would prefer to say, instead, that Paul's dialectical eschatology is his hermeneutical reformulation of Jewish apocalyptic thought in light of the cross, so that we should speak not of two different eschatologies but of one complex apocalyptic eschatology.

Third, I note that, in contrast to Moo, Gundry-Volf affirms (if I read her correctly) that Paul's struggle to work out a sexual ethic between the times is exemplary for our own analogous task; in other words, we cannot simply quote the NT's rule-statements and regard the issues as settled. We, like Paul, are faced with the necessity of eschatological discernment--eschatological *phronēsis*—about contested gender roles.

In all these matters, Gundry-Volf and I are in close agreement. (And I am glad to see that she joins Gordon Fee and me in regarding 1 Cor 14:34-35 a post-Pauline interpolation.) In critique of my position, however, she poses the question of how I understand the tension between equality and difference of the sexes to be related to the coming new creation. She argues that for Paul the new creation entails, not the erasure of sexual difference, but its "adiaphorization."

I find this a helpful description of Paul's account of our condition in the time between the times, as we are placed in the present age in the anomalous collision of the "already" with the "not yet": sexual differences are not eliminated but redemptively reinterpreted. Here I agree with Gundry-Volf against Daniel Boyarin's contention (*A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Cultural Identity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994]) that Paul envisions the erasure of all differences in Christ. Furthermore, despite some of her formulations, I do not set equality and difference in eschatological opposition to one another. But I cannot go as far as Judy suggests in affirming that Paul sees continuity between the present age and the new creation, nor can I fully share her reading of Paul as offering a positive assessment of the culture of his time as a vehicle for the gospel. Thus, I want to pose a few questions to clarify the differences between us.

(1) In order to argue that new creation does not sweep away "bodily-inscribed differences," Gundry-Volf appeals to Gal 6:15, which she explicates by cross-reference to 1 Cor 7:18-19. I agree that Paul does not think bodily differences are abolished in Christ in the present time. But I find it odd that she points to 1 Corinthians 7 to describe Paul's normative understanding of the new creation. How can Gundry-

Volf read this text as describing Paul's understanding of new creation? Here, more than anywhere else in his letters, Paul's advice to "stay as you are" is heavily conditioned by the "not yet" of his dialectical eschatology—not by his vision of new creation. Paul's argument against erasing the Jew-Gentile distinction is based precisely on his imminent eschatological expectation and his conviction that believers should not prematurely try to leap out of their present condition to anticipate the fullness of the new creation. Thus, this text seems to me to be evidence for my reading of Paul's eschatology rather than Gundry-Volf's.

(2) In 1 Cor 11:2-26, Gundry-Volf sees Paul interpreting creation in two ways. The dominant of these two ways is "reading creation in light of new creation," so that "the new creation functions . . . to liberate the creation from bondage to sin and inject it with the power of the Spirit." But what then of Rom 8:18-25, where Paul speaks of how believers groan along with a creation in bondage to decay, a creation that still awaits a redemption that is not yet seen? I do not think that Gundry-Volf's account does justice to this crucial motif in Pauline eschatology, a motif that certainly has ethical implications.

(3) I think Gundry-Volf gives Paul too much credit for assigning a positive theological value to culture and to the necessity of enculturating the gospel. The published version of her response introduces some important qualifications to her position that were not present in the version of her paper that she presented at the IBR meeting in San Francisco; nonetheless, I still have questions about her speculative reasons for Paul's accommodation to the patriarchal norms of his culture. (She thinks the reason is basically one of missional apologetics.) In reading this part of her response, I was reminded of the feeling one sometimes gets in reading Bultmann's account of Pauline theology: this is not what Paul actually says, but perhaps it is what he *should* have said if he had only had our theological and analytical categories available to him! My question for Gundry-Volf is this: what is she really claiming about Paul's positive theological evaluation of culture? Does Paul really, as a matter of principle, think it important to "enculturate" the gospel? A closely related corollary question is how to define the difference between "enculturation" and "accommodation." Gundry-Volf seems to think that there is a crucial difference, but the line between the two looks blurry to me.

In the end, our actual readings of 1 Cor 11:2-16 are similar; both of us see strong internal tensions within the text. I read the tensions as signs of Paul's unresolved struggle between his vision of the coming new creation and the exigencies of the present age. Gundry-Volf reads the tensions as signs of Paul's missionary strategy to imbed the gospel in Mediterranean culture. I do not think that Paul was able to

transcend his own culture critically in the way that her description implies.

The difference between us was brought into sharp focus in San Francisco by Gundry-Volf's attempt to account for the coherence of Paul's thought amidst these unresolved tensions. She wrote that "Paul's affirmation of equality is consistent with his underwriting of gender hierarchy since by means of the latter the former becomes a social reality." This is a puzzling paradox. (I note with interest that, in the revision of her essay for publication, Gundry-Volf has abandoned this formulation.) Indeed, the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Pauline epistles suggests the reverse result: the social reality of gender hierarchy eclipsed equality. Thus, the vision of the new creation was indeed thoroughly compromised. I find it more helpful, therefore, to see Paul as engaged in a struggle to discern how the new creation might be embodied in his community while recognizing that "we who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly while we wait for . . . the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23).

The final paragraph of Gundry-Volf's essay raises a number of interesting issues that would repay further discussion. Her suggestion that Paul's foundational narrative must include creation as well as redemption is well taken, indeed. 1 Cor 11:2-16 gives unmistakable evidence that the creation of man and woman was part of the story that Paul told in his preaching and that this story played a significant role in his moral reasoning. It is a fair enough criticism that *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* tends to underplay the significance of the doctrine of creation for NT ethics generally. Gundry-Volf has put her finger here on a crucial issue for our continuing discussion. As I have already indicated, however, I am less persuaded by her contention that Paul's fundamental story also included "the enculturation of the gospel" (in the sense that she means this—for example, the underwriting of gender hierarchy) as part of the outworking of God's redemptive plan.