STR 7/1 (Summer 2016): 23–42

Rescuing Rahab: The Evangelical Discussion on Conflicting Moral Absolutes

David W. Jones
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Evangelical ethicists have perennially debated the topic of conflicting moral absolutes. Understandably, this is an important discussion, for the prospect of internal conflict within an ethical system could result in either an incoherent system or, even worse, moral paralysis. This article gives an overview of the current evangelical discussion over such moral dilemmas by looking at the three most common perspectives on conflicting moral absolutes that have arisen within evangelicalism. By way of illustration and demonstration of praxis this article makes application of each view to the Rahab narrative of Josh 2:1–24. Although the author's own view becomes clear, the goal of this article is not to try and win this ongoing debate, but rather to help readers with as-yet unformed moral systems arrive at a viable perspective and to facilitate dialog among those with divergent viewpoints.

The prospect of conflicting moral absolutes is a significant issue within the field of Christian ethics.[1] If moral norms can conflict with one another, resulting in what are sometimes called ethical dilemmas, one must have a means for resolving such conflict, for the alternative is an incoherent ethical system or even moral paralysis.[2] As evangelical ethicists have considered this

[1] Commenting on the importance of this issue for Christian ethics, Thielicke writes, "We have observed that he who thinks through [the coherency of the law] is . . . forced to betray almost all of his dogmatic and ethical secrets: his doctrine of justification, his concepts of the world, of history, and of the Law, and his views on the nature of sin and on natural law." Helmut Thielicke, "The Borderline Situation of Extreme Conflict," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 1, ed. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 128, n. 3. Note that the terms "moral absolute," "moral law," and "moral norm" are used synonymously in this article and by those cited in this article.

[2] Luck observes, "plural (absolute) rules + their conflict in application = an incoherent (and therefore unacceptable) system." William F. Luck, "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics," *Grace Theological Journal* 8 (Spring 1987): 20. Similarly, the Feinbergs identify this as an important topic, for the prospect of incoherency within the moral law raises "crucial concerns for people confronted with concrete decisions." John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 29. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* notes, "If several rules are defended as absolute, it is necessary to work out the boundaries of those

subject over time, a number of possible options have emerged,[3] the three most common of which in the field literature are (1) conflicting absolutism, (2) graded absolutism, and (3) non-conflicting absolutism.[4] This article will present and analyze these three main evangelical perspectives on conflicting moral absolutes and show how each viewpoint, in its own proponents' estimation, deals with a classic biblical example of moral conflict: the Rahab narrative of Josh 2:1–24.

For each perspective presented within this article the specific view will be explained, proponents and their nuanced arguments will be analyzed, and counter-arguments will be explored. By synthesizing, evaluating, and critiquing the major evangelical positions on conflicting moral absolutes, and by making application to the Rahab narrative, this article aims to accomplish two goals. First, for readers who have not yet adopted a particular approach to handling ethical dilemmas, this discussion purposes to clarify the major evangelical options and, in so doing, to aid in systematic moral formation. Second, this article aims to equip all readers better to participate in discussions about conflicting moral absolutes by exposing them to (or reminding them of) the strengths and weaknesses of the orthodox positions that have arisen with evangelicalism.

Conflicting Moral Absolutes

As we begin this review and analysis of approaches to conflicting moral absolutes, two caveats are in order. First, while the issue of the coherency of the moral law is an important and oft-discussed topic in moral literature, in practice ethical dilemmas (in the sense of conflicting moral absolutes) are exceptional, not normative.[5] This topic, then, is addressed not because of its

---

rules in order to avoid conflict." *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (1986), s.v. "Norms."

[3] The phrase "possible options" is used in light of Cambridge ethicist A. C. Ewing's warning, "No philosopher has succeeded in producing adequate general rules for dealing with conflicts of duties, possibly because this is intrinsically impossible." *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (1986), s.v. "Conflict of Duties." Further, it is recognized that some readers may believe one or more of the common evangelical approaches to moral conflict is inherently unbiblical. Indeed, as will be documented, this is the belief of some of ethicists cited in this article. Obviously, for those with such a view, not all of the perspectives in this article would be "possible," yet the presentation here is in light of the larger evangelical milieu.

[4] There are, of course, many non-evangelical perspectives that have been suggested by ethicists (e.g., situational ethics, among others), as well as many hybrid evangelical options. Yet, it seems that even the blended perspectives that have been suggested seem to take one of the three main positons covered in this article as their starting point. Thus, many of the strengths and weaknesses mentioned herein may apply.

[5] Jones observes, "Now there is something to be said for keeping borderline cases in perspective. Ethics courses structured around hard cases easily give the impression

frequency of occurrence, but because of its importance for the discipline of Christian ethics. Second, the possibility of moral laws colliding, resulting in an incoherent system of ethics, assumes the belief in more than one moral norm. Ethical systems that do not affirm the existence of multiple moral laws do not resolve the question of conflicting moral absolutes; rather, they are precluded from it. For this reason, as well as the lack of evangelicals who would self-identify with such ethical systems, the scope of the following discussion is limited to the three most common perspectives, which are conflicting, graded, and non-conflicting absolutism.[6]

Conflicting Absolutism

A popular Christian approach to navigating moral dilemmas is conflicting absolutism, alternatively known as ideal absolutism, tragic morality, or a lesser-evil view of moral conflict. This position holds that there are many universal moral absolutes. As its name implies, this approach teaches that moral norms can and do come into real conflict both in theory and in practice. When such a clash of norms occurs, conflicting absolutism teaches that man must choose sinfully to break one of the moral norms in tension—hopefully opting for the lesser of two evils—and then repent and seek forgiveness. John Warwick Montgomery, a leading contemporary proponent of conflicting absolutism explains:

> The Christian morality fully realizes the difficulty of moral decision [making], and frequently a Christian finds himself in a position where it is necessary to make a decision where moral principles must be violated in favor of other moral principles, but he never vindicates himself in this situation. He decides in terms of the lesser of evils . . . and

---

that the moral life is just one big quandary, that there are no easy answers to any of its questions." David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 126. Seasoned ethicist Robertson McQuilkin makes the telling observation, "I personally have never experienced a moral dilemma that was not resolved by biblical definition and choosing to trust God with the consequences." Robertson McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1995), 148. For a contrary perspective, see John Warwick Montgomery who writes, "Christian morality fully realizes the difficulty of moral decisions, and frequently a Christian finds himself in a position where it is necessary to make a decision where moral principles must be violated in favor of other moral principles." John Warwick Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1970), 69. Similarly, R. A. Hig writes, "Conflicts of moral duty do occur . . . . Human beings are then obligated to rank one duty higher than the other, to disobey one rule in order to obey another." *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (1995), s.v. "Absolutes."

[6] This is in contrast to Geisler who believes moral systems that deny a multiplicity of moral norms ought to be addressed in a discussion of conflicting moral absolutes. He notes, "Since they challenge Christian ethics, they must be addressed." Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 29.

> this drives him to the Cross to ask forgiveness for the human situation in which this kind of complication and ambiguity exists.[7]

In addition to Montgomery, other well-known advocates of conflicting absolutism include Helmut Thielicke, J. I. Packer, and Erwin Lutzer.[8] Interestingly, in the Protestant tradition this approach is most often (although not solely) seen among those who have adopted or been influenced by Lutheran theology. It has been suggested that this phenomena is due in part to Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms.[9] Lutheran scholar Bernhard Lohse explains this teaching: "The intent behind the differentiation between the two kingdoms or two governments, both of which exist side by side in Luther, is to distinguish human existence 'before God' (*coram Deo*) and 'before the world' (*coram mundo*). . . . They are especially to serve the purpose that the spiritual remain spiritual and the temporal temporal."[10] So, whether it was Luther's intent or not, the dualistic nature of this doctrine has produced, or at least allowed for, paradoxes in certain areas of Lutheran moral theology,[11]

---

[7] Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology*, 69.

[8] J. I. Packer, "Situations and Principles," in *Law, Morality, and the Bible*, ed. Bruce Kaye and Gordon Wenham (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1978), 164–65; Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Morality Gap* (Chicago: Moody, 1972); John W. Montgomery and Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: True or False* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1972), 46; Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Foundations*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 578–631. Note that some ethicists have traced the origins of conflicting absolutism back to the tragedies of ancient Greek drama. Cf. Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 98; Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 132.

[9] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 98. Note that the term "two kingdoms doctrine" does not actually appear in Luther, but was evidently coined by Karl Barth to describe this aspect in Luther's thought. Cf. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1999), 154.

[10] Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 315. Observe Luther's own words about the two kingdoms in his 1525 *Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants*, "There are two kingdoms, one the kingdom of God, the other the kingdom of the world. . . . God's kingdom is a kingdom of grace and mercy . . . but the kingdom of the world is a kingdom of wrath and severity. . . . Now he who would confuse these two kingdoms—as our false fanatics do—would put wrath into God's kingdom and mercy into the world's kingdom; and that is the same as putting the devil in heaven and God in hell." LW 4.265–66.

[11] In his classic work *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr writes of the tension such theology produces, stating, "Man is seen as subject to two moralities, and as a citizen of two worlds that are not only discontinuous with each other but largely opposed. In the polarity and tension of Christ and culture life must be lived precariously and sinfully . . . . [Luther] seems to have a double attitude toward reason and philosophy, toward business and trade, toward religious organizations and rites, as well as toward state and politics. . . . Luther divided life into compartments, or taught that the Christian right hand should not know what a man's worldly left hand was doing." H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 43, 171.

one of which is conflicting absolutism. An example from Luther's own thought where this tension can be detected comes from a letter to his colleague Philip Melanchton. Here Luther wrote:

> If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true, not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly. For he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness but, as Peter says (2 Pet 3:13), we look for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. . . . Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner.[12]

Advocates of conflicting absolutism support this view by appealing to Scripture passages that address the fallen condition of the world as well as the inevitability of personal sin (cf. Ps 51:5; Rom 3:23). As Geisler notes, the fact that the world is fallen and that moral conflicts will occur is "a central assumption of [conflicting absolutism]."[13] This is one of the strengths and attractions of conflicting absolutism—that is, an emphasis upon the fallen estate of man, the holiness of God, the unbending nature of moral absolutes, and man's need to repent when he transgresses the law.[14] Yet, proponents of this approach are careful to note that unavoidable sinful choices have their root in the corruption of man, not in the design of God. Another benefit of conflicting absolutism is its simplicity when faced with complex moral situations. Indeed, conflicting absolutism can ease the process of dealing with difficult ethical scenarios by teaching that sometimes there is no sin-free option, for sin is inevitable in a fallen world.[15] In such cases man is to freely sin, repent, and then seek forgiveness.

Additional support for conflicting absolutism comes from examples in Scripture that advocates of this view claim demonstrate real conflict between moral norms. Without commenting as to the quality of these examples, key passages cited in the moral literature in support of conflicting absolutism include: Abraham and Sarah's lie before Pharaoh and Abimelech (cf. Gen 12:10–20; 20:2–18), the Hebrew midwives' lie to Pharaoh concerning the birth of male babies (cf. Exod 1:15–20), Rahab's lie about the location of the spies (cf. Josh 2:1–14), Samson's divinely approved suicide (Judg 16:30), Michal's lie about David's whereabouts (cf. 1 Sam 19:14), David's lie about

---

[12] LW 48.281–82.

[13] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 97; cf. Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 132.

[14] Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 233; Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 132.

[15] Frame writes, "We should try to understand, however, why the theory of tragic moral choice is so plausible to many. The main reason, I think, is that many moral decisions are very difficult to make. Sometimes it is hard to find the way of escape, and people are tempted to think that such a way does not exist." Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 233.

his mission (cf. 1 Sam 21:2), Samuel's lie about his intentions (cf. 1 Sam 16:1–5), Daniel and his companions' defiance of the governing authorities (Dan 3:8–30), and the apostles' disobedience of the religious rulers (Acts 4:13–22).

Despite the appeal of conflicting absolutism, this approach to resolving moral dilemmas is not without its problems. In fact, Frame asserts that this view is "morally confused," even claiming it is "[not] compatible with Scripture,"[16] and Geisler calls it "morally absurd."[17] A major challenge for conflicting absolutism is the Christological implications that stem from the position. To elaborate, this approach seems to make Jesus' incarnation either less authentic or artificially engineered, for Christ never sinned. Scripture is clear that Jesus was fully God and fully man, yet was without sin (cf. Heb 2:14–18; 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 John 3:5). However, since conflicting absolutism teaches that in certain scenarios man must sin, it seems that during his incarnation Jesus must have been supernaturally preserved from situations in which he would have to sin. Yet, if this is true, in what sense can it be said that Christ "has been tested in every way as we are" (Heb 4:15)?[18] It seems conflicting absolutism must hold that Jesus' humanity in his incarnation was fundamentally different than that of other men in that he never experienced real moral conflict. If so, Jones writes that conflicting absolutism "renders the example of Jesus meaningless . . . [in that he] was not tested in all points like us."[19]

A second problem with conflicting absolutism is its view of the nature of law. Given that there is no conflict within the Godhead (cf. John 17:22), if the law reflects the moral character of God it is difficult to understand how the law could conflict with itself. While proponents of conflicting absolutism may appeal to the fallen estate of the created order in support of their view, the fall of man did not ontologically affect God or his law. Only man and the creation were cursed. Moreover, it is also worth noting that God formally gave his law to mankind *after* the fall. Therefore, in light of divine injunctions to keep the law (cf. John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 5:2–3), it seems reasonable to expect that redeemed man could in fact do so. While no one will perfectly keep the law, to deny this possibility may have the effect of minimizing personal holiness and creating what could be viewed as a moral duty to sin on some occasions. However, it would seem to make God unjust if he allows

---

[16] Ibid., 231.

[17] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 103.

[18] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

[19] Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 132. Lutzer's response to this critique, which Geisler labels "the antecedent sin defense," is common among advocates of conflicting absolutism. Lutzer claims that the event of having to choose between conflicting moral absolutes is always the result of previous sinful choices. Since Jesus never sinned, he never faced a moral dilemma. Yet, the teaching that all moral conflicts are the result of others' sins seems suspect. Cf. Lutzer, *The Morality Gap*, 112; Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 107–8.

mankind to exist in an environment in which he has to sin, and yet still hold man accountable for such necessary transgressions of the law.[20]

A third challenge for conflicting absolutism is that the Bible expressly forbids doing evil that good may result (cf. Rom 3:8; 6:1, 15) and clearly teaches, "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humanity. God is faithful and He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation He will also provide a way of escape, so that you are able to bear it" (1 Cor 10:13; cf. 2 Pet 2:9). Furthermore, it is interesting to note the Bible nowhere explicitly addresses the issue of conflicting moral absolutes—a surprising omission given that moral dilemmas, if possible, would likely be some of the greatest trials a Christian could face. Indeed, the burden of Scripture is on doing what is right—that is, simply keeping moral norms—not upon committing a lesser evil in the name of avoiding a greater sin. Perhaps, then, conflicting absolutism is open to the charge of being overly simplistic in that when faced with moral dilemmas, it fails to look for a way of escape.

Graded Absolutism

A view of resolving moral conflicts that gained popularity in the late twentieth century is known as graded absolutism. This approach has also been called ethical hierarchicalism, contextual absolutism, and qualified absolutism. In short, graded absolutism teaches there are many universal moral norms that can and do conflict. In this sense, graded absolutism is similar to conflicting absolutism. Yet, graded absolutism differs from other approaches to moral dilemmas, including conflicting absolutism, in its claim that all ethical norms can be arranged in a hierarchy of merit. According to graded absolutism, when moral conflict occurs, resolution can be achieved by breaking a lower moral norm in order to keep a higher moral norm. Yet, the defining characteristic of graded absolutism is its teaching that when a lower moral norm is broken in order to resolve a moral conflict, no sin has been committed. Graded absolutism differs from conflicting absolutism, then, in that it does not focus upon sinfully committing a lesser evil, but upon righteously keeping the greater good. Norman Geisler, the modern architect of graded absolutism, summarizes this approach to moral dilemmas:

> The essential principles of graded absolutism are: There are many moral principles rooted in the absolute moral character of God; there are higher and lower moral duties—for example, love for God is a greater duty than love for people; These moral laws sometimes come into unavoidable moral conflict; In such conflicts we are obligated to

[20] Jones writes, "The idea of being compelled by (providentially governed) circumstances to choose the lesser of two moral evils, that is, the lesser of two sins, is highly problematic on Christian assumptions. It impugns the integrity of the Lawgiver by supposing he has issued conflicting commands, yet holds us responsible for obeying both of them." Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 132.

> follow the higher moral law; When we follow the higher moral law we are not held responsible for not keeping the lower one.[21]

As was just noted, the key proponent, if not the originator, of this approach to resolving moral conflicts is Norman Geisler. Certainly shades of graded absolutism can be detected in earlier thinkers such as W. D. Ross;[22] yet, Geisler is the one who crafted and popularized the approach as it is known in modern evangelical ethics. Indeed, while other contemporary ethicists have adopted graded absolutism—including John Jefferson Davis, John Feinberg, and Paul Feinberg, among others—nearly all trace their views, however nuanced, back to Geisler.[23] Interestingly, Geisler shuns credit as the innovator of this view, claiming that it is rooted in the Reformed tradition.[24] Yet, his examples of Augustine and Charles Hodge as past advocates of graded absolutism are not convincing and tenuous at best, a fact Geisler himself seems to concede.[25]

---

[21] Norman L. Geisler, *Options in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 132. Geisler gives a similar definition in an earlier work: "Ethical hierarchicalism is so named because it maintains a hierarchical arrangement or ordering of ethical norms based on the relative scale of value they represent. It implies a pyramid of normative values which in and of themselves are objectively binding upon men. But when any two or more of these values happen to conflict, a person is exempted from his otherwise binding obligation to a lower norm in view of the pre-emptory obligation of the higher norm." Norman L. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 114.

[22] Cf. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930); W. D. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939).

[23] John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 20–22; Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 30–32. Another name associated with graded absolutism is Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 154–60.

[24] Geisler, *Ethics*, 113.

[25] Geisler admits that Augustine held "the unqualified absolutist position on the issue of lying" and that his views were only "similar to those of graded absolutism." Moreover, Geisler notes that Hodge's view was "a form of graded absolutism" and that it only has the "essential elements" of the approach. Geisler, *Ethics*, 113–14, 116. Presumably following Geisler, both Davis and the *New Dictionary of Pastoral Theology and Christian Ethics* cite Hodge as a proponent of graded absolutism. Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 21; *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (1995), s.v. "Norms." A reading of Hodge's exposition of the ninth commandment, which is the portion of his *Systematic Theology* cited by Geisler, shows that while Hodge's language is undefined in places, he was clearly a non-conflicting absolutist. For example, Hodge writes, "The question now under consideration is not whether it is ever right to do wrong, which is a solecism; nor is the question whether it is ever right to lie; but rather what constitutes a lie." Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1873), 442.

General support for graded absolutism comes from the apparent unavoidability of moral conflicts, both in Scripture and in real life, coupled with the divine expectation of holiness (cf. Matt 5:48). Geisler remarks, "It is both unrealistic and unbiblical to assume that moral obligations never conflict. Real life reveals this kind of conflict daily in hospitals, courtrooms, and battlefields. . . . It is naïve to assume that these kinds of situations never happen."[26] Scriptural examples of moral conflict cited by advocates of this approach are identical to those mentioned earlier in support of conflicting absolutism, including the Hebrew midwives, the Rahab narrative, and the like. Therefore, in view of the divine imperatives to keep God's laws, as well as the aforementioned shortfalls of conflicting absolutism, graded absolutists reason that there must be a way to navigate real moral conflict without creating a necessity to sin in order to avoid moral paralysis and incoherency of the law.

As its name implies, the aspect of graded absolutism upon which the entire system depends is the idea of a hierarchy or a gradation of moral norms. Proponents of graded absolutism generally admit there is not an explicit hierarchy of moral absolutes disclosed in Scripture; yet, they claim such a hierarchy, or what Geisler calls a "pyramid of values,"[27] can be readily discerned and constructed through various allusions in the Bible. Examples of such veiled references include: Jesus' reference to the "least of these commandments" (Matt 5:19); Jesus' citation of "the greatest and most important commandment" (Matt 22:38); Jesus' reference to "the more important matters of the law" (Matt 23:23); Jesus' reference to he who has committed "the greater sin" (John 13:18); and Paul's claim that "the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13). Advocates of graded absolutism also cite the idea of degrees of punishment in hell (cf. Luke 10:12–14) and rewards in heaven (cf. 1 Cor 3:12–15) as evidence of there being a hierarchy of moral norms; for, they reason, there must be a hierarchy of norms in order to produce a gradation of punishments and rewards.[28]

That graded absolutism is attractive to some modern evangelical ethicists is not surprising, for this approach appears to offer a way to resolve real moral conflict without requiring personal sin. Yet, graded absolutism is not without its limitations. For example, many have found the idea of a graded hierarchy of moral norms to be problematic, if not entirely unbiblical. While the aforementioned proof-texts for a hierarchy of absolutes may indicate that all moral norms are not to be weighed equally in application, these passages do not provide a working hierarchy of moral absolutes.[29] In view of this lack

---

[26] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 94.

[27] Ibid., 124.

[28] Ibid., 116.

[29] In his first ethics textbook, Geisler suggested the following hierarchical calculus: persons are more valuable than things; an infinite person is more valuable than finite person(s); a complete person is more valuable than an incomplete person; an

of an explicit hierarchy of moral norms, Jones comments, "As a method, Geisler's hierarchicalism is too open-ended. Such a theory requires that one know which value is intrinsically higher in the conflict situation."[30] Similarly, John and Paul Feinberg, who themselves are advocates of graded absolutism, admit that they are not "certain that if one did construct a hierarchy, it would be applicable to every situation, regardless of the factors involved in each case."[31] It seems, though, without a working hierarchy of moral norms, graded absolutism ceases to be a viable system of resolving moral conflict.

A second related challenge for graded absolutism is that even if a fixed hierarchy of ethical absolutes could be established from Scripture, proponents of this approach would still need to demonstrate that conflict between higher and lower moral norms actually occurs. It is worth noting again that the examples of moral conflict cited by advocates of both conflicting and graded absolutism are not described in Scripture as explicitly involving moral conflict. Indeed, the Bible does not contain any univocal examples of conflict between moral norms, nor is there any teaching in Scripture on how to resolve hypothetical or interpreted moral conflict. Furthermore, even if advocates of graded absolutism could establish a hierarchy of moral norms from Scripture and show that real conflict between higher and lower moral norms can occur, they would still need to demonstrate that the Lord sanctions breaking lower moral norms as a means of resolving such conflict.

A third limitation of graded absolutism is that in teaching that it is not sinful to break a lower moral norm, albeit at the expense of keeping a higher moral norm, this approach appears to trivialize the concept of moral absolutes. Indeed, in explaining this concept, it seems that at times advocates of graded absolutism are playing a word game or using, as Luck notes, "linguistic mirrors."[32] For example, Geisler writes, "Not all absolutes are absolutely absolute. Some are only relatively absolute, that is, absolute relative to their particular area. . . . Lower norms are not universal in the broadest sense of the word. . . . That is, lower ethical norms cannot be universally universal but only locally universal. They are valid on their particular relationship but not

---

actual person is of more value than a potential person; potential persons are more valuable than actual things; many persons are more valuable than few persons; personal acts which promote personhood are better than those which do not. Geisler, *Ethics*, 115–21. For reasons that are unclear, Geisler seems to have abandoned this calculus, as he suggests a different one in his later ethics textbook. Geisler's more recent hierarchical calculus is: love for God over love for man; obey God over government; and mercy over veracity. Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 121–22.

[30] Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 136.

[31] Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 32.

[32] Luck continues, "There simply is no such thing as a nonbinding, yet applicable moral rule. Obligation is part of the denotative meaning of a rule or law. A rule is a statement of obligation. Remove the obligation and you are left with a string of words or at most a descriptive sentence, but not a moral rule." Luck, "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics," 22.

on all relationships."[33] In another place, Geisler attempts to clarify this concept, writing, "There are no exceptions to absolute moral laws, only exemptions from obeying them."[34] Needless to say, to claim that moral norms are not absolutely absolute, nor universally universal, and that there are exemptions to obeying moral laws, but no exceptions to keeping them, Geisler leaves himself open both to misunderstanding and to criticism.

One final limitation of graded absolutism is that this approach seems to have problems dealing with verses in Scripture that specify breaking one point of the moral law makes one guilty of violating the entire law. For example, Paul taught, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue doing everything written in the book of the law" (Gal 3:10; cf. Deut 27:26; Rom 3:19) and James wrote, "For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all" (Jas 2:10). Rather than teaching that it is permissible to violate one part of the law in view of a greater good, these passages seem to indicate that there is an organic unity of the entire moral law that cannot be violated. A related challenge for graded absolutism is the so-called vice lists in Scripture that seem to present all laws as being equal (cf. Matt 15:19; Gal 5:19–21; 1 Pet 4:3–4). Indeed, it appears there are many more passages in Scripture that present the law as being equal than there are veiled allusions to a hierarchy of moral norms. So, while this approach is creative in its desire to affirm the reality of conflicting moral absolutes, as well as man's duty to avoid sin, as with each of the evangelical approaches to resolving moral dilemmas, graded absolutism is not without it challenges.

Non-Conflicting Absolutism

A third Christian approach to dealing with moral conflict is known as non-conflicting absolutism. This view, which Jones observes is "the classic Christian approach,"[35] has also been called unqualified absolutism, case analysis, and casuistical divinity. As with both conflicting and graded absolutism, non-conflicting absolutism holds that there are many universal and absolute moral norms. However, as its name implies, non-conflicting absolutism differs from other approaches in its teaching that conflict between moral norms cannot and does not occur. In other words, non-conflicting absolutism holds

---

[33] Geisler, *Ethics*, 132. Rakestraw observes that these statements betray the anthropocentric nature of graded absolutism. He writes that graded absolutism "fatally weakens the binding character of God's ethical norms and, in practice, shifts the locus of authority from the divine lawgiver to the moral agent." Robert V. Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-conflicting Absolutism," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 1, ed. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 123.

[34] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 129.

[35] Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 140. Curiously, Geisler claims that non-conflicting absolutism is rooted in the Anabaptist tradition; yet, there does not appear to be any historical evidence or proponents to support this, nor does Geisler offer any proof. Cf. Geisler, *Ethics*, 113.

that there will never be a case where moral norms collide, resulting in the need to break one moral norm in order to keep another, or vice-versa. Rakestraw summarizes this approach well, writing, "Divinely-given moral absolutes never truly conflict, although there are occasions when they appear to conflict. Non-conflicting absolutism holds that there will never be a situation in which obedience to one absolute will entail disobedience to or the setting-aside of another absolute."[36]

In the preceding citation Rakestraw makes the important observation that sometimes moral norms will appear to collide. Yet, non-conflicting absolutists hold that such conflict is only apparent—the result of either misperception of circumstances, misunderstanding of moral norms, or both; however, according to this approach, true conflict between moral norms does not occur. Advocates of non-conflicting absolutism teach that in order to avoid confusion, as well as the appearance of conflict, in ethical analysis it is important to focus on how moral norms are defined within the biblical record. O'Donovan writes, "If we are to obey any rule, we must understand the scope and meaning of its terms; and that applies no less to God-given rules such as those in the Decalogue."[37] Similarly, Jones comments:

> Analysis of how the commandments apply in typical cases begins with careful consideration of the commandments themselves. Absolutes in the sense of objective, universal, exceptionless moral norms can only be formulated by attending carefully to the whole teaching of Scripture in a given area. Many of the dilemmas posed in the evangelical literature on moral conflicts are readily resolvable on this basic principle.[38]

---

[36] Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices," 119.

[37] Oliver O'Donovan, "Christian Moral Reasoning," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David J. Atkinson and David H. Field (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 125. O'Donovan further explains, "When we deliberate about our moral rules, we aim to make them less general and more specific, i.e., to give them the clarity and precision that they need in relation to distinct kinds of circumstances." Ibid.

[38] Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 140. Similarly, McQuilkin notes, "The Bible itself, giving the command, must be allowed to define the limits of that command. . . . When we define the ethical choice in biblical terms . . . most dilemmas are solved." McQuilkin, *Biblical Ethics*, 148. Likewise, Frame observes, "Some alleged examples of tragic moral choice are really questions of priority within the divine law. . . . Others have to do with questions of interpretation." Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 233. Rakestraw, too, notes, "Non-conflicting absolutists pay close attention to the definition and scriptural basis of each moral absolute. . . . [So-called exceptions] are always within the absolute itself! They are part of the absolute and are therefore not exceptions to the absolute." Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices," 119–20.

This call for careful consideration and defining of moral norms is not a plea for what Kierkegaard called a "teleological suspension of the ethical,"[39] nor is it an attempt to recognize what Ross called "*prima facie* duties,"[40] nor is it to engage in what Geisler critically labeled "stipulative redefinition."[41] Rather, it is a call for critical, biblical analysis of moral dilemmas and the norms contained therein. To illustrate, if a father were to ask his son to steal a pack of cigarettes from a local convenient store, there is the veneer of moral conflict between the duty to obey parents and the law that prohibits stealing. Yet, upon further reflection, there is no real moral conflict here for, as Paul notes, the fifth commandment does not entail blind obedience; rather, it requires obedience "in the Lord" (Eph 6:1). Similarly, if a soldier was ordered by his commanding officer to kill an enemy in a time of war, there would be no actual moral conflict between the duty to submit to authority and the commandment that prohibits killing. This is because the sixth commandment does not prohibit killing *per se*; rather, it forbids murder—that is, the intentional, lawless, and malicious taking of human life. As such, there is a difference between cold-blooded murder and killing in a time of war.

As was observed previously, non-conflicting absolutism is the classic Christian position on dealing with moral dilemmas—that is, it is the view held by the majority of ethicists in the evangelical tradition. Yet, as Rakestraw rightly observes, "It is very difficult to find a clear, systematic, evangelical presentation of non-conflicting absolutism by an advocate of the position. Non-conflicting absolutism is most often assumed rather than argued."[42] This being true, cogent presentations and examples of non-conflicting absolutism can be found in classic Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Charles Hodge (*contra* Geisler), and in modern ethicists including John Frame, David Clyde Jones, William. F. Luck, Robertson McQuilkin, John Murray, and Robert Rakestraw, among others.[43]

One of the most common arguments offered by advocates of non-conflicting absolutism is that there are no univocal examples of moral conflict in

---

[39] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Class House, 2009), 47–60.

[40] W. D. Ross coined the phrase "prima facie duty" in reference to an act that must be done because it is first mentioned, promised, or required, even if it is wrong. The term that Ross uses to describe this confusing concept, prima facie duty, has been used by others to describe a duty that appears valid on first view, yet is not required upon consideration. However, this is not Ross's definition of the concept. Cf. Ross, *The Right and the Good*; idem, *Foundations of Ethics*.

[41] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 92.

[42] Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices," 118, n. 1.

[43] Cf. Augustine, *On Lying*; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 437–63; Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 230–34; Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 138–44; Luck, "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics," 19–34; McQuilkin, *Biblical Ethics*, 148–50; John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); Robert V. Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (Spring 1988): 239–67.

Scripture. While proponents of both conflicting and graded absolutism cite alleged examples of moral conflict in the Bible, it is noteworthy that none of these proof-texts are presented as moral conflicts in the narrative of Scripture itself—either in their appearance or in their resolution. Indeed, it seems clear that the focus of the Bible is not upon conflict between moral norms, but upon conflict between believers and moral norms, including the temptation to sin. In the face of such conflict, Christians have promises such as: "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Cor 10:13); and "the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations" (2 Pet 2:9). Additionally, believers have the example and help of Jesus who was "in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15).[44]

Another important argument in favor of non-conflicting absolutism is the nature of moral norms themselves. If moral norms are based upon and reveal the moral character of God, given the fact that there is no conflict within the Godhead (cf. John 17:22), it would seem logically impossible for moral norms to collide—this despite the fact that the world is fallen, for the moral law itself was not affected by the fall. Said differently, if God is absolute and non-contradictory, then his moral norms ought to be absolute and non-contradictory. Rakestraw explains, "The very definition and nature of absolutes argues for non-conflicting absolutism. . . . The character of God argues for non-conflicting absolutism. If God has given numerous moral absolutes, some of which [supposedly] conflict at times, it appears that there is conflict within the mind and moral will of God!"[45]

Of course, not all ethicists embrace non-conflicting absolutism, despite the preceding arguments and evidence, as well as the historicity of the position. Indeed, some have argued that, when taken at face value, real life experience and scriptural examples prove non-conflicting absolutism to be untrue.[46] However, as has been discussed, non-conflicting absolutists respond that such conflict is only apparent, the result of a misperception of circumstances, a misunderstanding of moral norms, or both. In other words, non-conflicting absolutists argue that perceived moral conflict is not the result of

---

[44] Geisler's objection to the biblical teaching that moral conflict is only apparent and that the Lord will provide a way of escape are troublesome. He either misunderstands this tenet of non-conflicting absolutism, or the biblical teaching upon which it is based. Geisler writes, "God does not always intervene and spare all the faithful from moral dilemmas. There is no evidence for this premise of unqualified absolutism either inside or outside the Bible. . . . God may sometimes in his mercy desire to intervene, but there is no reason to believe he must (or will) always do so." Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 93.

[45] Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices," 122–23.

[46] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 94.

a breakdown in either the character of God or his moral law; rather, it is the result of a breakdown in fallen man's perception of moral events.

Another charge that has been leveled again non-conflicting absolutism is that it focuses too much on defining moral norms, to the neglect of the individuals involved in moral events. In so doing, Geisler believes non-conflicting absolutism is tantamount to legalism. He writes, "Another difficulty with unqualified absolutism is that it often tends toward legalism by neglecting the spirit of the law in order to avoid breaking the letter of the law."[47] Yet, it seems Geisler has either misunderstood non-conflicting absolutism or begged the question, for proponents of non-conflicting absolutism would argue their approach does the exact opposite of what Geisler claims. That is, non-conflicting absolutism focuses on defining moral norms and not assuming moral conflict is present in biblical texts where it is not identified, thus avoid a skewed or legalistic approach to morality. In so doing, non-conflicting absolutism attempts to avoid positing the idea of unavoidable sin, as does conflicting absolutism, or tinkering with the concept of absolute, as does graded absolutism.[48]

A Biblical Example: Rahab and the Spies

Perhaps the preceding approaches to dealing with moral conflict can best be understood by way of application to a biblical example. The account of Rahab's concealment of the Hebrew spies is one of the most well-known examples of apparent moral conflict in Scripture. This narrative is cited in almost all Christian treatments of moral dilemmas, regardless of the favored approach of a given volume. For the sake of better understanding conflicting absolutism, graded absolutism, and non-conflicting absolutism, in what follows each view's interpretation of the account of Rahab and the spies will be given without comment or critique. In the conclusion, however, I will disclose my preferred option along with the rationale for my choice.

The details of the Rahab narrative, which is recorded in Josh 2:1–24, are familiar: Rahab, a harlot residing in the city of Jericho, lodges two Hebrew spies who have been sent by Joshua to scout out the city. When word of the foreigners' presence reaches the king of Jericho, Rahab voluntarily hides the men and then willfully deceives the inquiring authorities about the spies' whereabouts. Consequently, when Israel later captures Jericho, Rahab and her family are spared, as the text reports, because "she hid the messengers"

---

[47] Ibid., 95.

[48] Rakestraw writes, "This is not to say that non-conflicting absolutism is unconcerned with results or ends, or that we value some abstract rule or principle above the lives and real concerns of human beings, but that the moral guidelines of the living God, when followed fully and consistently, will produce the greatest good for those following them. Non-conflicting absolutism is concerned with results, but never at the cost of disregarding God's absolutes." Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices," 121.

(Josh 6:17, 25). The apparent moral dilemma in the Rahab narrative is that when the king of Jericho asked Rahab to turn over the spies, she was faced with two logical options: either assist the authorities and facilitate the spies' capture and presumed murder, or assist the spies by lying to and deceiving the authorities. Given these options, it seems as though there was not a way for Rahab not to sin.

Following the account of the fall of Jericho as is reported in the book of Joshua, Rahab is only mentioned three times in Scripture, all in the New Testament. The first citation is in midst of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, through his earthly father Joseph. This text reads, "Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab, Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse" (Matt 1:5). The second New Testament mention of Rahab is at Heb 11:31, where the author of Hebrews teaches, "By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace." The third and last mention of Rahab in the New Testament is James' rhetorical question, "Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?" (Jas 2:25). Clearly, one's interpretation of the Rahab narrative must incorporate later biblical commentary; yet, such revelation has not led to a unified view of the morality of the events reported in the Rahab narrative.

Conflicting Absolutism

Advocates of conflicting absolutism understand the account of Rahab to be describing a legitimate moral conflict between the laws prohibiting murder and lying—that is, the sixth commandment and the ninth commandment. Since most people would presumably view lying to be a lesser evil than murder, followers of this approach understand the text to teach that Rahab acted shrewdly, if not wisely, as she fulfilled her moral duty to protect life by lying about the spies' whereabouts. While the text does not record Rahab's repentance for this sin, conflicting absolutists would understand Rahab to have later repented of her willing yet unavoidable deception. Indeed, conflicting absolutists reason this repentance must have occurred between Rahab's sin in Josh 2:4–7 and the spies' expression of gratitude and promise of deliverance in Josh 2:8–14. J. I. Packer, a conflicting absolutist, writes:

> When one sets out to be truthful, new problems appear. . . . In such exceptional cases [of moral conflict] as we have mentioned, all courses of action have something evil in them, and an outright lie, like that of Rahab (Joshua 2:4–5; note the commendation of her in James 2:25) may actually be the best way, the least evil, and the truest expression of love to all the parties involved. Yet a lie, even when prompted by love, loyalty, and an escapable recognition that if telling it is bad, not telling it would be worse, remains an evil thing. . . . But the lie as such, however necessary it appears, is bad, not good, and the right-minded man knows this. Rightly will he seek fresh cleansing in the blood of

> Christ and settle for living the only way anyone can live with our holy God—by the forgiveness of sins.[49]

Graded Absolutism

As with conflicting absolutism, proponents of graded absolutism view the Rahab narrative as describing and containing real moral conflict. Davis, a graded absolutist, asserts, "After Rahab the harlot received the Israelite spies, she was met with a choice between telling the truth and preserving life."[50] Geisler concurs, noting, "The point here is that the conflict was genuine and both obligations were moral ones."[51] Graded absolutists conclude, then, that Rahab was caught between her duty to keep the fifth and ninth commandments.

So, graded absolutists view the apparent moral conflict in the Rahab narrative to be real; yet, unlike conflicting absolutists their solution is not to commit the lesser evil and then later to repent. Rather, graded absolutists understand the text to teach that in order to assist the spies Rahab innocently deceived the authorities and kept the greater good. According to graded absolutists Rahab's deception was not sinful, for the truth norm ceased to be normative in this scenario, as it was trumped by the ostensibly higher moral norm of protecting life. Davis writes:

> When Rahab the harlot (Josh. 2:1–7), for example, spoke falsehood to protect the Israelite spies, was she choosing the "lesser of two evils," or a course of action acceptable to God? . . . Her course of action was acceptable to God. In the New Testament, Rahab is cited as an example of faith for receiving the spies and sending them out another way (James 2:25). Nowhere in Scripture is Rahab condemned for her action. On this construction Rahab fulfilled the moral absolute that applied. . . . Her actions, rather than being the lesser of two evils, were actually good.[52]

---

[49] J. I. Packer, *Keeping the Ten Commandments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 97, 98–99.

[50] Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 18.

[51] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 118.

[52] Davis, *Evangelical Ethics*, 21–22. Geisler's comments are similar. He writes, "The Bible indicates that there are occasions when intentionally falsifying (lying) is justifiable. 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)." Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 122.

Non-Conflicting Absolutism

Non-conflicting absolutists arrive at the same conclusion as do graded absolutists—that is, Rahab did not sin in her deception—albeit via a different route. Whereas graded absolutists hold that Rahab's breaking of the truth norm was not a sin since it was committed in view of a greater good, non-conflicting absolutists teach that the entire event of Rahab's deception, considered in total, was not a violation of a moral absolute at all.[53] Non-conflicting absolutists assert that there is no moral dilemma in this passage. The only duty incumbent upon Rahab was the duty to protect the innocent human lives over which she had become a steward by agreeing to lodge the Hebrew spies.

Non-conflicting absolutists reach this conclusion in view of their understanding of the moral norms in play—specifically, in this instance, the truth norm. In the same context in which he cites the Rahab narrative, Frame, a non-conflicting absolutist, gives a general definition of the truth norm as he asks, "What, then, is a lie? I would say that a lie is a word or act that intentionally deceives a neighbor in order to hurt him. . . . The sin of false witness is that of distorting the facts in such a way as to harm one's neighbor."[54] In view of this definition of the truth norm, non-conflicting absolutists hold that Rahab did not break the ninth commandment by deceiving the authorities, for she did not speak a non-truth for her own glory or to expressly harm the authorities. Rather, in the text Rahab herself explains her actions, which was to include her deception, in view of her knowledge and fear of the Lord (cf. Josh 2:9, 11), whose covenant name she invokes four times in explaining her actions to the spies.

Moreover, advocates of this approach note that not only is Rahab not condemned for her words and actions in the biblical text of Josh 2:1–24, but she is commended for the entire event at Heb 11:31 and Jas 2:25. Rae writes, "[Rahab] is included in God's 'hall of faith' in Hebrews 11 . . . she is praised for her act of faith in providing a safe refuge for the spies. Clearly, part of providing that refuge was deceiving the authorities who were after the

---

[53] Some non-conflicting absolutists have preferred to weigh each component of Rahab's deception individually (i.e., her motives, her spoken words, her actions, etc.) and attempt to discern the morality of each part. While there may be some differences between ethicists' evaluations of the components of the narrative, a non-conflicting perspective of the entire event considered in total would be that her deception did not entail sin.

[54] Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 830–35. J. I. Packer, a conflicting absolutist, similarly defines lying as "false witness against your neighbor—that is, as we said, prideful lying designed to do him down and exalt yourself at his expense." Packer, *Keeping the Ten Commandments*, 98.

spies."[55] In like manner, Frame notes, "With regard to Rahab . . . what Scripture commends is precisely her concealment, her creating a false impression in the minds of the Jericho officials."[56]

Concluding Thoughts

After reviewing various evangelical approaches to resolving moral dilemmas, it seems that Sider was correct in noting, "There is no easy ethical calculus to solve such conflicts."[57] Each of the views on conflicting moral absolutes covered in this article has strengths and weaknesses, a long line of orthodox supporters, and surely deserves a place at the table of moral discussion. As the careful reader has undoubtedly discerned, I personally lean towards a non-conflicting absolutist perspective of resolving moral dilemmas, which shapes my understanding of the Rahab narrative. My rationale for such a stance are the strengths of the non-conflicting absolutist view detailed in the preceding discussion. Yet, three facets of the arguments for non-conflicting absolutism, which I will detail below, have been particularly influential in my own thinking.

First, the fact that non-conflicting absolutism has been the broad path of believers in the Protestant tradition—what my namesake termed the "classic Christian approach"—is weighty.[58] In regard to debated doctrines, there certainly ought to be room for divergence of thought and charitable discussion among like-minded Christians, yet it seems the burden of proof should rest upon those who want to depart from the "old paths" (Jer 6:16), not those who are on such paths. Second, non-conflicting absolutists' observation that none of the usual examples in Scripture of moral dilemmas, [59] including the Rahab narrative, are described as containing moral conflict. Indeed, one of the reasons why it may be difficult to navigate moral dilemmas is if

---

[55] Rae, *Moral Choices*, 34. Jones notes, "Certainly concealing the spies from the king of Jericho (treason from his point of view) is approved. Although it is not specifically mentioned in the New Testament retrospectives that extol Rahab's faith, the misdirection of the king's men would seem to be integral to the welcome and protection for which she is commended (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25)." Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 150. McQuilkin writes, "These spies were hidden, in good spy-thriller fashion, by an ancestor of Jesus, Rahab. At that point she began the act of deception, not when she uttered words that further deceived the home troops. For this act she was commended and rewarded by God (Heb. 11:31)." McQuilkin, *Biblical Ethics*, 440.

[56] Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 837.

[57] *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (1973), s.v. "Conflict of Duties, Interest."

[58] Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 140.

[59] A related observation is that the majority of the classic biblical examples of conflicting moral absolutes involve the truth norm in conflict with another moral absolute. The disproportional appearance of conflict involving the truth norm ought to give interpreters who find such conflict cause to closely exam this absolute to be sure that one's understanding of this norm is biblically faithful.

they are solely the product of our own presuppositions or interpretation. Third, since moral norms are reflective of God's character, which is absolute and non-contradictory, I would expect the appearance of moral laws in any given situation to be absolute and non-contradictory.

In conclusion, then, while God surely rescued Rahab from the destruction of Jericho, it seems unlikely that Rahab will be rescued anytime soon from the divergent views of evangelical ethicists regarding moral dilemmas. Yet, in the end, hopefully this investigation and review of the common evangelical approaches to ethical dilemmas will leave readers better equipped to adopt or synthesize a position on conflicting moral absolutes, to constructively dialog with proponents of alternative views, and to navigate moral dilemmas in the Christian life.