HOW GRADED ABSOLUTISM CAN BE VIRTUOUS

~ By Paul R. Shockley[1]

"Christians alone are godlike, for God is making them like himself in virtue, holiness, and character." ~ Carl F. H. Henry[2]

I. Introduction:

What we ought to do? This is the question the graded absolutist seeks to answer.

What we ought to be? This is the question the virtue ethicist attempts to answer. The

purpose of this paper is to consider the advantages of integrating both virtue theory and

graded absolutism into a complementary thesis which may be termed as "*aretaic graded*

absolutism."[3] The complementary thesis assumes both virtue and moral obligations

(deontological ethics) have intrinsic value and are needed in order to have a robust and

holistic moral system of ethics, especially if we seek to imitate Jesus Christ in both

character and action.[4] To be sure, a complementary thesis has been affirmed in

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[1] See www.prshockley.org for more information about this author.

[2] Carl F. H. Henry, *Personal Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 508.

[3] "Aretaic" comes from the Greek word "*arete*" which means "*virtue*." See Jean Porter's, "Virtue Ethics" for an excellent historical survey of the development of a Christian tradition of virtues in *Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 96-109.

[4] In his philosophical study on Jesus Christ, Douglas Groothius observes:

> One cannot easily make the division between deontology and virtue in the teachings of Jesus (or in the Scriptures as a whole), since God's character bears on one's own character (attitudes and disposition) as much as on one's actions. For Jesus, we have a duty to be virtuous before God, on account of God's nature. 'Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). Moreover, Jesus criticized external actions which, while in keeping with moral duty, lacked

contemporary evangelical literature.[5] Nevertheless, on a normative level, little is

presently written on how revelatory models of absolutism may be integrated with virtue

theory and implications thereof, especially within conservative evangelicalism.[6] Thus,

the goal of this paper is to introduce the idea of integrating both graded absolutism and

virtue ethics. Perhaps this harmonization will be helpful in motivating discussions on

how other models of evangelical absolutism such as conflict absolutism and unqualified

or non-conflict absolutism may be incorporated into a holistic system since both

approaches are also within the realm of orthodoxy.[7]

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the proper motivations and aims. Those who gave large sums of money to the temple-which is a good thing-still lacked the virtue of the poor widow who gave only a fraction of a penny (Mark 12:41-44) [*On Jesus*, Wadsworth Philosophers Series (Thomas/Wadsworth: London, 2003), 69].

[5] In their examination of normative ethical theories both J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig affirm the complementary thesis. They write:

Each position [pure virtue ethics; standard deontic view; complementary thesis] has had it its share of advocates and there is no clear winner in this debate. However it may be that the complementary view best expresses the ethics of the Bible since Scripture seems to give weight and intrinsic value both to moral commands and virtues of character [*Philosophical Foundations for A Christian Worldview* (Downer's Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 2003), 458].

In his chapter, "The Ethics of Jesus" Groothius states that Jesus offered himself offered a complementary thesis of virtue ethics and deontology that is profoundly theological and teleological [*On Jesus*, 67, 69].

[6] Two notable exceptions include Carl F. H. Henry's *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); *Readings in Christian Ethics*, 2 vols., ed. by David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw. Roughly speaking, there are three levels of ethics: descriptive, normative, and metaethical. Descriptive ethics "describes" virtues or actions. For example, they ask the question, "Do most Christians lie?" Normative ethics evaluates virtues or actions *as being* morally right or wrong. For example, normative ethics will ask the question whether lying is bad. On the other hand, metaethicists will ask *how* we know lying is bad. They focus on "terms" and "principles of ethical argument" [J. P. Moreland, "The Nature of Ethics" in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, 1:18].

[7] Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 113. The other two options of ethical absolutism generally held by evangelical Christians are: (1) unqualified or non-conflict absolutism (historically associated with the Anabaptist tradition) which affirms that all such moral conflicts are only apparent; they are not real; (2) conflict absolutism (historically associated with the Lutheran tradition), which admits to real moral conflicts but claims that one is obligated to do the lesser evil though he or she is guilty no matter which way he or she goes. Graded absolutism finds its origins in the Reformed tradition. To be sure, these models cross over evangelical traditions and theologies.

I will begin my proposal by juxtaposing virtue theory and graded absolutism, primarily by description and suggestion of weaknesses. Afterwards, I will demonstrate how their weaknesses as distinct models are translated, on various levels, into strengths when virtue theory and graded absolutism are integrated into a holistic system of biblical ethics that involves both the heart and our obligations with a distinct *telos*: to worship our Holy God. A conclusion will then follow.

II. The Juxtaposition of Virtue Theory and Graded Absolutism:

Virtue Theory. Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe's (1919-2001) famous 1958 article, "Modern Moral Philosophy," brought virtue ethics to contemporary and scholarly debate in normative ethics when she challenged both deontological and utilitarian ethics for seeking a foundation of morality grounded in *legislative* notions such as "*obligation*" (law conception of ethics) without a divine lawgiver.[8] She writes, "It is as if the notion 'criminal' were to remain criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten."[9] But Anscombe's striking critique also promoted a new

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[8] G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy" in *Virtue Ethics: Oxford Readings in Philosophy*, ed. by Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 2003), 26-41. In her introduction she writes:

> The second [thesis] is that the concepts of obligation, and duty-*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say-and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of 'ought', ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it [Ibid., 26].

The term "*legislative*" (which was introduced by Kant) contends that we are obligate ourselves by willing that we act in a way that we would act if we were to think of ourselves not as individuals but as universal moral legislators.

[9] "Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 31. "Later Anscombe writes, "And I should be inclined to congratulate the present-day moral philosophers on depriving 'morally ought' of its now delusive appearance of content, if only they did not manifest a detestable desire to retain the atmosphere of the term" [Ibid., 43]. Louis P. Pojman nicely summarizes this criticism against action-based ethics this way:

direction for morality: return to the ancient Greek notions of "*virtue*" (*arete;* excellence)

and human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). By turning away from moral law theory (whose

origin is essentially religious) to practical reasoning, an Aristotelian type theory of moral

virtue may perhaps be generated.[10] In sum, virtue ethics states the following proposition:

an action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would do in a given set of

circumstances. Anscombe cautioned her proposal to return to virtue ethics by arguing

that we must stop doing philosophy until "*moral psychology*" advances to the point that

we are able to have a better if not proper scientific understanding what certain terms

mean: "*intention*", "*wanting*", "*pleasure*", and "*action*" –especially before we can

actually say what virtue is.[11]

Since Anscombe's criticism, other disparaging comments have been made against

action-based ethics. For example, duties or adherence to rules fail to motivate or inspire

people to action (there is no "*want*" to obey). These systems fail to motivate or inspire

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Moral language in traditional schemes usually has a structure that resembles that of a law. Typically, the notions of right and wrong occur within the structure of a legal context in which there is a clear authority. Traditional, natural law ethics used this model with integrity, for they saw moral principles as analogous to law and God as analogous to the sovereign. Now, however, ethics has been detached from its theological sovereign. It has become an autonomous activity, leaving the legal model without an analogue, so that it is now an incoherent metaphor. The virtue ethicist rejects this model. Rather than spending time on hair-splitting and puzzle-solving, ethics should help us develop admirable characters that will generate the kinds of insights needed for the exigencies of life [*Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 2nd edition (Belmont, CA.: 1995), 163].

[10] Alan Donagan, *A Theory of Morality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), xv.

[11] C.E. Harris, Jr., *Applying Moral Theories*, 5th edition (Belmont, CA.: 2007), 209. Harris defines a virtue as simply a "character trait that inclines us to act in a way that is morally desirable" [Ibid., 195]. On the other hand, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that there are too many different and even incomparable conceptions of what virtue is in historical and contemporary philosophy; there is no single conception. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 2007), 181-203. Nevertheless, in his study of the New Testament's account of the virtue MacIntyre offers this definition which he believes has the same logical and conceptual structure as Aristotle and Aquinas' account: "A virtue, is, as with Aristotle, a quality the exercise of which leads to the achievement of the human telos" [Ibid., 184]. This in contrast, for example, with Benjamin Franklin's concept of virtue as described by MacIntyre: "A virtue is a quality which has utility in achieving earthly and heavenly success" [Ibid., 185].

people to action because deontological rules are typically expressed in negative terms like "*You shall not _____!*" The focus is on "*doing*" (i.e., compliance), not "*being*" (i.e., what type of a person you are) and the rules are usually negatively formulated. Even if the rules are positively formulated, they do not have the same "*existential*" force as negative commands do (e.g. "*Tell the truth!*" vs. "*You shall not lie!*").[12] Thus, it is typical of strong versions of deontological ethics to give little attention to character formation; it only matters that one obeys-for moral duty must be performed for its own sake; the right is always prior to producing a good outcome (whether character formation or other outcome).[13]

There may be other factors that may make a duty right or obligatory such as the command, principle, or norm is commanded by God or generated by government.[14] Moreover, not all deontological versions are based on impartial considerations regarding the welfare of others (e.g., rule or act deontology). For example, Hobbes' contract ethics proposes a theory of minimal morality whereby rules constructed are simply more preventive than anything else. To a deontological moral minimalist "*thick morality*" is viewed as "*oppressive.*" In fact, a deontologist may adopt a view of what is good or bad in a non-moral sense.

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[12] Nancy (Ann) Davis, "Contemporary Deontology" in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 1993), 208.

[13] Though debated it seems Kant's notion of virtues are morally valuable if accompanied by a good will-which is the only thing that is intrinsically good (hence, the need for the categorical imperative). See Michael Slote, "Virtue Ethics" in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Malden, M.A.: Blackwell, 2000), 325-47 for a comparative study between Kant and virtue ethics.

[14] William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd edition of Foundations of Philosophy Series (Englewood, Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1963, 1973), 15.

And still, other action-based ethics, like utilitarianism, are unable to provide a satisfactory account in their "*calculus*" when it comes to certain acts of nobility and supererogatory acts (e.g., when people risk *their* lives to rescue *a* newborn baby from a roaring fire) or offer a satisfactory defense of universal and inalienable natural rights- whether the scale is pleasure minus pain in terms of intensity, duration, fruitfulness, or likely benefits.[15] For example, in Dostoevsky's famous novel, *The Karamazov Brothers*, Ivan raises a very troubling problem to his brother Alyosha:

> … imagine that it is you yourself who is erecting the edifice of human destiny with the aim of making men happy in the end, of giving them peace and contentment at last, but that to do that it is absolutely necessary, and indeed quite inevitable, to torture to death only one tiny creature, the little girl who beat her breast with her little fist, and to found the edifice on her unavenged tears-would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me and do not lie![16]

In contrast, virtue ethics as a system of morality by itself is often and aptly criticized by both utilitarians and deontological ethicists. Two criticisms stand out. First, virtue ethics lacks clarity in resolving moral conflicts because the focus is on character, not specific action. And second, virtue ethics also fails to give us any help with the practicalities on how we should behave. Let's consider these two weaknesses further.

First, virtue ethics lacks clarity in resolving moral conflicts because the focus is on character, not specific action. Since virtue ethics offers no fixed set of rules or principles, there is no clear guideline on how to resolve moral conflicts when they occur. One hopes the individual who strives to be a person of intellectual and moral excellence will make the most virtuous decision. However, the issue becomes even more

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[15] Barbara MacKinnon, *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, 1995), 36-38.

[16] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. David Magarshack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 1: 287-88. One typical utilitarian response to this problem is that the killing of this young girl will perhaps do more consequential harm than good.

complicated in dealings with others because there are those who will not be as intellectually and morally formed. Aristotle believed it was a brute fact that not everyone will be able to flourish with intellectual and moral excellence because not everyone will have a certain set of external goods (e.g., an appropriate family, income, education, health, opportunity, etc) to flourish as a human or achieve "*eudaimonia*" (i.e., well-being, successful living, or happiness which is "*flourishing*" in accordance with moral and intellectual excellence).   So, it would seem that rules, principles, or norms are important when dealing with others; we are social creatures.

 Related, virtue ethics fails to give us any help with the practicalities on how we should behave. Since virtue theory centers on the "*goal*" of life, "*well-being*" as the master value, and character pursuit of intellectual and moral excellence both as an individual and as a member of a community, it does not offer a "*calculus*" for determining moral action (like utilitarian models) or "*deontic rules*" to follow-no matter the situation or potential consequence. (e.g., Kant's categorical imperative). Like J. L. Mackie states, while one does have the "*golden mean*," virtue theory does not tell us "where or how to draw the dividing lines in particular instances."[17] The "*golden mean*" only assists in us in the degree and kind of passions appropriate to a certain context.[18]

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[17] J. L. Mackie states:

> As guidance about what is the good life, what precisely one ought to do, or even by what standard one should try to decide what one ought to do, this is too circular to be very helpful. And though Aristotle's account is filled out with detailed descriptions of many of the virtues, moral as well as intellectual, the air of indeterminancy persists. We learn the names of the pairs of contrary vices that contrast with each of the virtues, but very little about where or how to draw the dividing lines, where or how to fix the mean [*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 186].

[18] Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics," 98.

Having described virtue ethics, considered some its recent criticisms of action-based ethics, and examined two of its major weaknesses, we will now direct our attention to graded absolutism. I will briefly summarize graded absolutism then consider three weaknesses of this model.

Graded Absolutism. Graded absolutism is one of three major deontological options typically held by evangelical Christians. According to Norman Geisler, graded absolutism has its origins in the writings of St. Augustine. It was later expressed in the writings of Charles Hodge. [19] This model was perhaps best popularized by Norman Geisler in his work, *Christian Ethics* (which is in its 11th printing since 1989), a standard textbook used across evangelical institutions of higher learning.[20]

Graded absolutism involves the following the characteristics. First, in view of God having one nature, but many moral attributes, each attribute is traceable to one of God's unchanging moral attributes. [21] Second, graded absolutism is a deontological form

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[19] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 1: 437.

[20] Saint Augustine, *Enchiridion*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 3:245; Ibid., *On Christian Doctrine*, *in A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 2:530; Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 113-14.

[21] The term, "gra*ded absolutism*" is used by Geisler because he believes there are three ways in which this theoretical model of ethics involves absolutes. He explains:

> It [graded absolutism] is absolute in its source. All norms are based in the absoluteness of God. God does not change, and principles based on his nature are likewise unchanging. Furthermore, each particular command is absolute in its sphere. Each moral law is absolute as such. It is only when there is a conflict between two of them that appeal must be made to the higher in order to resolve the conflict. Finally, it is absolute in its order of priority. The very gradation of values by which the conflicts are resolved is absolute. It is, for example, absolutely established by God that in an unavoidable conflict between God and parent, one must put God first [Geisler, *Christian Ethics,*124].

Additionally, Geisler states:

> Second, there is of course a sense in which graded absolutism is not an unqualified absolutism. Graded absolutism may be called qualified absolutism or contextual absolutism as some do.

of ethical absolutism whereby there are higher and lower revealed moral laws.[22] Third,

this model advocates the idea that when two or more universal ethical laws, duties, or

obligations, come into unavoidable conflict, the Christian's non-culpable duty is to

follow the higher moral law.[23] And fourth, Geisler's hierarchy involves love for God

over love for man, obedience to God over government, and mercy over veracity.[24] Thus,

God grants an exemption to the lower moral law in view of one's duty to obey the higher

law.[25]

> However, it is not improper to designate it as s form of absolutism because it does maintain, in contrast to situationism, that moral laws are absolute in their source, in their sphere as such, and in order of their priority [Ibid., 124].

[22] The phrase "*ethical absolutism*" denotes the idea that because God's character is immutable, his law reflects his character.

[23] The word "*Christian*" is used because this model presupposes the authority of Scripture as special revelation given to humanity by God which St. Augustine, Charles Hodge, and Norman Geisler embrace and defend. Geisler writes that the focus of his particular book is not God's natural law for humanity, but His divine law for believers (p. 14). Moreover, Geisler's intended audience in *Christian Ethics* is Christians. Geisler writes in his preface:

> Much has happened in our world since I first wrote on ethics in 1971, and none of it has decreased the need for an analysis of the ethical problems facing Christians today. More than ever before, we need to bring the standard of God' revealed truth to bear on the multitudinous moral problems that confront a Christian in our contemporary culture [Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 13].

He goes on to say:

> Someone has said that we live in a strange world where the relativity of Einstein is considered absolute, and the absolutes of the Bible are considered relative. Be that as it may, in our relativistic culture Christians can ill afford to make an uncertain sound on our ethical trumpet. Rather, the need for a clear understanding of the issues and a courageous application of God's Word to them is pressing [Ibid., 13-14].

[24] Mitchell, *Charts of Philosophy and Philosophers*, 142.

[25] Geisler writes:

> Therefore, in real, unavoidable moral conflicts, God does not hold a person guilty for not keeping a lower moral law so long as he keeps the higher. God exempts one from his duty to keep the lower law since he could not keep it without breaking a higher law. This exemption functions something like an ethical 'right of way' law. In many states the law declares that when two cars simultaneously reach an intersection without signals or signs, the car on the right has the right of way. Common sense dictates that they both cannot go through the intersection at the same time; one car must yield. Similarly, when a person enters an ethical intersection where two laws come into unavoidable conflict, it is evident that one law must yield to the other [Ibid., 120].

In sum, graded absolutism contends for the following: (a) there are higher and lower moral laws; (b) there are unavoidable conflicts; (c) no guilt is imputed for the unavoidable.[26] No attention is given to virtue ethics.

Now having briefly summarized graded absolutism we will now turn our attention to the following three weaknesses I personally perceive with this model: (1) It is too inadequate to readily handle "*gray areas*" where moral duties conflict; (2) It lends itself to antinomian abuse; (3) It neglects character formation. We will now explore each of these three weaknesses. Afterwards, we will make a couple of comments regarding motivation before we proceed to consider four advantages of aretaic graded absolutism.

First, *graded absolutism is too inadequate to readily handle gray areas where moral duties conflict*. In cases such as lying in order to save peoples' lives, the higher moral law appears to be obvious. But in difficult situations where it is not so obvious, let's say because of lack of contextual information, setting, or time needed to make a decision, how does one determine the higher moral law (e.g., Advising an elderly citizen regarding a heart transplant; giving counsel to a family with conjoined twins whose team

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Graded absolutism recognizes exemptions but not exceptions to absolute moral laws. An exception violates the universality and absoluteness of a moral law and an exemption only eliminates one's culpability of a lower law while still recognizing absolute moral laws. Also, this theory argues that moral judgments express belief [Mitchell*, Charts of Philosophy and Philosophers*, 142].

[26] The conflicts Geisler cites from includes the story of Samson whereby he committed a divinely approved suicide despite the moral prohibition against killing a human being ("do not kill") in Judges 16:30; Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter in Judges 11 even though one is not to kill an innocent life; the choice between lying and saving a life for Rahab in Joshua 2; the story of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ whereby people advocate that Jesus, an innocent man, took the punishment for the sins of others (Isaiah 53; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21); and finally, there are other cases in the Bible whereby there was a conflict between obeying God's command to submit to civil government and maintaining one's obligation to some other higher laws such as the Hebrew midwives to disregard the Pharaoh's command to kill all male infants (Exodus 1), the Jewish captives ignored Nebuchadnezzar's command to worship the golden image of himself (Daniel 3), and Daniel disregarded Darius' command to pray only to him (Daniel 6) [Ibid., 117-19].

of doctors said that separation will likely cause the death to one or perhaps both; the violation of human rights of one person to gain intelligence information)?

Second, *graded absolutism lends itself to antinomian abuse*. I have noticed some of my Bible students are attracted to graded absolutism because it gives them a sense of freedom, an antinomian opportunity to violate a lower command as long as they maintain a higher moral law. For example, one student grossly violated the posted speed limits in order to make it to my class on time. As he walked into my class he thanked me for introducing graded absolutism because he felt free to break the law having concluded that receiving biblical instruction in my class is the higher moral law. While I appreciated his honesty (though he thought it was funny), I explained to him that I was disappointed in him for two simple reasons. First, he abused this model. Neglecting this model reveals a deficiency in his character. And second, he failed to appropriately follow graded absolutism because he placed not only himself but others at risk by surpassing speed limits.

The last major weakness to mention is the *neglect of character formation*. Anscombe and other virtue ethicists aptly criticized deontological or rule-based ethics for focusing on obligations to the detriment if not complete neglect of character-formation. Perhaps, her observation is indicative of some of our contemporary evangelical communities. Appealing to personal experience, I have observed that some of our evangelical churches have so focused on their obligations to be obedient to the biblical norms of Scripture that their members have neglected the priority of cultivating a disposition of moral excellence. Except for issues regarding the moral qualifications of pastoral candidates, elders, and deacons (Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3), rarely have I heard

the need to be virtuous in contrast to the overwhelming call to be obedient to the commands of Scripture. Often I hear the need to confess our sins but infrequently am I called to trace the particular manifestation of sin to its root in my character. If I do talk about it, the response is typical: "What do you expect, we are "*sinners saved by grace*." While we are "*saints who sin*" never is there an emphasis placed upon the inculcation of virtues to the extent that we come to bear a disposition of intellectual and moral excellence, one that hopefully bears the integral qualities (to some extent) of "*second nature*." The term "*second nature*" is having a disposition to think, feel, desire, and act in an appropriate way without even having a tendency to consciously will to do so.

Related, we often applaud one who successfully overcomes a particular temptation even though he or she habitually struggled with the temptation in the process. Our commendation is suggesting that only acts of duty have worth. Notwithstanding our applause for a person's victory over temptation, we perhaps all too often fail to give serious attention to the deficiency of his or her character-for this "*struggling of the heart*" reveals a character deficiency (moral incontinence)- whether it is a fleshly habit one carries over from one's former unregenerate state or because an immediate or impulsive attraction to an entangling sin.

Consider the following illustration. Among your two other colleagues in ministry, you come to find out that one of them, Dwight, acts caring towards you, but in his mind he bears unjustifiable bitterness towards you-although he never expresses them. Your other colleague, Fitzgerald, acts caring to the same degree as Dwight, but never has

bitter thoughts about you. If you would like to spend a vacation with Fitzgerald over

Dwight, then perhaps an inner character does matter.[27]

In contrast, one should not exclusively focus on virtue theory for sake of virtue

without moral principles in place for "traits without principles are blind."[28] Consider

the following statement by ethicist William Frankena:

> It is hard to see how a morality of principles can get off the ground except through the development of dispositions to act in accordance with its principles, else all motivation to act on them must be of an ad hoc kind, either prudential or impulsively altruistic. Moreover, morality can hardly be content with a mere conformity to rules, however willing and self-conscious it may be, unless it has not interest in the spirit of its law but only in the letter. On the other hand, one cannot conceive of traits of character except as including dispositions and tendencies to act in certain ways in certain circumstances.[29]

And secondly, if virtue theory is not ultimately related to God, then the practices

of virtue are nothing "but natural impulses educated and disciplined by reason … the

more dangerous because they seem good."[30] In the words of Dennis Hollinger (who was

quoting from Geoffrey Bromiley), "Christians should think of God as the ground of

ethics, the norm of ethics, and the power of ethical living."[31] A virtue is typically defined

as a disposition or trait which must be acquired, at least in part, by practice, teaching, or

perhaps by grace; they are not completely innate.[32] They are traits of character, not

personality (e.g., sanguine). Having a virtuous character involves the idea of having a

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[27] Groothius, *On Jesus*, 67.

[28] Frankena, "A Critique of Virtue-Based Ethics," 266.

[29] Idem.

[30] Friedrich Paulsen, *A System of Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1899), 66.

[31] Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 64.

[32] Frankena, *Ethics*, 63.

virtuous "*tendency*" to do certain kinds of actions in certain kinds of situations which is more than thinking or feeling in certain ways.[33] I am defining virtue as a habit of excellence, a beneficial, valuable tendency, a skilled disposition within the heart, the inner soul, that enables a believer *to realize* the vital potentialities that constitute godliness (our relationship with God) and righteousness (our relationship with others) from the new nature God has created for him or her at the moment of salvation-for God's glory (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:5-6).[34] In other words, as a believer one bears a new *telos*, a new purpose: Worship God as His living representative, both individually and corporately, now and future. Consider the words of Douglas Groothius:

> These character traits do not merely exhibit objective moral properties … they fit the world and the people God has created. Jesus account of virtue is similar to Aristotle correlation of virtue and *telos* (cosmic purpose), where proper conduct is conducive to human flourishing. But Jesus' view is dissimilar as well, since Aristotle's philosophy allotted the Prime Mover no ethical role in establishing, announcing, or rewarding moral character. For Jesus, God is central to the nature and experience of virtue.[35]

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[33] Idem.

[34] Moreland & Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for Christian Worldview*, 456.

[35] Groothius, *On Jesus,* 66. Groothius has a number of excellent insights in his overview of Jesus' ethics. For example, in his discussion of Jesus use of Matthew 5:1-11Groothius writes:

> Jesus is profoundly concerned with the character or inner disposition of people as they relate to God, others, and creation. He is not unlike the Hebrew prophets who often spoke of internal motivations and beliefs. Jesus' beatitudes stress attitudes that Jesus pronounces 'blessed,' or objectively good, right, and in harmony with God's ways. 'Blessed is not synonymous with our meaning of 'happy'-a subjective state of pleasure or enjoyment. Jesus says that those who are 'persecuted because of righteousness' are blessed (Matthew 5:10), as are 'those who mourn' (Matthew 5:3). Therefore, mere happiness is not in view, but something deeper.

Following his brief discussion of the Beatitudes Groothius states:

> Jesus blesses these actions and attitudes as intrinsically good before God, but each personal trait is also linked to a further benefit. For example, 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.' Paradoxically, meekness before God leads to possession of earthly enjoyment in the long haul. Likewise, those blessed with a pure heart 'will see God.'

Then in the next paragraph Groothius states, "Jesus places the virtues into a cosmic and supernatural framework, that of 'blessedness'" [*On Jesus*, 65].

The issue of Motivation. One way to address the weaknesses in graded absolutism and virtue ethics is to integrate graded absolutism with Christian virtue theory into a holistic robust system of morality that appropriately emphasizes both "*being*" (agent) and "*doing*" (obedience to moral obligations).[36] This integration not only recognizes the intrinsic value of obedience to God's commands and having an appropriate disposition, but combines both the motivation of moral truths for moral action and the appropriate character that is molded to honor God-all from within the agent.

When it comes to motivations for developing a godly character, we have a number of motives. Most attention given is the motivation that is derived from our deliverance from the penalty of sin; we are the recipients of God's grace; He is our God who saved us in spite of ourselves. Other *external* motivations may include the examples of Christ and the apostles, the desire for heavenly rewards, evangelism by word and deed, the good of the community, the avoidance of God's chastisement, fear of external consequences such as bearing shame before others.[37] We also have the opportunity to experience growing intimacy with God-seizing Christ in the manner He seized us.

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[36] I am distinguishing virtue theory from virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is a pure virtue approach entirely agent-centered seen as a third alternative to both deontological and consequential forms of ethics. Virtue theory is typically re-casted with some integration or contact with these two other action-based models.

[37] Interestingly, Linda Zagzebski contends that the ground of ethics is not a concept but in individual exemplars. She writes:

> Exemplars of virtue are admirable persons, and to see them as admirable is to feel some attraction to imitating them. An admirable life is a life led by an admirable person. A desirable life is a life desired by an admirable person. Admirable persons desire an admirable life, so the admirable is desirable. Admirable persons also desire the uncontroversial elements of flourishing such as health, friends, and enjoyment. It is a sad fact of life that often we cannot have it all. A fully desirable life is not within the reach of everyone. We cannot imitate luck, good, or bad, and so we cannot imitate the lives of persons who do not have a fully desirable life, but we can imitate that

Internally, we have the role of conscience, the conviction of sin, fear, empowerment, illumination, guidance, and other ministries by the indwelling Holy Spirit. It very well could be that there is a "*network of motives*" in various qualities, both internally and externally that spur us to action. For example, a web of motives might include the love and fear of God, future heavenly rewards, a burdening sorrow for those who refuse the free gift of salvation, and a fear of dishonoring Him before others. It could be that differing contextual settings might foster some sort of interplay which restructures these sincere motives (perhaps in a *prima facie* way) in degrees of emphasis. Some motives become paramount whereas others diminish depending upon context. For example, when I hear a sermon on eternal rewards my mind is upon that particular motive. Then when I'm in an evangelistic setting my overriding motivation is to see others receive eternal life. Now that does not mean that the former is no longer a motivational factor in an evangelistic setting or less important. However, it does suggest there is perhaps an interplay between situational context and motivations, whether external, internal, or both. Thus, in a given situation, one or more motives may clearly have priority.

Nevertheless, Scripture is clear that obedience to God's absolute commands should not be done for duty sake, but for the opportunity to glorify God, reflecting His beauty. In fact, if we are not careful our motives may unintentionally collapse into "*ethical egoism*." Ethical egoism is the moral theory that one ought to do what is in one's own interest. In this context, self-interest rather than God-directed interests become

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part of desirable life that is imitable. What is imitable includes the admirable [*Working Virtue*, 66].

supreme.[38] However, if our overriding purposeful desire is to glorify God for who He is,
then God is most glorified. Thus, an integrated model should foster "*corrective*" thinking
for this type of mindset. The reason why is because motives are purposely judged and
critically evaluated in view of cultivating a God-honoring way of life; corrective thinking
is both decisive and on-going (present-tense). Jonathan Edwards, for example, exhibited
this on-going corrective mindset with his extensive list of personal resolutions which he
dedicated to reading over once a week.[39]

Having juxtaposed virtue theory and graded absolutism, primarily by description
and considering some of their weaknesses separately, we will now proceed to consider
the advantages of integrating them.

This integration may also be applicable to other models of revealed absolute
ethics-and this is an important claim. It is significant for the following reasons. First,
graded absolutism may not be the best model to integrate virtue ethics because there is
the possibility that graded absolutism struggles with both ontological issues and using
narrative literature to accommodate normative claims.[40] And second, since graded

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[38] Frankena, *Ethics*, 28. This raises the issue whether self-interest is always negative. For example, if I consider Pascal's wager, it is in my best interest to be saved in order that I may be spared from eternal salvation. On the other hand, Kant argues that acting from self-interest, even if the course of action is wise, is unmoral.

[39] *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (Yale: Yale University Press, 1995), 274-80.

[40] One response by Geisler to the ontological problem is that it is not necessary to graded absolutism that there be a hierarchy in God's attributes. So, the real hierarchy may not be in God's attributes but in the application of them to His creatures. Thus, the priority is not in the basis of the values but in their expression in moral laws [Geisler*, Christian Ethics*, 125]. Geisler offers the following illustration:

> For example, light is one, yet when it passes through a prism it is manifest in a whole array of colors from higher to lower wavelengths. In like manner, all the many moral attributes are one in God, but they diffuse into many laws, ranging from higher to lower, as they pass through the prism of the finite world [Idem].

absolutism is often (and falsely) accused of bearing a utilitarian nuance (because the

context perhaps informs which absolute to follow), adding virtue ethics may further

advance that utilitarian caricature since the priority of pure virtue theory is the person, not

obligations.[41] Nevertheless, graded absolutism has explanatory power. Like John and

Charles Feinberg state, "As to moral conflicts, we think some form of hierarchicalism

handles matters best."[42]

<div align="center">

III.   **Advantages of Aretaic Graded Absolutism**:

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> *"Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in their hearts, and evil*
> *people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in their hearts" (Luke 6:45).*

Aretaic graded absolutism may perhaps be best described as trait-deontological.[43]

A trait is a disposition, habit, or quality of a person.[44] The moral qualities or traits to be

inculcated are deontological moral principles disclosed from divine revelation and

promoted both historically and ideally in the person of Jesus Christ. Like Archibald

Alexander states:

I recently heard a discussion where someone was criticizing graded absolutists for appealing to Old Testament cases that appear to demonstrate moral conflict between two prescriptive duties. But his argument was self-defeating because he inadvertently did the same by arguing for non-conflict absolutism from the very same passages. Moreover, some attempted to redefine the moral conflict to harmonize with non-conflict absolutism is by redefining what "deception" is and give circumstances where not being completely forthright is acceptable: games, prevention of crime, or war. Nevertheless, these exceptions inadvertently established a hierarchy of moral duties in certain contexts.

[41] Geisler's response to the claim that graded absolutism has a utilitarian nuance is that graded absolutists speak of the 'greater good,' they do not mean greater results but the higher rule. Furthermore, utilitarianism is end-centered whereas graded absolutism is duty-centered. Certainly, any ethical model is wise to consider the possible results of actions, but this does not automatically mean they are utilitarian [Ibid., 127].

[42] John and Charles Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 31.

[43] William Frankena, "A Critique of Virtue-Based ethics," 265.

[44] Idem.

Christian Ethics therefore is based on the twofold assumption is based upon the twofold assumption that the ideal of humanity has actually been revealed in Christ, and that in Him also is the power by which man may realize this ideal.[45]

Biblically, integrating both graded absolutism with virtue ethics into a complementary system is necessary for holistic worship before God as a way of life. Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Wisdom literature of the Bible (e.g., Psalm 19:7-11, Psalm 26, Psalm 119, Proverbs 23:7, Ecclesiastes), Matthew 5-7, 23:37, Mark 8:34, John 14-15, John 17:17, 1 Corinthians 13, Philippians 1:20, James, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 1 John 3:16-17; 1 Peter 3:3-5; 2 Peter 1:5; Revelation 2-3, and Revelation 4-5 are among the portions of Scripture which clearly reveal God is concerned with both inner character and outward action. These traits are not mere theoretical abstractions isolated from everyday life.[46] Rather, the contextual setting and circumstances therein is the location where God's principles are exercised and the quality of inculcation revealed (Psalm 1).

Some of the advantages of this combination include the following: (1) A balanced emphasis on both obedience to biblical commands and possessing a requisite disposition that reflects Christ-"*for God looks at the heart of man*"; (2) a two-fold motivational component whereby one positively delights in pursuing and developing godliness; (3) a two-fold focus on both the development of habits that promote human excellence and obedience to moral obligations-all for the glory of God; (4) and lastly, the chronic problem of indeterminancy, compromise, and imprecision in decision-making

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[45] Archibald B. D. Alexander, *Christianity and Ethics: A Handbook of Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 24.

[46] Archibald Alexander, *Christianity and Ethics: A Handbook of Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 186.

diminishes. We will now proceed to examine each of these four advantages. Afterwards,

we will examine three potential misunderstandings of aretaic graded absolutism.

First, aretaic graded absolutism emphasizes both obligation to biblical commands

and character-building. The recognition of moral obligation from God's Word *should*

provide sufficient motivation for action. In fact, one's response to the commands and

examples of Scripture reveals much about both one's view of God and personal character.

Yet, the integrated model becomes even more robust in terms of motivation when one

purposefully seeks to cultivate a worshipful, virtuous disposition that honors God.

However, in order to do so one must receive a new disposition from God and consistently

and purposefully "*set*", "*strive*", and "*press*" on in cultivating this received disposition

into one that reflects Jesus Christ.

Regarding the former, one must *receive* a new nature or sphere of life by means of

spiritual regeneration. At the moment one is identified with Jesus Christ by means of the

baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit, one is in a "*position of ethical normality*."[47] The

result of that unity between Christ and the believer is well expressed in the following

statements by Lewis S. Chafer:

> The believer is in Christ and Christ is in the believer. The believer is in Christ as
> to positions, possessions, safe-keeping, and association; and Christ is in the
> believer giving life, character, and dynamic for conduct.[48]

> To the Christian, Christ has become, in the divine reckoning, the sphere of his
> being, and this reckoning contemplates all that the Christian *is* and all that he
> *does*.[49]

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[47] Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 384.

[48] Lewis S. Chafer, *Grace: God's Marvelous Theme* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1922, 1950), 305.

[49] Ibid., 307.

The received nature given does not mean that one is able to "*be Christ*." Rather, one is "*in Christ*." In fact, according to Romans 6:5 believers are "*joined*" or "*united*" to Christ ("*sumphutos*" = joined together). This insight from Scripture is much different than the proclamation that one is to simply follow or pattern after the "*ideal man-Jesus*" in the exercise of one's own strength. Instead, after having received a new disposition from God, one is now in the position to be an ethical person before a Holy God.[50]

Not only does one receive a new nature or sphere of life by God at the moment of salvation, one is now able to appropriately cultivate and strive for godly intellectual and moral habits with a passion for excellence dependent upon the Holy Spirit. As Ronald B. Allen states, "In Christ there is the rediscovery of what it truly means to be human."[51] Thus, the development of intellectual and moral habits decisively, persistently, and dependently involves the *re-direction of the mind* on what is morally excellent or virtuous for the purpose of character-formation as Romans 12:1-2 asserts. Stated differently, I need to habitually correct and direct my thinking "*Godwardly*." As Philippians 4:8 states:

> Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell [present tense imperative which calls for a continual and habitual action] on these things [NASB].

In sum, consider the following by the late Archibald Alexander;

> Virtue may be defined as the acquired power or capacity for moral action. From the Christian point of view virtue is the complement, or rather the outcome, of grace. Hence virtues are graces. In the Christian sense a man is not virtuous

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[50] Henry, *Personal Christian Ethics*, 411.

[51] Ronald B. Allen, *The Majesty of Human: The Dignity of Being Human* (Portland Or.: Multnomah Press, 1984).

when he has first appropriated by faith the new principle of life. He has within him, indeed, the promise and potency of all forms of goodness, but not until he has consciously brought his personal impulses and faculties into the service of Christ can he be called truly virtuous. Hence the Christian character is only progressively realized. On the divine side virtue is a gift. On the human side it is an activity.[52]

Secondly, a proper character of moral excellence will be able to better resist sin and bring inward motivating glory to God even though the knowledge of Scripture should naturally provide motivation for obedience since it is God's Word. Consider the following illustration. Wayne and Parker are both believers. Wayne is obedient to the imperative to be holy in 1 Peter 1:15-16. Both Wayne and Parker decide to go to the local cinema. Both Wayne and Parker immediately resist the temptation to see a sexually explicit movie; they decide to see Peter's Jackson's adaptation of Tolkien's classic work, *The Hobbit*. Pastor Xavier and his associate Mr. Lehnsherr join them for coffee following the movie. After explaining to the pastor, what happened, the pastor commended them both for being obedient to 1 Peter 1:15-16. But Mr. Lehnsherr, who tends to be both suspicious and intellectually curious, decides to probe their motivation. Wayne's motivation for resisting the movie is simply because he wants to be obedient to the biblical command found in 1 Peter 1:15-16. While Parker whole heartily agrees with Wayne's motivation, Parker says he has an additional purpose: "I want to develop a character that reflects Christ for the glory of God. In order to do so, I want to obey the Scripture." Wayne's motivation is compliance to bring honor to God. Parker's motivation is not only compliance but the inculcation of God's commands in such a way that it shapes, molds, and becomes who he is.

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[52] Alexander, *Christianity and Ethics*, 184.

Another illustration may help. Wayne and Parker are two archers who have their respective targets. Wayne's target is 10 feet away whereas Parker's target is behind Wayne's, 100 feet away. Wayne hits his short target. Parker's arrow, on the other hand, not only went through Wayne's target but penetrated his own more challenging target. Therefore, we observe that Parker has a greater understanding for the sport of archery and we wonder how he gained the skill and who trained him.

Now going back to the movie illustration, both Wayne and Parker did the right thing but Parker has a larger purpose: obedience to God and the on-going cultivation of his character for God's glory. He realizes that in the act of worshipful obedience for God's glory, a *doing and undergoing* occurs; one's new nature informs one's decision-making and one's character informs one's decision-making. Moreover, Parker will seek to purposefully choose the most excellent action among a company of good choices, not merely a good choice among bad ones (Phil. 4:8). Once again, all this is done dependent upon the Holy Spirit (Romans 8; Galatians 5:16-18; 22-23).[53]

Secondly, aretaic graded absolutism focuses on both the development of habits that promote human excellence and obedience to moral obligations in order to holistically model Jesus Christ as an individual and as a member of the community. Consider the following: (a) It is necessary to develop God-honoring habits; (b) One is called to live one's utmost for the glory of God both individually and corporately; (c) Imitation of Jesus Christ includes an emphasis on character formation and commitment to fulfilling moral obligations.

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[53] At this point my movie illustration may falter because it may not be the most excellent choice to even go to the movies. Nevertheless, the point made should be clear.

Let's consider the need for the development of God-honoring habits. Each of us live our lives in habituated ways of seeing and doing. Because we are habitual creatures, our behavior requires being sensitive to the social and personal dimensions of our lives as establishing habits that conform to the truths of Scripture. Therefore, developing God-honoring habits of intellectual and moral excellence is vital for a God-honoring way of life.

Pro-actively seeking to live one's utmost for God's glory, developing one's character and fulfilling one's obligations one not only bring greater "*health*" or "*well-being*" to one's life, but is able to lift other members in the community (s). In fact, an integrated model is *missional* at its core. As one magnifies Christ by the choices one makes both inwardly and outwardly, people will be attracted to *Him* (Philippians 1:20).

In contrast, if one disregards the formation of character and suggests obedience to commands for duty sake is merely sufficient for modeling Christ, this person *will not be the only individual* who suffers from the wounds of his or her wickedness-for this person has not dealt with the frailties, appetites, and fleshly tendencies, and evil desires within.

There is also the recognition that the overall purpose within one's particular context is the flourishing qualities of virtue is for the glory of God. Like Cornelius Van Til states, "All my life, my life in my family, my life in my church, my life in my society, and my life in my vocation as a minister of the gospel and a teacher of Christian apologetics is unified under the banner *Pro Rege* [For the King]!"[54] Thus, while theological virtues such as love, faith, and hope are worth pursuing for its own sake

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[54] Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius of Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), 5.

(intrinsic value) as well as for the benefits they bring to the community (consequential), the overriding unified purpose is to bring glory to God-even if it did not benefit oneself or the community (s).[55]

Related, Jonathan Edwards contends that moral judgments are found not in reason but in sentiment (similar to David Hume in this regard). Edwards describes sentiment as a *sense of delight in the presence of virtue*, a disposition of beauty and action which involves two levels: *justice* which consists of harmony and proportion in human relationships; and secondly, *benevolence* towards Being in general, which essentially implies love of God as the supreme-infinite Being.[56]

Let's now consider the imitation of Jesus Christ. Since aretaic graded absolutism is a form of "*revealed ethics*," the grounding and sources of these character traits are the biblical commands and principles in Scripture as disclosed by God. Therefore, if God's revelation is accurate (which I believe we have good justifications to believe it is), then we have an objective basis for moral values, duties, and accountability. Since it is revelation from God, it is every believer's responsibility to rightly know and appropriately apply. Just as Jesus obeyed the Father (Philippians 2:5-11), every believer is called to do the same (John 14:23; 15:9-10; Mark 8:34).

Not only are believers to imitate Jesus Christ, but they also recognize that Jesus Christ embodied both virtue and deontology. As Groothius states, "One cannot easily make the division between deontology and virtue in the teachings of Jesus (or in the

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[55] Naturalistic virtue theorist Philippa Foot argues that beliefs that are necessarily united with human welfare in terms of benefits or needs are moral beliefs. So, while a person may perform a virtuous act, that action does not make them virtuous. For her moral virtues are corrective. See Foot's article, "Virtues and Vices" in *Virtue Ethics*.

[56] Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics," 104-5 cf. Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960 (originally published 1765), v-xiii, 1-13.

Scripture as a whole), since God's character bears on one's own character (attitudes and dispositions) as much as on one's actions."[57] Thus, following Christ involves more than obedience, but an inculcation that leads to a full-orbed imitation. The apostle Paul was evidently one who modeled both in view of his command to the Corinthian church, "*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ*" (1 Cor. 11:1). In fact, holistic imitation is an indicator of progressive sanctification (Hebrew 6:12).

Third, aretaic graded absolutism offers a two-fold motivational component whereby one positively delights in pursuing and developing godliness. Frankena observes, "Traits without principles are blind, but principles without traits are impotent."[58] While God's gift of grace and obedience to God's commands should motivate one to right action, a virtuous disposition *enhances* that motivation for it involves desire and pleasure. Thus, one's motivation is not simply based upon being obedient to one's duties or obligations but because one *desires* to cultivate a disposition of moral excellence that will both better resist the entanglements of sin and bring greater glory to God. In fact, the criticism of self-centeredness (i.e., the primary concern is the agent's own character) made against Aristotelian virtue theory is non-applicable in this aretaic model because it is done for the glory of God.

And fourth, deontological ethics is often criticized for offering no clear way to resolve moral duties when they come into conflict with each other and is not readily able to handle gray areas or hard case dilemmas. While graded absolutism is able to handle this former criticism in obvious cases, integrating virtue theory with graded absolutism,

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[57] Douglas Groothius, *On Jesus*, 69.

[58] Frankena, "A Critique of Virtue Based Ethics," 266.

i.e., having a biblical disposition *might* perhaps shed light in determining which moral law is higher, especially in gray cases where one lacks the time to investigate or the ability to acquire all the contextual information needed to make the right moral decision.[59] Combine an informed disposition with a tri-perspectival model of normative claims, existential needs, and situational setting, perhaps hard case scenarios may be better handled.

If temptation creeps into the decision-making process, the struggle to easily give into the enticement and compromise may perhaps be weakened if one is decisively focused on seeking to build a moral character of excellence for the glory of God, not merely being committed to being obedient for the sake of obedience. In fact, biblical norms should foster the disposition that will sustain one *in the moment* when one is trying to determine the higher law between conflicting biblical norms.[60] In other words, as the agent is attempting to discover the most God-honoring action, temptation (s), either from within or from without, may enter into the decision-making process which may potentially cloud or even thwart biblical motivation or/and action. But if the particular temptation(s) is not a "*real possibility*" for the agent, then the temptation will never be "*entertained*" in the mind.[61]

Now having given some of the advantage of aretaic graded absolutism: (1) A balanced emphasis on both obedience to biblical commands and possessing a requisite disposition that reflects Christ; (2) A two-fold motivational component whereby one

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[59] Interestingly, the imprecision found in Aristotelian virtue theory on decision-making is not a problem because aretaic graded absolutism is trait-deontological.

[60] Frankena, "A Critique of Virtue-Based Ethics," 265.

[61] Foot, "Virtue and Vices," 172.

positively delights in pursuing and developing godliness; (3) A two-fold focus on both

the development of habits that promote human excellence and obedience to moral

obligations-all for the glory of God; (4) and lastly, the chronic problem of

indeterminancy, compromise, and imprecision in decision-making perhaps diminishes in

some cases, I will now address three potential misunderstandings of this model: (1) A

de-emphasis on our propensity of evil; (2) Negligence regarding the ministry of the Holy

Spirit to formulate compliance to biblical norms and the development of a God-honoring

character; (3) Misplaced priority on the role of Scripture.

One may contend that aretaic graded absolutism deemphasizes our propensity of

evil even as a regenerate person. As J. Dwight Pentecost writes:

> Things just don't go as planned. We realize that we're living in an upside-down
> world, and we wonder sometimes if we can make things come out as we plan or
> desire. We recognize fully well that we are living in an unredeemed body, in an
> unredeemed creation, with an unredeemed nature within us.[62]

Indeed, one may even go on to say that the God of the Bible knows our propensity

of evil and nowhere in the Gospels do we have an account of Jesus Christ taken by

surprise when people did that which He knew all the time was their nature, their character

(John 2:24-25). In other words, one might say, "The aretaic graded absolutism is

expecting too much; our bodies our too corrupted by sin to cultivate a God-honoring

disposition."

My response is three-fold. First, the very fact that "we are living in an

unredeemed body, in an unredeemed creation, with an unredeemed nature within us"

reveals the desperate need to enlarge our reasons for obedience to include character

formation so that we may *better* resist the temptations of the flesh, world, and devil. In

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[62] J. Dwight Pentecost, *Man's Problems-God's Answers* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 37.

fact, we should never be shocked at the evil in another for we recognize in our own thoughts and works the ever-present seed of potential ruin.[63]   In fact, purposefully fostering a God-honoring disposition assumes the need for both mortification and vivification.

Secondly, Jesus repeatedly concentrates on matters of the heart (e.g., the Beatitudes in Matthew 5; the account of the poor widow in Mark 12:41-44; the harsh criticisms of hypocrisy in Matthew 23; the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5). His instruction and illustrations imply the possibility to go beyond what one ever thought possible, especially when abiding in fellowship with Christ (John 15).

And third, since aretaic graded absolutism integrates both duties and character formation, this model offers a robust anthropology that involves design, tendencies, motivations, and actions.

Another misunderstanding may be a de-emphasis on the Holy Spirit's ministry to formulate a suitable character. To be sure, the role of the Holy Spirit is assumed. One should always look to Jesus Christ to see how one ought to be and look to the Holy Spirit to make it so. Nevertheless, this model assumes more than a "*let go and let God*" approach. Rather, this model assumes an "*an undergoing and doing*" whereby the inward enablement, conviction, guidance, and illumination of the Holy Spirit to glorify God is in cooperation with one's responsibilities to allow Jesus Christ to be reproduced in one's lives by means of the Holy Spirit.[64] Both divine enablement (divine side) and

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[63] Allen, *The Majesty of Man*, 188.

[64] See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Designed to be Like Him: New Testament Insight on Becoming Christ-like* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1994) for an example of a work on sanctification that incorporates God's ministry in our lives and our responsibilities as his children.

human responsibilities to yield to God, are needed in order to holistically reflect Jesus Christ by thought and deed (Romans 12:1-2). Though fragility of life is central to anthropology, unlike the Aristotelian model of sanctification, no believer is hostage to luck (e.g., certain external goods) in order to become virtuous; The Holy Spirit is given to all who receive the free gift of salvation (John 3:16).

Lastly, there is a potential misunderstanding regarding the role of commands of Scripture. Some may think that I'm misplacing Scripture in favor of character formation. Quite the contrary: I whole heartily contend that if obedience to biblical commands is rightly done, it *naturally* leads to habits, and habits lead to character-formation; my obedience informs, shapes, and molds my character when dependent upon the Holy Spirit. But if I struggle as a believer in the act of obedience to a particular biblical command, then I'm not as virtuous as the one who does not struggle in obedience to that command. Then again, since I struggled in the act, maybe I was not fully obedient to the whole of Scripture. Maybe obedience is greater than I think. But wanting to know and apply the whole of Scripture implies having a certain appropriate character. Perhaps at this point I'm equivocating. In sum, I'm proposing that in our aim to be obedient to God we should purposefully seek to develop a character that will bring God the most glory by means of intimately knowing, inculcating and applying the Scripture rather than out of obedience for the sake of obedience. As Carl F. Henry states:

> The New Testament commands believers to follow in his steps. It does not belittle the idea of imitation. But such imitation must flow from faith. It results in a reshaping of the inner attitudes, motives, and desires of life. The Spirit now prompts willing conformity. It does mean asceticism, but it involves an inner death to the pull of the world. It consists primarily in the dedication of the whole personality to the love of God and man as Christ exemplified.[65]

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[65] Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 412.

IV. Conclusion:

"There are a great many exercises, that for the present, seem not to help, but rather impede, religious meditation and affections, the fruit of which is reaped afterwards, and is of far greater worth than what is lost; for thereby the mind is only for the present diverted; but what is attained is, upon occasion, of use for the whole lifetime." ~ *Jonathan Edwards*[66]

My attempt is to integrate virtue theory and graded absolutism in such a way that when I'm obedient to God, I desire to be obedient. By strengthening graded absolutism with virtue theory I am offering a more robust, holistic model that is more satisfactory as I seek to imitate Jesus Christ in both action and character. If graded absolutism is left to itself, it suffers from difficulties such as not being able to readily handle "*gray areas*" where moral duties conflict, lends itself to antinomian abuse, and neglects character formation. But if graded absolutism is integrated with virtue theory into what I term as *aretaic graded absolutism*, these weaknesses are replaced, in various degrees, with the following advantages. First this model offers a balanced or well-orbed emphasis on both obedience to biblical commands and possessing a requisite disposition that reflects Christ. Secondly, this model offers a two-fold inward motivational component whereby one seeks to foster their new disposition in delighting or taking pleasure in the pursuit of godliness. Third, this model incorporates a two-fold focus: fulfilling moral obligations and developing habits that honors excellence -all for the glory of God. And lastly, this model might provide greater assistance when dealing with hard case dilemmas, especially in those cases where there is a lack of time or inability to receive all the instruction

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[66] *Jonathan Edwards Reader*, 274.

needed to discover the higher moral law. One already has a disposition that involves

corrective thinking, discipline, and intimacy with God.

Jesus called us to a life of loving God with our entire being for we are His living

representatives and He is our Lord. Thus, if we want give God the most glory in how we

live, from day-to-day, moment-by-moment, by imitating Jesus Christ, we need to be

concerned with both outward obedience and the cultivation of a God-given nature within.

I believe W. H. Griffith Thomas understood this concept well when he penned these

words:

> Receiving everything from Christ. Seeing everything in Christ. Doing everything
> for Christ. This is life in its simplicity, sufficiency, and satisfaction. This is
> ministry in peace, power, and progress. Away from this is unrest, dissatisfaction,
> emptiness, weariness, powerlessness. Apart from this is disappointment,
> depression, discontent, despondency, and despair. But when Christ is our life,
> ministry becomes a privilege, a joy, a delight; an ever-deepening experience, and
> ever-heightening to glory to God. So let us sum up all by saying that for life and
> ministry Christ is always necessary, Christ is always available, Christ is always
> sufficient.[67]

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[67] W. H. Griffith Thomas, ?