

A Christological Critique of Divine Command Theory

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Abstract: This paper presents a theological critique of divine command theory, a metaethical theory stating that moral wrongness is constituted by God's command. First, I argue that this theory does not qualify as a Christian moral theory because it lacks connections to central parts of Christian theology, such as Christology. This argument does not imply that the theory is wrong nor that it is inconsistent with Christianity—only that it is not Christian as such. Second, I argue that divine command theory does not fit well with the New Testament's vision of the moral life, in which being conformed to the image of Christ has primacy over adherence to law. This argument implies that the Christian ethicist should look elsewhere for a metaethical theory. I next argue in favour of a moral theory of imitation, in which the moral life consists of imitating God, the prime exemplar of goodness, which is made possible through an imitation of Christ.

Keywords: divine command theory; imitation; Christian ethics; Robert Adams; metaethics

1. Introduction

Divine command theory states that morality depends on God's command. Proponents of divine command theory formulate this dependent relation differently. Moral obligations may, for instance, be caused by, grounded by, identical to, or constituted by God's command (Lee and Evans 2022, p. 94). However, they all agree that an act is morally wrong if God has forbidden it and obligatory if God has commanded it (Hare 2022). There are many strengths to a divine command theory of morality. It explains the objectivity, universality, and normativity of morality (Lee and Evans 2022). For this article, the most important strength is that it also provides a tight connection between God and morality.

Critiques of divine command theory have mainly been philosophical¹. In this paper, I present a theological critique of divine command theory, arguing that although the theory provides a tight connection between God and morality, it does not cohere very well with central parts of Christian theology. I consider the divine command theory formulated by Christian moral philosopher Robert Adams along with perspectives from John Hare, Stephen C. Evans, and Philip Quinn—whom are all recognised as the leading contemporary defenders of divine command theory (Lee and Evans 2022, p. 94; Hare 2019).

At the beginning of his *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams presents a theistic theory of value. He argues that there is one intrinsic good—one prime exemplar of goodness—and that this intrinsic good is God (Adams 1999, pp. 14, 28). All good things derive their goodness from God. This means that something is good only insofar as it resembles God. For instance, it is good for humans to be compassionate because this resembles God. Furthermore, Adams develops a theory of moral wrongness, a theory of what makes an act morally obligatory or morally wrong. He argues in favour of a divine command theory in which moral wrongness is constituted by the commands of a loving God.

To prepare for my critique of divine command theory, let me draw attention to how philosopher Linda Zagzebski distinguishes between two ideas of morality (Zagzebski 2004, p. xi). She writes that some ethical theories arise from the idea that morality compels, and some ethical theories arise from the idea that morality attracts. From the idea that morality compels follows a conception of ethics that focuses on law. One example of this



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is Kant's theory in which ethics is the law of reason. This conception of ethics has since been dominant in Western theological ethics, or at least argues Elizabeth Anscombe in the classical paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" (Anscombe 1958). However, theological ethics do not need to be seen as an ethics of compelling law. Morality can be seen as attracting rather than compelling. The idea that morality attracts is found in Plato, where the good has an almost magnetic force. This is the conception of ethics that Zagzebski recommends.

This distinction between two ideas of morality shows how Adams's moral theory is simultaneously Platonic and Kantian. Adams's value theory is very much inspired by Plato's treatment of the good, while his theory of moral rightness and wrongness is essentially an ethics of law. What I call for is to wholeheartedly embrace the idea that morality attracts—not only when it comes to value theory, but also when it comes to our understanding of rightness and wrongness. I argue that Christian ethics should not be seen as primarily an ethics of law in which morality flows from God's commands; rather, it should be conceived of in terms of imitating the divine.

My argument consists of two parts. First, I consider the place of Christ in Christian ethics. Second, I consider a New Testament vision of a good life, especially the Pauline imagery of being "in Christ." These two factors, I argue, suggest that the moral life does not consist of following divine commands but of imitating God.

2. What Makes a Moral Theory Christian?

What is it that qualifies a moral theory as a Christian moral theory? If a moral theory is to be called Christian, it is not enough that the theory is consistent with Christian theology. Immanuel Kant's ethical theory is admittedly consistent with Christian theology (Hare 1996), but it would not be correct to describe it as Christian ethics. For ethics to qualify as Christian ethics, it must be integrated into Christian theology.

Some might argue that the interesting question is not whether a certain moral theory can be labelled Christian, but whether it is true. I do not oppose this at all. When evaluating philosophical or theological theories and determining whether the theory is true, I hold that coherence is the best method. And the philosophical notion of coherence is precisely what I have in mind when I state that Christian ethics must be integrated into Christian theology². For two theories to cohere (such as ethics and theology), it is not enough that they are consistent; they must also be connected. Both the number of connections and the strength of connections are relevant (Olsson 2012; Rescher 1973, pp. 168–75). The connection would be stronger if elements in two theories logically entail one another rather than merely suggesting one another, if the connection pertains to central parts of the theory rather than peripheral parts, and if the connection is fine-grained rather than coarse-grained—that is, if it is detailed and specific rather than vague (Søvik 2016, pp. 38–39).

Because consistency is a matter of either/or and connectedness is required, there are some clear cases for whether a moral theory qualifies as Christian. A moral theory that is inconsistent with Christian theology will not qualify; a moral theory that is consistent but not connected will not qualify. However, because connectedness is a matter of degree, there will also be some borderline cases. Take John Finnis's natural law approach to ethics (Finnis 2011). The theory is consistent with Christian theology and has some connections, so it cannot be ruled out immediately as "not Christian ethics". However, the connections are few; the theory is connected to creation theology but few other parts of Christian theology. Moreover, the connections are vague; although the theory has a few connections to theology, the connections lack the detail and precision that would specifically connect it to Christian theology. For instance, the theory does not connect to a specific Christian conception of God but to a vague conception of a benevolent God. This is not to say that Finnis's project fails. After all, he does not try to justify his ethic as Christian ethics. It is merely questionable whether a moral theory with few and weak connections to Christian theology qualifies as a Christian moral theory.

An advantage of this approach to the question of what makes a moral theory Christian is that the approach leaves open exactly how a moral theory integrates into Christian

theology. Approaches that specify exactly how morality and theology are to be connected risk restricting the field of Christian ethics. For instance, stating that Christian ethics must “arise from the gospel of Jesus Christ” (O’Donovan 1986, p. 11) might be a bit too restrictive because it rules out approaches to ethics that arise from conceptions of the spirit or the church³. Stating that Christian ethics must be “governed by the whole [salvation] story” (Biggar 2011, p. 3) is a more open criterion, but it might omit approaches to Christian ethics that for theological reasons—such as certain views on the fall and sin—omit parts of the whole salvation story, such as not letting creation theology govern Christian ethics.

Although I do not specify exactly how Christian ethics must integrate into Christian theology, I give some direction by stating that a strong connection must be precise and connected to central rather than peripheral parts of Christian theology. Because the most central part of Christian theology is Christ, a moral theory that is not connected to Christ has a weak connection to Christian theology and hardly qualifies as a Christian moral theory. If a moral theory integrates a conception of God but not a specific Christian conception, the theory qualifies as theistic ethics rather than Christian ethics. Therefore, although it is too strong of a statement to say that Christian ethics must arise from the gospel of Jesus Christ, Christian ethics must at least be connected to Christ.

One could argue that my criterion—that Christian ethics must be integrated into Christian theology—would not be met by Jesus or his early disciples whose ethics were entirely Jewish, suggesting that something is wrong with the criterion⁴. Although it is correct that Jesus and his followers saw it as crucial to remain faithful to the God and the covenant of the Old Testament, it is also true that central to the disciples’ and the New Testament writers’ thinking about God (theology) and about human behaviour (ethics) is the life and teaching of Jesus Christ (Witherington 2016b, vol. 2, pp. 10, 30). In some cases, the life and teaching of Jesus overlapped with Old Testament ethics, or dismissed previous requirements (some food laws and sabbath requirements), or intensified them (marriage and divorce), or gave new content to what the people of God directed their lives toward (eschatology and the kingdom of God) (Witherington 2016b, vol. 2, p. 430). Therefore, although the early followers of Jesus did not integrate their moral thinking into a fully-fledged Christian systematic theology, their moral thinking has a strong connection to Christ, and in that sense, their moral thinking is integrated into (the early stages of a) Christian theology.

Consider the case of divine command theory. This moral theory has no obvious inconsistencies with Christian theology, and it has important connections. The conception of a good God who cares for humanity is essential to Adams’s divine command theory, as is the conception of a God who is willing and able to communicate his will (Adams 1999, p. 263). A divine command theory also uses biblical imagery of God as king, ruler, and judge who issues his decrees. Although these theological features are not exclusive to Christian theology, thereby not entailing Christian theology, they are not peripheral. However, Christ—who is essential to Christian theology—is not essential to this moral theory. Christ is not necessary; all that is necessary is a legislative God issuing commands. In Adams’s 400 pages on God and morality, Christ is rarely mentioned, and he is never made relevant to Adams’s moral theory. Not only does this mean that Adams—who is a Christian—is missing out on all the resources of Christian theology that derive from the life, death, and resurrection of Christ when he develops this ethical theory, it also means that the theory does not qualify as a Christian moral theory because of the lack of a specific connection to central elements in Christian theology, such as Christology.

How might a divine command theorist respond to this? One way could simply be to say that I am stating the obvious because divine command theory was never meant to be a Christian conception of morality but rather a theistic conception that could include religious traditions other than Christianity. Adams (Adams 1999, p. 6) as well as other proponents of divine command theory (Hare 2015, p. vii; Jeffrey 2019, pp. 1–2; Evans 2013) have answered along these lines. Another response could be to argue that although a

divine command theory may not need Christology, it could include it. This is the possible response I pursue.

One way divine command theory could connect with the life and teaching of Christ is to suggest that Christ gives content to the divine commands. Both Karl Barth and John Hare take this route. According to Barth, ethics is an aid to hearing God's voice, hearing what God commands. Where do we hear God's voice? In the Word of God, that is, in Jesus Christ (Barth 1957b, vol. II.2, p. 559). When Barth structures his *Ethics* in a trinitarian manner—writing about the commands of God the creator, the redeemer, and the reconciler—the commands of God the reconciler form the material heart of Barth's divine command theory, making Christology central to his applied ethics (Barth 1961, vol. III.4, pp. 24–25; 2013; Biggar 1993, p. 48). Hare has a similar approach, arguing that God's commands are revealed in the Bible and Jesus Christ. Hare asks us to imagine a situation in which we did not have the life of Christ as a moral example: "Would we know simply from analyzing human nature that we should love our enemies, and forgive seventy times seven times, and take on the role of becoming each other's servants?" (Hare 2011, p. 151). No, says Hare. The moral law cannot be deduced from creation (Hare 2011, p. 150; 2015, chap. 4). We need something transcendent to tell us what fulfilment to seek and what not to seek. Moral theories that attempt to deduce morality from human nature fail to hear at least some of God's commands and also risk "losing God as a person who speaks to us" (Hare 2015, p. 250). Although Hare writes this to argue against a natural law approach to ethics, his insistence on Christ as an indispensable moral example shows how central Christ is to the material content of Hare's ethics.

The divine command theories of Barth and Hare show that this ethical theory can be connected to Jesus Christ because Christ gives content to the divine commands. However, I argue that this is not sufficient for divine command ethics to qualify as Christian ethics. Consider the distinction between metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Metaethics considers the nature of morality (what are moral obligations?), normative ethics considers how and by what criteria we judge what we should morally do (consequences? duties?), and applied ethics applies this moral evaluation to concrete practical moral problems (for example, how should we think about euthanasia?). Hare and Barth show that divine command ethics can be combined with theological convictions on how to discern the will of God, which might lead to a normative ethics and an applied ethics connected to the life and teachings of Christ. However, divine command theory is a metaethical theory on the nature of moral obligations. Because Hare and Barth do not connect the metaethical theory to Christ, they have not shown that divine command theory qualifies as a Christian moral theory.

Some might object here, arguing that there is no need to demand that a metaethical theory must be Christian, just as there is no need to construct a Christian cosmology or a Christian microbiology. I agree that there is no need to construct a Christian microbiology because Christian beliefs do not contribute to the production of knowledge in this field. Regarding metaethics, I believe that things are different. Christian beliefs about who God is might be useful when considering the question of how morality is grounded in God. If morality depends on God, knowledge of God might reveal how this dependence relation should be formulated. Some may prefer to formulate a metaethics that is theistic rather than Christian, arguing that morality is grounded in God without using a specific Christian notion of God (see Jeffrey 2019, pp. 1–2). An advantage with what can be called a thin description of God—in which God is described as the God of the Abrahamic traditions or as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent—is that it grants a theistic metaethics that may be accepted by a variety of religious and philosophical traditions. A disadvantage with a thin description of God is that it omits the features that are distinct in a Christian conception of God, leaving out resources that might be useful when describing the relationship between God and morality. I suggest that the Christian philosopher ask herself: If the Christian description of God is correct, what follows from this? A distinctive Christian view of God, which includes the incarnation, might make a difference in the

metaethical description of how morality depends on God (Jeffrey 2019, pp. 63–64). As such, the question of whether a metaethical theory qualify as a Christian moral theory is more than a discussion on semantics. It is a question that might affect how we formulate a metaethical theory.

Another similar objection might be as follows: it is the material content of a moral theory that matters, not the metaethical structure. In that case, what is needed for an ethical theory to qualify as Christian is that the theological material is made relevant to the moral life—that is, to the level of normative and applied ethics (Biggar 2011, p. 2). To this, I say that the metaethical structure matters for the other branches of ethics. Metaethics matters for how the moral life is described, perceived, and communicated. Metaethical theories will often influence the discourse on applied ethics (Stephen 2006). As such, it is not indifferent to Christian theology how the metaethical theories are formulated.

Second, I say that divine command theory is a metaethical theory, and the problem at hand is whether this metaethical theory qualifies as Christian. To say that the metaethical theory can lead to an applied ethics that is integrated into Christian theology does not suffice. Consider Barth's ethics again. Regarding the construction of a Christian metaethics, Barth's approach to ethics is somewhat un-Barthian. He insists that theology "as a whole and in all its parts" must be Christologically determined (Barth 1956, vol. I.2, p. 123). Although his normative and applied ethics are Christologically determined, his metaethics is not. Barth's metaethics is not without connections to Christian theology. Barth is a divine-command theorist, holding that God's command constitutes what is a right and wrong action⁵. This metaethical position is theologically grounded in various ways. First, it is grounded in the view that God is sovereign. Ethics, then, is always subject to God's decision. Moreover, the position is grounded in the view that the human creature is a sinner—a creature that "does not find the divine good in himself" (Barth 1957a, vol. II.1, p. 554). Because the human creature does not manage to will or do the good, morality comes as a bidding from outside—a commanded law imposed on a reluctant nature (Biggar 1993, p. 15). Although Barth makes connections to Christian theology, they are not connections to central parts of Christian theology, such as Christology, which Barth believes should determine all parts of his theological thinking. The strongest contender for such a connection comes when Barth connects ethics to the belief that God is a God who reveals himself: because God is a God who reveals himself and his will for humanity, the moral life is understood as a life "addressed by God" (Barth 1957b, vol. II.2, p. 547). The goodness of actions and the obligatoriness depend on "what God says"—God's command (Barth 1957b, vol. II.2, p. 547; McKenny 2021, p. 57). The question, then, is how strong these connections are to central parts of Christian theology. I say that they are not very strong. First, the connection to Christian theology is not precise. Connecting ethics to the belief that God is a God who reveals himself is not a fine-grained connection to God's revelation in Christ but a connection to the more coarse-grained belief that God reveals himself. Second, the connection to divine command ethics is not precise. The theological convictions that God reveals his will and that man is fallen and in need of God's guidance entail that God communicates moral rightness and wrongness. However, these convictions neither suggest nor entail, but merely fit with, the view that moral wrongness is constituted by God's command—which is the view of divine command ethics.

3. Imitation in the New Testament

In the New Testament, ethical prescripts are found in the form of commands. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "this is my commandment, that you love one another" (John 15:12)⁶. The question I have at hand is not whether biblical texts or Jesus himself expresses commands but whether the biblical material suggests that moral obligations are constituted by commands, as divine command theory holds. I argue that the vision of the moral life found in the New Testament as well as the commands expressed by Jesus suggest that moral obligations are not constituted by God's commands but rather by God's nature.

First, consider some of Jesus's commands, such as to be perfect and be merciful: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mathew 5:48) and "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). Here, Jesus points back to God both to explain why we have a certain duty and to give content to the duty. He does the same in his command to love. Jesus says that he imitates the Father's love and that his followers in turn should imitate the love of Jesus: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). The same is the case in Jesus's teaching on forgiveness. In Matthew 18, Jesus tells a parable to illustrate that there is no limit on how many times we should forgive. Why is there no limit? Because there is no limit to God's forgiveness⁷. Therefore, because God forgives, humans should forgive. In addition, because God loves, humans should love. The same structure is present in the Old Testament imperative "be holy". Why should God's people be holy? Because "I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). These expressions of command suggest a deeper reason for upholding a certain duty than the command itself: that humans should uphold a certain duty not because God says so, but because God is so (Linville 2012, pp. 156–58). In other words, humans should imitate God. Now, Jesus is not recorded using the word "imitation" (Greek: μιμῆομαι). However, the theme of imitation is present when Jesus urges people to "follow me" and to learn from his example (Mark 1:17, Matthew 11:29).

The theme of imitation is central in Paul's writings. Here, the heart of the moral life is the imitation of God after the model of Christ (Grenz 1997, pp. 119–20, 267–68; Witherington 2016a, vol. 1, p. 244). When urging his fellow Christians to live a moral life, Paul tells them to be "imitators of God" (Ephesians 5:1)⁸. Moreover, he lets the exemplar of Christ determine the content of moral prescriptions. Paul urges his readers to have the same mindset as Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5); he writes that a husband should love his wife just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25) and that people should forgive one another "as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32.). Although the term "imitation" appears in Paul's writings, he tells his readers only three times to imitate Christ⁹. A more central term in Pauline theology is that of being "in Christ" (Dunn 1998, p. 391)¹⁰. New Testament scholar James Dunn identifies three ways in which Paul uses this term (Dunn 1998, pp. 397–99). There is an objective usage that refers to the redemptive act that has happened or will happen in Christ (e.g., Romans 3:24). A subjective usage refers to the believers' existential participation in the new reality brought about in Christ (e.g., Romans 12:5). Finally, there is an active usage in which Paul urges his readers to adopt a particular attitude or action. These three categories overlap. Dunn's point is not to construct clear categories but simply to show how deeply integrated the notion of being in Christ is to Pauline theology. I want to draw attention to Paul's active usage of the term "in Christ". This usage shows how Pauline theology at its core connects the notion of union with Christ with the moral life. Union with Christ entails a Christ-like life, and a Christ-like life means a life of imitation¹¹. To borrow the words of another New Testament writer: whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did (1 John 2:6).

Imitatio Dei

Jesus's grounding of commands and Paul's theme of imitation strongly suggest a metaethics in which moral obligations depend on God's nature and not God's commands. An alternative metaethical view of divine command theory could be, in the words of Christian philosopher Linda Zagzebski, a "moral doctrine of *Imitatio Dei*" (Zagzebski 2004, p. 190). Zagzebski argues that God is the paradigmatically good person, that all value derives from God, and that human virtues are those traits that imitate God (Zagzebski 2005, p. 358). She also specifies the aspects of God we are to imitate: the emotions that motivate God to act should also motivate us. For this article, there is no need to commit to a specific view of what aspect of God we are to imitate. It might be God's emotion, attitudes, intentions, or virtues. I want to draw on the notion of "imitation"—that God is the paradigmatically good exemplar for imitation.

To describe morality in terms of imitation is not new. Imitation is key in Plato's value theory. It is also central to Aristotle's normative ethics where we learn to live virtuous lives by imitating someone's example (Aristotle 1932, p. 1448b; 1934, p. 1115b). Several Church fathers describe the moral life in terms of imitation; however, contrary to Aristotle, they specify the exemplar we are to imitate (Athanasius 1885, chap. 9; Origen 1885, sec. 4.1.31; Irenaeus 1885, vol. 1). As Clement writes, "our instructor Jesus should draw for us the model of the true life" (Clement 1885, sec. 1.12).

The moral doctrine of *Imitatio Dei* works better inside a Christian framework than outside. However, this is not to say that *Imitatio Dei* works only in a Christian framework. The moral significance of human likeness to God can be found in many traditions, such as Judaism (Leviticus 19:2; Sotah 14a) as well as Stoicism and Platonism (Russell 2004). When I say that *Imitatio Dei* works better in a Christian framework, I mean that Christian theology solves some epistemological problems that other philosophical or religious frameworks might not resolve. First, if one attempts to imitate the divine, one must have some knowledge of the divine. One needs to give an account of how humans, mere immanent creatures, can come to know the transcendent. The next task is even more difficult. One needs to describe what on Earth a life of imitating the divine would look like. The difficulty lies in the vast distance between human nature and divine nature; God is wholly other. These two issues might be difficult to resolve but not that difficult within a Christian framework. According to Christian theology, God has revealed himself through Jesus Christ. In Jesus, humans can imitate a person who combines the divine nature with human nature. This means that it is possible to describe what it would be for a human to imitate the divine: by learning how Jesus responded to certain situations and by learning how Jesus was motivated by certain ideals, goals, and purposes, we can learn what a life of imitation looks like (Zagzebski 2004, p. 233). Therefore, one can say that *Imitatio Christi* facilitates *Imitatio Dei*.

Imitatio Dei is well integrated into Christian theology because it has strong connections to central parts of Christian theology. It shows the importance of Christology in ethics. It is Christologically determined in its material aspect because the content of the imitation is spelled out by stories of the life of Christ¹². *Imitatio Dei* is Christologically determined in its formal aspect as Christ is the essential centre of the moral theory: Christ is not just a good exemplar for imitation but the defining exemplar of the good life. To imitate Christ is not merely to imitate a being who happens to instantiate a set of general principles or virtues so that someone else could equally well have filled the role of exemplar by instantiating a set of virtues. Rather, the imitation is essentially tied to the person of Christ, the Incarnate one.

There is a difference in how a divine command theory and a theory of imitation connect to various themes in Christian theology. Consider how these theories connect the Christian moral life to the goal of the Christian life. A common theological conception is to take the goal of human life to be a loving union with God. Not everyone agrees that this is the goal of human life, but divine command theorists such as Karl Barth, John Hare, and Stephen C. Evans at least agree. They take union with God, becoming co-lovers or friends with God, as the human goal (Barth 1957b, vol. II.2, p. 549; Hare 2001, p. 53; 2011, p. 210; Evans 2013, p. 31). A divine command theory connects the moral life and its goal through obedience and covenant. The theory describes the moral life as obedience to God's law. Obedience to God's law is then seen as facilitating a relationship with God, that is, becoming God's people through obedience (Hare 2015, p. 39). A theory of imitation draws a different connection because both the moral life and its goal can be described as a life in Christ, being conformed to the image of Christ and united with him. This, I will say, gives a more direct connection between the Christian moral life to the goal of the Christian life. The way divine command theory connects the Christian life with its goal corresponds more with an Old Testament Covenant theory in which obedience to the law facilitates a life with God. A theory of imitation connects through Christology, where a life in Christ facilitates union with God.

Because a theory of imitation connects to such a central part of Christian theology—a central part that is connected to other theological themes—numerous connections to Christian theology exist. For instance, the theory of imitation connects to the theological theme of sanctification. The Christian life does not consist of conformity to law but rather of being conformed to the image of Christ. A moral theory of imitation, as any moral theory, recognises the importance of doing what is right. We can imitate how Jesus acts. However, the primary emphasis lies on the moral agent's character, on becoming the sort of person who does what is right—on becoming the person God intends each of us to be. In this sense, a theory of imitation is a type of virtue theory because the moral properties of persons (virtues) are more basic than the moral properties of acts and outcomes. A moral theory that does not primarily draw attention to what a person does (follows commands) but rather the person's character (trying to resemble the character of God) fits better with how sanctification involves transformation. Moreover, it connects to the Christian view of revelation. God ultimately revealed himself in the person of Jesus. This means that since the Incarnation, the will of God is both perfectly expressed and perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ—not in a set of commands. Because a divine command theory does not connect to such a central part of Christian theology as Christology, it will not have the same number of connections to other theological themes.

4. Possible Objection: Christ Commands Us to Love

A divine command ethicist might argue that there are some key connections between divine command theory and Christian theology. Philip Quinn, for instance, argues that a divine command theory should be the preferred ethical theory for Christian moral philosophers (Quinn 1992, p. 493). He argues this by making two points: that the commandment to love one another is central to Christian ethics and that it is vital that this is expressed in the form of a command (Quinn 1992, p. 504). I grant Quinn his first point. Quinn presents two reasons in favour of the second point that are based on the claim that the specific love commanded by God is unnatural for humans in their present condition¹³. He points to Kierkegaard's distinction between (1) erotic love and friendship and (2) the Christian love of the neighbour. With erotic love and friendship, humans choose a favourite based on preferences; someone is loved in contrast to the rest of the world (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 19/IX, 23). However, the kind of love that Jesus speaks of is a kind of love that does not choose individuals at the expense of others. It is a love that extends to all people, equally (Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 21/IX, 25). This means that the love Jesus speaks of will place every human—including one's beloved, one's friend, and one's very self—at the same distance from oneself as one's worst enemy or billions of people with whom one has had no contact. It may be easy to imagine a God who loves all people equally, says Quinn, but it is difficult to see how it could be either desirable or feasible for humans to respond to one another in this way. If this love were optional, most of us would not pursue it (Quinn 1992, pp. 504–506). Therefore, Quinn's first reason for why this love needs to be a command is that only a dutiful love can embrace everyone without distinction. A natural love based on our preferences will extend only to some people; it will oppose a universal extension. After all, humans would normally prefer not to love their enemies. Therefore, it needs to be issued as a command. The second reason is that only a dutiful love can be safeguarded from alterations in its object. Quinn writes that if the beloved loses the traits that made them erotically attractive, the erotic love will change. A natural love based on our preferences will in that sense be unstable. Only when it is a duty to love—when the love is not contingent upon certain features of its object—is love secured (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 39/XI42; Quinn 1992, p. 507).

Although Quinn's argument may show that neighbour love should be regarded as a duty, the argument does not show that neighbour love is constituted by a divine command. To be convinced that this duty is something that in the end depends on a divine command, one must be convinced that moral duties are best understood as divine commands. That is, we must already be convinced of what the argument attempts to prove (Wainwright

2013, p. 134). As Quinn writes, the fact that a Christian ethics of love *can* be put in terms of commands does not imply that it *must* be formulated or is *best* formulated in such terms (Quinn 1992, p. 504). I grant that divine command theory can explain the distinction between good acts that are obligatory (duties) and good acts that are not and does so more straightforwardly and elegantly than most theories. However, divine command theory is not the only way to make sense of obligation (see, for instance, Jakobsen 2020, vol. 67, pp. 236–42).

Quinn's reasoning can be interpreted as a way to integrate divine command ethics and Christian theology because it is key to his argument that Jesus commands us to love. Jesus has the role of an ethical authority over his people. In a similar way, Hare proposes a connection between divine command theory and Christian theology by starting from the notion of how a king or a lord has authority over his people¹⁴. The first of the Ten Commandments states, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Deuteronomy 5:6–7). This commandment expresses a particular relationship between God and the Israelites; God is their Lord, and they are his people. The commandments, then, express the obligations God establishes within this covenant relation (Hare 2015, p. 148). This reasoning can also be formulated Christologically. Jesus is lord; we are his people. To proclaim that Jesus is lord is to proclaim that Jesus has authority over his people and that this relationship between Jesus and his people is expressed, on our side, by obedience (Hare 2015, p. 39). Having Christ as lord, then, entails obedience to his commands. As Jesus says, "if anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching" (John 14: 23–4).

Both Quinn and Hare connect divine commands to Christ, either by arguing that Christ is lord with authority to command or by stating that Christ's command to love must be understood as a command. Both these lines of reasoning connect well to central parts of Christian theology, but their connection to divine command theory is not that strong. Although Hare's argument may show that God's people should obey the lord, it does not show that the commands constitute wrongness—only that it would be wrong not to do as commanded.

Some might worry that divine commands are made irrelevant to ethics if one rejects a divine command theory. Others could make a stronger claim: that such a moral theory cannot incorporate commands, so the theory would be falsified if, for instance, God issues a command—which, according to the Bible, God surely has (Harrison 2018, p. 19)¹⁵. However, a theory of imitation can incorporate divine commands and grant them great normative force. I suggest the following conception of divine commands: God's commands do not constitute moral wrongness; they communicate moral wrongness. To understand God's commands as communicating moral wrongness is a departure from a divine command theory. However, the main elements of the theory can still be maintained. One may hold that God's commands guide us and that God's commands have such great normative force that they make acts obligatory. Moreover, one might still hold that God's commands are sufficient for something to be obligatory. Hare writes that for "a Christian who is a divine command theorist, the Golden Rule gives us obligation not because we know the reason for it in our reason, but because Jesus commanded" (Hare 2015, p. 230). However, one does not need to be a divine command theorist to hold that Jesus commanding something is reason enough to act accordingly; one does not need to hold that divine commands constitute moral duties to believe this, it is sufficient to hold that divine commands communicate moral wrongness. Therefore, God's commands are not made irrelevant when one rejects a divine command theory. Even though God's commands are not seen as constituting moral wrongness, they can be seen as communicating moral wrongness.

5. Conclusions

My theological critique of divine command theory does not suggest that divine command theory is false, only that it is not well integrated into Christian theology and as such does not qualify as a Christian theory of morality. My critique has two parts. First, I

argue that this theory is not a Christian moral theory because the metaethical theory lacks connections to central parts of Christian theology, such as Christology. Second, I argue that divine command theory does not fit well with the New Testament's vision of the moral life. In New Testament ethics, the deepest reason for doing what is required of us is not that God says so but that God is so. Seeing the moral life as a life of imitating Christ integrates into Christian theology better than divine command ethics does and can still incorporate the ethical relevance of divine commands.

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Notes

- ¹ See, for instance, (Antony 2008; Koons 2012; Morrision 2009; Sullivan 1993; Joyce 2002; Craig et al. 2020; Jordan 2012; Murphy 2002, 2011; Wielenberg 2020, 2022). A consequence of the fact that most critiques are philosophical is that books defending divine command ethics—such as *God and Moral Obligation* by Evans, *Finite and Infinite Goods* by Adams, and *God's Call* by Hare—mainly deal with philosophical rather than theological critique.
- ² Some might worry whether this allows for some timeless truths. The metaethical theory that is true today would presumably also be true in the days of Moses, but it certainly could not be labelled as Christian in those days because there was no Christian theology into which to integrate it. Now, it is entirely possible to hold that there are some timeless truths and also hold that coherence is a good method of pursuing truth. Consider our capability of knowing God. Because God's self-disclosure has occurred over time—culminating in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ—we are in a better position today to know who God is than in the days of Moses. Therefore, in the same way that God is always the same but we are in an epistemologically better position to know who God is after the incarnation, God's grounding of morality is always the same but we are in a better position to reveal this after the Incarnation. So, using coherence as a method for pursuing truth—especially when combined with a view of progressive revelation—implies that some people at a certain time and place will be in a better situation to discover some (timeless) truths.
- ³ O'Donovan is not as restrictive in *Self, World, and Time* (O'Donovan 2013). Because *Resurrection and Moral Order* is “an outline for evangelical ethics”, it would be more to the point to say that evangelical ethics must arise from the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- ⁴ Thank you to an anonymous referee for this objection.
- ⁵ As opposed to the other divine command theorists mentioned in this article, Barth also holds that what is good for humans is constituted by God's command (Barth 1957b, vol. II.2, p. 547; McKenny 2021, p. 54).
- ⁶ NRSV is used unless otherwise stated.
- ⁷ Zagzebski makes this point (Zagzebski 2004, p. 240).
- ⁸ See also 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 1 Corinthians 11:1.
- ⁹ Ephesians 5:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, and 1 Corinthians 11:1. There are also other cases in which Paul urges his readers to imitate himself (1 Corinthians 4:16) or other churches (1 Thessalonians 2:14) who are in Christ.
- ¹⁰ See also (Sanders 1977, pp. 502–508). The phrase “in Christ” or “in the Lord” occurs 130 times in the Pauline Corpus.
- ¹¹ Paul holds that it is not our imitation but the work of Christ that bring us into union with Christ (Dunn 1998, pp. 410–11). This is to say that moral life is a consequence of the union with Christ rather than a precondition. See, for instance, Romans 6, where Paul first elaborates on the “in Christ” motif (6:1–11) and then draws the ethical consequences (6:12–14).
- ¹² The theological question of the relationship between the historical Jesus and the Christ is important one but is not addressed here.
- ¹³ What Quinn seems to have in mind here is the traditional Christian thought of the human condition as fallen (Quinn 1992, p. 508).
- ¹⁴ I am grateful to Hare for making this point at the *God and Morality* conference at Aix-Marseille Université, 2021.
- ¹⁵ Harrison critiques a theory that, similar to mine, grounds morality in God but not in God's command (Jordan 2012). Harrison's critique is connected to his view on the relationship between normative reasons and commands. He argues that some normative reasons (presumably obligations) are identical to commands. I argue that a command gives rise to a reason and that God's command gives rise to an overriding reason, that is, an obligation (Jakobsen 2020).

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