

Biblical Worldview Scope Document for *Ethics*

This scope document is our attempt to answer the question, “What must a student understand and value in order to comprehend ethics from a biblical worldview?” What follows is a list of the topics that we believe are essential for twelfth-grade Bible students to understand and internalize. We anticipate that early in the course students will be required to *explain* these themes. However, as these themes recur, we plan to require students to *evaluate* ideas within these themes, *formulate* a Christian understanding of these themes, and *apply* what they have learned about these themes to real-life situations. We hope to achieve high levels of internalization when students are required to *apply* their learning.

Authority

Creation

Because there is only one God who made the world and everything in it, this God is the ultimate authority. He has revealed himself in words, and acts, and further words that explain those acts. Students should be able to explain why God’s authoritative revelation ought to guide all people in their worship and in their ethical decisions.

Fall

Since Eden humans have replaced God’s authoritative word with other authorities. Every religion or ethical system sets up its own authority in place of or alongside God’s revelation.¹ Many people set up their own reason, intuition, or feelings as authorities in place of God’s Word. The result is the multiplication of false ethical systems.

Redemption

The only hope for sinners is to turn from false authorities and to submit to the authority of the true God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture. Any personal ethical reformation will have to begin with the acknowledgment of God’s authority in Scripture to guide human character, desires, and behaviors. Students should develop the habit of testing all developments in ethical systems, and their own ethical choices, by Scripture.

• Action Points

- Explain how the Old Testament law relates to the Christian today.
- Explain how biblical wisdom functions in ethical decision-making about issues the Bible does not directly address.
- Evaluate ethical systems (e.g., utilitarianism, situation ethics) by the standard of Scripture.
- Apply Scripture wisely to a variety of ethical decisions.

Creational Order

Creation

When God created the world, He made not only the physical stuff of the universe, but He also built into it the structures by which it works. Students should be able to explain that God designed the world to work in a moral way that conforms to His character. God’s law is a statement and an application of these creational norms, and true ethics will involve conformity to the way God made His world to work.

¹ Placing an authority alongside Scripture is a more subtle way of nullifying the authority of Scripture. As Jesus told the Pharisees, their tradition made void the Word of God (Matt. 15:6).

Fall

Fallen humans resist living according to the creational order. Though every ethical system is in some sense dependent upon the creational order, every fallen system twists it in some way. For instance, a principle of teleology can be perverted into consequentialist ethics. The importance of acting with integrity can be twisted into an existentialist philosophy of ethics. Students should develop skills in identifying these distortions of creational order and distinguishing what is creational and what is fallen.

Redemption

As Christians evaluate ethical issues, they need to demonstrate not only what a right course of action is but also why that course of action makes better sense of the world that God has made than the fallen alternatives. Since unbiblical worldviews have shifted the plausibility structures² of many people, Christians must shift their worldview away from the twisted ways that many people have come to view the world.

• Action Points

- Defend the idea that God’s creation includes a moral order.
- Evaluate the various ways in which fallen ethical systems conflict with the created order.
- Formulate how a biblical worldview needs to shift current plausibility structures.

Man’s Chief End

Creation

The Bible provides a number of purposes for which God made humans: to be conformed to God’s image (Gen. 1:26–28), to rule over creation under God’s greater rule (Gen. 1:26–28), to delight in God’s law (Ps. 1:1–3), to fear God (Prov. 1:7), to trust in the Lord with all one’s being and to know Him in all one’s ways (Prov. 3:5–6), to be blessed or to flourish (Ps. 1:1; Matt. 5:3–12), to walk worthy of God and do good works that glorify the Father (Matt. 5:16; Col. 1:9–12), to seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33) and then to enter that kingdom (Matt. 5:20), to be conformed to the Son’s image for the Son’s glory (Rom. 8:29), to be holy, blameless, pure, and righteous so that God receives glory (Eph. 1:4; Phil. 1:9–11), to be mature in Christ (Col. 1:28), to attain the Sabbath rest (Heb. 3–4). These various purposes are often summed up as “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”³

Fall

In a fallen world humans make themselves, not God, their chief end. Happiness has long been thought to be the chief end of man. This is not far wrong if one’s happiness is to be found in God.

But non-Christian ethical systems will root happiness in doing good to oneself or to others. This error can be difficult to spot because doing good to others is the focus of the second Great Commandment. It is a subtle idolatry. More commonly at present, people root their happiness in experiential satisfaction. The story in the West has been “a history of diminution of the object of love: from the vast expanse of the infinite God, love first tapered to the boundaries of the universal human community, and then radically contracted to the narrowness of a single self—one’s own self.”⁴In other words, people have replaced love of God with love of self.

Redemption

As students consider various ethical decisions, they need to examine their motivations. Christians should be motivated to act ethically because they desire to glorify God by being conformed to His image, in obedience to His law and for the advancement of His kingdom. Only a life that seeks the glory of God will truly flourish.

² The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission defines “plausibility structure” this way: “A plausibility structure is a belief-forming apparatus that acts as a gatekeeper, letting in evidence that is matched against what we already consider to be possible.” “The Role of Plausibility and Community in Shaping Beliefs: Understanding the Significance of Worldviews,” The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (website), September 30, 2022.

³ This iconic phrase is from the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 387.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, “Human Flourishing,” in *Renewing the Evangelical Mission*, ed. Richard Lints (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 17.

Students should also be able to demonstrate in evangelistic encounters and ethical debates why the chief end of the Christian faith is more compelling than the ultimate goals of other philosophies.

- **Action Points**

- Identify the ends the Bible gives for humans and how these ends contribute to glorifying God and enjoying him forever.
- Evaluate the ends other ethical systems propose, especially the end of personal, experiential satisfaction.
- Internalize conformity to Christ, delighting in God's law, and glorifying God as one's chief end.

Virtue

Creation

Virtue is “rightly ordered love,”⁵ which is another way of saying that virtue is excellence of moral character.⁶ Character can grow and develop, but character is not transitory. A person with a virtuous character will have “an active, developing, persisting, and reliable disposition to act, feel, or respond” in morally excellent ways.⁷ God's goal is not merely for people to *do* the right things. God's goal is for people to *be* the right kind of people.

Fall

In many philosophies of ethics virtue remains a significant concern. However, the means by which virtues are attained are often moralistic. In reaction to moralism, many have embraced the cult of authenticity. Students should recognize the choice between moralism and authenticity to be a false alternative to having a character formed in virtue so that one truly becomes what he ought to be.

Redemption

The development of true virtue is not something that individuals can achieve on their own. The work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for true, inner transformation. Students must internalize this reality so that they can grow in virtue. As students interact with others in evangelistic and apologetic encounters, they should reckon with this fact. The people they encounter may be internally disappointed with their own failures in developing virtue. They may have given up on that effort and become satisfied with moralism.

- **Action Points**

- Explain the importance of developing virtue.
- Evaluate authenticity.
- Develop a plan for growing in virtue themselves.

Wisdom

Creation

O. Palmer Robertson helpfully explains the concept of wisdom: “Wisdom is [1] the ability to understand the basic principles inherent in God's created order, and to live by those principles. [2] Wisdom enables a person to summarize these basic principles in a succinct and memorable fashion.

Wisdom is living out the whole of life with a constant awareness of accountability before a loving, gracious, and just Creator and Redeemer.”⁸ Proverbs 8:22–31 teaches that God built wisdom into the order of creation. So the

⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 15.22; cf. “From what has been said, 'tis evident that true virtue must chiefly consist in love to God.” Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey and John E. Smith, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 550.

⁶ Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd, “Introduction,” in *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

⁷ Drawing on wording from Timpe and Boyd, *Virtues and Their Vices*, 8.

⁸ *The Christ of Wisdom: A Redemptive-Historical Exploration of the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament* (P&R, 2017), 12–13. The three parts of this definition correspond to three wisdom words or phrases found in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament: *chokmah* (“wisdom”), *mashal* (“proverb”), *yirat Yahweh* (“the fear of Yahweh”). *Ibid.*, 9–12.

wise person must observe the world, through the corrective lens of Scripture's teaching and from a posture of fearing the Lord, to become wise.

Fall

The fool is the person who lives against the grain of the created order and in resistance to all consequences or instruction related to his or her foolishness. This foolishness can be expressed with great sophistication and can be developed into complex ethical systems.

Redemption

Students show growth in wisdom by learning how to apply the Bible to situations that it does not directly address by drawing principles and paradigms from Scripture and applying them to various situations that call for ethical discernment.

• **Action Points**

- Relate wisdom to the created order.
- Evaluate attempts to live against the created order, and predict likely consequences for doing so.
- Practice a method of ethical decision-making that makes use of biblical wisdom.