

## Ethics and Biblical Events

By [John Frame](#)

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Some may wonder why I have chosen to write an ethical treatise focused on law, rather than on the great events of biblical history. Why not an ethic of creation? Or incarnation? Or atonement, resurrection, or eschatological expectation?

An ethic of creation would, of course, focus on the biblical concern for the environment. But since the environment includes everything, it could use the environment as a perspective on other ethical teaching in the Bible: God as our worship environment, the Sabbath as our temporal environment, the family as our nurturing environment, etc.

An ethic of incarnation might focus on how we should follow Jesus' example by entering fully into the lives of others, loving them by empathy and sympathy. An ethic of atonement would focus on self-sacrificing love as the paradigm of love. An ethic of resurrection would stress bringing God's renewal into our own lives and those of others. An eschatological ethic would see everything in the light of our future hope, including the rewards of heaven.

I have no objection to ethical treatises of these types. They can be very helpful, useful perspectives on the discipline. I have chosen, however, to focus on the law, for reasons such as the following:

1. The focus on law enables us to interact with our historic traditions, for it is the focus of the confessions of various denominations.
2. The law has been the main focus of my own study of ethics. So I find it easier to work in this conceptual milieu.
3. I believe that despite its historic centrality, the authority of the law is under attack in some Christian circles (let alone secular circles). Many Christians think that attention to the law is spiritually detrimental, or that it detracts from grace. In my judgment, this view confuses the legal with the legalistic. This whole book, I trust, is an antidote to that kind of thinking.
4. An ethic based on one or more redemptive-historical events inevitably reverts to law when it seeks to define its specific standards. In an ethic of creation, an author will want to say that we should care for the environment. But how does he know that, from the bare fact that God created the heavens and the earth? God

has not charged rats or tigers with the care of the earth, only human beings. And he has given us that responsibility, not just by creating things, but by giving us a mandate to care for them. Mandate is another word for law. Similarly, whatever we may want to derive ethically from incarnation, etc. will have to be verified in God's law. To derive it from the event simply in itself is a case of the naturalistic fallacy.

5. It may be that in some cases the desire to turn from law to some other aspect of Scripture as ethical focus is related to the desire for human autonomy. As sinners (and often as modern theologians), we don't want God telling us what to do. It may seem that by moving away from a legal focus we can avoid the stark voice of God commanding good and forbidding evil. But as I have indicated, the focus on biblical events depends on the law for its ethical authority and credibility.

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