

Christian Issues in regard to Ethics

By Barry McWilliams

Ethics and Morality for the Christian are based on God's Revelation. The believer is not concerned so much with their source and content as he is with their practical application.

The believer lives in a place of tension, he is a citizen of two realms - living in the midst of a sinful and rebellious world, but as a part of God's kingdom - one who has been redeemed and is being sanctified, and who lives in anticipation of God's final consummation of history.

Christians live in a state of continuity and discontinuity - that results in a tension between his faith and cultural settings. Our lives in many ways are undistinguishable from the lives of our fellowmen, as are the ethical situations we find ourselves in. But our relationship with the world has been changed in our new birth in Christ. In Christian history, the church has been tugged both ways.

Many problems for Christian ethics often arise out of this.

- Christian action should be visible in word and deed. But how do we make it so? Answers differ. Liberals preach social action, evangelicals preach salvation.

- Christians do not pretend to live in a perfect world - the struggle lies in how to live in a sinful world. And love our sinful neighbor.

- Does the Christian live under rigid principles (maxims), or under a Lordship?

- Does the Christian strive towards healing this world or preparing for the next?

A Christian's ethics are not based on ethical codes, naturalism, social environment, or human values, but rooted theologically in the nature and activity of God. The ethics or lack of ethics of the culture or society in which he lives are on another and much weaker foundations.

As we look to God and His character, we find He is holy, righteous, just and loving, and He acts accordingly - He judges righteously, He keeps his Covenant, He reveals His love in Christ. Christ's righteousness was revealed in His humbling Himself to live under law - obedient to the cross,

laying His life down for His people. Christians are to be imitators of Christ, their activity is to be redemptive.

Jesus stressed loving one's neighbor. But who is our neighbor and what is his highest good? Jesus was concerned about wholeness - he ministered bodies and relationships as well as souls. He was undoing the evil effects of sin and destroying Satan's dominion, and establishing His kingdom in its place. What God is doing is the ultimate "good."

The question is ... "How can I know what is the Christian action in a given situation?"

- One approach is simply to ask "What does the Law say?" But the Law does not always speak clearly. It tells us what not to do and not what to do. Leviticus is filled with casuistic examples of applying the law negatively and positively - but it is incomplete. For example, it says little about the ethics of marriage. And there are many situations where it does not speak that arise in our daily lives and world and culture.

- Another approach is to find situations in the Bible and use them for direction for the situation at hand. But are they analogous enough to give direction? Is a biblical situation normative or just descriptive? Are there situations to cover the complexities and variety of our situations?

- Another approach is to take one norm and absolutize it - for example "love" - Situational ethics does this = "love is to will my neighbor's good" - but what is my neighbor's "good?" Others might suggest "Faith" as a starting point. However, a Christian's sense of what is the "good" the standard must be the whole character of God, not just one aspect.

Thus there tend to be three approaches to Christian Ethical systems:

Nomism - the Ethical rules in the Bible are all applicable today because God doesn't change. It is our responsibility to bring into expression as many of the biblical rules as possible, even if this requires restructuring society to do so.

Some argue strongly for the Old Testament Civil Law, or at least identifying the ethical principles under girding them and implementing a new case law. Critics of this approach point out its limitations, the cultural problems, and the changes that Christ and the New Testament have made in particular the leadership of the Spirit. (Gal 3:19-4:7)

Situationalism - at the other extreme, sees an ethics of absolute rules as inappropriate and too inflexible. Every situation is different. The greatest commandment is Love, which is a moral compass that can be trusted for direction. Biblical situations are examples, not binding in us.

Certainly many ethical situations faced may have their unique elements and we need to be sensitive to these - but this approach opens the door to moral relativism and subjective answers - but may not distinguish wants from needs or clearly show how to meet those needs. Situationalists tend to emphasize the extreme examples of moral dilemmas - protecting Jews hiding in the closet, etc. and often pit God's attributes or commandments against each other; and play down the role of God's providence and His power to deliver us from evil.

Principlized Ethics - is a middle ground between the extremes. It looks to what the whole Bible says and teaches, deriving from its great ethical themes principles as a norm for the believer. Some recognize the place of natural law as the basis of ethics in society. Recognizing the legitimacy of a hierarchy of ethical rules to deal with dilemmas, and also the changed relationship of the believer to the law taught in the New Testament, it avoids nomistic approaches by

focusing on God's character, on Christ's love and the leading of the Holy Spirit. It looks to the wisdom of the community of believers for guidance. Jesus himself summarizes the law in terms of Loving God and Loving one's neighbor. But principlized ethics avoids pure situationalism by an inclination to follow Scriptural teaching unless there is good reason not to - like the contradiction of an important ethical principle.

Beyond the differences in relating law to ethic, is the matter of priorities.

While methodology determines the correctness of what we say, prioritization determines what we actually do. Are we too focused on the details - too involved in our own personal holiness to deal with exploitation and injustice in our society, etc. Is our morality focused on positive warm ethics of love, or coldly negative, avoiding contamination by sin through contact with our culture.

A truly biblical ethic should result in "faith working through obedient love," taking action, integrating and reflecting the redemptive nature and work of God into our actions as the basis of our conduct. It looks to the Word and the Body for wisdom, and views situations through an understanding of the implications of the creation, fall and redemption of man through Christ.