



Biblical Ethics

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The subject of ethics is generally conceived of in terms of a system of moral values, a way of treating or thinking about moral questions and choices; thus the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Shorter) speaks of ethics as a "field of moral science" or as "rules of conduct." This is a starting point for a general definition but is inadequate for distinctly Christian purposes.

Biblical ethics relates human values and conduct directly to the text of the Word of God. Because Christians have historically believed that God speaks His mind to the world in the sacred Scriptures the Bible has always governed their approach to ethics. Christian ethics, as a subset of this larger field of thought, includes reflective and distinctive Christian thought about ethical decision making as well as the consideration of the history of Christian theologians' response to the myriad of moral questions and decisions believers in Christ face. Indeed, ethics is related to theology in general and the living of the Christian life specifically. It is related to Justification because men made righteous through faith are new men. It is related to Sanctification because men being made progressively holy long not only to be right before God but to do the right *corram deo*. It is related to Glorification because those whom He will glorify are, by union with Christ, "being made holy" (Heb. 10:14).

Robertson McQuilkin writes:

Ethics might be called a system of moral values and duties. It has to do with ideal human character, actions, and ends. What ought a person to do or refrain from doing? What attitudes and behavior should be viewed as good? And *why* should they be considered good? What is the highest good, "the chief end of man," the purpose of human existence? These are the questions the study of ethics seeks to answer.¹

The word "ethics" itself is derived from two very similar Greek words which mean simply, "custom or usage and sometimes custom or practice as prescribed by law."² Professor John Murray suggests in his classic lectures on Christian ethics, *Principles of Conduct*, that the one instance in which the New Testament exemplifies more closely than any other the idea to which ethics has been used in Christian thought is 1 Corinthians 15:33. Here the apostle writes, "Bad company corrupts good morals." The term "good morals" (or "good character," NIV) refers to the manner of life and conduct which is in agreement with the Christian faith and a sound profession of its teaching. Adds Murray, in a succinct and helpful manner, "In terms of this concept ethics would refer to the manner of life, to the pattern of conduct, or, in a word, to conduct."³

The biblical word that more accurately expresses the actual concept of ethics in the New Testament is not the word from which we derive our English word ethics. The biblical concept is more clearly discovered in a word translated "good behavior" (in James 3:13, or "good life," NIV) and "respectful behavior" (in 1 Peter 3:2, or "reverence of your lives,"

NIV). What this means is that the behavior the Christian life demands, and the Spirit produces, is one of goodness, purity and holiness.⁴

The Christian life is a way of living unto the glory of God. It is a life that relates all to one supreme goal--the glory to God! Ultimately, therefore, Christian ethics seeks to relate all of life to the highest good.

Is it not more than coincidental that early believers were first called people of "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22)? Their confession and manner of conduct was called, "the way." Why? No doubt they understood this association in terms of our Lord being "the way" (John 14:6). Personally, I have no doubt that the ethical dimension of who and what these followers of Christ were and how they lived in a pagan culture must not be missed in this nomenclature either. As Murray again notes, "it (i.e., this designation) does evince the total distinctiveness of the faith, worship and life of the disciples of Christ."⁵

So we see that ethics is at the very heart of the Christian faith, both theologically and practically. The living of this distinctive and freeing lifestyle, called Christian, is profoundly related to what we call ethics. As David Clyde Jones writes in his excellent new work, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, "What goals ought we to pursue in life? What sort of persons ought we to be? What practices ought we to follow? These are the great questions the discipline of ethics seeks to answer."⁶

Living life to the highest good, as referred to above, can take several approaches when Christians tackle this subject with passion. Some have come to the text of the Bible in a rather wooden fashion, looking for selected texts that will support a certain conclusion. In this approach the Bible is used as a kind of code book without reference to its covenantal structure. Efforts to systematize are pushed upon the text too rigidly.

Others come to the text with no confidence that God has revealed clearly an ethical perspective that can be clearly known. (This can be seen, for example, in the modern arguments certain supposed evangelicals have made regarding the homosexual lifestyle.) Often in this approach the Word of God is treated as a nonauthoritative text of antiquity that merely suggests ways in which people once lived in more primitive times. In this view the Bible merely contains the *opinions* of ancient religious writers. Good opinions they might be but not morally binding on modern people.

There are two basic presuppositions I bring to this issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal*. First, Scripture is the final authority in all ethical matters. This means that every teaching of Scripture (and this is not as easy to determine as many conservative Christians sometimes tend to think) is normative unless it is limited to a specific audience or modified within the canon itself. The question of hermeneutics will always be extremely important for the study of ethics. This important presupposition is quite often forgotten when believers begin to disagree regarding issues of conduct and decision making.

The second presupposition that I bring to this issue is that of the Gospel itself. Indeed, in every issue of this publication I strive to bring all subjects under the authority of the Gospel. Modern evangelicals far too often advocate an ethical perspective that is not *distinctly* Christian. The ethics of moral consensus has overwhelmed much modern emphasis in evangelicalism, even in the Reformed community of the church. Any ethical approach that focuses on the larger society loses ultimately its distinctively Christocentric approach. The Cross of Jesus Christ is the foundation of all Christian ethics. Evangelical ethics must find its basis in the doctrines of Reconciliation and Redemption. Ethics, in this environment, is a creative response to the grace of God rather than "a servile conformity to the inflexible

moral code on the one hand or an ongoing discovery of abiding values on the other." Donald G. Bloesch is surely correct in *Freedom for Obedience* where he seeks to "present an ethic beyond legalism on the one hand and antinomianism and situationalism on the other." Further, Bloesch demonstrates that "The divine commandment is held as the only infallible basis for ethical decision; not law, as such, but law united with gospel, the new law of spirit and life made possible by divine grace."⁷ Only with an approach such as this can we approach the subject of ethics in the classical sense that the early Reformers understood as they helped free the church of their time from a philosophically slavish understanding that submerged Christian ethics under a sea of moral reasonings and dicta that brought bondage to the hearts of God's people.

We are not, in the proper sense, doing moral theology in this issue. We are seeking to follow the way of the Cross which cannot be reconciled with the laws and regulations of the non-redeemed. Only when we are set free by the Gospel of God's grace will we understand ethics with this whole new Christian understanding. I pray that you will live all of life to His glory and learn to think ethically because of His grace!

Testing (*dokenazein*) is the key to all New Testament ethics ... Certainty of moral judgment in the concrete sense is in the last analysis the one great fruit that the Holy Spirit, this factor in redemptive history, produces in the individual man.

Oscar Cullman

When all is said and done, morality becomes a way of protecting ourselves against the fact that salvation depends on God, and on Him alone. We establish norms (out of the Bible, to be sure) as a safeguard against God If only we could offer God an indisputable virtue, then we could put our minds at rest. God would not be able to condemn us. We would not be delivered into his hands, to *His* free decision.

Jacques Ellul

The point of departure for Christian ethics is not the reality of one's self, or the reality of the world, nor is it the reality of standards and values. It is the reality of God as He reveals Himself to Jesus Christ. It is the reality of God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Notes:

¹ Robertson McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (Tyndale: Wheaton, 1989), 9.

² John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 11.

⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics for Contemporary Times* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), xvii-xviii and comments from dustjacket.