

# Ethics

Unit 313 – Foundations 3

## Week 2 Christians and Social Ethics



## Last time we were together...

- Ethics is the field of study; Morality is the focus of study.
- Morality is the set of judgements people make about what is right or wrong, good or bad.
- Ethical frameworks are either Deontological (duty-centred) or Teleological (end-centred)

DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS (duty-centred)	TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS (end-centred)
Based on the authority of a higher power EG: God	Based on the pursuit of a desired end EG: Happiness
Claim to be objective and absolute EG: Divine Command	Are subjective and contextual EG: Situational Ethics
Rules are good and right regardless of results	Rules are good and right because of results
Dominated Pre-Modernity and Modernity	Dominates Post-Modernity

- A variety of ethical frameworks were developed by secular philosophers to answer the fundamental questions “What is right and wrong?” and “Are there any objective universal moral laws?”
- For the Christian God is seen as the basis of defining what is good and right because He is the ultimate being and has the final say.
- The primary sources for determining who God is and what God wants are: Scripture (revelation), Tradition, Reason and Experience with Scripture receiving priority.

## Where we left off...

Christians are often described as “people of the Book.” What does this mean in the context of ethics? The goal Christians share ...

“is to shape our common life in the situations in which we find ourselves according to the characters, convictions and practices related in Scripture” (S. Fowl and L. G. Jones).<sup>1</sup>

But, whenever Christians eat pork (Leviticus 11:7-8), refrain from stoning sexual offenders (Deuteronomy 22:13-24) or no longer require women to wear veils when they pray (1 Corinthians 11:5, 13), we are saying something about *how* we are “people of the Book.” So, in what way is the Bible to be used in ethics? What are the options?

### (a) *The Bible is a “rule” book*

Some believe that, in ethics, the Bible should be used as a rule book – that God’s revelation of himself comes to us in the form of commands or laws. Our task is to systematise the rules and then obey them. For example,

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<sup>1</sup> S. E. Fowl and L. G. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 20.

“The goal of practical theology is to deduce, from the doctrines and precepts of the Bible, rules for the organization and administration of the Christian Church in all her functions, and for the guidance of the individual Christian in all the relations of life” (A. A. Hodge).<sup>2</sup>

**(b) *The Bible is a “principle” book***

Some believe that, in ethics, the bible should be used as a principle book – that God’s revelation comes to us as a set of principles rather than a set of rules or laws. The laws are still important, but they are expressions of principles applied to particular historical contexts and situations.

Some see viewing the Bible as either the source of “timeless rules” or “timeless principles” is missing the point of what the Bible is.

“The ultimate purpose of God’s self-disclosure is to bring us not into a relationship with either a body of timeless laws or moral axioms, but into relationship with the self-revealing God, and as a consequence with one another and with all creation. The moral principles found within the pages of Scripture serve the Bible’s central purpose, namely to facilitate fellowship or community” (S. Grenz).<sup>3</sup>

Some theologians see what they call a “trajectory” or “development” in scripture. That is, there is a movement in scripture that took ethical situations at the time and improved them, but also pointed forward to further development and improvement. William J. Webb calls this approach the “redemptive-movement” hermeneutic (EG: slavery, the role of women in society and the value of children).

Another significant movement in scripture is the transition every follower of Jesus makes from “Law” to “Liberty” and from “Liberty” to Love”.

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. <sup>2</sup> Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. <sup>3</sup> And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. <sup>4</sup> You have become estranged from Christ, you who *attempt to be justified by law*; you have fallen from grace. <sup>5</sup> For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. <sup>6</sup> For in Christ Jesus

<sup>2</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1870), p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> S. J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, p. 245.

neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love". (Galatians 5:1-6)

"For you, brothers, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. <sup>14</sup>For all the law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Galatians 5:13-14)

All people are bound to and condemned by life under the Law but through faith in Jesus receive and experience Liberty or freedom from the consequence of the Law's judgement. This freedom however is not the end goal and should never be used to justify licentious or self-indulgent behaviour. The higher way is to choose a life of Love which often forgoes personal freedoms and individual rights in favour of selfless concern for the 'other'.

## Week 2 - Christians and Social Ethics?

### 1. Introduction:

Jesus said that as His followers we would be 'in the world' but not 'of the world' (John 17:15). This simply means that even though we live within the context of human social constructs we often represent very different values and priorities to the ones held by those living around us. As ambassadors of God's alternative kingdom here on earth we have a responsibility to engage with the culture of our given social context and affect change for good and for God in whatever way we can.

***The Evangelical Heritage of Social Concern.<sup>4</sup> Some examples:***

***(a) The United Kingdom: The Clapham Sect.***

England of the 18th century has been described as being characterised by "the wanton torture of animals for sport, the bestial drunkenness of the populace, the inhuman traffic in African negroes, the kidnapping of fellow countrymen for exportation and sale as slaves, the mortality of parish children, the universal gambling obsession, the savagery of the prison system and penal code, the welter of immorality, the prostitution of the theatre, the growing prevalence of lawlessness, superstition and lewdness; the political bribery and corruption, the ecclesiastical arrogance and truculence, the shallow pretensions of Deism, the insincerity and debasement rampant in Church and State – such manifestations suggest that the British

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<sup>4</sup> J. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 2006), pp. 2-6.

people were then perhaps as deeply degraded and debauched as any people in Christendom” (J. Wesley Beady).<sup>5</sup>

Yet, into this situation a number of Evangelical Christians, some from a church in Clapham (at that time a small village 3 miles south of London), banded together. Their leader was William Wilberforce, a member of the British Parliament. They became known as the Clapham Sect, and were sometimes mocked in the press as “the Saints.” They are mainly known for their work toward the emancipation of slaves and the abolition of the slave trade<sup>6</sup>.

**(b) Reversing “The Great Reversal.”<sup>7</sup>**

Shortly after WWI, there appeared to be a great shift in the Evangelical church away from social concern. This has been called “The Great Reversal” because it was the exact opposite of what had been occurring in the 18th and 19th centuries. The reasons sometimes proffered for this are:

- (i) Fighting against theological Liberalism.
- (ii) Reaction against the “social gospel” of Liberalism.
- (iii) Widespread disillusionment and pessimism after WWI.
- (iv) The spread of Dispensational Pre-millennialism.
- (v) The spread of Christianity into the middle-class.

However in the twentieth century “The Great Reversal” underwent a reversal of it’s own as a result of a rediscovery of clearer and fuller understandings of the great doctrines of the Bible<sup>8</sup>:

## 2. Engaging with Social Ethics

The Christian Church has three general options when responding to social / ethical issues in the world:

**ESCAPE** \_\_\_\_\_ **ENGAGE** \_\_\_\_\_ **EMBRACE**  
 (Avoid) (Adopt)

<sup>5</sup> J. Wesley Beady, *England: Before and After Wesley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939), p. 405.

<sup>6</sup> Settlement of freed slaves in Sierra Leone (1787), the abolition of the trade (1807), the registration of slaves in the colonies (1820) which ended slave smuggling, and finally their emancipation (1833).

<sup>7</sup> J. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>8</sup> J. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, pp. 14-25.

When seeking to *engage* society the church can either:

**IMPOSE** \_\_\_\_\_ **IGNORE** \_\_\_\_\_ **INFLUENCE**  
 (Beliefs, Behaviour, Morals) (Persuasion, Dialogue, Example)

### 3. Christian Involvement – 4 Essentials

#### (a) *Permeate – being salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16)*

Four truths about Jesus’ teaching about salt and light cannot be missed:

- Christians are fundamentally different from non-Christians.
- Christians must permeate non-Christian society.
- Christians can influence non-Christian society.
- Christians must retain their Christian distinctness.

“Our Christian habit is to bewail the world’s deteriorating standards with an air of rather self-righteous dismay. We criticize its violence, dishonesty, immorality, disregard for human life, and materialistic greed. ‘The world is going down the drain,’ we say with a shrug. But whose fault is it? Who is to blame? Let me put it like this. If the house is dark when nightfall comes, there is no sense in blaming the house, for that is what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is ‘Where is the light?’ If the meat goes bad and become inedible, there is no sense in blaming the meat, for that is what happens when bacteria are left alone to breed. The question to ask is ‘Where is the salt?’ Just so, if society deteriorates and its standards decline, till it becomes like a dark night or stinking fish, there is no sense in blaming society, for that is what happens when fallen men and women are left to themselves, and human selfishness is unchecked. The question to ask is ‘Where is the church? Why are the salt and light of Jesus Christ not permeating and changing our society?’ It is sheer hypocrisy on our part to raise our eyebrows, shrug our shoulders or wring our hands. The Lord Jesus told us to be the world’s salt and light. If therefore darkness and rottenness abound, it is our fault and we must accept the blame” (John Stott).

#### (b) *Protest*

The church can and must raise its voice in opposition to injustice and unrighteousness with humility, grace, brokenness and compassion. Sometimes this requires a public stand for truth and righteousness that may attract persecution, oppression or resistance from the world or from the perpetrators of the injustice or unrighteousness.

“Sometime the law and justice stand in opposition to one another and when they do the church must always side with justice” – Tony Campolo

**(c) Pray**

“We cannot read the Bible without being impressed by its constant emphasis on the efficacy of prayer. ‘The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective’ wrote James (5:16). ‘I tell you,’ said Jesus, ‘that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 18:19). We do not claim to understand the rationale of intercession. But somehow it enables us to enter the field of spiritual conflict, and to align ourselves with the good purposes of God, so that his power is released and the principalities of evil are bound” (John Stott).

**(d) Proclaim**

The church has a mandate to be a prophetic voice and to proclaim truth and grace to the world as representatives of the Kingdom of God. Teaching and Preaching are essential components of this proclamation.

## 4. Current Christian Social Involvement – Case Studies

**(a) Westboro Baptist Church (United States)**

1. What do you think is wrong with the Westboro Protest?
2. What might be wrong with the Westboro Message?
3. What impact are they having on the world around them?
4. What do you think motivates their actions and beliefs?

**(b) Love Makes A Way (Australia)**

1. Is it wrong for a Christian to break the law in protest?
2. When should a Christian accept being arrested over submitting to the law of the land?
3. What other or alternative forms of protest might a Christian make?
4. Is civil disobedience and effective form of Christian protest?