

Ethics

Unit 313 – Foundations 3

Week 3 Christians, Ethics and Justice



Last time we were together...

- For the Christian the Bible plays a central and important role in answering the question “what is good and right?” because the Bible contains a revelation of the heart, mind, will and way of God.
- How we interpret and apply the Bible’s revelation however can be a challenging task and is consequently the source of disagreement and division.
- Although the Bible contains “laws” and “principles” it is not a book of “timeless, universal, laws and principles” and must be understood first and foremost as the narrative history of God’s redemptive dealings with humanity and as preparation for His ultimate self-revelation in Jesus.
- The Bible reveals two very important trajectories: the development of human morality into what we know today as the Judeo-Christian Ethic and the spiritual progress of individual disciples from Law to Liberty to Love (Galatians 5:1-6; 13-14).

LOVE _____
Embracing Responsibilities
(The “Royal Law”)

LIBERTY _____
Enjoying Rights
(danger: licentiousness)

LAW _____
Obeying Rules
(danger: legalism)

Where we left off... 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.¹ Some examples:

(a) The United Kingdom: The Clapham Sect.

¹ J. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 4th ed., 2006), pp. 2-6.

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 people were then perhaps as deeply degraded and debauched as any people in Christendom” (J. Wesley Beady).²

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 trade³.

(b) Reversing “The Great Reversal.”⁴

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.

² J. Wesley Beady, *England: Before and After Wesley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939), p. 405.

³ 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).

⁴ J. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, pp. 6-8.

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 Bible⁵.

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)

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

⁵ J. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, pp. 14-25.

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 an effective form of Christian protest?

Christians and Justice?

“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you”. (Psalm 89:14)

“He has showed, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

1. The Common Sense of Justice

(a) *Justice is about human rights.*

This conviction is that people ought to get what they have a right to have. When people in a society generally get what is theirs by right, we call that society just.

“It is generally agreed that it is for justice to pay what is due” (Thomas Aquinas).⁶

(b) *Justice involves obligation.*

If one person has a right, someone else has a duty to honour it. If a person has a right to personal property, others have an obligation not to steal it.

⁶ T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 2a, q. 60, art. 3.

(c) Justice is impersonal.

Justice is impersonal in that it is not dependent upon our personal attitudes toward others. We owe our neighbours what they have coming to them, regardless of whether we are friends or strangers.

(d) Justice is social.

Justice has to do with arranging things in human society so that individuals and groups respect each other's rights. There are different kinds of social relationships in which we press our claims to rights on each other.

(i) Contractual justice

Between parties in a business contract.

(ii) Distributive justice

When society shares its tangible resources (water, land, air, minerals) and intangible resources (opportunity to learn, power to determine one's own life, protection from aggressors) with each other.

(iii) Retributive justice

Society has claims on us (taxes, obedience to laws, respect public property) and if we do not meet our obligations, society may

(e) Justice depends on just persons.

A just society, in the end, depends upon being filled with just persons.

2. The Biblical Sense of Justice

(a) Why do people have rights?*(i) My neighbour has rights because God created him*

“My neighbour exists separate from me, rooted in God, standing in his own space, different from me. He is there. I am here, separate from him, rooted in God too, a being apart. He has a right to be there because God has set him there. When he claims his own right to be, he only claims the right to be what God created him to be. I must respect him, keep my distance, and let him be. I must not try to own him, control him, seduce him, manipulate him, or deny him his place. It does not matter at all whether I like his being there or whether he is attractive or useful to me. He is there and I must respect his right to be there, because it is where God wondrously set him” (Lewis Smedes).⁷

⁷ L. Smedes, *Mere Morality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 43.

(ii) My neighbour has rights because God created him in his own image – he is a person created to relate to the divine persons and other human persons.

(b) The Gospel’s sense of justice.

- (i) God’s justice gives more than ordinary justice gives.*
- (ii) God’s justice may contradict ordinary justice (Matt 20:1-16).*

(c) The prophets’ sense of justice.

(i) The prophets’ promised more than ordinary justice – the OT prophets called for ordinary justice on a common human scale. But, they had a larger vision than mere justice – they wanted righteousness to flow (Amos 5:24). Righteousness involved justice, but went beyond it.

(ii) The prophets’ passion is for the poor – God had promised that if the judges were fair and did not favour the rich (Deut 1:16-18), then there would be no poor (Deut 15:4-5). Yet, the prophets consistently found the poor being trampled and judges being unfair (Amos 5:12). So, God became a champion of the poor.

(iii) The Decalogue as a guide to justice – the second half of the Decalogue summarizes what most people know to be their neighbour’s rights. This is part of what Paul called the law “written on their hearts” (Rom 2:14-15).

3. Love and Justice – how do they work together?

We have seen that part of a Christian ethic is justice – the respect for people’s rights. Yet, we have also seen that the Christian view of justice went beyond the common sense of justice. In common justice, people get what is theirs by right. In Christian justice, people often receive what is not theirs by right. What is the impulse that is behind this wideness in justice? It is love. How does justice and love work together?

- (a) Love demands that we do justice – justice is love’s minimum demand.***
- (b) Love enlarges the scope of justice – love pushes our concern for justice beyond our own.***
- (c) Love enriches justice – love deepens the common sense of justice.***
- (d) Love gets direction from justice – justice decides where love should focus its attention.***

“There is seldom only one wounded man on the road to Jericho. And most Good Samaritans have a limited budget. Whenever

we have resources for only one needy person and meet two, the calculations of justice must direct the work of love ... these are not questions love is able to cope with; they call for the headwork of justice” (Lewis Smedes).⁸

3. Justice, Love and breaking commandments

(a) Justice and Love are ethical absolutes

Justice demands that people get what is theirs by right, love demands that people get more than what is theirs by right.

(b) Justice and Love need to be held in tension: they are to inform each other.

An action may be motivated by love but is not just, or may be motivated by justice but is not loving. An action must instead be lovingly just or justly loving.

(c) Justice and Love held in tension enables us to prioritise.

The conflicts of this world may force us to choose against one divine commandment out of respect for another. For example, one may, in the interests of justice and love, tell a lie to preserve a life.

⁸ L. Smedes, *Mere Morality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 65.