

CHRISTIAN ETHICS:

Introduction:

Readings: 1 Sam 15:1-3, Deuteronomy 7:2, Levit 24:16,

How do we make moral decisions? What is 'right or wrong?'

World has differentiated between the 'private' & 'public' – God, the church – relegated to a sub-culture:

“We should not narrow down God’s interests to Sundays and the church”

As God’s people, we can adopt this approach: can be “more to do with prayer and fellowship than about involvement in the world”.

Post-Modern Issue – “No such thing as truth” – if it’s true for you – how might this be a dangerous platform for making moral decisions?

THE CHRISTIAN APPROACH:

ABSOLUTIST: 'Biblical', 10 commandments, no 'compromise'

'The commandments which God gives, the laws which he lays down... [are] a classical statement... delivered to Moses on the mountain top, graven on tablets. They come down direct from heaven, and are eternally valid for human conduct' (J.A.T. Robinson, Honest to God [London: SCM, 1963], 106).

SITUATIONIST: The 'New Morality': "Depending upon the situation":

Is our 'conscience' enough? (1 Cor 4:4, 1 Tim 4:2)

Discussion 1 – discuss where you think YOU may be at this time

After 5 mins – introduce case study: Brother Andrew (smuggling bibles) vs The Bible Societies (smuggling is wrong) – does the 'end' (more bibles in country) justify the means? (smuggling).

Discussion 2 – Abortion – right or wrong? Always?

Discussion 3:

Suppose you lived in Nazi Germany and a simple lie on your part could save a Jewish friend from the gas chamber, wouldn't I be justified in committing a comparatively minor moral offence (lying) to prevent a much more serious offence taking place?

This argument introduces the idea of *levels of moral actions*. A person now not only has to choose between right and wrong, but between the *greater* and *lesser* evil.

A KEY POINT IS THAT OUR ETHIC & MORAL DECISIONS SHOULD BE GOD-CENTRED – BUT WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE?

We want to know what 'God thinks' on life matters!

“The Christian believes that moral issues are not merely a matter of social convenience or well-being, but are primarily to do with accepting God's authority over all areas of life”.

Rules (deontological ethics) – there is maximum security in a rule book (providing it can be trusted!).

Results (teleological ethics) – we ask about the consequences of an action or decision.

Motives – we should be interested in the question, Why? Thus, we must *obey* God's rules, be *motivated* by God's love, and make sure the *results* fit in with what we know of God's will as revealed in the Bible. David Field (*The Bible and Christian Living*[London: SU, 1987], 7-18)

Using The Bible:

For the purpose of this study, we are assuming first that the Bible has something *relevant* to say on the subject of making moral decisions, and, second, that it is *authoritative*.

Deductive – Bible as starting point

Inductive – the ethical dilemma as starting point

Meaning – what is *meant*

Significance – what it now *means* for us

(Hermeneutics – see midweek notes on Web)

Example – 1 Corinthians 8: ‘meat sacrificed to idols’ – (remember the issue?) – briefly discuss.

We need to take the time & culture gap into consideration.

1. Using the Bible as our authority in matters of moral conduct does not excuse us from using our minds to think about these things, nor does it excuse us from the responsibility of making our own decisions. The ‘rule book’ approach we noted above is really an attempt to opt out of that kind of responsibility.
2. The Bible need not be expected to answer all our questions. We have to remember the nature of the biblical material. ***It is not a text book of moral behaviour, but primarily a revelation of the person and purposes of God.***
3. Regarding the Bible as our authority does not mean that we should give no place at all for the operation of the Christian conscience, or the teaching of the Christian church. Even so, neither of these is infallible. Both must be directed by, and be subject to, the Bible. ***No action, however attractive to individual Christians or to the whole body of Christians, that is contrary to the revelation of God’s nature and purposes as recorded in the Bible, can be regarded as morally right.***

WE NEED TO ASK SOME QUESTIONS WHEN FACED WITH A MORAL DILEMMA:

- **What is the issue at the *heart* of any particular matter?**
- **Are there *direct* cross cultural relevant passages within the scriptures?**
- **What would Jesus do?**

Questions about the Bible Passage we may refer to:

- What was the *original* meaning?
- What is the *immediate* context?
- What does the Bible *as a whole* say on this matter?
- Can we formulate some *principles*?

“When we come to a biblical exhortation, we must inquire into the underlying theological and ethical principles which are expressed in it, and then proceed to work out how to translate those principles into appropriate exhortations for today” (I. Howard Marshall, ‘Using the Bible in Ethics’, in D.F. Wright (ed.), *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1981], 50).

Exercise 1:

You are driving through a small village at 3am – the traffic light is on red (with no-one around) – do you drive through the light?

Exercise 2:

A couple of (responsible) guys from the church men’s group have invited you out for a game of pool and a ‘beer’. Your work colleague (who has had issues with alcohol) has just come to Christ at the work CU, you want to get to know him and introduce him to some more Christian men – do you invite him along?

Exercise 3:

Look at Joshua 2:4-6. What justification, if any, could be given for Rahab’s lie?

A careful study of the Scriptures will give the Christian clear guidelines concerning the moral and spiritual dimensions of life. It is then our responsibility to apply the principles to our own situations.