

Foundations of Christian Ethics
February 22, 2015, The Rev. Tom Pumphrey

Dilemma Ethics vs. Foundational Ethics

Dilemma Ethics: in terms of goods in conflict.

Doesn't reinforce the good; often is practice in making "the good" disposable;

As a starting point, may erode basic values

Foundational Ethics: the basic values that undergird "the good"

A better starting point to establish "the good" first.

Christian Ethics is the study of moral decision making: making right choices and avoiding sinful choices. The study of Christian Ethics involves four topics:

- **God**: our understanding of who God is in relation to us and our choices;
- **Moral Formation**: the formation of our conscience and habits that recognize the good and exercise good judgment.
- **Good**: discerning the basic values: what is 'the good' to be desired, or 'the evil' to be avoided;
- **Moral Judgment**: the analysis and use of moral principles in given situations

God:

God comes first—not ethics!

How we act affects how we pray and love, and who we worship.

But God loves us first—God's grace saves us, not our behavior.

The ultimate end of Christian Ethics is *God*, not "goodness."

Notice that with God at the center, ethics are not based on "self-interest," freedom, efficiency or social utility.

Moral Formation:

Thus Moral Formation is intertwined with Christian Formation. The human conscience is not automatically pure, but rather beset by fallibility. The conscience must be formed to recognize the good and our wills formed to seek the good and avoid the evil. For Anglicans, ethics is not so much a code or a philosophy, but a matter of daily Christian living ("practical piety"), formed in a community of word and sacrament, in the practices of prayer, reading scripture, and relationship with God together.

The Anglican saying of "Scripture, Tradition and Reason" helps us: Scripture is the basis of our understanding of God and the Christian life. Our reading of scripture is guided by the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through the life of the church in history and today. We seek God with our God-given capacities of understanding, being guided by the Holy Spirit. Notice the primacy of scripture and the subsidiary place of reason.

"The Good:"

How do we determine what is good? There are three approaches, and each is important in the Christian life. Here is a summary:

- **Law**: righteousness is obedience (& sin is disobedience).
- **Purpose**: righteousness is living in accordance with God's purposes.
- **Relationship**: righteousness is right relationship with God and others (and one's self).

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of Law & Obedience:

The Summary of the Law (Matt 22:37-39: love of God & neighbor)

The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17 or Deuteronomy 5:1-21)

Jesus’ New Commandment (John 13:34: love as Christ loved us)

Teachings of the church such as the “Seven Deadly Sins” and Seven Virtues.

Primacy of God above all else in our lives, and the dignity and worth of every human being.

Knowledge of right & wrong does not come from our preferences or desires (we often get it wrong). Our conscience must be *formed* to avoid vice (habits of the heart that lead to sin) and promote virtue (good habits of the heart, and gifts from God (faith, hope and love). We are also called to love sacrificially for others.

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of the purposes of God:

Drawing principles of action based on what are God’s purposes in aspects of life, such as life itself, sex, marriage, government, etc. For example, Jesus grounds rules of marriage in the Genesis creation account, and he grounds rules against malice in the law against murder. This approach often understands most sin as “disordered loves,” abuses of the natural order, requiring re-formation of our conscience and will.

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of relationship:

Rather than determination of “guilt or innocence,” this approach describes our situation in terms of our closeness to God, allowing our brokenness and God’s forgiveness and help of us to be part of our assessment, and avoiding faulty legalism. Laws and purposes inform our daily engagement in this relationship.

Moral Judgment: the analysis and use of moral principles in given situations.

Informed about good and evil and formed in relationship with God, we then live in a complex world involving challenging moral decisions. “The good” is often unclear or mixed with the evil or imperfect, and often, our alternatives and understanding is limited. How do we make good decisions? Often, our moral decisions are complicated by the systems of relationships and external factors involved. It is helpful, therefore, to determine to what extent we can effect an outcome, and to what extent we are responsible. These are questions of *agency*.

And we live together. We have responsibilities to our neighbors and ourselves. We may not be accountable for another’s actions, but we play a part in social systems that can do great harm (such as racism) or great good. How do we act to support the good in the system? Principles of justice (there are several) and respecting the dignity of the individual through autonomy play roles here as well. But they are complex and can sometime mask more selfish ends.

- **Agency and responsibility:** Our role and ability to effect outcomes in a given situation.
- **Doing Good (Beneficence):** act so as to further ‘the good.’
- **Avoiding Evil (Nonmaleficence):** act so as to avoid evil.
- **Justice:** treating equals equally
Justice can be based on merit, need, effort, or common benefit
- **Autonomy:** respect for self-determination of others. Autonomy is not a good in itself, however, for human choices often are sinful. Coercion of others can violate dignity and trust, so limits to human freedom are carefully chosen, usually in terms of the common good, relying on principles of justice. Autonomy does not relieve us of our responsibility to encourage the good in others and decline to participate in the evil of others.