

## Foundations of Christian Ethics (3/8/15, TCP)

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

This approach is more characteristic of Roman Catholic moral theology. Catholic teaching acknowledges the commandments, but infers from them, and from classical logic, the purposes of God in various aspects of life. This then forms general principles which can be applied to various situations.

One can see the beginnings of this line of thinking in Jesus’ teaching. Jesus raises the bar from simply murder to mere insult against one another. In the matter of divorce, Jesus acknowledges the allowance for divorce in the Old Testament law, but says “*in the beginning it was not so*” and quotes Genesis: “*Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*” (Matthew 19:4-6). Here, Jesus grounds his teachings in the purposes of God for marriage, or the underlying purposes behind the prohibition against murder.

The church has likewise developed descriptions of ‘the good’ by attempting to discern the purposes of God in various aspects of our lives. For instance, if the purposes of human life are to glorify God in this life and the next, and if life itself is a gift from God, and if murder is a violation of God’s gift of life, then suicide or euthanasia is against God’s purposes. Such willful destruction of human life is against the purposes of life, even in the face of suffering.

Likewise, if the purposes of sexuality are union between husband and wife and the procreation of children, then sex outside of marriage is against the purposes of sexuality. This matches up with scriptural prohibitions against fornication and adultery, for instance, but this principal can be applied to the abuse of the sexual relationship *within* the bonds of marriage: such abuse is against the purpose of mutual union between husband and wife. “Natural Law” is a school of thought that develops this thinking extensively, and is highly valued by Roman Catholics. This approach often understands most sin as “disordered loves,” abuses of the natural order, requiring reformation of our conscience and will. This kind of ethics tends to be highly systematic, setting up its own internally consistent thought structure.

### **One example:**

#### **Just War Principles (based on the unconditional value of human life):**

One example of how this works is in the development of the church’s teaching on “Just War.” The early church was strictly pacifist, but when Christians began to have the responsibility of governing, questions arose about the place of violence in the Christian life. We now have a set of rules (think of the first model of ethics in terms of law & obedience), but these rules are derived from principles about the purposes of life and the purposes of engaging in violent conflict based on the value of life.

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**Just War Principles (based on the unconditional value of human life):**

The place of violence in the Christian life is still a challenging issue for us. The church has wrestled with this issue for centuries. Over time, principles developed for determining if going to war is the just decision, and for how to conduct war justly. Firstly, however, one must notice the theological and Biblical preference for pacifism that underlies these principles. Though Christians in history have done poorly in adhering to these principles, the aim is to uphold the value of life, especially innocent victims.

**“Jus ad Bellum:”** just principles for **going to war:**

Just Cause: only for the protection of innocent life

Just Authority: only when authorized by the proper authority

Right Intention: to protect innocent human life and never for revenge

Last Resort: only after all other attempts to protect innocent human life

Proportionality: only when the good to be obtained outweighs the harm inflicted

Probability of Success: only when there is a reasonable chance that it will be successful in protecting innocent life

**“Jus in Bello:”** just principles for the **conduct of war:**

Proportionality: only when the good to be obtained outweighs the harm inflicted

Discrimination (Non-combatant Immunity): only against those who threaten innocent life and never against non-combatants.

The risks of this approach to ethics include the human tendency to self-justify even the most hideous of crimes. Or we can use these philosophical systems to back ourselves into a logical corner or develop rules far removed from the authority of scripture.

The benefit of this approach is that it helps us take the teachings of scripture and apply them to new situations. For instance, there is nothing in the Bible about cocaine, but that doesn't mean the church can't inform the faithful about our choices involving cocaine. This ability to form principles from Biblical teaching is especially helpful if the church has wrestled in the past with similar situations, leaving us a legacy from which we can learn and on which we can build.