

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

Discerning ‘the good’ in terms of relationship:

In the prior models of Law or Purposes, those models impact the way we describe the Christian faith as a whole. Sin is disobedience and salvation is being justified the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. These are legal metaphors (well developed by St. Paul in Romans and elsewhere). Or, in terms of the Purposes of God: sin is acting contrary to God’s purposes, and salvation is being brought more fully into line with God’s purposes through the incarnation and death and resurrection of Jesus who enters human life to renew our lives and draw us deeper into God’s vision for humanity.

A third model of the Christian life is one of relationship. Sin is broken relationship—with God, with each other, and with ourselves. Salvation is the restoration of relationship through the initiative of Jesus Christ in his life, death and resurrection, and our renewal through the presence of God the Holy Spirit in our lives. We are restored to relationship with God. In Christ, we are restored to relationship with others, and in Christ, we are restored to the wholeness that God desires for each of us. Paul also uses this language, and in some ways the language of relationship is closer to the reality of God’s saving grace and his purposes for us. However, we are heled by the other models to understand what that right relationship looks like.

This third model can be applied to Christian ethics: the right choices are the ones that bring us into right relationship with God and others and ourselves. This approach softens the approach of bare laws or complex thought systems, and shows us a path to dealing with our failings of those laws or that vision God has for us. This approach more readily incorporates God’s grace into the picture, whereas either the laws of scripture or the ‘natural law’ leave only blunt objection to flawed human life. The model of relationship accepts the reality that our relationship with God is broken by sin, but renewed by Jesus, under repair by the Holy Spirit, and awaiting its full wholeness in heaven. This model acknowledges the moral law, and the purposes of God that underlie that law, while bridging the distance between our flawed humanity and God’s holiness.

Without learning obedience or understanding the purposes of our lives, the model of relationship struggles for lack of practical supports. The human mind is adept at self-deception and self-oriented justification. *With* the practice of obedience and seeking such understanding of God’s purposes, however, ethics as response to God in relationship with God avoids the legalism or idealism that can themselves become idols. Properly informed, Relationship ethics provides an appropriate context for decision making, and connects us to the formative practices of prayer, word and sacrament in the Christian Community. Relationship ethics calls us to forgiveness and reconciliation with others who have broken God’s law and gone against God’s purposes. And that reconciliation is itself part of God’s purposes and the aim of God’s law.

(see the back of this page)

Pros & Cons of three approaches to Christian Ethics:

In terms of “Law:”

Pro

Clarity & consistency
Many are easy to remember
Applies to everyone

Con

Can lead to legalism (trusting in the law, not God)
Sometimes hard to interpret or apply
False sense of righteousness
(rather than relying on God’s grace)

In terms of God’s purposes:

Pro

Expansive, leads to principles
Can apply to new situations
Brings nuance vs. legalism
(‘the spirit of the law’)

Con

Can get 2 or 3 layers removed from scripture
Can get backed into a logical corner
Can form a new kind of legalism

In terms of relationship—with God and with others *in Christ*:

Pro

Sets a high priority on grace, mercy
and forgiveness
more about the relationship,
less about legalism
more about what is *shared*
including accountability
no room for self-righteousness

Con

Could be used to dodge the law
Risks evaluating the relationship only on one’s
own subjective terms (bias...)
-or on the model of transactional mutual
self-interest vs. self giving
Risks forgetting about relationship with *God*
as the basis

Perhaps *Covenant* integrates Law, Purposes (“laws written on your heart”) & Relationship

Moral Formation (to form our consciences):

Knowing the law
Understanding God’s purposes
Engaging in relationship with God
Engaging in relationships with other people *in Christ*