

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF ETHICS

by Bill Crouse

Modern culture, no longer held together by a consensus worldview, is in the midst of an ethical crisis. Today there is only a faint memory of biblical norms. Naturalistic philosophies have made it their goal to critique and replace traditional values based on the Judeo-Christian world view. Moral values, say the humanists, are not based on the revelation of a transcendent deity but are the product of human experience. ¹ Hence, Harvey Cox, liberal theologian, and author of *The Secular City*, writes:

Secular man's values have been deconsecrated, shorn of any claim to ultimate or final significance . . . They are no longer the direct expression of the divine will. They have become what certain people at a particular time and place hold to be good. They have ceased to be values and have become valuations. . . . ²

While secular philosophers deny the existence of true ethical absolutes, it becomes apparent with closer scrutiny they cannot avoid making moral statements that are asserted in an absolute way. For instance, Joseph Fletcher, the popularizer of *situation ethics*, produces the absolute: "*One should always do the loving thing.*" ³ Erwin Lutzer, in his book *THE NECESSITY OF ETHICAL ABSOLUTES*, demonstrates the impossibility of avoiding moral absolutes in any system.⁴ The main problem with secular ethical theories is that the absolutes they assert cannot avoid being arbitrary. Completely sound arguments are not given as to why an assumed moral position should be viewed as universally true. If the universe does not have theistic purpose, then why would it be good to keep one's promises or do the "loving thing?" Is it so that mankind can survive? Why would survival be "good" if man were produced by a cosmic accident? If man is only the unintended end of unconcerned forces or "the phosphorescence of slime," as Bertrand Russell proclaimed, a major question of our time then becomes "Why should I be moral at all?"

Recent technological advances have, of course, heightened the moral crisis of Western civilization, but its roots go far deeper. The trouble began when man assumed himself to be "the measure of all things." While this statement was first uttered by Protagoras (5th century B.C.), it did not become the clarion call of philosophy until the Enlightenment (18th century). From this period, philosophers began to view man as the starting point, or the ultimate point of reference.⁵ These thinkers viewed man in the same way they had once viewed God: as the ultimate arbitrator, the one having authority over issues of life

and death. Influential thinkers of the Enlightenment fostered this idea until it became widespread, and today it impacts whole cultures.

Thus, our crisis today is not one of immorality, but of amorality. If immorality were the problem, there would still be a standard left by which to judge an action. Amorality knows no universally applicable standard. This causes great concern among educators and social planners in the West where there remains a substance of personal freedom. Where no strong central government (or no strong cultural force) exists to enforce arbitrary standards, how can a society function? As one writer penned: "The worst problem for Europe is not inflation or unemployment, racism, or communism, the Russians or the Americans. The worst problem is a whole generation of young people without values!"⁶

Because of the present moral crisis, one does not have to be a prophet to be able to predict that Western civilization can only go in one or two directions. It can either return to the Judeo-Christian ethic which made the West the great civilization it was, or it can move toward the tyranny of totalitarianism. Since we have already departed from our roots and are moving toward the latter, it has been said, "The only thing that saves us while we are in this transition is fear." What prevents a person today from committing a crime? Not a strong sense of right or wrong, but a fear of getting caught!

What we are saying thus far is this: starting from secular and humanistic assumptions, no adequate ethical universal can be given. It cannot come from nature because the ethic practiced there springs from the law of "the tooth and claw." It cannot come from the ballot box because the whims of the majority can make anything moral. Nor can it come from a naked use of civil power (i.e., kings, parliaments, and high courts). The reader would do well to remember Francis Schaeffer's insightful admonition: "If there is no law to govern society then society (in one form or another) becomes the law." Even if reason could give man an unequivocal standard, reason cannot give man the ability to want to do what he construes as right (see Romans 7). Stephen Toulmin admits this enigma in his book REASON AND ETHICS.⁷ He says, "We can know the answers, but what we can't do is put our heart into it." Why? Perhaps the reason is the underlying belief that if life is absurd, what difference do my actions make? If man is absurd too, then what one conceives as moral is also absurd. In short, Dostoevsky probably was more to

the point when one of his characters says, "If there is no God, then everything is permitted."⁸ For if there is no divine standard or future impending judgment, then all the standards that men employ are arbitrary and subject to change without notice.

Christians not only have a responsibility to point out the consequences of such moral reasoning (2 Corinthians 10:4-5), but first and foremost, to present a positive and living example of the kind of conditions Christian moral values can bring about. In the upper room discourse, Jesus said that the way we treat our brethren would be the world's basis for judging whether we were His followers. (See John 13:34-35 and 1 John 3:11.) Simply stated, the goal of Christian ethics is to do the will of God. We find these principles of conduct revealed in the Scripture. It is the purpose of this essay to show that the Christian ethical system is superior to the relativistic ethical theories prevalent in societies today. Our procedure will be to demonstrate that the principles of conduct as revealed in Scripture, when seen as a system, meet all the requirements for an adequate ethical order for all men for all time. (See Romans 14:18.)

The Characteristics of an Adequate Ethical System

The following characteristics are those which both Christians and non-Christians agree upon as being the essentials of a good ethical system:⁹ (1) standard, (2) justice, (3) a motive-dynamic, (4) guidance or a model, (5) a relationship between rules and results, and (6) harmony.

1. The Necessity of a Standard

Since ethics is the study of what makes an action moral or immoral, it is essential for every ethical system to have a non-question-begging standard by which all laws can descend, and by which all acts can be evaluated and/or corrected. There must be a *Summum Bonum*, or highest good, that will be universally applicable to all cultures and generations. It must be the basis for and source of a non-arbitrary content to such words as "dignity," "honesty," and "love."

The need for such a transcendent absolute, or law above the law, can be illustrated by what happened at the Nuremberg Trials of World War II criminals. Those accused appealed to the fact that they were only obeying the laws of their own culture, and that they were not legally responsible to any other. Faced with

this argument, Robert H. Jackson, Chief Counsel for the United States, appealed to permanent values and moral standards that transcended life-styles, particular societies, and individual nations. While he was not necessarily appealing to biblical norms in this trial, the situation illustrates the need for a transcendent basis for moral values. For example, God's commandment against murder was not just for the Jew. It transcends culture, and it transcends generations. Murder is as wrong today as it was in the Old Testament.

Christian ethics escape this problem of cultural relativity because it is based upon the nature of God. Good is what God wills in accordance with His nature (see Mark 10:18). God provides the moral patterns which apply to all human behavior.

Because this standard is based upon God's holy nature, it is binding on all people. There is no standard beyond Him that can define moral conduct. Christian ethics applies to everyone and is not merely a parochial discipline for Jews and Christians. God's moral revelation extends to all generations. God is the ultimate standard for human behavior.

Thus, Christian ethics asserts a Summum Bonum that escapes the problems of cultural relativity. The Christian God is transcendent and therefore, the measure of all things, meaning that nothing (no standard) is beyond Him by which anything, moral or otherwise, can be defined. God's will, hence, expresses His nature or essence. (See Mark 10:18).

Naturalistic systems of ethics (which begin with a naturalistic state of affairs) also claim a universal scope of some basic values such as love and honesty. However, non-Christian ethicists will generally conclude that these laws or values can only be known imperfectly. Arbitrariness and subjectivity cannot be totally avoided. Famed situationist, Joseph Fletcher, has claimed universal applicability for his "love" principle, but when it comes to defining "love," he leaves us hanging. What a member of the Irish Republican Army views as a "loving act" may be assessed differently by a British soldier. In contrast, the biblically-informed Christian claims that Scripture reveals the content of love (agape). (See John 13, 1 Corinthians 13, and 1 John 4.)

In essence, the Christian says that a universal good cannot come from man, a finite being. It must be from a transcendent

source. Wittgenstein, an important twentieth century philosopher, said as much: "The sense of the world must lie outside the world. . . . And so it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. . . . Ethics is transcendental."¹⁰ As water does not rise above its level, neither can ethics rise above human nature which is its starting point. Rousseau, however, said it best:

To discover the rules of society that are best suited to nations there would need to exist a superior intelligence, who could understand the passions of men without feeling any of them, who had no affinity with our nature, but know it to the full, whose happiness was independent of ours, but who would nevertheless make our happiness his concern, who would be content to wait in the fullness of time for a distant glory, and to labour in one age to enjoy the fruits in another. Gods would be needed to give men laws.¹¹

We thus conclude that ethics desperately needs these standards, and the only one qualified to provide them is a transcendent god who really exists. But a transcendent ethical source is not the only criterion for an ethical system. We turn to a second.

2. The Need for Justice

The potential to provide justice is a major test of any ethical system. Many systems fail to measure up in this area. To pass this test, ethical law must provide justice in balanced measure at both individual and corporate levels; it must function in the here and now, and it must be final.

It is perhaps in this area that Christianity has the best record. When biblical principles have been applied properly, they have produced great reforms. The writings of Paul were revolutionary in their day ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. . ." Galatians 3:28). As a result, many social reforms were instituted in the Roman world during the first two or three centuries. During the next several centuries (Middle Ages), the situation was largely reversed, due to the fact that biblical principles were either not applied or were grossly distorted. Following the Reformation, and on into the modern era, many social reform movements could again be cited which were primarily spear-headed by the Christian church. Among these were the repeal of slavery in England, prison reform, child labor laws, the founding of the British Labor Party, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Christian medical movements, and

others.¹²

Perhaps one of the brightest spots in Christian ethics is the realization that the individual is never in danger of becoming lost in the group. Individuals are important and viewed as created in the very image of God. No civilization before or since has emphasized the worth of the individual and personal freedom as has Western culture. This is undoubtedly due to its Christian roots,¹³ and it is a well-established fact that the Second Great Awakening had a profound influence on the writing of the United States Constitution with its concern about the rights and freedoms of the individual.¹⁴

But justice must not merely be here and now; it must also be final. In the face of the inadequacies and failures of even the best human justice, biblical revelation assures us of a Last Judgment, where perfect justice shall be rendered (the theme of the book of Revelation). Our legal systems suffer from human fallibility. Absurdities are made of law, the guilty go free, and the innocent are punished. But the Scriptures promise a last assize, when "there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known." (Luke 12:2-3). The Judge on that day will be at the same time omniscient and just, and the ambiguities and failures of human justice throughout history will be totally and completely rectified. On that day, every individual will need the services of the Divine Advocate.

As Kant observed moral injustice, he conjectured that a moral being must exist.¹⁵ Without the possibility of a final accounting where injustices are given their proper due, life would be absurd. One death for Hitler seems unfair; if only he could die six million deaths! The Branch Davidian cult in Waco, TX is a more contemporary example. We all feel outrage that David Choresh was not brought to trial. His suicide was an easy way out. We wish for a more complete justice. But we know and accept the fact that justice is not complete in this life, and we hope and expect for it to be executed some day. With this assurance, even the presence of evil in the world becomes less of a mere philosophical and theological problem, because we know it is not being ignored. The Christian ethic, therefore, provides humankind with a surety that true justice will ultimately prevail and be meted out.

3. The Need for a Motive

Regardless of the sophistication of a moral system, it must also have within it a motivating factor, or it will fail. An ethical system may have the loftiest of goals, but without a motivating factor, it fails as a system. Knowing one's duty is to love one another, but lacking the desire to do so does not fulfil the demands of the system. People must want to behave in moral ways. Humanistic ethics is troubled by the problem, as evidenced in the previous reference to Toulmin's Reason and Ethics. A person may have a goal of getting to New York. He may have a shiny new car full of gas, but if there is no battery to provide spark, he will not advance one inch. It is probably worthwhile to observe here that societies based on humanistic ethics (as in communism) must rely very heavily on external stimuli and controls to bring about desired behavior. One might even ask: if communism's lofty goals are so beneficial to man, why do not all nations clamor for that system of government? Why must it nearly always be forcefully imposed on people?

The question of motive, or will, always involves questions about human nature. Generally speaking, humanistic ethical theories see man's will as being determined or shaped exclusively by his genetic inheritance and/or by his environment--all external factors. The Bible views man as spiritually dead in transgressions and sin (Ephesians 2:1). Due to his fallen sin nature, man cannot do that which is totally right before God. A sinner may appear moral before men. But before God, he always falls short. However, Christianity provides "a spark" which can intrinsically motivate a person toward bringing honor and glory to God by doing His will. This motivating factor is the Holy Spirit, which is given to persons of faith as part of God's gracious gift of redemption. In Philippians 2:13, Paul writes, "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." (See also Romans 8:5-6). This does not, of course, mean that the believer infallibly lives up to God's standards of conduct. What it does mean is that he now has enablement, desire, and a potential to please God by living up to His standard. The change is internal, due to the spiritual renewal of the heart. Hence, the moral life of a Christian is a walk of faith, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to produce in him the fruit of righteousness. (See Romans 6:15-20 and Galatians 5:13-26).

There are several corollaries to the work of the Holy Spirit which motivate the believer. First, the new believer, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, is motivated by his love for God. This is what

makes the believer want to obey God. The apostle Paul spoke of being compelled by Christ's love (2 Corinthians 5:14), and the psalmist poetically wrote "as the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God" (Psalm 42:1).

Secondly, the Holy Spirit's confirmation of God's love for the believer motivates Him to become other-directed. A person is unlikely to be concerned about the needs of others if he has a poor self-image and can only focus on his own needs. Christians who come to know the nature of their forgiveness, their unconditional acceptance before the Father, and their acceptance into the Christian community, are then freer to focus on meeting the needs of others.¹⁶

The believer is also motivated by external factors, such as receiving blessings (for example, see Ephesians 6:3-4) and the promise of eternal rewards. But it should be noted here that good works must be done in accordance with a proper attitude of faith. Even an apparently unselfish act, if done with the wrong attitude, will result in the loss of rewards (1 Corinthians 3).

4. The Need for Guidance

A disadvantage of some secular ethical theories is that they are so intricate and cumbersome, it is doubtful the average man in the street could understand their principles, let alone implement them in daily life. Further, some systems such as utilitarianism, which says you should do that which will bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number, requires a person to have more knowledge than it is possible for mere mortals to possess. Without this necessary information, how is it possible to calculate what would be the "greatest good" for the "greatest number" as required by this system?

It is one thing to have an ultimate principle in an ethical system, but it is another matter to apply this in the many ethical decisions one must make each day. The Christian receives help from the Scriptures in which God's will is revealed in hundreds of particular situations, as well as in broader principles that can be applied to the gray areas. Hence, the Christian's success in the ethical life is partly predicated upon his knowledge of scripture.

Not only are many precedents given in Scripture, but recorded in its pages is the historical appearance of God's Son, the perfect model for Christian ethics. The Christian thus has

an example of someone who experienced the same flesh and blood phenomena as all men, but without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Our Lord Jesus not only told us how all the laws and commands in the Scripture could be summarized ("Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . And your neighbor as yourself.") (Matthew, 22:37-38); He also gave us the supreme demonstration of how to apply them. Thus, the christian world view not only provides us with the ethical garments of moral action; it also demonstrates how they are to be worn.

5. A Relationship Between Rules and Results

As a person studies ethical theories, he will note that there are basically two approaches to ethics. One centers in rules and the other in results. Ethical systems that are rule-oriented are called deontological. While those that are result-oriented are called teleological. To illustrate these two concepts, let's take abortion as an example. The person who is rule-oriented will be largely concerned with principles such as the sacredness of life and the command not to kill as he decides the issue. The one who is result-oriented will be concerned about unwanted children, loss of sexual freedom, genetically malformed infants, and other issues.

Immanuel Kant was among those who believed that right was right, regardless of the result. He believed that the rightness of an act did not depend at all on the value of its consequences. In order to know whether an act is right or wrong, we need only see whether it is in accordance with a valid moral rule. For Kant, a valid rule was determined by deductive reasoning. One should ask himself, "What would happen if my actions became a universal rule?" If the result would be destructive, it would not be a good rule. Valid rules are determined on the basis of what could consistently be universalized and, if followed, would treat other human beings as ends, rather than as means.¹⁷ Kant seemed well aware of the importance of motive in ethical theory. To be a good man, one must not only do the right thing, but do it with the right motive or with the conviction that an act is right in itself.

A teleological ethic is concerned only with results or consequences. The good is determined solely on the basis of results. Usually, in teleological ethics, the end in view is to do that which will maximize pleasure or minimize pain for the greatest number. "Pleasure" is defined in different ways by

different theorists of this position.

Both of these views of determining the good have some helpful points and some that are weak. Ideally speaking, we believe a good ethical system must have a balanced relationship between rules and results.

An extreme emphasis on rules or duty will lead to pharisaism, as recorded in the New Testament. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their emphasis on duty alone (see Mark 3 where Jesus asked them if it was lawful to do good or evil on the Sabbath). Blind duty can lead to a state of being uncompassionate. There are many cases in war (e.g., My Lai in the Vietnam war) where blind obedience to duty brought great evil.

On the other hand, relying only on results is also not capable of preventing evil acts. Strictly speaking, only an omniscient god could be a utilitarian, because only this kind of being could know all the results of an action. Not only is it difficult for a mere mortal to calculate the consequences of an action, but utilitarianism fails to honestly address man's motives in his ethical decisions.

For the Christian, the anticipated results of an action can never, nor should they ever determine what is right. Right is based on the character of God, and the Christian trusts God concerning the results (Romans 8:28). However, this does not mean that Christians totally ignore results. Everything we do should be done with a view of bringing the best results possible, within the bounds of the ethical duties that God has revealed to us. As in the abortion controversy just mentioned, the Christian should demonstrate a compassionate concern to right the situation that makes abortion desirable without sacrificing the principles of the sacredness of life. Also, sometimes the anticipated result might help us discover which ethical norm or principle to apply when two or more ethical norms appear to conflict (see the following discussion of the problem of conflicts). So, while good results do not prove that an action was good, it is reasonable for the Christian to assume, that by following the rules, in the end, good will result. Hence, a comprehensive ethic will maintain a relationship between rules and results. The Christian should concern himself with both.

6. Internal Harmony

A good ethical system, ideally speaking, should also have internal harmony. That is, it should hang together as a system and should have minimal conflicts within the system. Some ethicists (such as Fletcher), however, believe Christianity possesses this type of flaw, because whenever there is more than one absolute, they say, there will be hopeless conflict between absolutes.¹⁸

The legal scholars (of the Mosaic Law) of Jesus' day undoubtedly had these conflicts in mind when they questioned Jesus about a hierarchy. "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (Mark 12:28). His answer showed His legal genius when He summarized all the commandments with the command to love in two directions: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. . . . (and) your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). If a man really loves God in this way, he will certainly love the man whom God created. Augustine later said, "Love God, and do as you please." As we first read this, it sounds like heresy, but really it is only a similar kind of summary. If a man truly loves God, he will automatically be motivated to keep His commandments. Hence, the love-motif, which is the product of redemption, produces a harmony that will resolve potential conflicts within the system.

Some Problems in the Christian View of Ethics

The Christian system of ethics is not without its areas of controversy, even though we believe it to be superior to its alternatives. The critics of Christianity have repeatedly pointed out these problem areas and insist that they are reason enough to abandon the system as a whole. We believe this is a mistake. Good answers do exist; however, Christian scholars have sometimes chosen different approaches to answer these charges. Three main problems, as well as some viable options, will now be discussed.

The Problem of Conflicts

As Joseph Fletcher has pointed out, when there is more than one absolute in a system, the possibility of conflict exists. Take the Ten Commandments as an example. Should one tell a lie (Commandment 9) in order to prevent murder (Commandment 6)? Christian ethicists have put forth three different explanations in an effort to explain this difficulty.

The first view denies that God ever puts us into a situation where we have to choose between commands. It holds that the conflict is only apparent and there is always a way to avoid sin. Those who hold this view would use the incident in Daniel 1 as an example. Daniel and his three friends appear to be in a dilemma when they are commanded to eat meat sacrificed to idols, a violation of their dietary code. Daniel presents his captors with a creative alternative which allows him and his friends to honor their dietary code and meet the demands of the state at the same time. Another example used is where one is hiding Jews in his house and then is asked by the Nazis if this were true. One does not have to sin by lying. One could choose not to answer, or to say, "Go see for yourself" and leave the results to God. Some Christian ethicists defend this view admirably; others do not think it conforms to the model Christ used in avoiding conflicts. It appears difficult for adherents of this view to avoid legalism in that they minimize the connection between rules and results. Opponents of this position also suggest that it is evil to do less than one can do, if, for example, lying would have saved a life.

A second approach is the lesser-of-two evils view. According to this position, there are genuine moral dilemmas which one is faced with in life, in where both alternatives are clearly wrong. For example, if I am hiding Jews in my house, and the Nazis knock on the door, it would be wrong to lie, and it would be wrong to tell the truth since it would result in death to Jews. In this situation, I'm simply to do what I construe as the lesser of the two evils, and then confess my sin. This view does not deny the absoluteness of universal norms, but it does admit the reality of conflicts of duty.

There are two criticisms of this view. One is that it reduces the choices to fit the situation, and it also puts the person in the difficult position of deciding what is the lesser evil. In some cases, the lesser evil may not be as clear as in the previous example. One of the difficulties noted in utilitarianism is the actual calculation of the greater good. The same criticism would apply here, since a similar kind of moral reasoning is involved. How does one determine which is the lesser evil? Would time and circumstances alter one's evaluation of choices? Possibly.

A second problem with this view is it apparently contradicts 1 Corinthians 10:13, in which God promises to provide a way to

avoid evil. Ultimately, this view leaves us with the dilemma of a good God requiring us to sin in situations where ethical conflict is inevitable.

A third option is some kind of a hierarchy. This option might also be called the "greater good" view. It maintains both a multiplicity of absolutes and the reality of conflicts in a fallen world. Those who hold this view claim it seems to be the model of Christ Himself. He spoke of "greater sin" (John 19:11), "greater love" (John 15:13), "greatest commandment" (Matthew 5:19), and "weightier matters" of the law (Matthew 23:23). For instance, our duty to God is greater than our duty to our neighbor. It is our duty to obey government, but not when in conflict with a command of God. (Acts 5:29).

There are two problems with this view. How can there be conflicts in God's commands, and how can a person know the hierarchy? The proponents of this view answer that the conflicts are not in God and His character, but rather the result of sin and a finite world, and the position asserts that hierarchy can be demonstrated from a study of scripture. One should also bear in mind that God judges the heart, or motive, rather than the results. Biblical morality, they would say, consists of more than mere obedience to a moral code. **19**

This problem of conflicts is undoubtedly an area worthy of further discussion and evaluation among evangelical ethicists. However, of these three views, the third seems to be more in harmony with biblical revelation and the moral examples found there. **20**

The Problem of Evil

Succinctly stated, the next question the Christian ethicist must answer is this: if God is wholly good and wholly powerful, how does one account for the existence of evil? If He is all powerful, why does He not eliminate evil? If He is all good and the Creator of all that is, how did evil ever originate? This problem is indeed one which theologians and philosophers have debated for centuries. Up to this point, there is no single answer that has silenced all of Christianity's critics. There are, however, answers given to fully take into account the nature of God. It is our assumption that any answer concerning this problem must itself come out of God's revelation of Himself in the Scriptures. We will look at three passages of Scripture.

Genesis 50:20: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." Here the writer is saying that Joseph was sold into slavery (a great evil) in order that good might be done--that is, to redeem his brothers from famine. The thought appears to be that God allowed evil to work out His plan of redemption.

John 9:3: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, but this has happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." The disciples had just questioned Jesus about the origin of this man's blindness. The answer Jesus gave indicates that the evil of blindness was allowed in order that God could display His glory.

Romans 9:17: ". . . I raised you up (speaking of Pharaoh) for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." In this reference to Pharaoh, we see Pharaoh acting on his own free will, yet the outcome is that which God pre-ordained. What one would want to say here is that "what ought not to be, ought not to be permitted." But Paul seems to be saying the opposite in the following verses (18-21). Sin, or evil, is somehow permitted and is a part of God's overall plan. While it is a part of His plan, we are not hindered in saying that the evil had its primary source in responsible, created agents--not God Himself.

Liebnitz, a German philosopher of the seventeenth century, tried to harmonize the concept of God's goodness with the existence of evil by maintaining that happiness is the goal of creation. He claimed that evil is only God's way of bringing about good. Hence, World War II was not in reality a dreadfully evil event, but actually a preserver of peace and freedom! Carried out to its logical conclusion, this theory holds that evil is itself a good. Because the world was created by a perfect Being, then it must itself be perfect, assert proponents of this view. One must then conclude that sin itself is good. The world, with its immediate pain and misery, is ultimately God's way of bringing about greater good (a contradiction!). But in this view, the careful observer will notice that the term "good" has been redefined, referring not to moral good but to happiness.

When first considering this view, it sounds very plausible, but it has several flaws. First, it limits God. It was, of course, perfect for His purposes, but not necessarily the only

possible world he could have made. With God, there are an infinite number of possibilities. In fact it is incorrect to ascribe worlds to God in terms of better or best. The world cannot be perfect in the same sense that God himself is perfect or it would be infinite. It is sufficient to say that the world we know is what God, in His wisdom, saw fit to bring into existence. It was perfect for His purpose. Secondly, happiness (or the greatest good) as the goal of creation does not seem to have scriptural warrant. And thirdly, the obvious criticism is that this view ultimately does away with evil by equating it with good.

It is surprising how many modern theologians are attracted to this kind of thinking when the Bible clearly declares that the glory of God is the final cause for which all things exist (see the following passages: Psalm 19:1, Romans 9:23, and Ephesians 2:7). The glory of God is equal to God's self-manifestation. The existence of evil is not for the purpose of bringing about a greater good, but to display God's attributes. Charles Hodge, the great theologian of Princeton, wrote, "As sentient creatures are necessary for the manifestation of God's benevolence, so there could be no manifestation of His mercy without misery, no grace and justice without sin."²¹ This perspective permits evil, but lets it remain what it is--evil.

While this explanation may not answer all of our questions, we might take comfort in the fact that there are some things about an infinite God that finite creatures will never be able to comprehend. Can a small child always understand the decisions and ways of his parents? Can the average citizen always understand the ways of his government? In view of this antinomy between evil and a good God, we must be content with the scriptural fact that the purpose behind the creation of the universe has been the self-manifestation of the attributes of God. Without the permission of evil to exist, good would be without definition. Light would be incomprehensible without a knowledge of darkness. (That A cannot be known without non-A is the primary principle of logic.) The Bible clearly states that though not all things are good, all things do work together for good (Romans 8:28).

The Problem of Interpretation

A third problem to be answered in Christian ethics has to do with interpretation. If God has made known His will propositionally, how does one then avoid the entrance of human

subjectivity into the understanding, or the interpretation of that will? How does one interpret clearly and objectively what God has revealed so that life might be lived accordingly? This, of course, is not always easy or simple, and no pretense is made here to the effect that it is. But most theologians agree, that when the commonly accepted rules of hermeneutics (laws of grammatical interpretation) are applied, a consensus will emerge as to what the principles of scripture are.

The examiner of the Bible encounters a strange situation. Scripture does not lay down a large number of specific statements about every particular problem. If the Bible sought to accomplish this, it would be far too bulky and unwieldy to use conveniently. It would be an entire library rather than a book.

For example, the Bible does not give specific dictates about abortion. But, it does present clearly the dignity of man, the sacredness of life, and the fact that God is involved in the growth and development of the fetus (Psalm 139). Through the application of these principles, we can conclude with certainty that abortion on demand violates biblical principles.

Other biblical commands must be interpreted in the light of cultural situations. "Greet one another with a holy kiss" might be applied in our Western culture as "greet one another with a sincere handshake." To make these kinds of commands universal would be a mistake. The ethical principles of the Bible however, transcend culture. There will always be among Christians differences of opinion on cultural issues as we presently observe among different groups, cultures, and denominations.

Anticipating these gray areas, Paul gave some principles to apply in 1 Corinthians 8; 10:23-33, and Romans 14. Church history attests to the fact that when men are in agreement about their basic assumption that the Bible is God's word written, a high degree of harmony will be attained concerning the basic ethical teachings of scripture.

Summary

We conclude with the thought that the Christian ethical system is not wholly alien to non-believers. Since every man is a moral being after the image of God, we should expect a similarity of values world-wide. C. S. Lewis demonstrates this in his book *THE ABOLITION OF MAN*. The most elementary principles of right and wrong must be conceded to man as man; they are the

birthrights of his being, not the legacy of a subsequent revelation. All men as men, therefore, possess an ineradicable ethical sense (cf. Romans 2:14ff). However, while every man has a native law within, it is another thing to say it is adequate for perfect guidance in human decision-making, or that it supplies the power or motive to fulfill its dictates. "Ought" does not imply "can" or "will." The apostle Paul admitted this in Romans 7:15. God's standard is "Be ye holy, as I am holy," an impossible instruction were it not for the divine enablement provided through the death of His Son. Upon the acceptance of the gift of salvation, we are given the Holy Spirit, who begins immediately to overhaul our volition, and we gradually move toward the goal of Christ-likeness.

It is interesting to note here that, while most philosophers reject Christianity as a system of truth, many claim to be admirers and followers of Christian ethics. B. F. Skinner, a behaviorist, made such claims.²² Bertrand Russell, after he wrote a book entitled WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN, wrote, "What the world needs is Christian love or compassion."²³ Others claim to be followers of the Golden Rule or the principles contained in the Sermon on the Mount. Humanistic ethical theorists may talk a great deal about being compassionate to their fellow man, but in the end, there is no basis for doing so within humanism itself. Moral values must be smuggled in from Christianity, and many humanists quietly do so, though they are embarrassingly inconsistent. The reason they are thus inclined is because, even in their opposition to Christianity, they must acknowledge that its ethical teachings are unsurpassed in the history of humankind.

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4. Erwin Lutzer, *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 27-39).
5. See Chapter 4.
6. Andrew Greeley, "Young Europeans Lack Real Values" *Detroit Free Press*, 8 November 1981.
7. Stephen Toulmin, *The Place of Reason in Ethics* (London: Cambridge Press, 1970), p. 163.
8. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Signet Classic, 1957), p. 538.
9. See Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958).
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 6.41-6.421.

11. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 84.
12. For a good study of these Christian social movements, see Earl Cairns, *Saints and Sinners* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973).
13. See the excellent study by Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1975).
14. I am referring here specifically to the work of Jonathan Witherspoon. See also Francis Schaeffer's comments in *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell Co., 1976), p. 109.
15. See Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. 2nd ed. (Chicago: Open Court Publishing co., 1934).
16. The little book of Philemon in the New Testament teaches by use of analogy how we are accepted before the Father. As the Father accepts the Son, so also we are accepted if we are found in Him. This same truth is also taught in Ephesians 1 and 2.
17. Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Trans. L. W. Beck. (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1959), p. 19.
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21. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. I* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n.d.), pp. 435-36. See also: Plantinga, Alvin C. *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974).

22. Time Magazine, 26 September 1971.

23. Bertrand Russell, *The Impact of Science of Society* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), p. 114: "The point of the matter is a very simple and old fashioned thing, a thing so simple that I am almost ashamed to mention it, for fear of the derisive smile with which wise cynics will greet my words. The thing I mean-- please forgive me for mentioning. It is love, Christian love, or compassion. . . ."

For Further Study

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