

ET 2.1 – INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Ethics, Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology

A. Ethics in Biblical Theology

What's "ethics" about?

What might serve as a "working definition" of ethics?

What is God doing and how does "ethics" fit into that?

- glory of God – display of God's infinite perfections
- earth to be like heaven – Gen 1 & Rev 21-22; Lord's Prayer; ouranification
 - what is heaven like?
 - the dwelling-place of God – determined by the character, purpose and command of God
 - Gen 1 – light, full, ordered
 - Ezek 1, Rev 4-5 - filled with the glory, praise, righteousness, love of God, Xt-centred
- image of God – reflecting God's character
 - relationship between image and glory
 - imitation of God
 - righteous rule – Kingdom – fruitfulness / glorification
 - relationships of love
- marriage of the church with the Son of God – mutual incorporation
- this accomplished by obedience - according to the norms of the Word and the energies of the Spirit

What are some of the Bible's favourite answers to the question, "what is God doing?"

The Story:

1. Made very good by God – obedience, glory, image, kingdom, love
2. Marred by the fall – curse because of guilt and corruption - negatives of obedience, glory, image, kingdom, love
3. Redeemed by Christ - obedience (see later), glory, image, kingdom, love - bore the curse
4. Renewed by the Spirit - regeneration - obedience, image-glory, Kingdom, love
5. Consummated in the New Heavens and New Earth - glory, kingdom, love, image, obedience

Ethics may be defined by virtually any of the categories mentioned / explored above.

- Ethics as "God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven"
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It gives content to the glory, righteousness, love, image, obedience, kingdom ...

What is God's will?

How do we know?

How is it to be done?

Ethics and the Key Moments in the Bible's Story

1. Creation

2. Fall

3. Israel (Election – promise - covenant)

4. Incarnation, life, death, resurrection, enthronement, reign, (return) of Jesus

5. Church (Spirit - Kingdom – Gospel)

6. Judgment

7. New Heavens, New Earth

B. Ethics and Systematic Theology

What is Systematic Theology and why is it important?

Systematic Theology is the particular form of talk about God (uttered in his hearing) which seeks to synthesize and coherently order the truths of the whole Bible. Pursued at one and the same time with the utmost intellectual rigour and upon the ultimate presupposition that the Scriptures are the revealed Word of God, the study of systematic theology exists in a mutually-informing and mutually-enriching relationship with exegetical theology, with biblical theology and with historical theology. It engages with non-Christian worldviews and responds to criticisms of the Christian faith with philosophical tightness and polemical force but will first and foremost be subject to the Word and at the service of the church. It forms an essential part of preparation for 'the ministry' by presenting to seminarians the 'whole counsel of God'. 'An eschatological concept' (Barth), 'never a finished science' (Murray) and 'an element in the sanctification of the church' (H.Berkhof), systematic theology shares the dominant characteristic of the Kingdom – it is 'already ... not yet', it is total in its demand but partial in its current manifestation; triumphant in grace yet bearing the offense (and the marks) of the cross. It is oriented to God and the world, to the Word and other disciplines, to the past and the future, to the church and to all of life.

In particular, the topics of ST are addressed by asking, "what does the whole Bible (rightly read) teach about X?"

And as a sub-discipline, ST especially seeks connection, consistency and comprehensiveness and is particularly attentive to

a) distinctions – working for precision

1. It is a sin to kill another human being
2. We should *and* shouldn't answer a fool according to his folly
3. God is a rock so he is lifeless and quite heavy
4. God is everywhere so it's pointless asking him to be with us
5. God does everything according to his will so it's pointless praying that his will should be done
6. Who wrote the Bible – God or humans?
7. God cannot die; Jesus was God; Jesus died
8. Christians are not under law so they are free to eat pork / marry their siblings / steal

b) connections – working for perspective

1. Everything is connected to everything else
2. Everything is a revelation of God
3. Everything says everything about everything to an infinite mind
4. All doctrines cast light on all other doctrines
5. All sins are ultimately one and ultimately many – and therefore cast light on each other
6. All doctrines cast light on all duties.

1. How is Adam's sin a transgression of each of the 10 commandments?
2. How is murder a lie? How are lies murderous?
3. How are all sins the same?
4. How are all sins different?

c) representations – another day

Ethics and the main loci in systematic theology

1. Authority, Revelation
2. The Triune God
3. Creation
4. Providence
5. Humankind
6. Sin
7. Israel
8. Person and work of Christ
9. Holy Spirit
10. Salvation
11. Church
12. Mission
13. Eschatology

The scope of ethics in relation to systematics

1. Considered from one angle, systematic theology is ALL ‘application’ – we learn nothing for its own sake and nothing which we are not meant to ‘use’ and ‘live’.
2. And if systematic theology is the orderly presentation of ‘what the whole Bible says about x’ then Christian ethics is not only a systematic discipline but also provides the ‘missing loci’ – environment; civil government; family; personal relationships; money and possessions; work; leisure; body and mind; education etc

John Frame’s ‘perspectives’

control	authority	presence
events	words	persons
situational	normative	existential -personal
(Father)	(Son)	(Spirit)

“Perspectives on the Discipline of Ethics:

In general, ethical judgment always involves the **application** of a **norm** to a **situation** by a **person**. One can look at the discipline from any of these three vantage points.

- a. The Situational Perspective (*teleological*)
 - i. Focuses on nature and history as under God’s control.
 - ii. Notes relations of means to ends in God’s economy.
 - iii. Asks “What are the best means of achieving God’s purposes?”
- b. The Normative Perspective (*deontological*)
 - i. Focuses on Scripture as the source of ethical norms.
 - ii. Asks “What does Scripture teach about this question?”
- c. The Existential Perspective (*existential*)
 - i. Focuses on the self in confrontation with God.
 - ii. Asks “How must I change if I am to be holy?”

“The faithfulness and sovereignty of God insure that the three foci will be consistent with one another. A right interpretation of the situation will be consistent with a right interpretation of the law and of the self, etc.

“Contrary to some critics, Reformed ethics need not be a mere “ethics of law.” The genius of the Reformed faith is its view of the comprehensiveness of God’s covenant lordship. This view implies a broad vision of the many elements of the ethical situation, of the many factors influencing ethical judgment and action.

1. A strong view of biblical authority, clarity, and sufficiency (normative).
2. A strong view of general revelation (situational).
3. A strong view of the importance of self-knowledge (existential).

“Reformed ethics can account for all the nuances, the subtleties involved in ethical decision-making, without compromising the straightforward, simple unity of our obligation, namely obedience to God as He has revealed His will in Scripture. Unity and diversity.”

These perspectives are sometimes elevated into whole systems:

Situational – about outcomes - having the right understanding of the present and desired situation and knowing what will take you from one to the other. (teleological / consequentialist ethics)

Normative – about rules - having the right set of rules and knowing when exactly which one applies. (deontological ethics)

Existential-personal – about persons – having the right understanding of a healthy, virtuous human being who will act ethically. (virtue ethics)

Sufficiency of Scripture for ethics

“The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” (Westminster Confession of Faith I:vi).

Relevant Scriptures:

Matthew 15.1-10
2 Timothy 3.15-17
Proverbs with Colossians 2.2-3
2 Peter 1.2-11

Scope:

Everything. “teach, rebuke, correct, train in righteousness so that the man of God may be fully equipped for every good work”

“This is not to say that Scripture contains all the world’s information or instructs us in all human skills. The point: in any area of life, our duty toward God will be an application of Scripture.” (John Frame)

Method: - sufficiency in what way?

Clearly not by speaking of everything directly.

Theologically, by bringing us to Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden and in whom we come to completeness.

Hermeneutically, by “standing before us as the light in terms of which all the facts of the created universe must be interpreted”. That is to say that Scripture either tells me directly what I need to know, or it gives to me the wisdom, principles, analogies which will equip me to evaluate data which come to me from elsewhere.

Ethically, one of the “good works” which Scripture equips us for is to recognise and use well extra-biblical stuff which is Scripture-compatible and Scripture-derivable but is at levels of detail which God has chosen not to give us explicitly.

The “regulative principle”

- of worship?

- of everything!

The Biblical data and some of the questions it raises

- 1) Whole Bible places ethical demands upon the reader
- 2) Whole Bible is needed to equip us for ethical thinking (and living)
- 3) But some parts of Scripture will be more directly and immediately ethically relevant than others
- 4) All the normal hermeneutical demands rest upon us – linguistic, cultural etc. Particularly important is proper regard for

a) the genre

HOW do we generate ethical data from

narrative
wisdom
poetry / hymns / imagery
occasional letters
“law”

b) the moment in redemptive-history

HOW will we differently read ethical data from

commands given before the fall
laws given to OT Israel
injunctions given to the first generation church

c) the degree of generality / particularity

HOW will we make use of

foundational theological truths
broad principles
ethical commands / rules
specific cases, particular examples

Exercise

Look at one of the following passages.

What is “in there” ethically?

What questions do we need to ask in order to make sure we “get it right”?

In what ways might we fail by under-interpreting or under-applying it?

Gen 2	Leviticus 18	Psalm 2	Romans 13
Gen 12	Joshua 8	Psalm 94	Ephesians 6
Exodus 20	Judges 19	Proverbs 18	Hebrews 13
Exodus 21	I Samuel 17	Amos 1-2	Revelation 18
Leviticus 1-7	Job 14	Matthew 5	

Components of, Perspectives on, and Frameworks for Evaluating Moral Actions

Normative Perspective

What is done?

A moral action considered with respect to the rules.

Was this action “right” – did it conform to the rules?

According to the law of God – associated with the Son of God

Isolated from other perspectives and detached from Scripture this becomes the non-Christian framework of deontological ethics - something is right for its own sake, we do right things because they are our duty not because of what will result. The rightness of moral actions is identified by the rules.

Existential perspective

Who does it?

A moral action considered with respect to the persons.

Was this done by a virtuous person?

In the strength of God from union with Christ – associated with the Holy Spirit

Isolated from other perspectives and detached from Scripture this becomes the non-Christian framework of virtue ethics – ethics is about the development of morally mature, upright persons – right actions will follow from this.

Situational Perspective

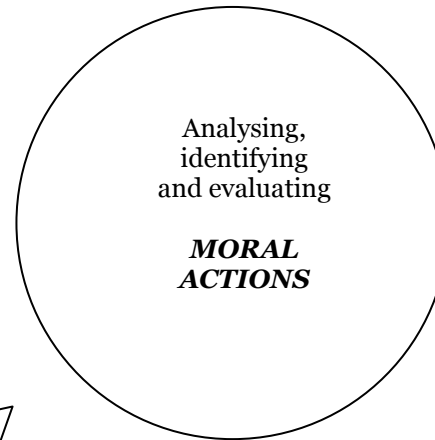
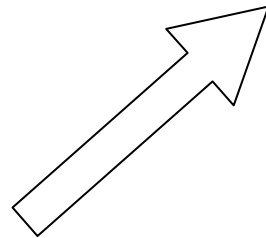
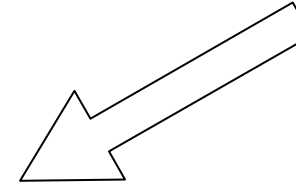
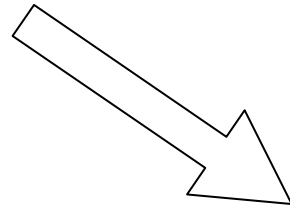
Why is it done?

A moral action considered with respect to the outcomes.

Will this action achieve the “good” – will it bring about the right “end” or “consequences”?

For the glory of God – associated with God the Father

Isolated from other perspectives and detached from Scripture this becomes the non-Christian framework of consequentialist or teleological ethics – something is right if it move us from the less desired to the more/most desired state of affairs. The rightness of moral actions is identified by their outcome.



Note

Properly understood these are perspectives not alternatives. Christian ethics will take all three perspectives into account and a moral action has not been adequately considered if one or more perspectives is omitted.

There is a fuzziness in the boundaries. For example, where does motive come? – it’s partly personal and partly situational. Or, isn’t the demand that an action be done for the glory of God itself a norm? Which reminds us, further, that all three perspectives are subject to the Word of God.

How we do ethics - talking about some ethical questions

A. In groups of four:

1. OT slavery is due a comeback.
2. Same-sex sexual activity should be against the law.
3. Corporal punishment no longer has a place in good child-rearing.
4. There's nothing wrong with cross-species organ transplantation.
5. If you were responsible for an adoption agency would you rather a) close or b) operate under rules which forbid you from taking the gender-mix or sexual orientation of couples applying to adopt?

Process:

Groups of 4. Three of the four discuss one of the propositions above (without interrupting each other). The fourth member of the group observes / listens and takes jottings on the following:

1. What sorts of arguments are brought for or against the proposition in question?
2. Is the Bible used and if so, in what sort of way?
 - detailed and specific parallels
 - general principles with assumed application?
 - as the starting point or to bring support to a position independently held?
3. Do key systematic truths get used in discussing this proposition?
4. Do the participants have sufficient knowledge of the situation under discussion to consider it properly together?
5. Is there movement during the discussion? Either by way of some unclarities removed or of some errors acknowledged and abandoned or of an emerging consensus?
6. Anything else of interest in terms of HOW these discussions are conducted.

B. Some others

Do we use the Bible in answering these questions? If so, how? If not, what else do we use?

- My 16 year old daughter is out with her friends at the weekend and I'm pretty sure that she is using illegal drugs. What should I do?
- My fiancée and I intend to live together in our new house for the three months leading up to the wedding. We realise that it's a bit risky but it's not actually wrong is it?
- \$10 million per annum for an LA Galaxy football player's salary (and £128m 'earnings' over 5 yrs) is obscene isn't it?
- We've been trying for a baby for 6 years now and we think that we should investigate ART - what do you think?
- When you think what other people spend on chocolate or DVDs in a month, you can't really suggest that spending a couple of pounds on the lottery every now and then is wrong can you?