

## ET 2.1 - INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS

### Questions of Moral Theology

1. Three perspectives - analysis of moral action
2. The classic Thomist version of the components of a moral act
3. What makes an action good?
4. Who defines good?
5. What makes an action bad / sinful?
6. So who does good?
7. Are any human actions morally indifferent?
8. Are all sins the same?
9. What are the forms of moral responsibility
10. What makes for full personal liability to praise/blame?
11. What does full voluntariness require
12. What are the modifiers of voluntariness?
13. So can a person commit "sin" without personal culpability / liability to punishment?
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15. Conscience
16. Affirmative and negative duties
17. Conflicting moral duties and the lesser of two evils
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23. Law and grace (see separate handout)

### 1. Three perspectives - analysis of moral action - see previous handout

- normative
- situational
- existential

### 2. The classic Thomist version of the components of a moral act

- object - a thing and an action considered with respect to their nature
- end - the aim in doing this act
- circumstances - "those moral conditions which are added to and modify the already existing moral substance of the act". "Quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando?" (Who, what, where, by which means, why, how, when?)

### 3. What makes an action good?

*"Bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defectu"* ("The good is from the ordered and complete set of perfected causes, whereas from any defect whatsoever evil ensues.")

It must be good in respect of all three perspectives / components.

For an absolutely good action there must be perfection in

- a) what is done
  - is it according to the law of God (normative – about rules)
- b) why it is done
  - is it for the glory of God? (situational – about outcomes)
- c) how / by whom is it done?
  - is it by the strength of God – i.e. by one indwelt by the Spirit, in union with Christ (existential – about persons)

### 4. Who defines good?

Inescapable question - what makes an act right or wrong?

- in the area of "oughtness", obligation, duty
- about conformity to a norm / "law"
  - (what is a good person, good action, good intention?)
- what norms? where does this come from?
- is an authority question
  - moral authority: a competent judge to determine/ define what is right and wrong
    - (all-knowing, all-good, all-righteous)
  - legal authority to require / command what is right and wrong (sovereign)

Would also need, for an ultimate moral authority, the will to reveal what is right and wrong and the power to impose just sanctions on those doing right and wrong.

If we had this – an all-knowing, all-good, all-righteous sovereign – then the rightness of what is right and the wrongness of what is wrong would flow from conformity to or transgression of his revealed will.

Ultimate moral authority - some possibilities. (Murder is wrong but whence its wrongness?)

- The state
- Sheer power / might is right
- Reality / 'the way things are'
- Custom
- Majority opinion
- Intuition / conscience
- Whatever I fancy
- God

A related question:

"Are wrong things wrong in themselves (natural law / moral realism) or only because a competent authority declares them to be so (positive law / moral voluntarism) ?

End up with the Euthyphro dilemma:

Is something right because the gods command it?  
- tends to moral voluntarism / positive law

Or do the gods command it because it is right?  
- tends to moral realism / natural law

This in turn becomes a question about the relation between the knowledge and the will of God.

But both are necessary (essential to God), perfect, personal, righteous. God in his infinite and simple essence is the standard and source of all that is right.

And, remember, goodness is personal. It is not a thing but an attribute of persons. God is not "good", he is "goodness". See Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 405-9

Once you have stated that God is perfectly and personally good and goodness then you avoid the horns of the dilemma – either positing an independent standard of goodness outside of God (how could there be unless there were something else uncreated?) or suggesting that God could arbitrarily change what he regards as good (but good/goodness is what he is not just an arbitrary whim of his).

Only a necessarily righteous and sovereign and wise God can be the ultimate authority for ethics

And his authority (as revealed) will be the source of the "oughtness" of a given act:

Westminster Larger Catechism

Q91: What is the duty which God requireth of man?

A: The duty which God requireth of man is obedience to his revealed will.

Thus "sin" is always defined by "law". It is only against some standard or criterion that we are able to declare an action to be "right" or "wrong".

The source and content of that "law" is the whole of "normative ethics".

Relationship to the revealed will of the wise, righteous, good sovereign God constitutes the goodness or wickedness of moral action.

Kirk and Burke:

“Either order in the cosmos is real, or chaos exists. If chaos reigns, then the fragile equalitarian doctrines and emancipating programs of the revolutionary reformers have no significance; for in a vortex of chaos, only force and appetite signify.

I allow that, if no supreme ruler exists, wise to form, and potent to enforce, the moral law, there is no sanction to any contract, virtual or even actual, against the will of prevalent power.”

## 5. What makes an action bad / sinful?

A defect in relation to any one or more of the perspectives / components makes an action bad.

*"Bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defectu"* ("The good is from the ordered and complete set of perfected causes, whereas from any defect whatsoever evil ensues.")  
Examples: ...

## 6. So who does good?

- there is one alone
- the good works of the unregenerate
  - relatively good (to the worst they could do) - and yet evil

Article XIII of the Church of England - *Of works done before justification:*

Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the School-authors say) deserve grace of congruity: yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin.

- the good works of the regenerate
  - relatively evil (to the perfection of Christ) - and yet good

## 7. Are any human actions morally indifferent?

There are some things which human beings do which may be morally indifferent - such as breathing while asleep, for example. But these are “actions of a human” rather than “human actions”. Some degree of knowledge and voluntariness (though not necessarily “actual intention”) is necessary for an action to be a human action (see below).

- not considered as whole actions - all human actions have a who, a what and a why
- but some proximate ends may be - though then they resolve to their ultimate ends
- some circumstances may be

## 8. Are all sins the same?

- sic et non

- in what ways, "yes"?
  - against God
  - bound up with all other sins
  - flow from same spring
  - will be punished
  - deserve hell
  - can be dealt with only by saving work of God
- in what ways, "no"?
  - actors, circumstances
  - heinousness ...

- degrees of sin

- a) the whole principle of "retributive justice" proves that some sins are worse than others - the law is an expression of the character of God and in the law (in which all transgressions received their due recompense of reward) there were different punishments for different crimes
- b) it is deeply ingrained in most human beings that some sins are worse than others
- c) specific examples:
  - "he who handed you over to me is guilty of the greater sin"
  - "woe to you Capernaum"
  - "beaten with many stripes ... beaten with fewer stripes"
  - "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth"
  - "cause one of these little ones to sin ..."
  - don't pray for that one
  - guilty of an eternal sin, never be forgiven

d) Westminster Larger Catechism,

Q. 151. What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?

A. Sins receive their aggravations,

1. From the persons offending; if they be of riper age, greater experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others.
2. From the parties offended: if immediately against God, his attributes, and worship; against Christ, and his grace; the Holy Spirit, his witness, and workings; against superiors, men of eminency, and such as we stand especially related and engaged unto; against any of the saints, particularly weak brethren, the souls of them, or any other, and the common good of all or many.
3. From the nature and quality of the offence: if it be against the express letter of the law, break many commandments, contain in it many sins: if not only conceived in the heart, but breaks forth in words and actions, scandalize others, and admit of no reparation: if against means, mercies, judgments, light of nature, conviction of conscience, public or private admonition, censures of the church, civil punishments; and our prayers, purposes, promises, vows, covenants, and engagements to God or men: if done deliberately, willfully, presumptuously, impudently, boastingly, maliciously, frequently, obstinately, with delight, continuance, or relapsing after repentance.
4. From circumstances of time, and place: if on the Lord's day, or other times of divine worship; or immediately before or after these, or other helps to prevent or remedy such miscarriages: if in public, or in the presence of others, who are thereby likely to be provoked or defiled.

## 9. What are the forms of moral responsibility

(see Frame, *Doctrine of God*, pp.119-146)

- responsibility as answerability, accountability. We are responsible for everything that we are and everything that we do in the sense that God may (and will) require us to give a full account.
- responsibility as liability to God's approbation/disapprobation (expressed in reward and punishment). We are not liable to punishment/reward for all that we are and all that we do because this sort of moral responsibility may be limited – see below.
- so - we are answerable for everything but not liable for everything

## 10. What makes for full personal liability to praise/blame?

- full personal "ownership" (Aquinas: "man as the source of actions which are his own")
- there are two forms of "ownership"
  - a) I have moral responsibility (liability to punishment / reward) for an act which is my own because I knowingly choose to perform it
  - b) I have moral responsibility (liability to punishment / reward) for an act which is my own because a divinely ordained covenantal representative of mine performs it

[The two clearest examples of this in Scripture are the imputation of the guilt of Adam's sin and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Both of these are applied to people who had no knowledge of or will in the original acts. The imputation is a matter of sheer covenant headship. Other instances may be had from Garry Williams who is writing a great book on this very subject.]

## 11. What does full voluntariness require

- that the intellect knows and the will chooses
- relating this to the sinner's bondage of the will
  - does not require ability to perform the contrary/alternative action (liberty of indifference)
  - "a voluntary action is one which finds its principle from within the agent and which proceeds with knowledge of the end" - consciously want to do it (not = immediate consciousness)
  - "interiority and due knowledge serve as the criteria for evaluating a human action's voluntary character" (Cessario 108)

## 12. What are the modifiers of voluntariness?

Those things which either "restrict requisite knowledge" or "intrude upon interiority".

i.e. when an action is less than fully a person's "own" because either s/he doesn't know what s/he is doing or doesn't want to do it

Liability to punishment is limited by how far this is a voluntary act.

### Clarifications

1. "Choose" does not mean that there must be active and actual awareness and intention at the moment of the action. "Choice" is rather about "moral consent" and thus may be actual, virtual, interpretative etc. Do we have a part in the fall of Adam? Or Saul in the death of Stephen? etc
2. Some ignorance and some inability to choose otherwise may add to rather than diminish our guilt – see below.
3. Some ignorance lessens or removes my responsibility: Ex 21.12-14, 22.2-3, 21.28-29
4. Some ignorance is culpable: Luke 12.47-48; Romans 1.21-23 – this ignorance heightens responsibility; Leviticus 4.2, 13-14, 22, 27
5. Increased ability/knowledge leads to increased responsibility: Isaiah 5.1-7, Luke 12.48, Matthew 11.20-24; Hebrews 6.1ff, 10.26-31
6. But some kinds of inability do not excuse at all
  - inability to avoid events which are divinely foreordained: Isaiah 10.5-11; Luke 22.22; Acts 2.23, 4.27-28
  - "moral" inability - Romans 8.6-8; Matthew 12.33-37 - moral inability is another way of saying how deeply evil we are. It would be odd if we could claim exemption on this basis. "You cannot judge me because I am so evil that I was bound to do it."

### Levels and modifiers of voluntariness?

(see Fagothey, *Right and Reason*, pp.98-111 and R C Mortimer, *The Elements of Moral Theology*, A & C Black, 1947, pp.38-74)

#### *Voluntariness of an act*

"It is customary to distinguish four levels of intention which ... represent a progressive diminution of voluntariness ..."

1. an actual intention – one that a person is conscious of at the moment he performs the intended action
2. a virtual intention – one that was once made and continues to influence the act now being done but is not present to the person's consciousness at the moment of performing the act
3. an habitual intention – one that was once made and not retracted, but does not influence the performance of the intended act (not about habit)
4. an interpretative intention – one that has not been made but presumably would have been made if the person were aware of the circumstances

### *Voluntariness of the consequences of an act*

1. directly voluntary (voluntary in act) - the consequence is the thing willed
2. indirectly voluntary (voluntary in cause) – the unintended but foreseen/welcomed consequence
3. involuntary – where the consequence is neither intended nor foreseen

### *Modifiers of voluntariness*

Voluntariness is perfect if the agent has full knowledge and full consent.

Modifiers:

1. Ignorance, affecting the knowledge
  - invincible ignorance destroys voluntariness
  - vincible ignorance – may be overcome. Culpability of vincible ignorance depends on the amount of effort put forth to dispel it, and the amount of effort called for depends on the importance of the matter and the obligation of the agent to possess such knowledge.
  - make no effort to dispel ignorance (though you know you could or don't care whether or not you could) – crass ignorance
  - deliberately avoid knowledge – studied ignorance
  - vincible ignorance lessens voluntariness
  - studied ignorance both lessens and increases voluntariness
2. Passion, affecting the consent of the will
  - a very strong motion of the sensitive appetite
  - antecedent passions - occurring without our will or against our will
    - may cause complete loss of control – no voluntariness
    - usually makes proper exercise of knowledge and will more difficult
  - consequent passions – deliberately aroused
  - when an antecedent passion is recognized and then retained or fostered it becomes a consequent passion
  - consequent passion – does not lessen voluntariness but may increase it
3. Fear, opposing to the will a contrary wish
  - the apprehension of impending (natural) evil (degree depends on amount and proximity of the perceived evil)
  - fear is a modifier of voluntariness only when it is a motive for acting and not a mere accompaniment of our act
  - fear lessens but does not destroy voluntariness – the “admixture of reluctance weakens the consent of the will”
  - the unwilled wish (the thing you wanted at some level but chose to reject) is involuntary
  - acts done under duress and intimidation are voluntary (though maybe considerably lessened voluntariness)
  - fear of storm: " While he jettisons his cargo freely, still, throwing the goods overboard expresses voluntary action only after a fashion, for he certainly would act otherwise if not for the sure perception that his fragile bark might sink and his life would be lost. Actions induced by fear exemplify the voluntary only in a qualified sense of the term for apart from the concrete circumstances which precipitate the fear, the individual would not have acted in such a way." (Cessario, 111)
4. Force, actual use of physical compulsion
  - external physical power making us do something against our will
  - destroys voluntariness - have become "instrumentalized to the will of the aggressor"

5. Habit, a tendency acquired by repetition
- constant way of acting obtained by repetition of the same act
  - may deliberately set out to acquire a habit
  - may voluntarily perform acts we know are habit-forming
  - may unintentionally acquire a habit
  - as soon as recognize our condition we have choice
    - let the habit remain
    - get rid of the habit

Modifiers of voluntariness which can probably be classified under the categories above: sleepiness, sickness, hypnosis, pain, alcohol, drugs, brainwashing, depression, paranoia etc

Examples:

- child-murderers
- the emotionally and behaviourally disturbed
- hypocritical church leaders
- committing violent acts when drunk

### **13. So can a person commit "sin" without personal culpability / liability to punishment?**

a) distinguish formal and material sin. cd be labelled:

1) objective sin – sin from the point of view of actions which God has commanded or forbidden. Actions of moral agents which are contrary to God's law and would not happen in an unfallen universe.

2) subjective sin – sin from the point of view of the moral responsibility of the one performing the action

Material sin is that the thing done is contrary to God's law – e.g. someone is deprived of their life without God's authorisation. However, it is possible that this thing which is sin as to the matter of it, sin as judged against God's objective standards for actions, is not sin as to the form of it, sin as judged by the knowing choice of the agent (e.g.).

For the action to be formally sinful as well as materially sinful, the agent must knowingly choose to perform it.

b) *actus reus* and *mens rea*

A similar distinction holds in English law. Broadly, the *actus reus* is material sin and the *mens rea* is formal sin.

c) sins of inadvertence / ignorance - ignorance and weakness (as against own deliberate fault / high-handed sins)

Leviticus 4-5; Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing; I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief; if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth

d) does this mean that there are free-standing evils - materially sinful actions which come from nowhere and are of no concern to God - or is someone always to blame?

Example: A man strapped to a robotic machine and forced to kill another man - resisting with his will the whole time.

1. material sin has been committed - the universe is disordered. God is displeased with this.
2. but the sin is not his - he is not culpable or liable to punishment

However, it is not that the sin is no-one's. Someone strapped him to the machine.

There is not free-standing moral evil in the universe - someone, somewhere is culpable for every evil. (Though of course culpability may be shared). Bottom line - Satan / Adam.

So with invincible ignorance. The sin committed in invincible ignorance is a sin - materially. And someone, somewhere is morally responsible for the ignorance - at bottom Satan / Adam.

#### **14. Institutional sin**

Is there any moral evil in the universe which does not, properly understood, attach to individual personal moral agents?

“Structural sin”; “institutional X-ism”

But take into account:

- a) individual traits AND relational traits
- b) increased temptations through organisational “culture” (habits, precedents, policies etc)
- c) demonic activity

What remains?

Objection: “this is individualistic”.

Response: “If we pretended that you could properly understand or evaluate a person detached from his/her relationships or isolated from his/her environment then, yes, it would be. But no such claim is being made. The claim is rather that when *all* relevant actions of personal (and in that sense, individual) moral agents have been taken into account, there will be no residual culpability in the walls or in the institution.”

#### **15. Conscience**

- “the mind passing moral judgment”
- “intuitive moral awareness”
- “moral self-judgment”
- “being aware of right and wrong and our relation to it”
- “a principle of reflection in men by which they distinguish between, approve and disapprove of their own actions” (Joseph Butler)
- “a man’s judgment concerning himself, as regards his subjection to the judgment of God” (William Ames)

The key to understanding conscience is its relation to revelation:

- it is not an independent source of ethical knowledge

- it is not a separate psychological faculty but rather the mind/heart in a particular function
- conscience is “internalized revelation” or “revelation so far as I currently have received / understand it to this moment”

How far, then, is conscience the “voice of God”?

How far is it authoritative – I Cor 4.4 I Jn 3.19-20?

How comforting or conclusive is the thought/phrase: “my conscience is clear”?

What is a “conscience vote”?

Distinguish between antecedent and consequent conscience.

*Antecedent conscience* – my judgment / evaluation of a moral action which I am considering - in the light of what I know. Moral consciousness. Tension may be a message of our conscience.

*Consequent conscience* – my judgment / evaluation of a moral action which I have performed - in the light of what I know. Moral self-judgment. Self-recrimination may be a message of our conscience - Joseph’s brothers, David (Saul’s cloak, Ps 32), Peter, Herod (Mt 14.2).

Thus we can have a

- good conscience – Acts 23.1, I Tim 1.5, 19 I Peter 3.16, 21 Heb 13.8
- pure conscience – I Tim 3.9, II Tim 1.3
- clear conscience – Acts 24.16
- evil conscience – Heb 10.22
- seared conscience – I Tim 4.2
- defiled conscience – Titus 1.15
- weak conscience – I Cor 8.7,12
- and, praise God, a cleansed conscience - Heb 9.14, 10.2-10, 22

And there is not one but two questions which matter. Not just “have I followed my conscience?” but first, “is my conscience correctly ‘educated’?” and then, “have I followed it?” What’s the good of following your conscience if it tells you to slaughter millions of Jews?

Our double duty is

- a) to educate our conscience so that it more closely conforms to God’s revealed will
- b) to follow our conscience

Must we obey our conscience?

Yes – it stands for “what we know of God’s will at this point”. To go against conscience would be to go against what we think God says.

But what if our conscience is mistaken? (Jn 16.2, Acts 26.9)

Then

- a) if we disobey our conscience then – in our own minds – we are disobeying God - formal sin
- b) but if we obey our conscience then – objectively – we are disobeying God - material sin

“If you follow it, you break the law of God in doing that which he forbids you. If you forsake it and go against it, you reject the authority of God, in doing that which you think he forbids you.” (Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory*, p.117)

What can / should we do?

We are obliged to educate our conscience so that it conforms properly with what God has revealed – and then obey it.

“There is no attaining to innocence any other way, but by coming first to know your duty, and then to do it. If you command your servant to weed your corn, and he mistake you, and verily think, that you bid him pull up the corn, and not the weeds; what now should he do? Shall he follow his judgment or go against it? Neither, but change it, and then follow it.” (ibid)

How proceed when unsure?

- a) There are actually two questions:
  1. what is the right thing to believe?
  2. what is the right thing to do while I remain uncertain about the right thing to believe?
  
- b) on the second of these, two principles hold:
  1. The morally safer course is to be chosen – “err on the safe side”
  2. A doubtful law does not bind – that is to say that where there is significant, solid doubt that X is your duty then you are not bound to X. This complements rather than overrides 1.

## 16. Affirmative and negative duties

(// with sins of omission and commission)

Affirmative duties require the performance of an act.

Negative duties flow from prohibitions and require the omission or avoidance of an act.

Westminster Larger Catechism, q.99, rule 5: “That what God forbids is at no time to be done; what he commands is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.”

“The importance of the distinction between affirmative and negative duties is that they impose a different type of obligation. Negative laws and duties require constant fulfillment every moment; one must never be doing the thing forbidden. Affirmative laws and duties impose a lasting obligation in the sense that one is never exempt from it, but the obligation does not require constant fulfillment every moment” (Fagothey, p.255)

Every moment of your life you must be not murdering. But not every moment of your life must you be clothing the naked.

There were thousands of good works which Jesus could have performed but which he did not perform. It would have been a good thing for Mary to sell the ointment and give the money to the poor. etc

What is the practical importance of this distinction?

## 17. Conflicting moral duties and the lesser of two evils

### a) Conflicting Affirmative Duties

The situation:

It seems that there are two relevant affirmative duties upon a person at the same time.

The possibilities:

- a) acknowledge real conflict and determine which of the two moral demands should be met
- b) see the conflict as a sign that at least one of the demands has not been understood with sufficient precision

A way of thinking about this:

Think of moral demands as territorial claims.

Does conflict mean that God has given mutually exclusive commands for this person at this moment in this situation?

And that we set aside a command of God which really does apply here?

Or does it rather mean that we have not properly understood the precise boundaries, contours and timings of at least one of the commands and should re-examine their meaning and application?

What might be some of the “weightier” matters of the law / some of the more pressing duties when there appears to be a conflict?

Fagothey gives a number of factors to be borne in mind in determining which of two apparent claimants to territory called “present duty” is likely to be the legitimate one:

1. the nobler person – God before man
2. the closer relationship – closer relatives before remote ones
3. the more common good – world peace before personal comfort (!)
4. the wider social order – family before individual
5. the graver matter – life before property
6. the greater urgency – fighting a fire before reading a book
7. the higher law – inalienable rights before alienable
8. the clearer title – paying a debt before giving a gift

### b) “Lesser of two evils” or Conflicting Negative Duties

Another version of the same basic issue?

What is meant by evil? The difference between moral and natural evil.

Moral evil – the sinfulness of the actions of morally responsible agents which contravene the law of God

Natural evil – the unpleasantness / tragedy of the circumstances which arise from living in a fallen world.

The possibilities:

- a) choice between two natural evils – a legitimate demand from a real authority over you that you eat either some broad beans or some brussel sprouts. No sin involved whichever choice is made.
- b) choice between a natural evil and a moral evil – say “Caesar is Lord” or die. No question – moral evil is always to be avoided before natural evil. No natural evil is worse than moral evil. It is better to die than to sin.
- c) choice between two moral evils - there are two mutually exclusive revealed and relevant commands of God and one or other of them must be broken – there is no other course of action.

More on the choice between two apparently conflicting moral evils:

1. both commands fully apply and thus there is no choice but to sin. The lesser sin is to be chosen and God will hold you responsible for it;
2. both commands fully apply and thus there is no choice but to sin. The lesser sin is to be chosen and at that point God will overlook it and not hold you responsible for it;

Problems with these two views:

- (i) did Jesus face such a situation?
    - if so, he sinned
    - if not, but we do, then he was not tempted as we are
  - (ii) is it possible to please God in this situation?
    - if not then God has forced us to sin
    - if so then God is pleased with sin
  - (iii) how does this fit with e.g. I Cor 10.13?
  - (iv) if sin is defined by transgression of God’s law then there is a contradiction in God’s revelation – he says “do A” and “do B” where A and B are mutually exclusive
3. one of the two commands, in this situation and properly defined, nuanced and understood, does not apply. There are not really two moral evils here but one and that one must be avoided.

Has some connections with 1. and 2. above in recognising that there is a greater and lesser sin but says that the duty to avoid the greater sin renders the lesser “sin” no sin at all because the greater command redefines the lesser.

e.g. God has told you to preach the Gospel or to affirm, whenever asked, that “Jesus is Lord”. He has also told you to submit to and obey the civil authorities. What of the situation in which the civil authorities forbid you to preach the gospel or require you to deny that Jesus is Lord?

Appears to be a choice between two moral evils:

1. disobey the civil authorities – which would be a sin
2. deny that Jesus is Lord – which would be a sin.

An easy example but one which clarifies the issue.

We realize that what we need to do is nuance / redefine one of the commands in order that the two do not conflict.

Thus the real command is NOT “obey the civil authorities” but rather “obey the civil authorities unless they tell you to deny that Jesus is Lord.”

And what has happened here is not the transgression of a biblical command. Nor has an exception or exemption been suggested. It is simply that careful attention to the whole teaching of Scripture has allowed us to redefine / redraw the boundaries of one of the two commands.

Clyde Jones puts it well:

“Absolutes in the sense of objective, universal, exceptionless moral norms can only be formulated by attending carefully to the whole teaching of Scripture in a given area ... The “exceptions” define the rule (rather than exempt it) ... Paying attention to the whole teaching of Scripture in defining universal norms thus removes many supposed instances of conflicting absolutes.”

[Geisler and Fagothey see this differently.

Fagothey: “The conflict is only apparent ... the stronger right or duty does not conflict with lesser ones but extinguishes them”.

Geisler: “How can a moral law be absolute yet not obeyed? ... The lower command is not really broken when the higher command is followed ... there are no exceptions to absolute moral laws, only exemptions from obeying them in view of higher ones ... the command remains absolute even when it is not followed ...”

(Exemption – it applies but you are let off  
Exception – it does not apply)

This is unhelpful. The “greater” duty is better understood as redefining, redrawing the boundaries of, nuancing our understanding of the lesser duty than as extinguishing it or providing an exemption (not exception) from it.]

## **18. Are the unregenerate obliged to obey God's law?**

What's the issue?

- a) they are not able to obey?
- b) they do not consider themselves obliged to obey?
  - what sort of ignorance?
  - what do with misinformed conscience?
- c) there are moral demands which are addressed only to covenant people?
  - what is the relationship of the wicked to those commands?

Related: are we interested in presenting moral demands other than the gospel demand to unregenerate sinners / in helping unregenerate sinners sin less?

Possible reasons:

- a) sin is hateful and an offence to God
- b) this may be used by God to bring them to awareness of sin
- c) this may provide a better environment for Christians to live in
- d) God blesses people who seek him and the conscience of those who persist in sin hardens over time
- e) ...

## 19. What place natural law?

What is "natural law" and how does it help?

"A moral order divinely implanted in humankind and accessible to all persons through human reason" (van Engen).

The reflection of the perfect person and purpose of God as applied to human beings character and conduct. In Thomist terms, "eternal law" is "how God sees the world - since he made it - the proper way of looking at what is true and therefore what is good".

Aquinas: "natural law embodies nothing other than a participation of the eternal law in the rational creature." (Ia-IIae, 91.4.1)

"The way things are meant to be"

Everything has a nature which includes a built-in purpose. Non-moral beings act according to their nature involuntarily. Human beings are to act according to their nature voluntarily. Natural law is a revelation (to right reason) of how humans are meant to act.

How helpful is this?

- is it true that humans have a nature, including a built-in purpose?
- and that they are to fulfil this voluntarily?
- and that natural law reveals this?
- and that it is available to right reason?

The problem with this, from the point of view of Reformed ethics, is that it obscures the questions of revelation, noetic effects of sin\* etc. Because it is often related to general revelation.

\*Neat - and vaguely related article <http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i24/24b00501.htm>

How accessible is "natural law" outside of Scripture? And once you've got Scripture then why are we talking about natural law?

- a) as an independent source of morality? waste of time and won't work
- b) as a reminder that it is the creator who commands and that there is such a thing as "how things were built / meant to be"? Fine. Just get it and judge it by Scripture.

## 20. The 10 Commandments

Anything special about them?

- Place of Exodus 20 (and Deut 5) in the story
- Mode of revelation – Ex 20.1, 22
- Inscribed by God, called the covenant, placed in ark: Exodus 31.18, 32.16, Deut 4.13, 5.22, 9.9-10, 10.1-5, I Kings 8.9, 21
- Recognition and use in church's liturgical tradition
- Use in NT – Matt 15.19, 19.18-19, Rom 2.21-4, 13.8-10, Eph 6.1-4, I Tim 1.8-11, Jas 2.8-11

Of course,

- Not the only summary
- Not the whole story
- In the context of redemption
- Two tablets =?
- RC/ Lutheran enumeration different

However,

- Ten ways of understanding original sin
- Ten prohibitions against false solutions / gods
- Ten prohibitions against hurting ourselves
- Christ kept these perfectly
- What sort of God would command these? – a revelation of his character
- How do I measure up against these? – a revelation of my character

And appendix 1. below for Frame on *Preaching Christ from the Decalogue*

## 21. Casuistry

- Application of moral principles (biblical law) to cases of conscience
- Baxter's *Christian Directory* as pre-eminent example. See appendix 3 below for examples
- See also William Ames, William Perkins, Jeremy Taylor, Samuel Willard
- David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, pp.138-44 for a summary

Not “rules for getting round the rules” nor “an elaborate justification of sin” but rather the careful drawing of distinctions in circumstances and the careful elucidation of principles from Scripture to ensure that the right “laws” are applied to the right situations.

- lying / who has a right to truth?
- killing / without God's authorisation
- usury / charitable loans to poor brothers
- vows / those committing us to sin do not bind
- suicide / self-sacrifice – how distinguish?

Clyde Jones:

“The exceptions define the rule (rather than exempt it)” – 140

“Paying attention to the whole teaching of Scripture in defining universal norms thus removes many supposed instances of conflicting absolutes.” - 142

Cessario (hostile to casuistry) defines as:

"a morality based on the formulation of precepts, the formation of conscience and the obligation to obey duly established norms." He lists eight negative features of casuistry p.237-241 of *Intro to Moral Theology*. For example: the atomization of the moral action;

the disappearance of virtuous disposition; the juridicism of casuistry; individualism; casuistry practically eschews the notion of final causality. etc. Overstated.

**22. How can we preach ethics without being moralistic?**

- a) to whom are we “preaching” and with what intention?
- b) do we care about how much or how little the unregenerate sin so long as they are outside of Christ? - see above
- c) how does Jesus make ethical demands in, for example, the sermon on the mount?
- d) how are ethical demands made in apostolic writings?
  - Ephesians 4.25 – 5.5
  - Ephesians 5.21 – 6.9
  - Colossians 3.1 – 4.1
  - Titus 3.1-5
  - I Peter 2.11-17

Some principles: ...

## Appendix 1: Preaching Christ From the Decalogue

by John M. Frame

If all Scripture testifies of Christ, the law of God surely cannot be an exception. As we study the law in a seminary context, then, nothing can be more important than to study its witness to Christ. Ministers of the gospel need to learn how to preach Christ from the law.

In fact, the law bears witness to Christ in a number of ways, some of which I shall discuss in the following points.

1. The Decalogue presents the righteousness of Christ. When we say that Christ was the perfect lamb of God and the perfect example for the Christian life, we are saying that he perfectly obeyed God's law. He never put any god before his Father. He never worshipped idols or took God's name in vain. The Pharisees arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, he never violated the Sabbath command. So, the Decalogue tells us what Jesus was like. It shows us his perfect character.

2. The Decalogue shows our need of Christ. God's law convicts us of sin and drives us to Jesus. It shows us who we are apart from Christ. We are idolaters, blasphemers, Sabbath-breakers, and so on.

3. The Decalogue shows the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. In him we are holy. God sees us, in Christ, as law-keepers.

4. The Decalogue shows us how God wants us to give thanks for Christ. In the Decalogue, obedience follows redemption. God tells his people that he has brought them out of Egypt. The law is not something they must keep to merit redemption. God has redeemed them. Keeping the law is the way they thank God for salvation freely given. So the Heidelberg Confession expounds the law under the category of gratefulness.

5. Christ is the substance of the law. This point is related to the first, but it is not quite the same. Here I wish to say that Jesus is not only a perfect law-keeper (according to his humanity), but that according to his deity he is the one we honor and worship when we keep the law:

- (a) The first commandment teaches us to worship Jesus as the one and only Lord, Savior, and mediator (Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5)
- (b) In the second commandment, Jesus is the one perfect image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Our devotion to him precludes worship of any other image.
- (c) In the third commandment, Jesus is the name of God, that name to which every knee shall bow (Phil. 2:10-11; cf. Is. 45:23).
- (d) In the fourth commandment, Jesus is our Sabbath rest. In his presence, we cease our daily duties and hear his voice (Luke 10:38-42).
- (e) In the fifth commandment, we honor Jesus who has brought us as his "sons" (Heb. 2:10) to glory.
- (f) In the sixth commandment, we honor him as the life (John 10:10; 14:6; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:4), Lord of life (Acts 3:15), the one who gave his life that we might live (Mk. 10:45).
- (g) In the seventh commandment, we honor him as our bridegroom who gave himself to cleanse us, to make us his pure, spotless bride (Eph. 5:22-33). We love him as no other.
- (h) In the eighth commandment, we honor Jesus as our inheritance (Eph. 1:11) and as the one who provides all the needs for his people in this world and beyond.
- (i) In the ninth commandment, we honor him as God's truth (John 1:17; 14:6), in whom all the promises of God are Yea and Amen (2 Cor. 1:20).
- (j) In the tenth commandment, we honor him as our complete sufficiency (2 Cor. 3:5; 12:9) to meet both our external needs and the renewed desires of our hearts.