Contemporary Ethical Issues And The Christian Response

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The topic for this conference, "Contemporary Ethical Issues and the Christian Response," is an ambitious one. It is as "big" as God Himself, as expansive as all of history and all of human interaction. At the same time, the topic is as "small" as a fleeting human thought or judgement, as narrow as an isolated action or failure to act.

Christian ethics also is a topic of the utmost seriousness. All of us, as participants in this conference—and, indeed, as Christians—need to remember that it is the Almighty God Himself Who says, "*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight*" (Isaiah 5:20–21). In other words, this conference and the issue with which we deal are not mere intellectual exercises: First, because it is important—eternally important—that we "get it right." And, second, "getting it right" involves, not our intellect or cleverness, but God Himself.

Seriousness characterizes the attitude with which we, as Christians, approach ethical issues, but seriousness does not define Christian ethics themselves. To confuse approach with substance is parallel to the wooly-headed proposition. "as long as you are sincere, it does not matter what you believe."

Before addressing the substance of Christian ethics, I believe it would be useful to review non-Christian ("worldly") approaches to ethics—both to learn what we may safely use and what we must, in respect to God, avoid. I have sorted these worldly approaches into six categories:

The first approach to ethics, and one found throughout human history, can be summarized, "Might makes Right." The Book of Daniel is replete with examples ranging from diet to divine worship where the pagan powerful attempted to dictate and justify "right" on the forthright basis that they had the power to do so and make to it stick. The history of Christianity is not free from similar examples—look at the "conversion" of Gaul or the maneuvering of German states among religious camps. Certainly, one of the themes of Daniel is that might does not make right. In Proverbs, it explicitly states you are not to "*…withhold good from those who deserve it when it is in your power to act*" (Proverbs 3:27).

The second category after "Might makes Right" is what I call "Bright makes Right." The "guru" of contemporary cults and the "heroes" from the Greeks to Carlyle have been considered sources of ethical standards. Christians have not been immune to the lure of the charismatic leader. Consider the role of the "Fathers" in some traditions and of Martin Luther for some in our own tradition. While we are instructed, "*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority…*" (Hebrews 13:17) and to walk in the ways of good men (Proverbs 2:20), we are to remember that such obedience and submission does not make even our Christian leaders the authoritative sources for Christian ethical norms. Scripture says, "*One of you says, 'I follow Paul;' another, 'I follow Apollos;' another, 'I follow Cephas;' still another, 'I follow Christ.' "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?…*" (1 Corinthians1:12). It is not the false prophet that is the subject of the warning, but rather the true servants of Christ.

The third worldly approach to ethics is a variation on the ethical system "Bright makes Right." It holds that "I make Right." This individualistic approach is sometimes confused with ethical systems based on human reason, but, in fact, can include non-rational elements (e.g.,

emotions, "racial memory"). Certainly, Scripture does emphasize individual responsibility: "*No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough...*" (Psalm 49:7-8). None the less, the Bible also teaches that "*Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God*" (Romans 8:8).

The fourth non-Christian approach to ethics asks, if a Christian cannot, without qualification, say "I make Right," can he or she say "We make Right"? Ethical norms as "community consensus" are increasingly popular. Again, Scripture does emphasize Christian people as part of a caring collectivity, the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–13:13). However, popularity in its original sense of being approved by the people, is not a standard for ethical conclusions. The Bible enjoins us to "*...go with Him [Jesus] outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore*" (Hebrews 13:13). The statement "*...Let God be true and every man a liar ...*" (Romans 3:4) shows us God does not take votes to determine what is true or truly ethical. And no wonder, when you consider that among the "voters" in any community we could join "*... There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood ...*" *(*Romans 3:10–15). In short, we, in our lives in the community, fail both in ethical pronouncements and in actions.

A fifth approach takes reason as the source for ethical norms. The Bible says, "*Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding*" (Proverbs 4:7). It also teaches us that reason is *not* always right for "*There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads to death*" (Proverbs 14:12). God also says, "*... The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned...For who has known the mind of the Lord that we may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 1:19, 2:14,16). Reason, then, plays a role in ethics, but only divine reason, the "mind of Christ."

A sixth approach is utilitarian. The failure of reason as the basis for ethical norms has been obvious even to non-Christians since the end of the Enlightenment. This failure has been abundantly reinforced by the rationalistic horrors that have brought us the "final solutions" to many of our problems. The alternatives to reason have paraded under utilitarian and pragmatic labels. The ethical systems rooted in this approach can be crudely summarized as "do what is good" and "don't do what is bad." Even when described with more insight and sensitivity, there is a real sense in which these approaches to ethics "beg the question." Frequently, even the most sophisticated systems can be reduced to "if it feels good, do it." Contrary to what some think—and to what we, as Christians, portray in our lives—God is not an ogre, adverse to whatever is pleasurable. The Psalmist speaks of God as the One Who has filled "*...me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand*" (Psalm 16:11). Jesus came that we "*...might have life, and have it to the full*" (John 10:10), but Jesus warns that our faith can be choked by pleasure (Luke 8:14). "*Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach ...*" (Philippians 3:18). Pleasure is not, then. wrong, it simply fails as a "god," as a "law giver" of ethical norms.

The Pleasure Principle can be seen as a paradigm for all alternatives to Christian ethics. All—Christian leaders, reason, the community—have their place, but all are insufficient.

What, then, are the characteristics of Christian ethical propositions? Norman L. Geisler suggests the following: (1) Christian ethics are based in God's will; (2) Christian ethics are absolute; (3) Christian ethics are rooted in Revelation; (4) Christian ethics are prescriptive—i.e.,

they define what "ought to be" not necessarily what is;" and (5) Christian ethics are deontological—i.e., they center on our duty, not on "ends" or results.

Even within the literature on Christian Ethics, one also finds at least six schools of thought:

First, there are the antinomians, those who say no essentially Christian ethical system exists. Or, as an alternative to this, they say no such system can be discerned leaving the Christian ethicist to turn back to one or more of the admittedly insufficient non-Christian systems already described as the basis for a Christian ethical system. They can cite as their passage "*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and His paths beyond tracing out!*" (Romans 11:33-34). However, Jesus clearly said, "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth until Heaven and Earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Any one who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven*" (Matthew 5:17-19). In short, Christian antinomians are right in being humble and circumspect in what they posit as an ethical system, but they are wrong in "defining away" the possibility of a truly Christian ethic.

A second school in the literature on Christian ethics is represented by the Situationalists. These Christian ethicists also have "their" passage: Paul said, "*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible...To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel that I may share in its blessings*" (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Clearly, Situationalism is not unqualified as an ethical system. If it is to avoid the trap the "community consensus" school, it will have to acknowledge the situation or community as the place in which Christian ethics are exercised, not as the place in which Christian ethics originate.

A third school of Christian ethicists are the Generalists. These claim that there are general ethical norms, but that their application is not absolute. We only need to have recourse to the quotation of Jesus already cited from the Gospel of Matthew to remember that not one jot or tittle" of the law will pass away to establish God as a "God of the details," a God Who numbers the hairs of our heads (Luke 12:7).

A fourth school of Christian ethicists is called conflicting absolutism. This approach argues that ethical norms, including Christian ethical norms, can conflict. And, as a result, we must pick and choose on the basis of some other standard than the Law of God. A common example is lying to save a life. Thus what is wrong, lying, can become right when it conflicts with another right, protecting human life. But, "*Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, Who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth ...*" (James 1:16-18). In short, conflicting absolutism implies something about the nature of God and about the nature of truth that cannot be supported by Scripture.

A fifth school in Christian literature is called Graded Absolutism. Here there are many absolute ethical norms, but apparent conflict among norms does not cancel one; instead, the

ethical norms are graded with some judged to be more important than others. Under this theory, human life is a more important norm than telling the truth. It certainly is true that Jesus speaks of "lesser" commands (Matthew loc cit). However, in Christian doctrine a "lesser status" is not a license to break the law in question. James tells us, "... *whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For He Who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a law breaker*" (James 2:10-11). Graded absolutism also can readily lead to an "end justifies the means" ethic—a higher good justifying breaking a lesser law. But, if this were so, Jesus would not have prayed, "*Father, forgive them*" (Luke 23:34) from the cross, for, surely, if ever there was a "greater good" it was His atoning death, but His illegal, unjust execution was still a sin. The Bible rightly asks the graded absolutist, "... *Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! ...*" (Romans 6:1-2). Also, remember the example of Abraham who, when called on to sacrifice Isaac, did not say "life is more important than sacrificing or worshipping as God directed." Instead, we read, "*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that Your offspring will be reckoned*'" (Hebrews 11:17-18).

Finally, we come to the school of those called Unqualified Absolutists. At one time, these were primarily Lutherans. As the name suggests, Unqualified Absolutists are Christian ethicists who believe there are ethical laws which are specific not general, which are not qualified by the situation and which cannot be canceled by other laws or followed depending upon their position vis-a-vis other ethical laws. Most of the criticism of ethical absolutism is with its difficulty in application, but relatively little is written by Christians arguing that it is not a valid approach to ethics. One is reminded of Richard Gilman's spiritual autobiography. He became a Christian because "it is true;" he left the faith because he could not live it.

Having reviewed six alternatives to Christian ethics as well as six approaches to Christian ethics, I return to the point at which I began: this is "serious business." Our response to contemporary ethical issues reflects on the nature of God Himself. The Christian God is not just a God Who is there. He is a God of content, of truth. We are members of the body of the "... *God Who does not lie...*" (Titus 1:2), as we read in Titus. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot claim to be followers of Jesus, but not believers in or practitioners of Christian ethics. Isaiah says we are not true children of God if we "... *invoke the God of Israel—but not in truth or righteousness...*" (Isaiah 48:1), not in word and deed. Jesus said, "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father Who is in Heaven*" (Matthew 7:21).

Christian ethics, then, is a serious topic because it goes right to the heart of the great I AM, Himself. It also is a broad topic because ethics, for a Christian, involves *both* thought and deed (Matthew, loc cit. and James, passim). However, seriousness does not mean grim or vindictive. God says, "*...O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good* " (Deuteronomy 10:12-13, emphasis added). Fear, love, observe, serve ... for your own good. His commands are not burdensome (Matthew 11:29–30). We are to "*sing joyfully to the Lord...it is fitting for the upright to praise Him...For the word of the Lord is right and true; He is faithful in all He does. The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full*

of His unfailing love " (Psalm 33:1, 4–5). And, if you have any doubt that our task at this conference is a joyous one, look to the ethical standard declared to be yours by our loving Lord, "*God made Him Who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God* " (2 Corinthians 5:21).

<div align="center">Note</div>

This address was significantly influenced by Norman L. Geisler's *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989). While the conclusions I have drawn differ from Mr. Geisler's, his book gave organization and structure to my reading and conclusions on Christian ethics