

AN APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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Before taking this course, I found myself in basic agreement with the "principles" approach similar to those advocated by Longenecker and Chismar. The course did not make me change my approach to Christian ethics. However, it did help me to more clearly understand the basic components of Christian ethics.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the basic components of this "principles" approach, to explain its hermeneutical approach, to contrast this ethical approach to the contextualist and the theonomist approaches, and to apply this approach to the some of the issues which were discussed in class.

The Basic Components of the Approach

Using Chismar's schematic, the following terms need definition.

Boundary Conditions refer to those moral principles which are timeless and therefore do not require cultural adaptation. Boundary conditions would be similar to what other "principles" ethicists call rules. Boundary conditions include both issues of hierarchical importance and moral dictums. Hierarchical issues would include the priority of people over things, and the priority of seeking God's approval rather than man's. Moral dictums would include the sanctity of human life (to be safeguarded wherever possible), sexuality to be expressed within the context of heterosexual marriage, the benevolent rulership of man over nature, and basic respect for other people's property and well-being in all social activity.

It has been noted that most, if not all of these boundary conditions can be found to correspond in what is called "natural law". "Natural law" refers to those things which men know instinctively about how they should live.¹ The Bible does seem to teach that there are moral norms which people know instinctively (cf Rom. 1:26,27,28,32; 2:14,15). A study of the basic ethics of world religions and philosophers throughout history has revealed a remarkable agreement.²

Values refers to that state of affairs on earth which God wants to bring about. Obviously, one would be more solely dependent upon the Bible to discover values. It should be noted that these values do not inherently contradict one another, but it is often not possible to have all of these values at the same time, so that some sort of prioritization must be found to determine which are most strategically desirable in a given period of history. Such values would include man's reconciliation with God, peace on earth between people, the treatment of all human beings with love and the meeting of their basic needs, unity within the Body of Christ, and the development of individual God-given abilities to glorify Him and serve man.

Moral character development refers to virtue, or the sanctification of the individual Christian by the Holy Spirit so that he/she comes to manifest the values, goals, attitudes and motivation of

¹ Arthur F. Holmes, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), pp. 62,63.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 97-121.

Jesus Himself. This definition of moral character development is, like the above values, dependent upon scripture for its definition, and supremely on Jesus for its example. Such character would include above all self-sacrificing love for God and other people, as well as the wisdom to express that love appropriately (Phil. 1:9-11) in concrete situations as Jesus did.

Moral character development should be seen as of primary importance both for the individual's personal ethical development and, by extension, for the development of a church and then a society which reflects God's values.

Hermeneutical Approach

How one interprets the Bible is the critical question in Christian ethics, and it is a question which is not easily resolved. A bewildering array of questions faces the Christian ethicist: How do we go about finding the rules and values of scripture? How do we integrate the unity and the diversity of scripture - specifically, what role does salvation history play in developing our ethics? How do we discern what is cultural and what is trans-cultural? How binding are the applications of scriptural rules? What guidance does the Bible give for new applications of those rules? These questions are profound and can only be touched on in this paper.

It seems obvious that the *boundary conditions* would be expressed throughout the Bible. We would expect to find these timeless moral absolutes expressed often and every literary genre of the canon. We would expect that the major covenants in scripture (i.e. Mosaic and New) would continue to emphasize rather than negate them, since they constitute the purpose of God which *is* the goal of salvation history.

Values seem to be relatively easy to distill from scripture. One can read God's original commission to man in the early chapters of Genesis and get a basic picture of the way in which God ideally wants man to relate to Himself, other men and nature. Examining descriptions of the rule of Christ after His return (regardless of one's millennial view) yields a very detailed description of the same values which God wants for man.

The problem area in values is not in understanding what they are, but rather in how to *prioritize* those values in the stage of God's redemptive plan in which we now find ourselves. For the fall has shattered the kind of world God desired for man. God is in the process of restoring man and the world to the way He desires it, and He will accomplish that goal after the return of Christ. But until that day, we live in a fallen, abnormal world in which it is impossible for all of God's values to be realized. The reason for this is obvious. God's purposes for man are built on the foundation of man being in right relationship with Him. Since the majority of people are not reconciled to God, and since even those who are reconciled to Him still have fallen natures, there is a fundamental impossibility of all of His values being realized in human society at this present time.

This fact has great implications for the area of values in Christian ethics. While one must hold all of God's values to be true and perfect, one must prioritize which of these values be given greatest attention. and decide how he will approach pursuing those values. In other words, it is impossible to separate ethics from salvation history. If we believe that God has a strategy for accomplishing His goal (to bring the world back under His loving rulership), then how we see God pursuing that

goal and what specific stage we see God to be in must become our guideline for *what* values we as God's people will stress most and *how* to go about working for them.

It is my contention that such guidance is available to us in the New Testament and specifically in those passages in the New Testament which explain the role of the church, the Body of Christ. This is the stage of God's program which we ourselves are in. Therefore, we can look to these passages to find what God says are our primary objectives, and also to discover how God says those objectives are to be pursued.

It seems self-evident that the overriding mission of the church is to be Christ's witness so that people from every ethnic group in the world will come back to the right relation with God through Him and His work on the cross.³ To this end, verbal evangelistic mission is obviously highly prioritized. So also is the sanctification of individual Christians and the church, since we as Christians and the Body of Christ are the presence of Christ in the world - the light of the world⁴, the salt of the earth⁵, the pillar and support of the truth.⁶

In other words, the New Testament gives priority to witness over socially perfecting existing human society. While the church is to be a "new society" that shows the world the kind of society God wills for man, even this is ultimately so that lost people may come to Christ.⁷ The reason for this is obvious: it takes regenerated people to have a regenerated society. The church has a responsibility to actualize the "new society" of the Body of Christ. While that actualizing process may even (and has) influence secular society for good, to make the betterment of secular society the priority is both unscriptural and unreasonable. How can we expect unregenerate people to love God's way and be able to follow it? To assert this is to deny the biblical view of man's depravity and to undercut the value of Christ's death.⁸

So it should not surprise us to see that the New Testament has relatively little or nothing to say about changing the secular institutions of its day. I do not believe that the reason for this is merely because they were politically unable to change it. Rather, they did not focus on bettering secular institutions because Christ's strategy was far more biblical and radical: to change human society by changing humans through reconciling them to Jesus Christ through the gospel.

Longenecker agrees that this was the real reason for Paul's "relaxed" attitude concerning the institution of slavery in the first century world.⁹ It was not that Paul was "relaxed" about slavery; it was that he was *more* concerned about mission/witness because he correctly saw that only when society is deeply permeated with vital Christian churches can significant social change occur. Paul was *forced* to prioritize God's values, and he did so according to Christ's commission for himself and the church. Our situation has not materially changed today. Though Christians can exert more political influence, we still face an unregenerate society dominated by a non-Christian consensus. Therefore, the first priority must be evangelism, the vitality of the church

³ See Matt. 28:19; Lk. 24:46,47; Acts 1:8 which all clearly declare this to be the mission of the church. Matt. 24:14 makes it clear that Christ will not return until this mission is accomplished. Paul makes it clear that this is his purpose in Col. 1:28. He also declares that it is the purpose of the church in II Cor. 5:18-20 and I Cor 10:32-11:1.

⁴ Matt. 5:14-16; Phil. 2:14-16

⁵ Matt. 5:13

⁶ I Tim. 3:15

⁷ Jn. 13:34,35; See also Titus 2:9-14; I Pet. 2:9 for this same evangelistic reason for correct social behavior with non-Christians.

⁸ Gal. 2:21 in context refers not only to justification but also living life God's way.

⁹ Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics For Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.), pp. 54-56.

and church planting domestically and abroad. To focus first on the betterment of secular society is to violate not only the example of the New Testament church, but also its theology.¹⁰

The New Testament must also be our guide on *how* to pursue God's values for this stage in His plan. It is here that the New Testament emphasis on grace is so crucial. God's people have discovered the grace of God. They are to proclaim that grace to non-Christians, live under that grace in their own lives and approach other believers consistently with the grace that God has shown them.

This emphasis on grace is in contrast to an emphasis on law: specifically on imposing God's law on non-Christians, on relating to God nomistically,¹¹ and on relating to other Christians nomistically. This insight has tremendous implications for Christian ethics.

To pursue God's values by grace means first of all that Christians are not to impose God's ethics/values on non-Christians. This is in contrast to the Mosaic Covenant, in which God imposed His law on unbelieving Jews. If we are to be consistent with scripture, we must admit that that situation, while necessary, was inferior to God's way today.¹² Today God does not call non-Christians to keep His law - He calls them first to come to know Him personally. This is why we see the New Testament Christians refusing to impose Christian ethics on non-Christians.¹³ Jesus was not intent on getting the woman at the well to change her sexual behavior, but on getting her to accept the free gift of living water, which would then change her whole life from the inside out.¹⁴

To pursue God's values by grace also means to seek sanctification (or *moral character development*) by relating to God personally and depending on the power of the Holy Spirit to change us.¹⁵ This is in contrast to pursuing sanctification through a rule and task-oriented approach, which inevitably becomes impersonal and self-energized. Longenecker calls this "nomism", as distinct from "legalism", which refers to seeking justification by works. He correctly notes that nomism was a part of God's plan under the Mosaic Covenant, but again, this was necessary because the Jews did not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the adoption as sons (Gal. 4:3-7). But this was an inferior way to approach sanctification and is now ruled out by God in favor of "walking by the Spirit" under grace.

Understanding this has definite impact on the success of God's purpose for the church - mission and witness. Christians who relate to God nomistically will not be vital examples of the Spirit-filled life. They will misrepresent the gift God wants to give them through Jesus Christ. Their churches will be more like miniature Israels under the Mosaic Covenant than like the vibrant

¹⁰ See George Hunter, quoted in Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.), pp. 25,26. While I do not endorse all of McGavran's views, Hunter's point on the historical necessity of permeating a society with vital churches before real social change can occur is sound.

¹¹ To relate to God primarily in a rule-oriented way; to see the supervisory, "third use of the Law" as a valid application for Christians under the New Covenant. See Richard N. Longenecker, "The Pedagogical Nature of the Law in Gal. 3:19-4:7", *JETS* 25/1 (March 1982), pp. 53-61.

¹² For an excellent defense of the severity of Old Testament civil law, see John Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1974), pp. 131-147. However, while Wenham understands that Israel's spiritual weakness necessitated this civil system, he does not exhibit a good understanding of the change that the New Covenant has brought to God's people.

¹³ See 1 Cor. 5:12, 13.

¹⁴ See Jn. 4:1-26. Jesus does bring up her sexual behavior (vs 16-18), but evidently to verify His divine authority (vs 19) and to underscore her failure in relationships and need for "the gift" of God.

¹⁵ See Rom. 8:4-8 (contrasted to Rom. 7); Gal. 5:15-23 (contrasted to the legalism and nomism of the "Judaizers").

churches of the New Testament which attracted people to the grace of God and a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Applying Biblical Ethics to Today

One problem for all Christian ethical approaches is how to apply the biblical ethics to a society that is two thousand to thirty-five hundred years removed from the biblical period. On the one hand, there is the danger of making the biblical material irrelevant by overemphasizing the change in and uniqueness of contemporary society. On the other hand, there is the equal and opposite danger of ignoring or straight-jacketing culture by refusing to acknowledge societal change. All biblical Christians must wrestle with the fact that the Bible does not speak to many very real and pressing ethical issues created by our own society.¹⁶ This is another aspect of the hermeneutical issue involved in Christian ethics.

The theonomist approach to ethics is an example of an approach which seeks to keep the relevance of specific biblical ethical commands intact and relevant. It insists that the Old Testament (or New Testament) Law is applicable "in exhaustive detail" to today's society.¹⁷ It can and should be applied to society wherever presently possible, and society should be changed wherever necessary so that all of it can eventually be applied.

The most serious critique of this approach, in my opinion, is that the New Testament apostles clearly demonstrate that they did not apply either the Old Testament Law or Jesus' "law" in exhaustive detail. Rather, they discerned the *principles* underlying those laws and applied that principle to their own situations according to the stage of salvation history in which they were, and/or according to the cultural or situational setting in which they found themselves.

Examples of this kind of application abound - a few will suffice. In 1 Cor. 9:8-11, Paul applies the principle underlying the Mosaic law of not muzzling the ox while one is threshing to the payment of Christian workers. He seems to specifically call attention to the principle *rather than* the specific Old Testament application of that principle in vs. 9 and 10. In 1 Cor. 7:12-15, Paul adds another reason for permissible divorce (i.e. the unbelieving spouse's desertion or unwillingness to consent to live with a believer) to that of Jesus' (i.e. immorality). Though this is a hotly debated passage, it at least seems clear that Paul feels the freedom to give an application to the principle laid down by Moses and Jesus (that sometimes divorce is regrettably necessary) which they themselves did not give. This is possibly because they did not face the same societal situations which Paul faced.

Such passages seem to discredit the theonomist approach to biblical laws. They also support the "principles" approach which seeks to discern, wherever possible, the principles underlying specific biblical commands, and then to apply them faithfully to current situations. Though there is inevitably more interpretive ambiguity with this approach than with the theonomist approach, it allows the Bible to speak to more issues today without becoming excessively rigid or forcing society to change to fit the society of biblical times.

¹⁶ For example, the many medical ethical problems raised in class. It is ironic that as technology has alleviated much of the effect of the Fall in this area, it has also spawned a host of complicated, possibly unsolvable ethical issues! Might this be part of the inevitable situation living in a world "subjected to futility" (Rom. 8:20)?

¹⁷ Greg Bahnsen and J. R. Roushdoony would be examples of Old Testament theonomists; the Amish would be an example of New Testament theonomists.

The contextualist approach attempts to reduce the ethical content of the Bible to one overriding principle - love.¹⁸ This approach says that life is too complex for laws or rules ("boundary conditions"). The *one* mandatory thing is to act in love. While the Bible may be consulted to see examples of how people acted in love, these examples should not be permitted to become new "laws". Each ethical situation is totally unique and therefore each ethical choice must also be existential and unique. The desire to rely on "laws" is scorned as a sure sign of spiritual weakness like that exhibited by the Pharisees.

This approach makes the opposite mistake that the theonomist approach makes. Whereas the theonomist approach seeks to apply not only the biblical principles, but also *all* of the biblical specific case laws, the contextualist approach ignores all but one of the biblical principles. The crucial problem for the contextualist is to have any idea of *how* to know what loving is, without additional ethical guidance. To be loving is more of a *motive* which must underlie our actions than concrete direction for what actions to choose. This is why the Old and New Testaments always combine the admonition to be loving with more specific moral content. Clearly, more than one ethical principle is given in the Bible. Clearly also, many "boundary conditions" are given. Though one may argue about how to resolve dilemmas in which one "boundary condition" must be broken, to simply throw overboard all of the "boundary conditions" seems neither scripturally consistent nor practically feasible since love by itself is an inadequate foundation for ethical decisions.

The above critique of the contextualist approach also lends support for the "principles" approach in the area of application. The "principles" ethicist will seek to discover in any given situation what "boundary conditions" apply. He will also seek to discover what biblical principles (including love) apply. He will also consult the Bible for examples of similar situations for further help. Thus, the "principles" approach makes fuller use of the Bible than does the contextualist approach.

The "principles" approach is not, however, without its problems. Foremost among its problems is bridging the gap between biblical application of God's principles and values and contemporary application of them. Longenecker's suggestion is that we view the New Testament application of the gospel of Jesus, not as case laws, but as paradigms or examples of how to apply the gospel to our own day.¹⁹ I find this suggestion to be very helpful. Something like this is necessary for the "principles" ethicist. As was stated earlier, examining how the Bible gives specific application to its own values and principles must be considered a valuable source of wisdom in making such contemporary applications.

But Longenecker goes beyond this to suggest two things which are highly questionable in my opinion. The most serious suggestion is that there is some kind of "progressive revelation" going on in church history as to how to apply the gospel.²⁰ A logical implication of this position is that we must consult church history in order to understand this progressive unfolding of how to apply

¹⁸ Joseph Fletcher's *Situational Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966) is the classic liberal version of the contextualist approach.

¹⁹ Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics For Today*, pp. 16-18.

²⁰ Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics For Today*, p. 22. Longenecker says "...neither the Bible as a whole nor the New Testament in particular gives us the final word on the formulation of Christian theology - at least, not final in the sense that nothing more can or need be said."

the gospel,²¹ and that such consultation may yield applicational guidance as authoritative as the scriptural guidance itself.²²

In all fairness to Longenecker, my objection to these statements may be a result of not understanding him properly. But this in itself is a criticism, because one must be careful to speak clearly on a matter as important as the one under discussion. If Longenecker is saying that God is faithful to through the Holy Spirit to supply wisdom to apply the gospel to today, I have no quarrel with him. This would be the "illuminating" ministry of the Holy Spirit which Paul says is available to all Christians (Eph. 1:17; Col. 1:9-11; Phil. 1:9-11). However, it is not clear that Longenecker is saying only this.

If he is saying that God actually inspires believers through church history in their formulation and application of the gospel, I must disagree. The promises of Jn. 14-16 concerning the Holy Spirit are given to the disciples, *not* to all Christians. Only when we find other New Testament passages which apply the same ministries of the Spirit to all believers can we make such application today. Even if Longenecker's interpretation of Matt. 13:52 is correct, one is still faced with the fact that it was spoken to the disciples and *not* to all Christians. In other words, the ministry of inspiration seems to be given only to the apostles. Only *their* words and writings were to be taken as the Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 2:15).

Furthermore, there is the very dangerous tendency for uninspired application of scripture to become equal to and then superior to scripture itself in authority. This was what Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for in Mk. 7. Such a rebuke is equally applicable to church leaders throughout church history. The big problem in church history is not that leaders do not consult church history, but that they consult it too much and too uncritically. To say this is not to say that church history cannot yield great help in understanding how to apply scripture. It is only to say that such a task must be done very carefully and with real insistence that scripture alone is the final judge of church history. Actually, church history may be much more profitable as a guide on what *not* to do, what mistakes *not* to fall into, than as a positive guide in the sense that Longenecker suggests.

The Christian leader should apply the gospel to his day. He should depend upon the Holy Spirit for wisdom to do so. But he should not take the position that his applications of the gospel are of equal authority or inspiration to those of the apostles. He cannot say, "I say, not the Lord" in the same authoritative way that Paul could (1 Cor. 7:12). He cannot say about such applications "If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized" (1 Cor. 14:38). He must view the apostolic applications as inspired, but he may not view his own applications that way.

Ethical Dilemmas

Another point of contrast between ethical approaches is the subject of ethical dilemmas. Are there situations in which we must violate God's boundary conditions? If so, how do we decide

²¹ Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics For Today*, p. 22, "To be a Christian theologian today, therefore, requires (1) extensive familiarity with the Scriptures, (2) extensive familiarity with church history, (3) discernment in appreciating the essence and direction of the biblical statements, (4) discernment in distinguishing between advances and pitfalls in the history of Christian thought, being able to identify the lines of continuity which exist between every true advance and the New Testament, the touchstone for Christian faith, (5) creative ability to say what all this means for Christian faith and life today..."

²² Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics For Today*, p. 26, "Thus, as there is the conjunction of old and new in the Bible, so there has been the conjunction of old and new throughout the history of Christian thought."

which to break? Is violating the boundary condition wrong in that case? The implications of this subject are far too detailed to cover in this paper. A simple comparison of the three approaches' views on this issue is all that can be attempted here.

My understanding of the theonomist approach is that it would hold that such ethical dilemmas do exist and that one should violate the lesser of the boundary conditions. It would also say that this violation, though perhaps necessary, is still wrong. It would say additionally that such ethical dilemmas are not primarily the result of living in a fallen world, but more specifically the consequence of not structuring society according to biblical (Old Testament or New Testament) case laws in exhaustive detail. Thus, such ethical dilemmas provide additional incentive to structure society thusly.

The concept that ethical dilemmas are the consequence of previous disobedience to God's will is an appealing one. One may think of many examples in which this seems to be the case.²³ It is even possible that the previous wrong choices of others may have the same result in the lives of a later generation.²⁴ This seems to be a biblical position, in that Adam's fall may be the ultimate source of all ethical dilemmas. If this be so, nothing short of a new humanity could alleviate the human race of indigenous ethical dilemmas. It is just this that Jesus Christ came to inaugurate (Rom. 5:12-19).

My problem with the theonomist's understanding of ethical dilemmas lies not in their assessment of ethical dilemmas, but in the solution they offer. To go back to the case laws of Old Testament Israel would be wrong for the reasons described previously in this paper. Furthermore, it would not really alleviate ethical dilemmas. The Old Testament civil law does not speak specifically to the many medical and technological ethical dilemmas which exist in today's society. To advocate going back to second millennia B.C. medicine in order to escape from these dilemmas is hardly an "ethical" answer!

The contextualist approach would hold that no true ethical dilemmas exist. While the human situation is so complex that no set of laws can ever avoid the trap of ethical dilemmas described in the above sense, this only proves the inadequacy of a "laws", multiple absolutist approach. The contextualist holds that the only absolute is to act in love, and that therefore as long as one acts in love, there can be no true ethical dilemmas.

This approach does eliminate ethical dilemmas in the technical sense of the term, but it pays too high a price for doing so. Because of the critique of this approach offered earlier, it is difficult to see how contextualism is ultimately any different than moral relativism. To sacrifice all moral guidance in the process of escaping from the possibility of experiencing ethical dilemmas is unscriptural and unwise.

The principles approach described in this paper would hold that ethical dilemmas are a part of man's fallen condition. Both because of poor individual choices and because of the corporate solidarity of humanity, we can find ourselves in situations in which one of God's boundary conditions must be broken. This approach would advocate seeking to do "the lesser of two evils"

²³ For example, 19th century missionaries were frequently confronted with converted native chieftains who were married to more than one wife. Should he remain as he is? This violates God's design for marriage. Should he divorce all his wives but one, thus exposing them to hardship and ostracism? Many chiefs killed all but one of their wives! It would appear that this is an ethical dilemma which was precipitated by previous wrong choices.

²⁴ For example, one may think of the host of ethical dilemmas spawned by a nuclear holocaust.

in that situation. But that choice would still be wrong and the individual would be unable to justify himself - he would still be morally responsible to God for his choice. Such experiences, like others in a fallen world (Gen 3:16-19), should make us see the abnormality of our condition and drive us to Christ for forgiveness and further sanctification.²⁵

Conclusion

Although no biblical ethical approach is without problems, the "principles" approach described above is the superior approach. When compared to the other approaches studied, it affords overall the most extensive use of scripture and the most application to contemporary society.

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²⁵ See Joseph Fletcher and John W. Montgomery, *Situation Ethics* (Minneapolis: Dimension Books, 1972), pp. 50-52.