

LESSON 1

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Introduction

Christian ministers and church leaders should study and seek to understand the ethical and moral teachings of the Bible. A general decline in the practice of ethics and morals exists today. Many people openly commit shameful acts. Even Christians make no excuses for immoral behaviour, and it is difficult to distinguish Christians from the world. Dr. T. B. Maston wrote in the preface of his book *Biblical Ethics*, 'An outstanding weakness, if not the outstanding weakness, of contemporary Christianity is ethical or moral.'¹ In addition, many extreme ethical practices or viewpoints are sometimes justified by misinterpreting biblical passages. One can find a Bible verse to justify nearly any kind of behaviour; thus, many well-meaning believers are led unaware into questionable or immoral behaviour. The flock of God (church) can be especially vulnerable to the invasion of immorality if it has not been instructed in the ethical implications of the Holy Scriptures.

Professor Maston further states that a major factor contributing to moral breakdown 'is the tendency to separate faith from daily living, theology from ethics'. He continues by adding, 'This tendency stems . . . from a failure on the part of many ministers and Christians . . . to understand the significant place of the ethical in the biblical revelation.'²

The teachings of the Bible form the basis of our ethical values, our personal convictions, and our practices. Because of many problems and situations believers face in living the Christian life in contemporary society, the people of God should seek to understand the historical background related to the scriptural teachings and to search for meaning for Christian living today. The Bible was written because the revelation from God for the people and their problems was so significant that a record of His dealings with men could be useful to future generations. The Holy Spirit moved men to write down their experiences, which, when rightly interpreted and related to our day, become normative for us.

The average member of any congregation needs help in facing the many moral questions in life. The leaders of the church have a responsibility to convey the biblical teachings of morality to the members of the church and thus to strengthen them for daily living. The ministers, teachers, and other church leaders should, therefore, seriously study Christian ethics 'for equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ' (Eph. 4:12, NASB).

Definition of Christian Ethics

The word ethics comes from the Greek *ethos* and means the customs or practices that are approved by a given culture. We

¹T. B. Maston, *Biblical Ethics* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1967), p. v.
²Ibid.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Dr. Maston says that an outstanding weakness of contemporary Christianity is e_____ or m_____.

(ethical, moral)

Christians are less vulnerable to immorality if they have been instructed in the e_____ implications of the S_____.

(ethical, Scriptures)

What does Dr. Maston say is a mayor cause of moral breakdown?

(the tendency to separate faith from daily living)

In churches, who is responsible for 'equipping the saints' and teaching them biblical morality?

(ministers, teachers, and other church leaders)

FINISH READING THIS PARAGRAPH ON THE NEXT PAGE AND DO THE EXERCISE THERE.

call ethics the science of morality. It may be classified as a normative science in contrast to the more exact descriptive sciences, such as mathematics, biology, and physics. Ethics is a study of the principles by which man lives in his society. Morals deals more with practices which are considered acceptable in any given society.

Thus we see that the morals in any culture may vary according to the ethical principles which are considered authoritative by the majority of the people. *Authority* refers to the primary source of truth which man recognized and allows to control his life. The basis of authority has a lot to do with judgements about human behaviour. In some cultures, a given act may be considered morally and ethically acceptable; whereas, in another culture, it might be considered immoral or unethical.

Eugene Nida illustrates this point graphically by a reference to an experience that a missionary had among some inhabitants of the Congo in Africa. The missionary was attempting to convince the women that they should wear blouses to cover their breasts. But the African Christians resisted the pressure with the explanation that they did not want their women to look like prostitutes. The missionary was making the mistake of judging morality in Africa on the basis of customs in the United States of America, and they were opposite.³

There are some distinctive elements about Christian ethics which distinguish this discipline from other ethical systems. Emil Brunner defines Christian ethics as human conduct that is determined by divine conduct.⁴ Here divine revelation is the basis of authority.

Other writers limit the basis of authority to the writers of the New Testament, and some limit it further by including only the teachings of Jesus.⁵ The present study will attempt to point out the ethical principles which are presented in both the Old and New Testaments. We shall see how the teachings of the writers of the New Testament were based upon Old Testament revelation. Jesus used the Hebrew faith and teachings as the chief basis for His own emphases; He made frequent references to Moses (the Law) and the Prophets. But Jesus went beyond the Law and the Prophets, as we shall see in this study.

The matter of the basis of authority in ethics is the critical issue today. In recent years, the new morality has emphasized *relativity* (the view that ethical truths are derived from individual or group reasoning in light of immediate needs) as over against *absolutism* (the concept that God and His Word set the standard of ethical and moral behaviour). This emphasis gives a great deal more latitude to those who are seeking freedom to make their own moral decisions without having to be subject to the prohibitions of the past. At the same time, the pluralistic tendency of our age makes them want to have a choice of alternatives that are acceptable.

Another complication in this area comes at the point of listening to the source and voice of authority. In the past, individuals and institutions of society exercised the prerogative of declaring behaviour either immoral or moral. Parents, teachers in the schools, officials of the law, ministers in the churches, and even national leaders made their opinions known. But

WRITE AN **E** AFTER THE DEFINITION OF ETHICS AND AN **M** AFTER THE DEFINITION FOR MORALS.

1. Practices which are considered acceptable in any given society. _____
2. A study of the principles by which man lives in his society. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Would the primary authority for a Christian be logic, experience, divine revelation, scientific theory, or practical consideration? _____

(divine revelation)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Christian ethics is distinctive in that human conduct is determined by _____ conduct.

(divine)

The critical issue in ethics is the basis of a _____.
A _____ teaches that God and His Word set the standard of ethical and moral behaviour from which man may not vary. **R** _____ views ethical truths as derived from individual or group reasoning as based on immediate needs. Its basis is humanism which decides what is moral by rationalization (justifying actions by reasons).

(authority, Absolutism, Relativity)

³Eugene A. Nida, *Customs and Cultures* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1954), p. 1.

⁴Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 86.

⁵Georgia Harkness, *Christian Ethics* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 15.

today, many of these voices have been silenced or ignored by a generation that rejects imposition of standards from the past, categorical judgements, and 'being preached at'. The result is that some are confused and others are disillusioned. Those who are confused would like to have some clear answers which they don't seem to be able to find. The disillusioned would like to give some clear answers but are afraid of being rejected.

Some who have tried the pathway of *new morality* (basing conduct on 'love' or on personal satisfaction), *situation ethics* (a philosophy of moral conduct determined by the situation), and *contextualism* (based on concrete situations rather than specific biblical teaching) have already realized that these pathways are not as pleasant as they had thought them to be. They are looking longingly once again towards a more authoritative approach to acceptable human behaviour.

The biblical bases of ethics are timeless. They have withstood the attacks of opponents throughout the centuries. These bases have been rejected temporarily before, but they have stood firm to judge the wayward ones and to welcome their return to the fold. The application of these teachings to each generation guarantees a continued relevance. Thus the attempt will be made to interpret these teachings for our age.

The Sources of Authority in Christian Ethics

Christian ethics is based upon God's revelation of himself and his ideals to humanity. The record of this revelation is the Bible, the inspired Word of God that is the authority for us in matters pertaining to faith and behaviour. This authority from a spiritual Supreme Being is what distinguishes Christian ethics from other ethical systems, such as secular humanism, which makes human beings and their mental capacities supremely authoritative. If man has the mental and emotional capacities to decide whether or not an act is moral, and if the criteria for deciding the morality of an act is the degree of pleasure, happiness, or personal satisfaction that one derives from such act, then one does not need the Bible or any other source of authority to determine whether the act is good or bad. In this section we will consider the place of the Bible, of human reason, of the Holy Spirit, and of other avenues of authority, in order to make clear how we come to make good ethical decisions.

The Bible as the source of authority

God has given us a tangible record of his revelation to humanity in the Bible. It contains 66 books, written by 40 different authors over a period of some 1500 years.⁶ The Bible contains a variety of literature, including narrative history, drama, prophecy, poetry, biography, letters, and apocalyptic literature. We cannot interpret all these different kinds of literature in the same way. Some must be interpreted literally, and others symbolically. For instance, the beasts in the books of Daniel and Revelation symbolized people, nations or cultures and movements that were well known to the first intended recipients of those books, but they were concealed to the enemies of God's people. They are concealed to us somewhat, unless we strive to understand the historical situation in which

⁶James Montgomery Boice, *Standing on the Rock* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1994) p. 57.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Two results of today's rejections of ethical authority are:

1. c _____
2. d _____

(1. confusion, 2. disillusionment)

Denial of biblical propositions and basing proper conduct on 'love' or on what brings satisfaction to the individual is the n _____ m _____. S _____ e _____ is a philosophy of moral conduct in which the situation determines what is right or wrong. The concept of looking to concrete situations to determine right behaviour rather than to specific laws of the Bible is c _____.

(new morality, Situation ethics, contextualism)

TRUE OR FALSE?

To base ethics on the Bible guarantees relevance for all times. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Christian ethics is based on God's _____ of himself and his _____ to humanity.

(Compare your answer to the text.)

FINISH READING THIS THIS SECTION AND THEN LIST THE SEVEN SOURCES OF AUTHORITY WHICH ARE DISCUSSED.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

(Compare your answers to the text.)

What are the types of literature mentioned in the text as contained in the Bible?

- _____
- _____
- _____

(Compare your answer to the text.)

they were written. The poetry in the Bible was written in part to create an emotional response, and should not be interpreted in the same way that we interpret the Gospels. God's revelation has come to us including prohibitions, challenges, and examples of good behaviour which we can receive and seek to emulate. Sometimes irresponsible and immoral behaviour is recorded in the Bible, but not to encourage us to follow such practices. Rather, the truths are presented in these forms so as to cause us to see the negative consequences of such behaviour. Some examples are the slavery and polygamy that were practised at different times, but the Bible does not condone such practices. The Bible presents life as it was lived by the different characters at different times, and does not try to justify or excuse sinful behaviour.

We will study the various passages in the Bible, and comment upon the practices which it records, in order to gain insight for us in making the right decisions. Examples and experiences of others in ancient times can be helpful teaching aids for us today.

The place of human reason in ethical authority

When we say that divine revelation is the source of authority for us, we are not saying that reason has no place. Rather, we recognize that God has given mankind the capacity to exercise intellectual processes and thereby arrive at the best conclusions for any given problem. First, we must use human reasoning capacity in our study of the Bible. We need to study the historical background for the different books of the Bible. For instance, a study of the secular moral climate in Corinth helps us to understand not only the statements that Paul makes regarding celibacy, women, marriage, and the use of secular courts, but also his plea for high moral standards among the Christians. This helps us to determine the principles which are valid for us in making ethical decisions. This process is a challenge and requires mental discipline and serious efforts applied to the areas of biblical and contemporary theology.

Secondly, we must use human reason in studying all the advances and discoveries in the fields of science and technology, in order to understand how to apply this knowledge in a profitable way in Christian ethics. We especially need to apply all our mental faculties in the areas having to do with the human body and health, as these are areas which have experienced an explosion of knowledge in recent years.

For these reasons, we are called to be good students of the Bible and God's revelation to those who lived in other periods of time, as well as good learners from contemporary advances which are reported to us in newspapers, magazines, and journals, and on radio and television. The latest discoveries in the areas of biology, chemistry, physics and ecology may have much to say to us as we determine what is right and wrong in the use of such discoveries.

The place of the Holy Spirit in making ethical decisions

There may be times when one has carefully studied all the biblical material on a given subject, as well as having sought to understand all that the sciences tell us about the human body, and still not have a clear conviction of the rightness of a specific decision when faced with serious problems and different options regarding human life. For example, take the case of a young man who is in intensive care in the hospital.

TRUE OR FALSE?

All the different kinds of literature in the Bible can be interpreted in the same way. _____

(Compare your answer to the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The Bible is G _____ r _____ to us and includes p _____, c _____, and e _____, of g _____ b _____ which we should follow.

(God's revelation, prohibitions, challenges, examples, good behaviour)

We use the r _____ c _____ which God has given us in order to arrive at conclusions.

(reasoning capacity)

TRUE OR FALSE?

Historical background is important when interpreting the different books of the Bible. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

We must use human reason to study the continuing changes in the fields of s _____ and t _____ so that we can make e _____ d _____.

(science, technology, ethical decisions)

What are some of the areas about which we must learn in the various forms of mass media so that we may have information upon which to base proper ethical decisions?

(Compare your answer with the text.)

FINISH READING THIS PARAGRAPH ON THE NEXT PAGE AND DO THE EXERCISE THERE.

He has been unconscious for several days as a result of an automobile accident. The physicians say that his brain is dead, that 'he is a vegetable'. They want to disconnect the respirator which is pumping oxygen into his body. But the father is a Christian and insists that to disconnect the respirator would be to kill his son. He argues that God has given life to his son and will take away that life in his time. He talks with his pastor about the physicians' recommendation. This is a case in which the pastor and the family must seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the decision to remove the life support systems. In biblical times there were no hospitals with sophisticated equipment which can keep bodily functions going artificially for days or weeks and thereby prolong the process of dying. The pastor should lead the father to contemplate the possibility that turning off the machine may be the most loving and godly procedure possible. If such a decision is reached, after having sought guidance through prayer and reflection, he should not feel guilty about having to make such a decision.

There are numerous cases today which are very difficult. One such case is that of test-tube babies or artificial insemination, in which couples who have not been able to conceive through the normal procedure of sexual intercourse can receive help from specialists who unite the egg and the sperm *in vitro* (literally *in glass*, usually in a Petri dish) and then introduce the fertilized egg into the uterus of the wife. Many couples have been able to experience the joy of parenthood in this manner, whereas previously they could only know the experience of sadness and frustration. Another case is the possibility of amniocentesis by which physicians can determine, within the first months of pregnancy, if the foetus has serious defects. In cases where serious defects are detected, they may recommend an abortion. What should the couple do if such a recommendation is made? Another difficult case is that of an elderly person who has some incurable malady and who begs the physicians and his family members to let him die. Should the physicians and family members heed his request or continue treatment until all family members and all financial resources are exhausted?

The Bible does not give specific answers to these questions. The principle of sanctity of life is relevant in each case. But quality of life is also relevant. The Holy Spirit can guide the family as they apply this biblical principle and the knowledge that comes from medical science to reach the decision that gives them the most spiritual and mental tranquility.

The role of conscience in ethical decisions

We frequently hear the statement, 'Let your conscience be your guide.' Without doubt our conscience may help us in making ethical decisions, but we must have an enlightened conscience which has become sensitized to ethical issues as a result of meditation upon biblical teachings, serious reflection upon spiritual values, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For instance, we have all heard of people who had been liars, thieves, murderers, or some other sort of evil doers; but after hearing the gospel through radio, television, or some other means, they accepted Christ and a radical change took place in their lives. Upon receiving forgiveness for their sins, they immediately became more aware of the seriousness of their former manner of life, and were determined to live differently. With time, and the process of discipling, they slowly were

How do we seek the Holy Spirit's guidance in ethical decisions?

(Compare your answer with the text.)

AFTER HAVING FINISHED READING THE TOPIC ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT, LIST FOUR CASES MENTIONED.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

TRUE OR FALSE?

The Bible gives specific answers to all our ethical questions.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

How do we develop an enlightened conscience?

(Compare your answer with the text.)

conformed into the image of Christ, and they are amazed at the difference that Christ has made in their lives. Such is the case of Charles Colson, who spent several months in prison following his conviction for his participation in the Watergate scandal in the United States in the 1970's. He had a genuine conversion experience in prison, and now speaks and writes books about the responsibility of the church in today's world. He appeals to Christians and churches to be a leavening influence in society, in order to make a genuine impact upon our world. This shows how the Holy Spirit sensitizes our conscience through Bible study, prayer, and active participation in the advancement of the Kingdom of God. However, the conscience of an unconverted person will not cause this transformation of society, and cannot be trusted to cause one to make the right decision.

Intuition in making ethical decisions

We moderns tend to put to one side the element of intuition as a force for making ethical decisions, because we consider intuition to be lacking in intellectual reason and in theological foundation. But we need to remember that since the days of Thomas Aquinas intuition has been considered a resource to help in making ethical decisions. Aquinas taught the four virtues which were emphasized by the Greeks—temperance, courage, prudence and justice. He then added the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. But he then topped these off with the three intellectual virtues of wisdom, knowledge and intuition. He believed that intuition could perceive that which is correct in an instantaneous manner.⁷ We can justify the use of intuition, apart from Roman Catholic theology, because at times we all have had a special sense of conviction that a potential decision is correct or that it would be a mistake. We should take such impressions seriously, and bathe them with prayer and Bible study, to make sure that we are moving in the right direction.

The church as a source of authority

For many the declarations of their church are their source of authority. This is especially true in the Roman Catholic Church, because faithful members are to give special attention to and submit to the pronouncements of the leaders of their church. Ever since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has been in turmoil because many leaders within the church felt that they were free to express their questions and disbelief regarding some of the basic teachings which have been held for centuries. However, recently we have heard reports of *Veritatis Splendor*, from Pope John Paul II, and the instructions for Catholics are very clear—they are to accept and obey these teachings without dissent. It will be interesting to see the reactions of many Catholics in the time to come.

Church pronouncements do not carry the same authority in Protestant churches as in the Roman Catholic Church. But it is true that official pronouncements or decisions of an ecclesiastical group represent a consensus of opinion and give a sense of direction. For instance, many denominations in recent years have had controversies over the question of ordaining women as ministers of the gospel and whether or not to ordain avowed homosexuals as ministers. The official pronouncements, when

TRUE OR FALSE?

The conscience of an unconverted person can be trusted to cause him to make the right decision. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The virtues which Aquinas considered part of life and decision making are:

1. The four virtues emphasized by the Greeks:

_____, _____, _____, _____

2. The theological virtues:

_____, _____, _____

3. The intellectual virtues:

_____, _____, _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

How do we justify the use of intuition in reaching a decision? _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Roman Catholics are to accept and obey the teachings of their church without dissent. _____

2. Pronouncements by Protestant leaders may not be discussed nor disobeyed. _____

(True, False)

⁷R. E. O. White, *Christian Ethics: The Historical Development* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 131.

there have been such, indicate the opinion of the majority of the people who are voting, and their decisions should be taken seriously. Each time a denominational group meets many recommendations and motions which deal with ethical issues are presented. Decisions made at these conventions give an indication of the opinion of the majority, but they do not have the authority to force a person or a congregation to accept that point of view. Usually these items have to do with matters related to civil authorities and the principle of separation of church and state. They may also relate to personal and civic morality. This illustrates that churches and denominations do have influence in society, and the degree of influence will be determined by the numerical strength of the church or group and the nature of the issue being considered.

Tradition as a source of moral authority

Certainly the Roman Catholic Church declares that tradition is one of the sources of moral authority in ethical matters. But do we evangelicals depend upon tradition to guide us? The answer is affirmative, at least to a degree. Some ethical norms are a result of following tradition, although we do not have sound biblical bases for these norms. One example is the difference that exists from one country to another in the matter of church discipline. There is a lot of variation in the norms, and they usually have been formed in the remote past and carried down to the present. Some churches have a written or unwritten list of 'worldly sins' which cause expulsion from membership. In the past the list included those who smoked, drank alcoholic beverages, danced, or participated in sexual immorality. In certain areas mixed bathing in swimming pools or at beaches was prohibited. In other areas, going to movies in theatres was considered sinful. Each group had its list of special sins, depending upon geographic location and socio-economic levels within the membership. A scriptural basis for these norms was usually cited, 'I beseech you, therefore, my beloved brethren, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service' (Rom. 12:1 KJV). In recent years, most churches have become less legalistic in these matters. Thus in time customs change, eventually bringing changes in traditions.

Tradition still influences us a great deal in church life. Formerly, tradition dictated that the pastor's wife should take an active role in the education program of the church, be active in the women's organizations, and sing in the choir. More recently, a growing number of pastors' wives have a profession which keeps them occupied outside the home and the church, and their participation in the church program is comparable to that of any other woman in the congregation. For some churches this is a serious matter, and may determine whether or not the husband is called as pastor. Though we would not consider this a matter of morality or ethics, it does illustrate the changing climate in our societies.

Possible Classification of Christian Ethics

In order to better understand the field of Christian ethics, we now turn to a consideration of the various classifications of ethical principles which determine behaviour. This will help us to sort out the different ways that people have of interpreting ethical norms.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Decisions by denominational groups represent the o of the m but they cannot force a congregation to a a that viewpoint.

(opinion, majority, accept)

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Tradition is considered a source of moral authority by the Roman Catholic church. _____
2. Evangelicals are often guided by tradition. _____
3. Traditions do not vary from one area to another. _____

(1. True, 2. True, 3. False)

Absolutism and legalism

There are people who take the biblical declarations (whether they are prohibitions, commandments, principles, or ethical appeals) and make of them rigid laws to govern human behaviour. There have been adherents to this practice since ancient biblical times. The Pharisees represent the group most notorious for this position in the days of Jesus. They took the laws of Moses and the declarations of the scribes and made of them unbending rules which were to be followed literally, especially as they related to practices of observance of the Sabbath, the giving of tithes, not touching corpses or people with certain diseases, and eating meat that was considered unclean. Thus observance of the Sabbath came to be a heavy burden instead of a joy. One could not participate in activities which might enrich the lives of others, such as performing acts of mercy and healing, for fear that they would break the Sabbath.

In Paul's day there were those legalists who wanted to impose upon the Gentile believers the practice of circumcision which the Jews had followed since the days of Abraham. But Paul opposed this imposition, saying that faith in Christ was all that was necessary for justification before God. Others prohibited the eating of meat of animals which had been sacrificed to pagan idols, because they felt that this implied that they were worshipping those gods. Paul opposed this prohibition, saying that since the gods were false, making a sacrifice to them had no effect upon the remaining part of the meat. However, he did counsel consideration for the conscience of the weaker brother who might have recently come out of such idolatrous practices (1 Cor. 8:1-13). Paul considered these requirements and prohibitions to be burdens that some were imposing upon others, and he preferred a less legalistic approach to matters.

We still have legalists among us who want to dictate the minor aspects of behaviour for others. Some want to impose their specific doctrinal or theological point of view upon others, and insist that all people verbalize their beliefs with specific terminology. At times these impositions limit the freedom of thought and expression which results from a sincere study of the Bible and the direction of the Holy Spirit. For instance, a couple may be suffering because of the impossibility of conceiving a child or because of the possibility of giving birth to a deformed child due to a genetic disorder in one of the spouses. Should they resort to artificial insemination? Some legalists would answer in the negative and condemn any couple who decides to follow this option. Others would say that they should be free to consider their options and should have the blessing of fellow Christians if they opt for artificial insemination as a means of having a healthy child.

Literalism

There are others whose intent is to follow literally the teachings which they find in the Bible as they relate to moral conduct. For instance, the Seventh Day Adventists insist upon following the norms in the Mosaic Law with regard to meat that is considered 'clean' and 'unclean'. They will not eat pork, because hogs do not fulfil the requirements for being 'clean', since they do not chew a cud. They also insist upon worshipping on Saturday, because they believe that this is the seventh day set aside by God in Genesis and Exodus.

Others seek to follow Paul's teachings regarding women literally. They regulate their mode of dress and prohibit them

FINISH READING THIS SECTION AND THEN LIST THE EIGHT CLASSIFICATIONS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS WHICH ARE DISCUSSED.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

(Compare your answer to the text.)

What group is an example of the legalist position in the time of Christ? _____

(the Pharisees)

Which practice of the Jews did the legalists of Paul's time wish to impose upon the Gentile believers? _____

(circumcision)

Why did some believers prohibit eating meat sacrificed to idols? _____

(Compare your answer to the text.)

TRUE OR FALSE?

Legalists wish to dictate the minor aspects of behaviour of others. _____

(Compare your answer to the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Legalism may limit the f _____ of t _____ and e _____ which results from a sincere study of the B _____ and the direction of the H _____ S _____.

(freedom, thought, expression, Bible, Holy Spirit)

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Literalism affects the teachings of some as to foods which may not be eaten. _____
2. The Mosaic Law teaches that pork is an acceptable meat. _____
3. Genesis and Exodus are used to prove that we should worship on Sunday. _____

(Compare your answer to the text.)

from using cosmetics and wearing jewellery. Regarding women's participation in the worship services, they insist that it is wrong for them to teach men in the church and that wives are to submit to their husband's interpretations. We believe that we should interpret these teachings of Paul within the cultural context of his day, and recognize that they are not obligatory upon women in different cultural contexts today. The general principle to follow is that women, and men as well, should dress and conduct themselves in a respectful and respectable manner wherever they live today.

Situationism and circumstantialism

Since the 1960's it has been popular to speak of situation ethics. In 1966 Joseph Fletcher published his book *Situation Ethics*, which became an immediate best seller because it gave permission to people to do what most were already doing. That decade was characterized by rebellion against the norms of behaviour previously established by parents, religious leaders, tradition, and society as a whole—especially in regard to sexual and personal conduct. Many young people lived in communes, practiced group and open sex, 'did' drugs, rejected the institutions of society (such as marriage and the work ethic), and insisted that love was the only norm that was relevant.

Although it is not correct to attribute the disregard for all the ethical principles which we had previously followed to Fletcher, he did emphasize the ethic of love as the only valid norm to determine behaviour. He showed how the prohibitions of killing, lying, and stealing could be cast aside in the name of the highest norm of love in a specific situation. We do not question the importance of love in ethical behavior, but we do not believe that love annuls all the other teachings in the Bible. While it is true that Jesus underscored the importance of love in his summary of the commandments, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, ... and thy neighbour as thyself' (Matt. 22:37-40 KJV), this does not imply that murder, stealing, and lying were no longer prohibited.

No doubt the special circumstances surrounding each situation must be taken into account as we face complicated issues in our day. But biblical teachings, sound human reason, and the specific leadership of the Holy Spirit must be taken into account along with the situation. If the situation were the only valid norm for determining the morality of behavior, then most people could rationalize and do what they want.

Relativism

Relativists take the prohibitions, norms, and precepts of the Bible which have to do with ethics and apply the principle of relativism to them in order to have more latitude in their behaviour. For example, they take the teachings regarding divorce in Deuteronomy 24 and Matthew 19 and amplify the grounds for divorce today, saying that if Jesus were alive today he would give additional reasons for divorce. The social status and the higher level of rights of women today, plus the permissive society in which we live, would justify a more generous basis for the dissolution of marriages which have conflict.

Those who advocate relativism today include some of the major theologians of our century, such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, William Bennett,

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. Some literalists believe that women should not use cosmetics or wear jewellery. _____
2. All Christians believe that women should be allowed to teach at any time in church. _____
3. Some Christians believe that one should interpret Paul's teaching in the cultural context of his day. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

What book by what author was regarded as giving permission for the rebellious behaviour of young people during the years following its publication? _____

(*Situation Ethics, Joseph Fletcher*)

What was the norm Fletcher emphasized as the only valid way to determine behaviour? _____

(*the ethic of love*)

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. The importance of love implies that murder, stealing, and lying are no longer prohibited. _____
2. We should never take the situation into account when we face the circumstances of daily living. _____
3. When we make a decision, we must take into account biblical teachings, the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and sound human reasoning. _____

(*False, False, True*)

FINISH READING THIS TOPIC ON THE NEXT PAGE AND DO THE EXERCISE THERE.

James Gustafson, and Paul Tillich. They apply the implications of the Ten Commandments and the ethical teachings of Jesus, Paul and the other writers of the New Testament relatively. They emphasize the importance of social justice and the need for Christians to be involved in political and governmental issues, social legislation, and local movements to create a better moral and spiritual environment for humanity.

Principalism

Others take the teachings of the Bible and search for pertinent principles which may be relevant today as an outgrowth of those biblical principles. Although many of the prohibitions had to do with special conditions of ancient cultures, they represent values which are important for us today. For instance, Leviticus 13 and 14 contain prohibitions and instructions concerning people who had leprosy—not only for the victim, but also for the family, the priest, and society in general. The specific instructions are not relevant for us today, since leprosy is uncommon in most parts of the world and not as contagious as was previously thought. Also, modern medical treatments are available and much more effective than those prescribed in the Bible. But consideration of the patient and his family and the welfare of the entire community are pertinent principles which should be followed today.

Many of the prohibitions in the Old Testament had the ultimate purpose of protecting the community from exposure to contagious diseases, which could wipe out entire communities. For example, history teaches that large numbers of Indians in the Americas perished because they were exposed to diseases which the Spaniards and others brought to the New World. Some rules had hygienic bases. Others may have applied to practices of pagan religions or simply been a means of imposing the practice of mercy in human and animal relations. The prohibition 'Thou shalt not boil a kid in the milk of his mother' (Ex. 23:19) is a case in point.

The sanctity of life is one of the fundamental principles that we derive from a scrutiny of many of the ceremonial, civil, and moral laws of the Old Testament. These laws have to do with slavery, intentional and accidental manslaughter, accidents caused by humans and animals, and illnesses. Although we are not obligated to follow the specific commandments today, we still accept the principle which formed the underpinnings for such laws. The New Testament contains many teachings which are considered to be valid principles that we should follow today.

Existentialism

There are those who seek to give an existential interpretation to the ethical and moral teachings of the Bible. According to their view, these teachings are not to be taken literally; rather, they are given to create a mental and emotional attitude which gives a sense of direction in any given situation. Existentialists are not fond of limitations or prohibitions; they seek freedom to think and act according to the feeling which they have in any given moment and circumstance. Naturally this system leads to much relativism and situationism.

Hierarchical methodology

Norman Geisler, in his book *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, established a hierarchical method for giving guidance

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Relativists such as K B, E B, P T and others apply the implications of the e t of Jesus and the New Testament writers r. They emphasize the importance of s j and of Christian involvement in p and g issues, social l and local movements to change the m and s e for h.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

What are some principles which we should follow today which are derived from the teachings on leprosy in the Old Testament?

(Compare your answers with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The s of l is one of the fundamental principles that we derive from the laws of the O T which have to do with s, m, a, and i.

(sanctity, life, Old, Testament, slavery, manslaughter, accident, illness)

E hold that the e and m teachings of the Bible are not to be taken literally. They prefer a m and e attitude which permits them to act according to the f which they have in a given m and c.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

FINISH READING THIS PARAGRAPH ON THE NEXT PAGE AND DO THE EXERCISE THERE.

in ethical decisions. He begins with the principle of the sanctity of human life and establishes criteria for guiding one in ethical decisions. For instance, he states that many lives are of greater value than one life, and that actual life is of greater value than potential life. These principles guide one in specific decisions as they relate to moral choices concerning war, euthanasia, abortion, and other issues. Although the principle of hierarchy does not solve all moral problems, it does help one to reason through any given issue—considering all the alternatives and consequences of each one—and reach a specific decision.

Proportionalism

Pope John Paul II condemns proportionalism in his *Veritatis Splendor*. By this he means that it is wrong to follow the principle of ‘the lesser of two evils’. Some would argue that participation in war is a case in point. They insist that our choice is not between not defending ourselves against aggressors and being aggressors in an imperialistic war, since the consequences of not defending ourselves are so grave that we have no other choice. Rather, the choice is the level of violence that we will use in the war. Instead of having the goal of annihilation of the enemy, we may choose the goal of containment of the enemy within certain geographic or ideological boundaries, or we may choose to limit the use of nuclear arms because of our concern for the welfare of humanity as a whole.

Roman Catholics disagree as to whether to save the life of the mother or of the child in cases where both cannot be saved. Some teachings insist that the child should be saved, because it has not yet been baptized. Others insist that one’s obligation is to the person with greater responsibility, as in the case of the mother who has a husband and other children to care for.

The Relation of Ethics to Other Disciplines

To philosophy

Philosophy has been called the first of the sciences. For many years ethics was a subdivision of philosophy and was called *deontology* (the doctrine of duties). Later, deontology was divided into *jurisprudence* (the duties demanded by the law) and *ethics* (the duties not demanded by the law).

What is the relationship between ethics and philosophical ethics? Philosophical ethics includes some of the systems which were propounded by the Greek philosophers before the time of Christ. They were followed by many in the days of Christ and surely influenced the men who wrote the New Testament.

Harkness mentions six important movements which had ethical overtones and left an important stamp upon the minds of the West.

1. The Sophists’ relativism with its belief that ‘man is the measure of all things.’
2. The Socratic concept that ‘knowledge is virtue.’
3. The Platonic ideal of harmonious self-realization in conformity with eternal and objective values.
4. The Aristotelian sense of proportion and the right performance of natural functions.
5. The Epicurean ideal of refined pleasure and enlightened self-interest.
6. The Stoic ideal of self-controlled living actuated by an

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The principle of hierarchy helps one to r_____ through i_____, consider all the a_____ and c_____, and come to a s_____ d_____.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Proportionalism is the p_____ of ‘the l_____ of t_____ e_____’. It is condemned in the encyclical V_____ S_____.

(principle, lesser, two evils, Veritatis Splendor)

An example of the application of proportionalism is _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. All Roman Catholics agree that in the case of saving either an unborn child or its mother, the mother should be saved. _____
2. The principle which would decide the case by saving the mother is called absolutism. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANK.

Ethics was once a subdivision of philosophy called deontology, which means the doctrine of _____.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

AS YOU READ ABOUT THE MOVEMENTS WHICH HAD ETHICAL OVERTONES AND INFLUENCED THE WESTERN MIND, LIST THEM AND GIVE A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF EACH.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

immanent Logos pervading all nature and all men.⁸ More modern interpretations of these and similar ideas are *hedonism* (the search for pleasure), *perfectionism* (the doctrine that man can reach perfection), and *utilitarianism* (seeking the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people). Some of these have concepts that are similar to the principles of Christian ethics, and others are dissimilar.

Traditionally there have been three theories as to the way that Christian ethics should be related to the other ethical systems, or philosophical ethics.

1. The theory of elimination, as the name suggests, holds that philosophical ethics has nothing in common with, and should be eliminated from, all possibility of relationship to Christian ethics.
2. The theory of absorption proposes that at least some of the teachings of these systems may be absorbed into the body of Christian teachings.
3. The theory of supplementation suggests that the two systems can coexist and the teachings of some of the philosophers can supplement Christian ethics in a positive way.

An emphasis upon the distinctiveness of Christian ethics magnifies the sufficiency and the superiority of the Christian interpretation of the good life over all other systems.

To theology

There is a very close relationship between theology and ethics. Theological beliefs form the basis for conduct. The two cannot be isolated. God is the subject of theology, and His righteousness sets the ethical goals of man. For this reason, there will be frequent references in this study to the relationship between religion and ethics in the Law, the prophetic messages, and the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

Each section of the Bible emphasizes that ethical conduct is an outgrowth of a genuine and vital religious experience. The field of theology includes several disciplines which are also related to Christian ethics. A study of church history reveals the ethical issues which were prominent in the various periods of Christianity. In homiletics, the minister learns how to teach ethical principles within the context of his sermons. In pastoral ministry, the minister uses ethical insight in his counselling and other forms of ministry. Religious education increases man's knowledge and develops his skills to help him experience the greatest meaning in life.

To sociology

Christian ethics is closely related to sociology which is the study of human relations and ways in which men can live together in harmony and happiness. Christian ethics seeks to infuse Christian principles upon conditions which are impediments to the welfare of mankind. It will awaken man to recognize the spiritual values which can enhance life. Sociology needs assistance from Christian ethics in its efforts to better the social and moral conditions within society. Christian ethics gives sociology a basis of authority which is spiritual and eternal.

⁸Georgia Harkness, *The Sources of Western Morality* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), pp. 215-6.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

H _____ holds that pleasure or happiness is the sole good in life. P _____ states that perfection of moral character constitutes man's highest good. U _____ declares that the determining factor in right conduct is the usefulness of its consequences, such as the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

(Hedonism, Perfectionism, Utilitarianism)

LIST AND GIVE A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THREE THEORIES OF HOW CHRISTIAN ETHICS SHOULD BE RELATED TO OTHER ETHICAL SYSTEMS.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

How are theology and ethics related?

(Theological beliefs form the basis for conduct.)

TELL HOW EACH OF THE FOLLOWING AREAS OF THEOLOGY RELATES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS.

1. Church history _____
2. Homiletics _____
3. Pastoral ministry _____
4. Religious education _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Sociology is the study of human r _____ and ways in which men can live together in h _____ and h _____. Christian ethics gives sociology s _____ and e _____ bases of authority.

(relations, harmony, happiness, spiritual, eternal)

To economics

Christianity is closely related to that which occupies so much of man's time—his work and other economic factors. The field of Christian ethics can help man to establish proper values for his work, the place of material possessions, the use of his leisure time, and the stewardship of his life. It may pass judgement upon his values and help him to establish a more Christian value system.

To citizenship

Christian ethics gives illumination to man as he faces his civic responsibilities. It helps him to know what a Christian should do when political corruption exists; it can give him some sound principles to follow as he exercises his right and responsibility to vote in local and national elections; it can help him to establish adequate criteria in such problems as war, crime and its punishment, and pollution. Christian ethics emphasizes the ethical character of the God whom we serve, the moral nature of man, the worth of every individual in the sight of God, and the importance of love as the central virtue in life. In decision making, love will be accompanied by justice, tenderness, and humility.

To psychology and psychiatry

These disciplines deal with common areas of life. At times psychiatry has looked upon religion as a deterrent to mental and emotional health, and certainly some expressions of religion are more harmful than beneficial. But these areas are not antithetical.⁹ In a book by Dr. Karl Menninger, a prominent psychiatrist, we are reminded of the impact of sin on man's life.¹⁰

Psychology and Christian ethics are both interested in the place of motivation in human conduct. Good conduct, out of a right motive, is the goal in both disciplines; and the two can assist each other in their attempts to help man to achieve this end. Psychology has helped religion to see that much religious activity can be the outward expression of inner conflicts for which the individual is seeking a solution. Through a better understanding of the individual and what motivates him, psychology can help him to achieve inner peace in and through a healthy religious experience. At the same time, Christian ethics can give psychology the underpinnings which it needs to offer positive and lasting help to others.

Why Study Christian Ethics?

We have seen that Christian ethics is not a discipline isolated from other disciplines; rather it is an integral part of several, dealing with man's relations in his daily life. A person has to continually make decisions which involve, to some degree, his sense of values, his belief about man's worth, and his responsibility towards his neighbour. If he has a Christian basis to help him determine his attitude and actions, he will then experience a greater degree of happiness, self-realization, and harmony with the world.

⁹Wayne E. Oates, *What Psychology Says About Religion* (New York: Association Press, 1958), pp. 29-36

¹⁰Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973).

How can Christian ethics help a person in his work and other economic factors?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

How can Christian ethics help man in his civic responsibilities?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

TRUE OR FALSE?

Some psychiatrists realize the impact of sin on man's life.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

What do psychology and Christian ethics have in common?

(an interest in the place of motivation in human conduct)

NOW THAT YOU HAVE FINISHED READING THIS SECTION, NAME THE DISCIPLINES TO WHICH ETHICS RELATE:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

CONTINUE READING THIS TOPIC ON THE NEXT PAGE AND DO THE EXERCISES THERE.

A study of Christian ethics helps us to distinguish between what is vital and what is peripheral in life. For instance, some groups get very upset over such issues as the proper dress for women, the refraining from certain activities on the Sabbath, and the matter of following Paul's injunction concerning the role of women in the church. Yet, they seem to be unconcerned and uninformed about the multitude of problems confronting all mankind which threaten to destroy us. A few of these are: pollution of our air and streams, the dehumanization of the individual due to overpopulation and rapid urbanization, the suffering resulting from famine and overpopulation, as well as the vast number of people killed in violence and wars throughout the world. Christian ethics attempts to make us aware of the issues prevalent in our day.

Christian ethics enables us to establish worthy goals in life and also serves as a compass to guide us in our daily activities to reach these goals. In this sense, Christian ethics is teleological because it is interested in the goals or objectives that man sets. *Teleological* refers to a design and purpose in nature or to a design and goal for man's life. It may be illustrated in ethics by Jesus' prayer, 'not my will, but thine be done'. But Christian ethics is also interested in the means whereby the goal is achieved. The end does not justify the means in Christian ethics; and, therefore, we must emphasize the duty, the motivation, and the dynamic for daily living.

Christian ethics helps us to establish ideals for our lives as well as assisting us in the process through which we achieve these ideals. These ideals will always be held before and above us as goals towards which we strive. At the same time, our ideals will be challenging us because we have not yet attained them in this life. For instance, Jesus' challenge, 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect' (Matt. 5:48), represents an ideal that is constantly relevant for the Christian because no man has yet attained it. Jesus' standard is like a star above us to guide and inspire us, but it will not be reached in this life. Unattainable goals help to keep a healthy tension in our lives and prick our consciences when we become lax and indifferent.

In no other epoch of human history has there been so much difference of opinion and conflict over the competing systems of value clamouring for allegiance. The two world wars in this century, the 'cold wars', the serious conflicts which have taken place in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Israel, Egypt, and Pakistan—all coupled with conflicts on other continents—cause us to realize that all is not well with our world. The ideal age of peace predicted by Isaiah and Micah has not yet come to pass.

Jesus summarized all the Law and the Prophets when He commanded:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

(Matt. 22:37-39)

Here Jesus tells us that our conduct is based upon the all-encompassing element of love for God and for our fellow-man. We thus begin our search to clarify our duty in this bi-dimensional sphere of living.

AFTER READING THIS PARAGRAPH, REREAD THE PARAGRAPH ON THE PREVIOUS PAGE AND FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Christian ethics helps a person determine his a _____ and a _____. This will help him experience h _____, s _____-r _____, and h _____ with the world. Christian ethics also helps in distinguishing between what is v _____ and what is p _____ in life.

(attitude, actions, happiness, self-realization, harmony, vital, peripheral)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

T _____ refers to a d _____ or p _____ in nature or a d _____ or g _____ for man's life. Christian ethics is teleological in that it enables us to establish worthy g _____. The end does not j _____ the m _____ in Christian ethics.

(Compare your answers with the text)

Christian ethics helps us to establish i _____ for our l _____ and to a _____ these ideals. The Christian ideal is constantly r _____ since no one has yet a _____ it. Such goals help keep a h _____ t _____ in our lives.

(ideals, lives, achieve, relevant, attained, healthy tension)

On what is Christian conduct to be based?

(Compare your answer with the text)

Conclusion

This chapter introduces us to the field of Christian ethics and helps us to see the reasons for studying biblical ethics. We derive the bases for our beliefs and our conduct from the Bible. But we cannot be literalists and take every commandment in the Bible as equally authoritative. We must be able to discern which of the teachings are relevant for us today and which ones have primarily historic value to the Christian.

We must underscore the primacy of the theological basis for Christian ethics and recognize that we get ethical norms through divine revelation and not from human sources. Christian ethics begins by recognizing God as the ultimate source of authority and biblical revelation as the record of his revealed will to mankind in many different situations. This also gives us a divine source of authority and strength to teach and implement the ethical teachings of the Christian faith. The following chapters seek to delineate these truths for our enrichment.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

We must be able to d_____ which biblical teachings are r_____ for today. We must emphasize the t_____ basis for Christian ethics and recognize that e_____ n_____ come through d_____ r_____ and not human sources.

(discern, relevant, theological, ethical norms, divine revelation)

Home Study Exercise

Basic assignment (Levels 1, 2, and 3)

1. What does T. B. Maston say is an outstanding weakness of contemporary Christianity?

2. Give one cause for Christians' being vulnerable to immorality.

3. Who is responsible for teaching the ethical implications of the Scripture to church members?

4. Define *ethics*.

5. Define *morals*.

6. What is distinctive about Christian ethics?

7. What is the critical issue in ethics today?

8. What is the result of the breakdown of ethical authority?

9. On what is Christian ethics based?

10. List the seven sources of authority in Christian ethics.

11. List and define eight possible classifications of Christian ethics.

12. List the six movements that Harkness says influenced the mind of Western Civilization.

13. What theories have been advanced to explain how Christian ethics should be related to philosophical ethics?

14. What is the basis for conduct?

15. List other disciplines in the field of theology that are related to Christian ethics.

16. How can Christian ethics assist sociology?

17. Explain the relationship of Christian ethics to man's economic life.

18. How can Christian ethics help man with his civic responsibilities?

19. What is the interest of both Christian ethics and psychology?

20. Why should Christians study Christian ethics?

Supplementary assignment (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 3-11 in *Introducing Christian Ethics* by Henlee H. Barnett and do the following exercise.

1. How does Barnett define *Christian ethics*?
2. Write a definition for Christian ethics in your own words.
3. What is the task of Christian ethics?
4. What is the scope of Christian ethics?

Advanced assignment (*Level 3*). Do the following additional exercise based on the above reading assignment.

1. Discuss teleological and deontological ethics.
2. List and briefly explain the five reasons Barnett gives for studying Christian ethics.

Seminar Discussion

1. Formulate a group discussion for Christian ethics. Discuss how Christian ethics relates to man's total experience.
2. Evaluate Maston's statement, 'An outstanding weakness, if not **the** weakness of contemporary Christianity, is ethical or moral.'
3. Discuss the sources and place of authority in Christian ethics.
4. Discuss reasons why Christians need to study Christian ethics.
5. Discuss how Christian ethics may be used in connection with other disciplines in the field of theology.