

***CHRISTIANS LIVING IN A SIN-STAINED WORLD:
Some Ethical Questions Christians Face Today***

Evening Class (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) – **Dr. J. Mark Beach**
April 1, 2021

Session #1: Pathways to Moral Reasoning: Basics in Ethical Decision-making

To get started in looking at some basic ethical issues Christians face today, we need to ask ourselves how we come to make moral decisions. What grounds our moral perspective? What counts as fundamental and non-negotiable? What priorities do we apply when things get morally blurry? And what sort of fruits (outcomes or consequences) do our moral decisions produce, both to others and to a community and to ourselves?

Let's begin with a situation that brings about a moral decision.

Jessica, a single woman, in her early thirties, lives with her father, who suffers from dementia. She is his care-giver, but she likes to go out with friends. When she does, he is home alone, sometimes for fourteen hours straight. During that time he wets and dirties himself. He is hungry but can't feed himself. He cries out for his wife, who has died years earlier. He is angry and screams at the neighborhood children. Meanwhile, Jessica is at a party.

- What goes through your mind in reading about this? Let's say, we all agree that what Jessica does is wrong. Why? No doubt, we could think of a lot of things that make this wrong.
 1. Jessica is being selfish (not that she wants to go to a party) but in pursuing her pleasure at the cost of her father's pain.
 2. She has little regard for her father's misery: physical and emotional.
 3. She has not taken steps to "go to the party" but provide for her father.
 4. Her father suffers loneliness, confusion, hunger, humiliation, frustration, and more.
 5. Presupposed in our moral assessment is that people should not be treated this way. (And there are various answers what this is so, including the "golden rule" (Matt. 7:12).
 6. Presupposed, too, is that people have value (that care for one another is a given), that compassion is owed to our parents, and the like. (Think of the fifth commandment to honor parents, e.g.)
- We see, then, that we have basic commitments that call us to care for others (for Christians, such are grounded in God's Word, exhorting us to love our neighbors as ourselves, affirming the dignity of being made in God's image)
- We could calculate other things, too, in this moral situation. What are the consequences of her actions, both for herself and for her father (and for the neighbor kids)? Explore that a moment, for sins have legs and bear fruits elsewhere.

In making moral decisions (making a moral judgment) we can discern categories or ingredients within such a decision or judgment.

Four Ingredients of Moral Decision-Making

- (1) *the action itself.* (Is it right or wrong or unclear?)
- (2) *the motive behind the action?* (Is it pure, selfish, etc.?)
- (3) *the consequences of the moral decision.* (What are the effects and outcomes of your decision, your action? Are people hurt? Are you twisted and shaped in a good or bad moral direction? Is the community shaped in a particular way?)
- (4) *the character of the moral agent.* (That is, what role does a virtuous or vicious moral character matter in such judgments and actions?)

Now let's return to our moral situation above.

- (1) The action itself is wrong.
- (2) The motive behind the action is selfish, self-serving, and, therefore, brings harm to her father.
- (3) The consequences of her decision is (a) her father's suffering and misery; and perhaps (b) for her, a guilty conscience, which can soften her or harden her; or perhaps cause her to try to numb her guilt by abuse of alcohol or more partying (to forget); and so on; and (c) now the neighbor kids feel picked-on by a cranky old man (so they become jaded, mean toward him, maybe they decide to vandalize the old man's house in revenge, etc.)
- (4) Jessica's character, in this moral decision, is not virtuous but vicious – and her action likely nibbles away at her moral integrity and makes her less virtuous.

Here is another moral situation, which is much more benign on the surface.

Norman, a married father of four, makes a \$3,000 donation to a Christian orphanage in Romania. He wants to help the unwanted children who fill the beds and facilities; he wants to relieve suffering and misery.

When we apply the above ingredients to this moral decision, what do we find?

- (1) The action itself (on the face of it) seems noble, kind, and good—and quite possibly it is (but maybe not.) The action does seem to promise a good outcome for the Romanian orphans.
- (2) The motive behind this donation, as stated, is good: to help orphans and relieve suffering. (It is possible, however, that other motives are at work too: recognition, a scheme to get-in-good with the orphanage administrator who can introduce him to a person for potential investment and development in Romania (all to his own substantial financial advantage – so, what's a mere 3,000 bucks?)
- (3) The consequences of the moral decision, at least for the orphans, seems to be good. Depending on the motives behind the donation, the consequences can be positive or negative or a mixture of both. (What if Norman is already in grievous credit-card debt? What then? Is \$3,000 more debt worth it to help others? Who is he hurting by accumulating more debt?)
- (4) The character of the moral agent, Norman, is likewise reflective of his motives, and, as such, the consequences to his moral character follow.
 - Again, in making an evaluation of this moral situation (as we have just done), there are unexpressed moral assumptions or presuppositions we hold to and apply, and we always do well to explore those. For example, we think it is right to help orphans; we believe that helping them with \$\$

makes sense. Again, a neighbor-love principle applies; a golden-rule principle (and we could also point to specific biblical texts) (such as Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5; James 1:27).

What Moral Standards Shape Our Moral Decisions?

When we explore what goes into moral reasoning, we discover that ethical systems are diverse. Not everyone shares our moral convictions. Below is a rough sketch of *some* ethical approaches.

1. Duty ethics – Deontological systems: (a) *Natural Law*; (b) *Divine Command*; (c) *Ethical rationalism*.
2. Consequence ethics – Teleological systems: (a) *Utilitarianism* (what’s good for the majority?); (b) *Ethical egoism* (what’s good for me?).
3. Relativistic systems (mutual social agreement or individual choice) about preferences (there is no moral order “out there.”) Or: morality is situation specific (not universal).

Christian ethics is principally deontological in nature – that is, duty driven, living according to moral standards that can be discerned or known or discovered. These embrace principles and standards of moral requirements (obligation), permissions (rightness), and prohibitions (wrongness).

Even then, though, having the Bible and the Ten Commandments (the Law), an ethical life is not automatically or even easily solved. The Pharisees were adherents of the Law – yet, in many respects, quite immoral people! They did not temper the application of the law with love. They did not sort out major moral mountains from minor moral molehills. They flattened out duty with little discernment. They needed to learn what this text meant: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13; 12:7; cf. Hos. 6:6).

A Christian approach to ethics (deontological in character) is dependent upon divine command, natural law, but which also cannot disregard the importance of virtue, a degree of utility, and even a pinch of ethical egoism. It must sort out major principles from lesser duties.

Weighing the *Moral Weight* of Moral Decisions

- Stealing candy from a baby *versus* stealing the baby.
- Saying: I *want* to kill you *versus* killing him.
- Lustful leering at a woman (mental adultery) *versus* having innumerable affairs.
- Committing or devoting your money to God (*corban*) *versus* taking care of elderly parents (Mark 7:9-13).
- Tithing spices *versus* doing justice and mercy (Matt. 23:23).
- The Westminster Shorter Catechism echoes the sentiments of the Second Helvetic, “Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous? *Answer*: Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.” (For elaboration see Larger Catechism Q/A 151.)

Christian ethics keeps in play:

- » Law/Exhortation/Principles
- » Love – all law must be governed and applied by love (never raw law); love does no harm to a neighbor (Rom. 13:10).
- » Justice – what we owe others as “others” (as people created by God); giving them their due; what they have a right to expect from us.

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Session #2: A Christian Worldview and Christian Ethics

To address Christian ethics we need to consider a broader picture or conception of what the Christian life is, which takes us to rock bottom ideas about Christ and culture and about the relation of creation to redemption (Nature/Grace).

The relation of grace to nature is the great question!

The way this is conceived issues forth in all sorts of ethical implications: church/state; family and society; science and education, business and vocational life in connection with your Christian calling.

Q: *What is the relation between creation and recreation, kingdoms of the earth and the kingdom of God? The “here below” and the “here and now” with that which is “from above” and “what is to come”?*

Following Calvin, and other Reformed writers, like Kuyper, Bavinck, Berkhof (and others), the answer in shorthand is this: redemption *restores* creation, which is more than paradise restored. It is paradise *restored* and *blossomed!* Paradise in full-flower (something that never happened in the original paradise). Redemption brings creation to its originally intended goal!

- Calvinism, neo-Calvinism – grace restores nature. Nature = creation or the whole created order.

That answer, however, has not been the answer in many parts of Christendom throughout history.

- Roman Catholicism (Lutheranism, some Reformed today) – grace supplements nature.
- Socinian, Pelagianism, Neo-Protestantism (classical liberalism) – nature is grace. (Calls us to world-engagement but breeds moralism and worldliness!) Jesus is the great example!
- Anabaptist, Mennonite, Methodist, Pietist (some Pietist Reformed) – grace enables us to escape nature. (Calls us to world-flight and breeds otherworldliness! – but that, too, is just a form of worldliness.)

The Classic Roman Catholic (*Dualistic*) Approach (All of Life under the Ecclesiastical sphere)

How do you think about the world? Biblically we can say that it is (1) it is created good by God (His grand idea); (2) fallen and in rebellion against God; and we can say (3) it is the object of God’s love and under his redemptive plan (John 3:16).

But if we obscure either 1 or 2 or 3 (or all three together), we under-sale sin, which makes us make peace with a fallen world; or if we under-sale redemption, we abandon the world to its misery.

For Rome, there is the “natural” created order (left intact after the fall); this is rather “neutral” turf, yet it needs supplement. It needs the “supernatural” (as a *super added gift*) to help it out. Nature (the world) is missing the supernatural. Grace and redemption *do not penetrate creation*; rather, these complete (add to) creation. Nature and grace are two quantities: the supernatural above and detached from the natural, the below.

This is dualism. Natural and supernatural are separate realms, a lower and a higher. The natural world (creation) is devalued. It is common versus sacred, profane versus holy. [Many Christians think this way.]

The Lutheran ‘Two-Kingdom’ (*Dualistic*) Approach (Spiritual and Common Kingdoms)

While the Reformers sought to liberate the church from this sort of thinking, Calvin was far more consistent in this than Luther or Zwingli. In fact, Luther really did not escape this dualistic approach to life (and many Christians – even Reformed Christians – operate with it, still). Luther wrote that the gospel has nothing to do with worldly matters [business, commerce, political policy], for the Holy Spirit is unneeded in such affairs. Thus, in the various duties or vocations of life, vocation is independent of any Christian or redemptive influence.

While Luther liberated the public realm of life from the Church, the public, wider creational realm was left without redemptive influence. He called this approach a “two-kingdoms” approach: a spiritual kingdom where Christ reigns in the believer’s heart (a gospel ethic applies); and a common kingdom, where believer and unbeliever alike operate and live benignly alongside one another governed by natural law (i.e., conscience and reason; a creation ethic applies). The view remains in the nature/grace dualism.

Other Sub-Christian Alternatives and/or the Worldly/Other-worldly Alternatives to a Christian Worldview

- Meanwhile, not only Luther, but the Socinians and Anabaptists take sub-Christian paths. Socinians disregard special grace—all we have is nature (this is Pelagianism). The Anabaptists despise common grace. These movements have been very influential, even in Reformed churches. Anabaptist traits are related to Pietism, the Moravian church and Methodism [hence: asceticism, mysticism, withdrawal, world-flight, isolation, waiting for heaven, soul-saving, period]. This Pietism (also in its Reformed expression) is guerilla warfare Christianity—skirmish fighting. Sinful social structures and societal habits are left as is (get to glory is the singular goal). The truth defended here is, yes, there is the Kingdom to come in Glory, but mysticism displaces engagement with the world and pressing gospel sanctification into a world of sinful habits and structures. It lets the devil have free play in the world cultural affairs of life.
- Socinianism is related to neo-Protestantism (Classic Liberalism) and Unitarianism. Liberal theology restricts Christ’s power and word to the heart and inner chamber or reduces it to a moralism. Jesus is merely an example. The world, of course, delights that Christians hide in a corner and withdraw from the public square. They are happy if Christians isolate themselves and give unbelief free reign in the diverse spheres of life. Other forms of Liberal thinking engages life for justice, but it is purely horizontal.
- Each of these movements are caught in the legacy of Roman Catholic dualism. But the catholicity (universal reach) of Christianity and the church, of God’s healing grace, disallow this path. We are not of this world but we are *in* this world. Scholarship, science, political affairs, social structures must not simply be given over to unbelief (which is what Pietism does). Otherworldliness and suspicion of culture (a habit of heart of *Afscheiding* or Pietist churches) only aids the secularization of society. Contempt for created life is sinful. World-flight denies the first article of the Apostles’ Creed. Creation doesn’t need to be battled or denied, but the works of the devil in creation do (1 Tim. 4:4-5; 1 John 3:8). Grace restores nature! *Re-creation*, not discarded and tossed out creation.
- Whereas Rome conceives of redemption as creation *elevated*, for Anabaptism and Pietism, redemption is *escape*. (Pilgrim theology is misconceived to be anti-creation instead of anti-sin afflicting creation). Instead, we must see that redemption is *reparation, restoration*. Grace opposes sin, not nature as such. Sin does not merely afflict human hearts; the curse of sin permeates creation (it groans for liberation – see Rom. 8).

The Reformed Approach: Christ Is ‘King of All-of-Life’ – the Kingdom of God

But the reformation (through Calvin) labored to see that grace brings renewal to creation. *Everything (wherever sin penetrates) needs gospel renewal*. Everything needs to be ‘gospelized’: church, home, school, business, recreation, state—all must come under the principle (foundation and guiding light) of the gospel of Christ’s saving work and Lordship. (Redemption = purchased out of bondage and set free.)

This approach (a Reformed Worldview) bears the following traits:

1. Trinitarian

- No domain of life is excluded from re-creation.
- Creation & Resurrection

2. Sin and Grace are not “things” but each act upon Creation (for ill with sin, for good with grace)

- Sin has a catholicity (or universality – it penetrates everything!), likewise the claims of Christ’s redemptive work has a catholicity/universality – it must penetrate and transform, reform, restore everything!
- We constantly discern the difference between structure and direction. Structure represents creational givens, direction is our use of these givens. Faith directs to the glory of God and of His Christ; unbelief directs it in opposition to Him.

3. Reformation, Not Revolution

- Redemption is about reforming and restoring the God-intended created order. This is not nearly achieved or fully accomplished in this life. We get only first-fruits (but those fruits are more God-honoring than no fruits at all.) We make small steps of obedience here, like elsewhere, within homes, business, social life, creation care, etc.
- The gospel attacks sin alone, but it attacks it always and everywhere. Sin permeates politics, education, scholarship, science, art, the family, marital life, economic life, etc. All these need the gospel, correcting and driving away these sinful behaviors and broken structures

4. Restoration, Not Repristination

- Redemption is not paradise restored, but finally it will become paradise restored and blossomed into full-flower.
- There is an eschatology built into paradise that got derailed with the fall, but Christ restores creation to reach its goal. Thus, grace grants only what was part of the creation-reaching-its-goal to begin with, that is, in the way of obedience to God. The covenant of works and the covenant of grace are both aimed at the same destination. Grace restores nature and brings it to its highest fulfillment.

5. Practical Consequences

- The church isn’t sovereign over all of life. No! The gospel (i.e., Christ) heals and claims the heart, and from heart direction Christ is sovereign over all of life.
- The gospel impacts family, society, state, academics, science, art, recreation, etc.
- The gospel also liberates: redemption commences the-being-set-free to serve in obedience.
- All of life is spiritual. Creation is a holy domain. It awaits full redemption, total Kingdom Come!

Conclusion

Luther and Calvin part way relative to the calling of believers *as believers* in their vocations.

For Luther, Jesus Christ, as the Messiah) is king over church life (preaching, corporate worship, private prayer, etc.) but only the Triune God (not Jesus as the Christ), via natural law, is lord of the rest of life.

Christians, in public life, must behave according to natural law, along with everyone else (believer and unbeliever alike), making use of human reason and conscience to discern the law.

1. Redemption does not reclaim creation by and for Christ, even though all things were created by and for Him (Col. 1:16).
2. Grace therefore does not impact the whole of life. This presents, then, a truncated redemptive program.
3. Human sin and depravity are thought of, principally, in terms of individual corruption and guilt.
4. Justification becomes an end in itself. (Faith in Christ does not penetrate a believer's life in an integrated way. Your life as a believer is bifurcated between Christ as Lord of your spiritual life and God through natural law (conscience and reason) as lord of the rest of your life.)
5. Human reason is to be distrusted relative to salvation but trusted relative to the common affairs of life.
6. The dualism that is given a sanctioned place brings with it an unchristian worldview, which basically, in practice, banishes Christ from the public sphere. Jesus is privatized. Meanwhile, the devil does not play by those rules: he will not be privatized or confined to a spiritual realm! He is left to flourish in the public square.
7. Jesus Christ is the Lord of believers only!
8. The two-kingdoms doctrine of the Lutherans fences off Christ from the broader fabric of life, and, therefore, relies on a natural law ethic (conscience and reason) to carry the heavy freight of moral reasoning in the public square. But a natural law ethic relies on humans rightly reading morality off of their own hearts and nature. That is, it grossly under-estimates how humans suppress the truth in unrighteousness.
9. The notion of a common kingdom shows that Luther and Lutheranism is still caught in the medieval dualism of nature/grace = some of life is spiritual (the churchly) and the rest of life is secular, profane.

For Calvin, Jesus Christ (as the Christ, as Savior-King) is King over all of life. Christians must behave and think *Christianly* in everything! This means using gospel truth and scriptural teaching in a principled way to produce Christian implications for behavior and practice in public life and vocations.

1. Christian endeavor and influence is not coercive but moral – direct and indirect. Redemption!
2. Redemption, and the grace in back of it, impacts life in all its dimensions.
3. Human sin and depravity are thought of, principally, in terms of both individual corruption and guilt and cosmic and corporate disorder and accursedness.
4. Justification issues forth in sanctification – if possible, as far as curse is found! (This is the healing work of the kingdom of God.)
5. Human reason is to be distrusted not only in relation to salvation but also distrusted relative to the rest of human affairs: human sexuality, educational practices, political policies, etc.
6. Jesus Christ has *all authority in heaven and on earth*. He will not be privatized—though, to be sure, Christians can be forced out of the public arena by coercion and force, or by Christians advocating unchristian compromise. (Still, everything, in principle, belongs to Christ!)
7. Jesus Christ is the Lord of believers, to be sure; but He is also Lord *of lords* and King *of kings*.
8. This means that Christ's claim upon the whole creation includes all creatures and encompasses the arts, sciences, family, society, state, and the whole of life. There is no “neutral” turf. For the devil lays claim to it all and seeks to pervert life in every crack and crevice. The devil yields no domain to Christ. Christ yields no domain to the devil.
9. There is one holy kingdom, and One King – King Jesus, the Savior of the world, King of kings.

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**Session #3: Issues surrounding Human Sexuality:
Pornography & Marital Dysfunction**

Western society has changed radically from the 1950s. Consider the sexual standards of 1950s television and movies. Gays were in the closet (mostly), gender dysphoria was a culturally unknown concept, pornography was a scandalous, hidden indulgence—kept in private drawers or stashed behind boxes in the basement. Pregnancy out of wedlock was the occasion for shame and public embarrassment. Even divorce was a sort of scarlet “D” branded to one’s chest.

With the advent of Playboy magazine in 1953 the sexual revolution commenced (which was partly underway from the era of the roaring 20s, though side-tracked by the Great Depression and WWII). It gained real momentum with the arrival of “the pill” in 1960. James Bond, playboy extraordinaire, enticed a whole generation of young men to fantasize about the exploits of the sexually conquering male, with little emotional attachment to any female. Then, too, the 60s revolution and the hippie movement (free love), along with women’s liberation, and more, each and all coincided in ushering in a brave new world of sexual freedom—with gay rights gaining sway in the late 1970s and an onward march ever since. Most recently, transgenderism has become the focus of attention, most notably with Bruce Jenner (the famed Olympian decathlete) transitioning to become Caitlyn Jenner.

We have moved from the world of “Ozzy and Harriet” and “Leave It to Beaver” to “The Conners” (with a transgendering child) and “Beavis and Butthead” (with every rude-and-crude sexist cliché imaginable). Pornography—of the vilest sort—is only a few clicks of some buttons on your computer or cell phone. Pregnancy out of wedlock is now publicly paraded as an occasion for celebration—even on national TV. Gay persons have moved from the closet to the spotlight (from a hall of shame to a hall of fame). In fact, the old values and social mores are increasingly viewed as what should be shut-into-closets or forced-into-exile.

In these two sessions we want first to examine pornography and its associated marital dysfunction. In the second session (session 4 of the series), we will briefly look at transgenderism.

Pornography

Our culture indulges lust. That is, it is no longer a vice. It is no longer a deadly sin. It is a charm. It is an engine that fires life’s adventure. It fuels fun! Such is the media version of this vice. Lust contains nothing vicious. Of course, the biblical portrait is different. As a vice, lust is vicious—a sexual coveting of “bodies.” Outside the bounds of vowed love (marriage), it is desire gone astray. This vice, in a world alienated from God (1 John 2:16), is often packaged with other sorts of sins: greed, envy, anger, and the like. Sexual lust can be pre-marital, extra-marital, and post-marital. It can include any sort of sexual desire or pleasure or satisfaction contrary to or outside of God’s will.

And though the window of the eyes can breed lust in the heart—it is the heart that is disordered and misdirected, so that what we see with our eyes (even with our mind’s imagination) is twisted into lust. Fornication, adultery, lustful fantasizing, and everything associated with the same, is easily practiced in the privacy of one’s heart. Yet, inevitably, lust aims to push beyond such confines and find satiation through

another. Even though our culture judges lust as harmless and private—“just as long as you don’t hurt anyone”—a corrupted imagination is a type of self-harm; and if one is in a committed relationship, it harms one’s partner—compromising or altogether corrupting trust, commitment, fellowship, and union. Part of the fidelity of marriage includes mental fidelity!

Of course, sex itself is good. It is a wonderful gift of God. We are designed for it. God invented it (what a great invention!) God is not ashamed of it—only we make it shameful. Certainly a part of sex has the purpose of procreation, but that is not its sole purpose. Humans aren’t merely animals that come into heat. We are not meant for just any “body” handy—but for life lived together in committed love and fidelity. That is the design plan for human happiness and flourishing—God’s plan. The Song of Songs celebrates wedded sexuality.

Pornography, by contrast, mounts a full frontal assault on this divine plan. Pornography, the word being derived from two Greek words, *porne* (prostitute, whoring) and *graphein* (drawing or writing), is the portrayal of sexually oriented material, in written, audio or visual form, deliberately designed to stimulate sexually. It contains explicit descriptions or displays of sexual actions and/or organs, with the aim of stimulating sexually feelings, desires, and the like, versus, say, mere artistic expression of the human body. Ancient pornography once came in the form of painting, carvings, drawings, and literature. Now pornography comes in the form of photographs, films, and live sex shows. Internet pornography is now the dominant avenue in which pornography is consumed: via personal computer, tablet, or cell phone.

One of the most troublesome features of pornography, as some authors have noted, is not that it reveals *too much*, but that it reveals *too little*. All it reveals are objectified bodies (body parts) for sexual arousal rather than God’s image bearer—a person’s heart, mind, soul or spirit. It incites lust, not love. It arouses but does not satisfy. It objectifies persons and reduces them to sexual play things. It also sells a fantasy world of sexuality that is just that “fantasy.” That is, the persons performing in pornographic media are “acting,” indeed. Women are reduced to sex-starved sex machines that enjoy being disrespected, brutalized, becoming the sex object for any sex organ, performing most any possible sex act. Men are reduced to sex-starved sex machines as well—who live for that one singular purpose to be satiated by any and every possible sexual activity. In pornography’s devolution (the sinking corruption of the human soul) that next sexual “high” is to go “lower”—thus, the descent into child porn, incest, rape, bestiality, a descent lower and lower.

Why Pornography?

Why pornography? Why is it legal and why does it remains legal in Western society? The biblical answer is that pornography is a reflection and result of human depravity and corruption. The legal answer that pornography represents a form of “free speech.” Truth be told, however, the legal answer is but the outcome of human depravity having its way, for, in brief, much of the male population, including the white-collar judges, lawyers, and politicians, have a porn habit or want to indulge in some pornography on-the-side. Porn is here to stay because much of the male population enjoys pornography—and more recently, with the rise of internet porn, an increasing percentage of women and girls are becoming regular users of online porn.

So, what’s the harm? It is a person’s private business. How does it harm individuals or families or society at large? In fact, it is argued, porn is healthy inasmuch as it frees people from their sexual inhibitions. It is public sex education. The statistics will unsettle you,¹ but while many churches and sessions and consistories act innocent in regard to pornography, the facts suggest otherwise. While it is unedifying for a pastor to focus too

¹ Among the statistics are the following: 90 percent of American children between the ages of 8-16 have been exposed to pornography. There are over 1 billion online pornography sites. According to a 2016 Barna study, the majority of pastors (at least 54%) have reported being former or current users of porn, and many practicing Christians report feeling no guilt about their porn use—though others wallow in deep shame and misery from it. About two-thirds of Christian men view pornography at least monthly, the same rate as men who do not claim to be Christian.

much attention to the porn-problem in our midst, it is likewise unhelpful to act like ostriches, with our heads in the sand, because we are too ashamed to admit our own churches are seething with the sin of lust.

Interestingly, the Presidential Commission on Pornography appointed in 1967, which basically gave pornography a clean bill of health as having no social negative repercussions on society, was refuted, virtually on every conclusion it reached, by the Attorney General's 1986 Commission on Pornography. (Like all political debates, however, public debates on morals or morality wallows in a quagmire of opinion and so-called scientific findings.)

Scriptural Perspectives

For our purposes, we turn to what Scripture has to say about this topic? Although the Bible does not address pornography directly, it does address lust, sexual immorality, violence, racism, and abusive or exploitative attitudes and actions. Pornography fosters all such behaviors. First, we know that lusting in our heart is mental adultery (Matt. 5:28). Likewise, we are told to make no provision for the flesh (Rom. 13:12-14), something pornography incites in a most deliberate manner. Believers are exhorted not walk in the way of immorality, impurity, coarse joking, or filthiness. None of these befits the way of faith (see Eph. 5:2-3). By contrast, we are urged to dwell on what is noble, just, pure, lovely, and also excellent, what is of good repute and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8). Pornography, on the contrary, is dastardly, debased, debauched, impure, shameful, disgraceful, and leaves minds in the gutter. Women are reduced to sexual objects for sexual exploits. It leaves the minds of its consumers choked with poisonous sexual imagery, with a sensual idolatry itched in the mind. In this way, pornography inhabits the mind long after a given visual display is over. This, in turn, feeds a sex-saturated heart, which feeds our sex-saturated society. All this is the opposite of loving our neighbors as ourselves, or loving God with our hearts and our minds, or of directing our thoughts to God in thanksgiving or toward our neighbors for their welfare. This involves a “taking off” of Christ and pursuing “waywardness” rather than “putting on” Christ and pursuing “righteousness” (see Eph. 5:3-4).

Scripture is clear: sexual desire is permitted and natural, but it must be directed toward one's spouse alone (see James 1:15; cf. Matt. 5:27-28). Meanwhile, porn works in opposition to the exhortation of 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, where husband and wife rightly may expect conjugal rights from one another, and are not to deprive one another except by mutual agreement, and, then, for a set purpose. Pornography, however, given that it is mostly accompanied by masturbation, involves isolated sex versus a communion between partners. It all too easily involves depriving the victim-spouse of sexual affection, being replaced by a fantasy on the screen. Or, it is used in a manipulative way to guilt the victim-partner (usually the wife) into becoming more like the fantasy as found in the imagery of pornography, to do or perform or act like what the women in porn do or perform or act like.

Hebrews 14:4 informs us that marriage is honorable among all, and the marriage bed is to remain undefiled—that in contrast to God's judgment upon adulterers and fornicators. Pornography does not honor marriage. Quite the contrary. Pornography is wholly disinterested in sex between a husband and wife, unless a third party is brought into the situation: a (step)daughter, a sister-in-law, a neighbor friend, etc. It feeds human perversity and evokes deviant behaviors as normative. The naughtier, the better. The more scandalous, the more exciting. The more corrupting and debauched and novel, the more sexually creative and fulfilling. Perversity is pleasure, by this account.

So, in short form, pornography takes the beauty and wonder of sex, and debases it, cheapens and poisons it. It dishonors fidelity. It celebrates sinful behavior and incites the same in the lives of all its consumers—believers and unbelievers alike. It cultivates lust and adultery in the heart, which tempts some to find casual sex from internet sites, or induces men to go to strip-clubs, pay prostitutes, or turn to other partners in the pursuit of sexual excitement. It also debases our view of persons (especially women), darkens the heart and mind, damages marriage, and brings disintegration of families.

Pornography's Harm in General

1. It commodifies human beings, who are actually made in God's image. God advocates for the poor against those who would afflict or exploit them (Prov. 22:22-23; Amos 8:4ff.; Ps. 82:3-4). Yet pornographers are such persons: they exploit runaways, women forced into porn by abusive boyfriends, women and girls trafficked from poor nations, and other financially needy women, and such. Meanwhile, for most of those who are the performers, the profits do not find a way into their pockets. Others get rich from pornography.
2. It sexually humiliates women, in particular—often depicting extreme forms of sex acts that are forms of abuse: choking, hitting, gagging, and many other acts not fit for description.
3. It reinforces racist stereotypes.
4. Online porn is designed to offer free services which are to lead to paid services and habitual use.
5. It hyper-activates the appetitive system and creates new maps in the human brain based on the pornographic images. These map areas long to be activated and used—such that porn users start to act like rats pressing the bar to get a shot of dopamine or its equivalent. This may be likened to drug-like additions
6. The multibillion dollar porn industry fuels other industries—selling email addresses to spammers and others.
7. It fosters deceit within relationships and compromises and/or breaks marital fidelity.
8. Users of porn participate in all of the exploitative behaviors mentioned above, and indulge in and support a form of prostitution, pure and simple.

Pornography's Harm in Particular

1. Porn harms woman. It exploits and traffics women and children, and incites (first by way of fantasy) sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, child abuse, spousal abuse, incest, and more. Inasmuch as women are often, in pornography, objectified and reduced to sexual pleasure toys, the users (more predominantly males) witness emotional and psychological behaviors that they want to emulate. Some women and girls feel an emotional need to become what is expected of them as portrayed in pornography, which only leads to shame, abuse, and brokenness. Sexual degradation is a long distance from sexual fulfillment.
2. Harms to children:
3. Harms to girls and women:
4. Harms to boys and men:
5. Harms to marriages and relationships. Pornography breaks trust and intimacy between couples. Wives who catch their husbands viewing porn feel betrayed, diminished, distrust follows, not to mention a diminishment of respect, and marital breakdown is more easily escalated.

Personal

1. Acknowledge and confess it as a sin—a forgivable sin at that!
2. Separate yourself from sources of temptation.
3. Find and facilitate a good sexual relationship within marriage.
4. Pray regularly for God's help and forgiveness—acknowledge your sinful propensities and weakness.
5. Replace bad sources of image input with good ones.
6. Find an accountability partner.

***CHRISTIANS LIVING IN A SIN-STAINED WORLD:
Some Ethical Questions Christians Face Today***

Evening Class (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) – **Dr. J. Mark Beach**
April 8, 2021

**Session #4: Issues surrounding Human Sexuality:
Transgenderism**

Transgenderism is a rather recent trend, following in the wake of homosexual activism and the wider social shift regarding homosexuality. What is now branded as the LGBTQ+, *lesbian, gay, trans, bi, queer or questioning*, + (others), has become normative within large segments of society, especially in the academic world, corporate America, and large swathes of the liberal political and media world.

Definitions

What does it mean to be transgender? “*Transgender* is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. It is sometimes abbreviated to *trans*. *Transsexual* refers to persons who experience a gender identity inconsistent or not culturally associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.” Perhaps another term that needs definition is that of *gender dysphoria*, which refers to the distress a person experiences whose gender identity differs from their biological sex. *Gender identity*, then, has reference to a person’s internal sense of being male or female (or other). *Sex* refers to biological sexual organs, physical, biological, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics. In this connection we also note that some people suffer with disorders of sexual development, and this is referred to as *intersex*, and historically referred to persons who were *hermaphrodites* (denoting a congenital condition in which the development of a person’s chromosomal, gonadal, internal, and/or external anatomical sex is atypical. Some are visible at birth; others appear at later stages because of malfunctioning of hormones.

From the above, we see that *sex* and *gender* are viewed as distinct, such that persons can take on roles and identity of a sex different from their biological sex. *Gender* has reference to roles and sense of identity (not biological make-up). *Gender* also has reference to culturally defined roles, behaviors, expressions, which often are labeled as masculine or feminine. In that light, *gender nonconforming* persons refuse to act or identify according to those labels. Other terms used are *queer, genderfluid, or nonbinary*. Some persons who are transgender have transitioned or are transitioning, having undergone or are undergoing medical treatments (such as hormone therapy) and sex reassignment surgeries to bring their bodies into alignment with the gender with which they identify. Others make only a social transition, that is, they make nonmedical changes in their person: clothing, name, personal pronouns and the like, in order to live in alignment with their gender identity.

Mix-and-Match as Human Choice

Increasingly (though rare) we meet persons who count themselves as transgender. Key to this debate is the question whether sex and gender are distinct from one another. Beginning in the 1960s and over time this distinction become normative in the field of psychology.

From a biblical point of view, believers are placed in an awkward position in counting as “normative” what seems to be, *prima facie*, disordered or malfunctioning or not normative. Yet, human language has now been turned on its head. Terms like “natural” or “normative” and the like, if used one way, are branded oppressive or phobic or sexist or bigoted, but if used as descriptors of freedom to decide what is natural or normative,

then they have wholesome import. With the concept of gender fluidity and the like, humans are to be viewed as a mix-and-match assemblage of parts: physical sexual biology, gender identities across ranges, and sexual desires (across ranges). Some may opt for an internal coherence to match physical biology and sexual preference, but the idea of internal coherence is itself oppressive and Neanderthal.

Rival Worldviews

In an earlier session, we noted that worldview plays into ethical issues in a significant way. A worldview is “*a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.*”² As C. S. Lewis noted: “The Christian and the Materialist [a secular worldview—all there is physical stuff, and that is all we are!] hold different beliefs about the universe. They can’t both be right. The one who is wrong will act in a way which simply doesn’t fit the real universe.” Christians, of course, believe they are right about the universe—including the moral universe God has put in place. Secularists (humanists, materialists) believe they are right.

In addressing this issue, we must recognize that we interact with a rival worldview to that of Christianity—the worldview of secularism. (There is no God, there is no law-giver, there is no moral standard, except what we construct for ourselves, there is no right and wrong, again, except what we collectively decide to call such, and there is no heaven or hell or after-life. There is only this life, now. As such, there are no consequences beyond immediate gratification for self or the selves that embrace your “self.”) (Of course, there are many rival worldviews to the Christian faith, but everyone has a worldview!

Worldviews shape and account for: *authority* (who or what can tell us what to do?); *knowledge* (who knows what is right or best?); and *trustworthiness* (who loves us and wants the best for us?) As one author points out, in the simple decision to eat or not eat ice cream, we can listen to our feelings and physical desires, or follow reason, and so we rationally refrain from eating ice cream for health reasons, or we can trust the advice of mom that too much sugar should be avoided or contrariwise follow our successful sibling who never denies herself a treat.

Looking at the worldview of secularism, we see that it prizes science but truth is fluid. Natural order (even so-called natural law) is all a matter of interpretation. Morality is a choice, not an objective state-of-affairs. Morality consists of feelings and preferences, like “ouch!” or “aaah!” In keeping with this view, life is split into a public sector and a private sector. The private sector is where this view places religious beliefs and morality derived or dependent on them. That realm is regarded as subjective, personal, private, relative and only valid for yourself—or those who share your beliefs. The public sector looks to scientific authority and sanction—this forms values for the public square, for it is objective and valid for everyone; it is also incontestable, for it is how the universe works. (To speak of values here is only to say that science supports a kind of fluid and evolving set of opinions about how humans should behave toward one another. Again, this is not morality in an objective, out there, sense.)

In order to understand a secularist/materialist worldview, we must understand that this worldview splits apart “facts” and “values.” This means that there is, finally, no objective truth at all (“facts”). We only have ourselves creating our own “values” as we see fit. But Christianity denies this split. Theological/biblical facts are inseparably related to moral values. Of course, if one denies the facts, if one denies the Giver of those facts, then one can also deny the connection between those facts and moral values. F. Nietzsche’s program, in part, was to declare God dead, along with the Judeo-Christian values grounded on Him, in order to “transvalue” to a world of our own making.

² James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 17.

Because of the dualism we examined in part two of the first sessions of this class, many Christians are content with splitting life into sacred/secular. The sacred (or spiritual) realm consists of your soul or spirit, and such church related activities like worship and prayer and giving alms; the secular realm is really aimed at the physical aspects of life: making a living, recreation, vocation, your sex life, and hobbies, etc. This produces a piety that *disinvites* God into large portions of your life. It divides one's loyalties—it regards Jesus as Lord of pieces of your life (not your whole life). It produces, too, a concept of redemption that is mostly escape. The spiritual is good and important; the physical is lesser or lower. In fact, it gives over (as in surrenders) much of life to the devil. The public school can educate our kids; we'll pray with our kids. The secular world will teach them to live and pursue life; we, at home, will teach them to prepare for death. This piety thinks itself spiritual—but it is more spiritual than God, who made us physical beings, who invented the material stuff of life, and calls it good. In Jesus Christ, God (the Son) even took on human flesh; He promises us glorified versions of our bodies (see 1 Cor. 15:42, 44). Which is to say, the physical and material are the stuff of spiritual life!

Meanwhile, in reference to the question of transgenderism, Scripture does not endorse the notion of self-identity or being self-made—at least, not with respect to human sexuality. In contrast to the current blinding-of-genders and/or transforming or transitioning from one identity to another, or seeking internal coherence or rejecting that idea, or opting for one preference of sexuality versus another, Scripture lays out principles that present a different account of what ails us as human beings, and even an account why we can experience gender dysphoria and associated conflicting desires or yearnings.

Biblical Perspectives

The Bible teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It calls us to respect persons as persons. It calls us to be compassionate and sensitive to humans suffering in their own sin and misery and the sin and misery of the world that afflicts and wounds us all. The Bible informs us that we are fellow-sinners; so, in that light, there is always a “we-self” about us. As sinners, we are sinners together that need the same divine grace and rescue. The Bible also teaches us that God's love for sinners is the help and heal them, to forgive and save them; even to transform them and transition them from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom, from shame to innocence. Salvation is liberation and deliverance. Salvation, fully accomplished, never leaves us where we started or lets us stagnate halfway, stuck along the journey. It brings us fully home, fully healed, even transformed in the twinkling of the eye (1 Cor. 15:52).

The degree of healing persons experience in this life is diverse—some deep and radical; others meager and faltering. But forgiveness and God's patient grace is always and ever deep and radical, just as it is also persistent and patient; it is infallible and irresistible. Thus, Scripture (and a biblically informed worldview) offer different diagnoses and remedies to the issues surrounding gender dysphoria and transgenderism, for no matter how much modern advocates have sought to erase any differences between men and women, biology (the facts of the universe) refuse a radical erasure.

The Bible is pro-body, pro-sex, pro-male and female, pro-marriage, pro-love, and pro-fidelity. That is, the body is good; sex is good. Male and female is good. Marriage is good. Love and fidelity are good. And yet from a biblical and Christian understanding of life, each and all of these can be and are disordered; each is subject to corruption, can be (and has been) twisted and misdirected (structure = good created order; direction = either good or evil). And from this corruption dualism reigns.

- Genesis 1 and 2 serve us the biblical blueprint for human beings and human sexuality (see Gen. 1:26-29).
- He made us male and female not only for procreation (but, yes, for that) but also for intimacy, for fellowship, for vowed-love community, for one-fleshed companionship (see Gen. 2:21-24). [All this in

stark contrast to transgender thought, where autonomous selves are free to impose their own interpretations on their body; meanwhile their bodies are simply raw material with no intrinsic identity or purpose or sexual orientation or design.]

- Moreover, we belong to God as His creatures (see Psalm 24:1-2). This means that we live in a world structured by God. Structure/created/the natural order (though damaged by sin) as created suffers most when it is misdirected rather than directed back to God, according to his design plan and purpose, and for our wellbeing.
- As such, it is not my choice to disregard my physical biology, to disunite my body from my person or to disunite my mind (soul) as an autonomous, self-governing entity from my body. (Transgenderism grounds identity not in biology but in one's mind. You are what you *feel*. The world, or at least yourself, is what you decide it is. There is *no created order*.)
- God sets the script, not we ourselves. By contrast, according to our secular culture, a “gay script” (or fill in the blank “_____ script”) declares that any person who experiences same-sex desires or wishes to transition to a different gender identity has discovered their authentic self; such persons are embracing their true identity. Oddly, gay same-sex desires have long been regarded as hard-wired into a person; there is no “choice-making” with respect to sexual orientation; to attempt to change that orientation is to act contrary to your nature; yet, now, all of the above may be a matter of choice. The highest prize and the upmost respect should be afforded to the persons who is “self-made,” according to personal choice. (It is difficult to see how both ideas are true—or if they are, why changing one's sexual orientation [from gay to straight] is either immoral or impossible.)
- The Bible gives us the interpretative moral-grid by which we evaluate and assess our various feelings, impulses, and desires, such that we sift them, support or loathe them, and the like. An adult who has a sexual attraction to children can say, well, that's my identity. Or that person can declare that attraction, though real, as disordered and needing to change. A rapist, who enjoys humiliating women sexually, can declare that impulse valid and as who he really is, and, act accordingly; or, he can denounce it as disordered, even sinful and reprehensible, and suppress it, etc. Virtually all human beings have sexually deviant desires (along with other sorts of desires) and impulses that do not, and ought not to form their identity, but rather need to be rebuked, denounced as disordered, broken, and repressed as harmful to the self (and to others). We can have deep convictions which make us loathe such impulses or orientations or desires.
- Many Christians have lived and died with same-sex attraction as their impulse, desire, and disposition, but their identity in Christ trumps such desires and dispositions. They live happier lives following biblical mandates, and knowing God's embrace of them in their brokenness, than following after desires that are contrary to God's will and design for them as those made in his image.
- Being distorted by sin is very different from being made by God—God creates us as sexual beings, male and female; sin distorts and redirects our sexuality away from God's design.
- Chastity is a biblical standard for all human beings, of any predisposition, orientation, confusion, etc.
- Matthew 19:12 on eunuchs is helpful in showing us that some are born as, what we might call, intersex, with physical anomalies and find themselves infertile. Some are eunuchs, probably by castration, and have been made so by others (likely such persons were taken as captives). Still others take a vow of celibacy—spiritual eunuchs. In our sex-saturated society, it seems inconceivable, but the Bible tells us otherwise, for it is possible to happy and chaste.

***CHRISTIANS LIVING IN A SIN-STAINED WORLD:
Some Ethical Questions Christians Face Today***

Evening Class (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) – Dr. J. Mark Beach
April 15, 2021

Session #5: Christian Ethics & Cultural Engagement—Models of Engagement

Among the many intramural debates the church faces—gender roles, worship and music controversies, COVID protocols, not to mention theological doctrines—we also face the debate how the church engages the world. How do we (and how should we) engage the culture in which we find ourselves. Central here are questions of how you view human depravity and its extent, the role of common grace and its effects, the aim or goal or responsibility the church has (or, specifically, Christian believers in the world have) toward society at large for its welfare, and what authority governs or guides or determines a course of action or inaction in living and being a Christian out in the world.

These topics are often taken up under the topic of *Christ and Culture*. We addressed this topic indirectly in our first evening, the second session, in treating a Christian worldview. Here is a short synopsis, broadly speaking, of four views.

The Two Kingdom Model

Some recent Reformed writers reject the idea of “worldview” (though, the idea itself seems incontrovertible inasmuch as everyone views life and interprets its meaning and purpose through a lens or perspective with a set of values and commitments). Instead of “worldview” they posit that the Christian lives a distinct life as a believer, as a member of Christ in the arena of the church, while living a common life with all human beings in the arena of the world. Thus, the Christian occupies two hemispheres or realms or lives in two kingdoms: a *spiritual kingdom* called the church and a *common kingdom* called the world. This “Two Kingdoms” model has both a *Lutheran* and a more radical *Reformed* expression. This model is not countercultural or transformative of culture but embraces culture as a given to be occupied by the believer with the non-believer, with believers living well and doing “good” to their neighbors according to the shared authority (or court of appeal) of natural law.

The Countercultural Model

A different model is explicitly countercultural; it involves a posture of retreat from the world. Historically, this view has been most identified with the “Anabaptists”—think of the Amish as more radical examples of this view. However, there are other and newer versions of this model, including various forms of Pietism (also Reformed Pietism) and what is tagged as “the New Monastics.” This model requires that believers live in the world—and get on in life in the world—but avoid the “worldly” givens of “worldly” culture as much as possible. Advocates of this view regard worldly culture as irreformable. The Christian life is split between the sacred world of Christian fellowship and the secular world outside of it. Sometimes communal living is seen as an avenue to escape the wider fabric of life out-in-the-world. The recently proposed “Benedict Option” of Rod Dreher is a very mild version of this model, though its aim is also to effect real change in culture where possible—so, in that regard, it also fits under a more transformative model.

The Cultural Relevance Model

Some are familiar, too, with the old “Social Gospel” model, driven by classic Liberal theology (neo-Protestantism), where a kind of cultural relevance prevails. (Emergent Church models and Liberation theology fit here as well.) This view was popularized in the United States by Walter Rauschenbusch, especially set for in

his book *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917). Rauschenbusch lived among and ministered to the poor and abused in New York's city's district "Hell's Kitchen." Chief among some of its tenets is that sin takes on social characteristics and social institutions, and needs to be addressed practically and concretely as such. Perhaps an illustration from American history is the institution of chattel slavery. That sin is not solved by a sermon in church, for it was woven into the economic fabric of society and had legal sanction. This model, in various forms, places front and center a type of cultural engagement that focuses on the oppressed in society and looks to political solutions and practical actions to relieve suffering. Milder versions, with a more gospel of salvation focus, look to be culturally relevant on various levels.

The Transformative or Christ Is King of All-of-Life Model

Lastly, there is what has sometimes been labeled the "Transformationist" model, first associated with the Dutch Reformed theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, but later this model, with less nuance and sometimes with extreme radicalism, was commandeered by the Religious Right in the U.S., and also by a small group called Christian Reconstructionists or Theonomists. Some transformationists were also rather triumphalistic in their language and aims, such as the Dutch legal professor and philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd, along with his fellows and followers. Here it is fitting to mention also the Theonomists, who are typically post-millenianists—awaiting a golden age on earth to yet arrive. They look to the day when the old civil code in the law of Moses can be imposed on modern society. This view is quite biblicistic and quite out-of-step with the history of Reformed theology on such questions, but also champions, typically, Reformed theology in its creedal expression. More sober minded followers of Kuyper and Bavinck simply call Christians to faithfulness to Jesus Christ in the whole of Christian living, as they recognize that Jesus as "the Christ" of God has legitimate (but contested) claim over the whole creation and all of life. A believer is a follower of Christ in every nook and cranny of life under the sun.

* * * * *

We have adopted these basic categories from Tim Keller's book *Center Church* (and the chart attached likewise comes from that source). It is safe to say that no one likes to be placed on a chart or have their views put under a heading without nuance. What is more, no position has everything figured out and wrapped tidily in a box with a bow. Nevertheless, these distinct models as models can be set off from one another. Each model has something about which we need to pay attention.

A Particular Case—the Plumber

We can get at this issue in the case of a man who is a plumber. He owns a Heating and Plumbing business—he and his brothers. This man regards himself as a Christian, but depending on each of the above models, how *does* he conduct his business? How *should* he conduct his business of being a plumber? The plumbing business entails that he enter into contracts, say, with fellow believers or with non-believers, to do the heating and plumbing for a new building project of an old retirement home, a big enterprise. His business also brings him into private homes via house calls, repairing and servicing homes and businesses as plumbing or heating problems arise. In each of these scenarios, his work *out in the world* brings him into contact with non-Christian people, i.e., with human life "under the sun," involving contractual relationships with other people, involving too an implicit fiduciary responsibility upon enter homes and making plumbing or heating repairs according to legal codes and the like, insuring the safety of the work performed, such that he and his business associates and employees act with responsibility and respect for the welfare of others. This sort of work, out beyond the confines of Sunday worship, is a big part of this man's life—certainly taking up more than a regular 40 hour work week. What does it mean to be a Christian conducting this sort of business? (We could also think of appliance repair persons, physicians or nurses, salespersons of many sorts of products, lawyers, mechanics, coaches, airline pilots, teachers, farmers, along with butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers.)

What Is Not in View!

First this: what is not in view, or at issue! The physical mechanics of most such work does not vary or change as such whether one is a Christian or a non-Christian, whether a person is an Atheist or a Muslim, no more than whether he or she is of one race versus another race. There are rules and physics of good plumbing practices that have been discovered and practiced over time (gained wisdom and knowledge about that trade), involving sanitation, the use of gravity, the need for pipes to be suitable for handling waste products, etc., etc. Likewise, there are protocols and training and physical requisites for that work, just as there is for most vocations. This applies to being an auto-mechanic or a nurse or an airline pilot, and the like. Such things are part of the created order, as they are part of being a responsible human agent performing a service or task. The act of breathing doesn't change whether one is a Christian or not, or walking or running or eating or sleeping. Plumbing, then, is not about finding Bible texts to explicate plumbing or to explicate many other occupations. Some caricature and pretend that this is what is meant by a Christian acting as a plumber versus a non-Christian. That is a cheap side giggle but lands nowhere! The question is instead, Can a Christian do this work *Christianly*? Again, not the physical mechanics of it but *in* the whole conduct of his business, his living before God, his motives and dispositions in his heart, his care for the world and fellow human beings, and also his understanding of how this fits within God's plan for his life and care for the world unto *Christ's Kingdom Come!*? *That question!* Some models say "no!" whereas others models (at least one model explicitly) says "yes!"

Also what is not in view or, at issue, here is to think that in pursuing life out-in-the-world and viewing it as serving God as a Christian cannot entail simultaneously a longing for the life-to-come, or the hope for glory. To be sure and most certainly one can. That is, even a transformationist model (which is likely too optimistic and triumphalistic to think that transformation is ever in our hands) can still embrace the principle of life on earth as a pilgrimage; we are wayfarers. We are not yet home—the home of the new heavens and the new earth. It most certainly is not impermissible (but normal) to long for glory, to ache for the life-to-come! Thus, in whatever manner a person assesses the various views outlined above, none, except the most radical of the Theonomists and Liberationists, are saying that we can desire the full victory of divine salvation to be ushered in and come into being. So, what, then, is at stake in this discussion? Back to the plumber.

Pietist/Anabaptist Model

If he conducts his business as a person whose posture is to escape the world, with a very counter-cultural disposition, then he regards his business life as "worldly," as a necessary evil, as merely a means to make a living and obtain daily bread. He might or might not posture himself with a more-or-less hostile attitude toward all the non-Christian people for whom does plumbing and heating work, or perhaps he pities and loves them (if only they can be won for Christ!). Perhaps he pastes a Jesus fish (<><) on his business cards; perhaps he sees being a Christian and having a plumbing business as an avenue to witness to non-believers, this besides (as an attachment) doing actual plumbing work. Thus, the Christian part of being a plumber, who is a Christian out-in-the-world, is when he tries to win people to Christ. Otherwise, the business part is just business and there is nothing that is spiritual or godly or Christian or sanctified or holy about being a plumber—only spiritual activities, like witnessing, are Christian. Jesus Christ has no stake or claim on creation at large or how life proceeds in its ordinary affairs. Many, many American Christians conceive of their being "out-in-the-world," their *in-the-world-life*, in this way. It fits with an Anabaptistic and Pietistic view. It is an escapist view. The only service that honors God is Christian activities like worshiping, praying, repenting (mostly on Sundays) and witnessing, while avoiding a host of ungodly activities the rest of the week. Plumbing, as such, has nothing to do with Jesus or being a Christian—except in regard to personal interactions and opportunities for Christian witness. More radical versions of this view call for Christians to refuse to pay taxes, to serve in the armed forces, or to do anything that involves getting tainted with or sharing in the ways of the world. Or, the plumbing business enables him to give generously to Christian causes.

Relevance/Social Gospel Model

Now if our plumber follows more “a social gospel” and “relevance to culture” perspective, he will perform plumbing and heating tasks with a wider and higher aim than plumbing itself, namely to promote the welfare of life and society for social good. The mechanics of plumbing do not change (as earlier noted), but instead of viewing plumbing work as “worldly,” it is viewed as an avenue to make a difference in the world, now, for social reform. This can go in a variety of directions: his business profits can be poured into poorer neighborhoods for diverse programs; he might volunteer his business to do free (or for greatly reduced fees) plumbing/heating repairs for financially challenged families. He might identify and use his plumbing and heating business to be identified with political issues or programs of various types. Although this model is usually identified with leftist leanings, it can be identified with rightist leanings, too, though the political cause is often less identified with the poor or an underclass. A more middle class set of values can likewise be its identity. The point, though, is a person’s business life, in this case, plumbing, is a means-to-an-end. It is similar to the Pietist model, except the end isn’t witnessing and trying to convert lost people to Jesus (for eternal rewards); instead, the end is to do good for others, to help them in their specific social needs or to defend a political policy for a ultimate social good (for immediate, here-and-now goals). Once more, plumbing as such has nothing to do with Jesus Christ or the Christian faith. Plumbing is plumbing—but a person’s plumbing business affords the opportunity to use that business in order to do some “good” in the world, for the love of neighbor. For this view, being “out-in-the-world,” one’s *in-the-world-life*, is designed to help usher in some justice and wellbeing now! It need not exclude bearing witness to Jesus and salvation through Him, but it is mostly aimed at civic good—helping the poor and the underclass, though, again, it can also take on a social action with the goal of securing values characteristic of the middle class—say, gun rights or certain sorts of economic freedom. In more radical hands, this model, as with Liberation Theology, which agrees with a Marxist analysis of socio-economic injustice and class struggle, weds such categories to Christian theological themes at large. Some such versions of liberation theology is supportive of the use of violence and revolution. Here, following a radical idea of this model, one might use their “plumbing business” as a disguised “front” for the cause, or something of that sort.

Two Kingdom Model

What about the Two Kingdom model as it is expounded by some modern Reformed advocates? This model too is not interested in the notion that Jesus Christ is lord of a believer’s plumbing business. There is no such thing as “Christian” plumbing. As noted above, the idea that the task of plumbing (according to its mechanics and the like) can be distinctly Christian is not what is in view, in any case—no more than Christian running or Christian breathing. (As we shall see, under the last model, the use of the adjective “Christian” in, say, “Christian” School or “Christian” marriage, has a different import and scope.) The two kingdom model views believers as standing in two worlds or realms—the realm of Christ’s kingdom, the church (this the world of Sunday worship and the means of grace, the realm of the communion of the saints gathered together); it is also the realm of the Good News of salvation, the gospel (with the law taught to reveal to us our need for Jesus Christ, the gospel). In this kingdom (under Jesus Christ the king, the incarnate Messiah) we seek to live our lives according the ethics of the gospel. Here the Bible rules. The other kingdom is the common kingdom of “the rest of life.” Here, life is governed by God as the Creator, not the redeemer; and more specifically it is governed by the natural law written on human hearts—this is how civil authorities and office managers and employers govern us as well. Here, in this common realm, life is dependent on God exercising some measure of common grace in order to hold sin in check and to make civil life feasible. And here, as well, in this common kingdom, is where a Christian person conducts his or her plumbing and heating business (and all similar sorts of affairs). As such, the Christian owner of this Plumbing and Heating business is governed by the rule of natural law (as are all human beings in common). That law tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to protect them, to do them well, to act with equity (for we all possess a sense of right and wrong, of what is just and

unjust). Natural law and human reason (assisted by common grace) also teaches us to obey civil authorities; and this includes observing established building codes for plumbing and heating, and the like, and to perform all such tasks responsibly, as honoring to God, for all life is lived before the triune God's face. This common-kingdom-life is governed by a natural law ethic. Jesus Christ, according to this model, has no claim on and, indeed, no regard for my plumbing business. It is not in his purview. There is nothing about my business that should or can have a Christian flavor or approach, mostly because life lived out beyond the church-kingdom sphere, though serviceable, is a throw away. It is useful and necessary, to be sure, like scaffolding, for the building project of the church-kingdom of Christ, but the scaffolding itself, when the building is done, is a toss out. This life, then, including one's plumbing business, is useful for human affairs and wellbeing and serves, ultimately, for the support of the Christ-kingdom. But all of your life, as lived in the common kingdom, has little to do with your being a Christian or being united to Christ by faith. It has a temporary purpose, and so nothing of eternal consequence. It reaches a point of being discarded. As such, the Christian owner of this plumbing business conducts his business conscientiously according to the moral dictates of natural law—for human wellbeing. But Christ's kingdom and kingship does not intersect with that. For this view, being "out-in-the-world," a believer's *in-the-world-life*, is actually lived according to the same moral standards of conduct for all human beings under the natural law dictates of human reason and conscience (the law imprinted by the triune God on the human heart) and needing God's common grace to mitigate evil. There is, however, nothing distinctive, whether "Christian" or "non-Christian," to human vocation—no more so than breathing or running or eating. There is just breathing and eating and running as human activities, and so, too, plumbing activities or other diverse vocations in the common kingdom.

Christ Is King of All-of-Life Model

This model differs from each and all of the above in that it conceives of Christ as Lord *of both creation and the church*. This means Jesus as the Christ is lord of creation and the church—not God as triune is the lord of creation while Jesus as the Christ is lord only of the church (that sphere). Thus, this model conceives of the whole of the created order (including the domain of the church) as under the assault of the evil one and the kingdom of darkness. And it likewise conceives of Christ laying claim to the whole of the created order, contesting that assault, the usurpation of the devil of God's world. It conceives of a *kingdom of light* versus a *kingdom of darkness* contest being waged everywhere in life: in churches and their theology and worship, in businesses and their practices and behaviors and policies, in governments and the various laws put into place, in marriages, in families, in treatment and care of the creation, of animals, and the like—the whole fabric of life. The Christian's calling both in church (in worship and in prayer) and out-in-the-world, then, comes under Christ's lordship and His dictates. His commands or dictates certainly include, like the two kingdoms model, natural law; and it likewise requires that God dose the world and culture with the inoculate of common grace in order to hold the full effects of sin in check, but unlike the two kingdoms view, the Christ is king of all-of-life model also uses principles derived from Scripture and specific commands of the Bible, where applicable, to amplify and clarify natural law and to shape sanctified reasoning according to the fuller revelation revealed in Scripture. What is key in this view is that regular human life (and physical laws and what includes the well-ordered functioning of life) is not *sub-Christian* or *unchristian* or *non-Christian* or merely *common* but that life itself is *from God*, created by *the Word who became flesh*. That is, creation isn't something other than what is rightfully Christ's; on the contrary, creation is most properly that which belongs to Him *by right*. *Redemption restores creation*. Therefore, to speak of a vocation or business as coming under Christ's kingship does not change the mechanics of, in this case, plumbing—or carpenter skills and the craft of woodworking or good principles that are discoverable for sound pedagogy, etc., etc., etc. All such "creation stuff" was put there by God, through the Word, the Christ who became flesh, and He is not only the "*by whom*" all is made, and the "*through whom*" all exists, but the "*for whom*" all is made and exists! (see Col. 1:16). This isn't a foreign idea to Scripture. This isn't an odd concept! John 1:1-5 suggests the same theme. What is foreign and odd is our dualistic, two-layered way of thinking about spirituality—that is foreign to Scripture. As for the plumber going about the plumbing business, seeking to live

out the Christian life vocationally, it is an act of service to fellow human beings (grounded in Christian love), an act of making a living (as service before God's face), an act of service to Christ in a specific domain of creation, which is rightfully His domain.

***CHRISTIANS LIVING IN A SIN-STAINED WORLD:
Some Ethical Questions Christians Face Today***

Evening Class (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) – Dr. J. Mark Beach
April 15, 2021

**Session #6: Christian Ethics & Cultural Engagement—the Strengths of & Problems
with Each Model**

Strengths of the COUNTERCULTURAL/PIETIST Model

1. Although this model reduces God’s concern for the world to His church (which is untrue), it rightly recognizes that the thrones and powers of the world will always be hostile to the cause of Christ, and the church cannot coercively overcome them.
2. The model, while abandoning culture to its own devices (which can be a cop out), rightly calls the church to be *truly the church*. The church as a godly community is a counterculture; and, when its godliness is grounded in Christ and His love, with grace and mercy and the fruit of the Spirit, it appears as an oasis of hope in a broken world.
3. This model rightly warns about the inherent dangers in the Constantinian error, wherein the church links up with the power of the governing authorities but mostly accomplishes becoming worldly and compromised. An example would be the modern mainline churches; they are the Democratic Party at prayer. Or the Religious Right, the Republican Party at prayer.
4. The more Anabaptist version of this model calls for outreach to the poor, and getting back to a rich liturgy, forming strong bonds of Christian community. The more Reformed Pietist versions of this model is isolationist, but fully embraces the economic givens of wider secular society: wealth and comfort can be just as seductive as cultural influence.

Problems with the COUNTERCULTURAL/PIETIST Model

1. It tends to be escapist (not merely in wishing to go to glory – as Christian’s rightly desire) but in letting the world sink into the muck and sorrow of sin, while passively watching, doing little or nothing to effect positive social change.
2. It tends to demonize modern business, capital markets, and the government.
3. It is uninterested in a proper use of and the inevitability of contextualization, that is, of the church communicating in an idiom that the world can understand.
4. Anabaptistic versions of this model focus on horizontal sins whereas Reformed Pietist versions tend to be legalistic, moralistic, and promote a “doubting Christian” Christianity.
5. This model conceives of “belonging” to the Christian community as *coming before* “believing in Christ,” which is quite backwards and undermines vigorous evangelism to the world.

Strengths of the RELEVANCE Model

1. This model sees God at work out beyond the narrow walls of the church, and sometimes the culture at large (by God's grace) is ahead of the church in seeking to overcome stubborn culturally imbibed prejudices and such. Are many Christians facing their racism or sexism from carefully considered Bible study or from a society that has awakened them to inherited social sins?
2. This model is quick to use insights from the world (from science, medicine, psychology, ecology, the business world) to bring the Christian message to ears that already understand this language. This is a strength that needs wisdom and care—and easily devolves into a weakness.
3. This model cares about people outside the church. They care about social issues, poor people, refugees, battered women, drug addicts, etc. Many middle-class Christians are a bit like the Levite and Priest versus the Good Samaritan in this regard.
4. This model warns churches to get out of their subcultures and hostility toward unbelievers, and learn to connect with people unlike itself.

Problems with the RELEVANCE Model

1. By adapting so heavily and readily to the culture, such churches are quickly seen as dated whenever the culture shifts or changes.
2. These churches tend to be lax on sturdy Christian doctrine. It has no conception of a Christian view of the world versus a secular one. The antithesis is much truncated with this model.
3. These churches do little with the gospel and conversion to Christ and do more toward service projects or seeking justice; little to address personal moral failure and more of a focus on social sins. Some churches in this model, with a more gospel intent, are more doctrinally focused and do note personal sins, but also focus on a positive, entertaining worship experience.
4. The model lends itself to blurring Christian distinctives—so that hardly anything “Christian” matters.

Strengths of the REFORMED TWO KINGDOMS Model

1. This model rightly wants the institutional church not to lose sight of its principal mission to make disciples of the nations. As such, it wants the church to prize the means of grace: preaching and sacraments as the vehicles by which Christ builds His church.
2. This model rightly recognizes that God—as the triune God—is sovereign over the whole world, and governs it, even where and before any Christian witness exists. The Noahic covenant forms the basis of life proceeding forth from the destruction of the Flood. Common grace grounds such blessing and mitigates human sin.
3. It rightly fears that the relevance and transformationist models may divert the church from its proper task, namely the gospel going forth in the world.

4. This model advocates Christians performing their work out-in-the-world with high standards, with dignity and usefulness.
5. It rightly warns against triumphalistic traits in other models, as well as the escapist traits in the total countercultural/Pietist model.

Problems with the REFORMED TWO KINGDOMS Model

1. The Two Kingdoms model gives more weight and credit to the function of common grace than the Bible does (or than what Kuyper or Calvin did).
2. Much of the social good that Two Kingdoms people attribute to natural law and general revelation is really the clarifying fruit of the introduction of Christian teaching from Scripture or the application of principles from Scripture—thus special revelation has an effect on wider culture and society, too. (But they want Scriptural ethics cordoned off from society and life at large.)
3. The Two Kingdoms model implies or teaches that it is possible for human life to be conducted on a religious neutral basis. It has a rather benign view of total depravity relative to social and societal sin. Since it rejects worldview, it diminishes the antithesis weaving its way throughout the whole of life. Christians can't have, by definition, *Christian ideas* about the worldly things. This is dualistic to the core. For creation belongs to Christ. They should at least recognize that “worldly” wisdom is still God's wisdom, and since Christ is the Word and Wisdom of God, by and through and for whom all things are created. It is rightly *HIS!*
4. The Two Kingdoms model produces a form of “social quietism.” It is rather naïve about how “common” the common kingdom is. In a “woke” culture, versus a pluralistic and liberal one, the Christian common place in that common kingdom is increasingly uncommon!
5. The Two Kingdoms view contributes to a hierarchism between clergy and laity. Yes, the Word and Sacraments are central, but this leads modern advocates of Reformed Two Kingdom thinking to fall into various Lutheran emphases, such as the Word having Power in and of itself (a tinge of *ex opera operato* regarding preaching and absolution begins to surface). Sunday is everything!
6. This life now is a kind of “throw away,” since nothing except the believer him or herself goes forth into glory. The scaffolding idea!

Strengths of CHRIST THE KING OVER ALL OF LIFE Model

1. This model is holistic and integrative, such that there is One King and Lord whom we serve, the Christ of God, and we are united with Him in faith, everywhere we go and in every aspect of our lives. We are never disunited or detached from Him as our Lord, and as such there are no posted signs reading, “A No Christ Zone,” as in the Two Kingdom and Countercultural models.
2. This model recognizes both personal and social sins, and that human depravity makes its way and brings brokenness and misery into life not only personally (and first and principally there), but also in family life, in business life, in political life, in economic life, in media, in entertainment, etc. The devil

yields no piece of turf to God and Christ yields no piece of turf to the devil. Thus, this view is not naïve about social life and its dangers *out-in-the-world*.

3. This model cares about creation and the fullness thereof. It enables the Christian, as pilgrim, to live life as continuing (in some more wholesome way) the mandate to be fruitful and multiply. The *Christian* life isn't only Sunday. The *Christian* life is inclusive of the pursuit of life under the sun, for the glory of God.
4. This model calls for obedience not as fulfilling righteousness in Jesus' stead—for He fulfills all righteousness and He ushers in Kingdom Come; and He is the Last Adam in whom we have life and shall inherit all blessings, including a new heaven and a new earth. But precisely in belonging to Him we (aim) to walk in righteousness—our fruitfulness, as meager as it is, is wrought in us by the Holy Spirit. It is divine work in that sense. Life now is not a “throw away” but carries over, which God alone calculates, into glory! This life matters for God's glory now and for eternity!

Problems with CHRIST THE KING OVER ALL OF LIFE Model

1. The conception of “worldview” can be too cognitive.
2. Some of its advocates have “underappreciated” the role of institutional church.
3. Some of its later advocates were “triumphalistic, self-righteous, and overconfident” in bringing about change in society.
4. It can put too much stock in politics to change culture.
5. It is naïve about how power corrupts.

* * * * *

The Benedict Option

Recently, in view of the growing hostility toward the Christian faith and traditional “liberal-pluralistic” values that have long characterized Western culture, especially in the United States, and with the advent of a “woke” culture of intolerance, there is a growing concern that the church and Christians are facing overt persecution. In view of that, how ought believers to engage culture?

The above models are largely premised on the idea of cultural tolerance—to a greater or lesser degree. What if the state and the culture at large wish to oppose Christian values deliberately and unitedly? *The Benedict Option* by Rod Dreher seeks to offer a plan of action in light of this growing cultural circumstance, or what he calls “a strategy for Christians in a post-Christian culture.” What is this option?

In summary form, the Benedict Option states the following (which here is merely broadly outlined):

1. The Benedict Option, modeled after the *Rule of St. Benedict*, is a strategic withdrawal from culture at large in order to fortify and strengthen Christian faith and living within shared commitments and community. This includes cultivating traditional biblical commitments about marriage and human sexuality, an approach to politics, faith, family, community, education, and work. It calls for radical Christian living in a world devoted to sensuality and technology and entertainment.

2. If the church is to survive and thrive in the post-Christian West, local bodies of believers are going to have to work out the Benedict Option for themselves, holding tight to fixed principles but adapting strategies to local conditions and their particular theological traditions (he intends this not for one denomination of believers, but as something applied across denominations.)
3. Dreher believes we are well past cultural reform. Christians—Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox—have lost the cultural war. We are now more in a survival mode (like the church was in the West after the fall of Rome). Therefore, we must recommit to being committed Christians. The church needs order, prayer, work, discipline (going without), stability, community, hospitality, and balance in all of this. God must cease to be bracketed away from the rest of life, functioning within only a part of your life. No, He must pulse through everything!
4. Regarding politics, we must give up looking to national policies to save us. We must bring political action to the hands-on local level, where we can still make a difference. We do well to stop hitching our wagon to a Party and a person in the Party. We must not withdrawal altogether, but act prudently.
5. We must reinvent or reinvigorate a genuine Christian culture *within the local church* itself, and that includes a recovery of liturgical worship, fellowship and habits of asceticism, a tightening of church discipline, evangelism through the attractiveness of Christian goodness and beauty; and, what is more, an embrace of being exiled and even suffering as martyrs in our culture.
6. A Christian village must prevail—so that one’s Christian home is a kind of domestic monastery, living as non-conformists vis-à-vis cultural mores, building proper peer groups for our children, without falling into patriarchy and idolizing the family, such that dad displaces the minister and family displaces the church. Rather, live closely together as fellow believers in community. In a work of social networking, the church must become such a network for us. This also means that Christians must reach across old boundaries – as cobelligerents – to help and support one another. We must embrace the small-o orthodoxy that we share together.
7. Educate our children for Christian formation, not cultural conformity. This means concretely that we no longer allow public schools to educate them, and that we be very careful in evaluating already present Christian schools – just how Christian are they? He suggests founding classical Christian schools or home schooling.
8. Regard work as tasks God gives us for His great glory and for support of the community of believers; it’s a participation in God’s creative work of ordering Creation and bringing forth fruit from it (it also blesses us inwardly).
9. We must prepare ourselves to refuse to burn incense to Caesar. (Think particularly of LGBTQ+ agenda as requisite to be part of a trade, company, corporate world, etc.) With this we will need to learn to be prudent and bold and entrepreneurial. This means that we “buy Christian” and build “Christian employment networks.” We must re-learn trades, perhaps. And, frankly, we must prepare to be “poorer” and “marginalized.”
10. The church has to face the cultural “sex problem.”
11. The church has to face the cultural “tech problem.”

***CHRISTIANS LIVING IN A SIN-STAINED WORLD:
Some Ethical Questions Christians Face Today***

Evening Class (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) – Dr. J. Mark Beach
April 22, 2021

Session #7: Truth-telling as a Way of Love in Christ

“You Shall Not Give False Testimony against Your Neighbor”

Among the commandments of the second table of the law, *bearing false witness* is the sin that can do the most damage—like a pebble thrown in a pond, its ripples spread far beyond the initial spot. Consider gossip—even in Christian circles.

Teenage girls, jealous of one another, target one of their group who is perhaps prettier and more vulnerable than the rest. Perhaps she dressed a bit too risqué at a party, and now they spread a “slut” rumor about her. It takes off at school. Boys get wind of this and start calling her in the hopes of some cheap thrills. They in turn boast of sexual conquests with her—more lies, more gossip. At this point, the targeted girl is rather helpless to defend herself. Perhaps she reacts with anger. Perhaps she curls up in a shell of shame and confusion. She is shunned. She becomes a pariah. She is hated and spurned, snubbed and ridiculed. She flees! She flees the school! She flees her “no more” friends. She flees for self-protection. But the damage is done—and the damage is deep. Her self-worth is pulverized. She turns to drink to numb the pain. She also flees the faith and the Christian community as a mean, vicious collection of hypocrites. Her fragile faith bleeds out of her; the stab-wounds of cruel gossip have killed her faith—and her! She, the supposed “fornicator” in violation of the seventh commandment, is “murdered” by gossipers, who mobbed together to transgress the sixth and ninth commandments. As the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us: “I am not to belittle, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor [for each of these is a form of murder] ... and I am not to be party to this in others” (Q/A 105). This, of course, reflects the words of Jesus—that “name calling” is a form of murder (Matt. 5:22). And, I am never to “give false testimony against anyone, twist no one’s words, not gossip or slander, nor join in condemning anyone rashly or without a hearing.” On the contrary, “I should do what I can to defend and advance my neighbor’s honor and reputation” (Q/A 112).

Truth-telling is, as the above illustrates, a really big deal. The Hebrew word for *witness* includes what we can the *plaintiff*—the one who accuses another in court “against your neighbor,” just as the third commandment forbids the false oath against the Lord. (This is the first time the neighbor, the fellow Israelite, is mentioned in the commandments.)

“On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness” (Deut. 17:6). That does not mean that the judge need only count noses: “If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime ... the judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother” (Deut. 19:16-19).

Nevertheless, innocent people can be killed because of lying witnesses. It happened to Naboth, when wicked Jezebel set up two “scoundrels” to charge Naboth “before the people, saying, ‘Naboth has cursed both God and the king’ ” (1 Kgs 21:8-14). At the trial of Jesus, many false witnesses came forward, but they only agreed that Jesus had claimed he could destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days (Matt. 26:59-61).

Judges must use their discernment, but they can act only on the evidence presented by the witnesses. In court, the lies of a witness or two can utterly destroy a person. So the ninth commandment forbids lying where it hurts most.

Lying Politicians & Leaders

Most of us feel the acuteness of lies when told by our public officials. Al Franken, the comedian turned politician, now canceled by the “me too” movement, wrote a book some years ago against the political right, *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them* (2003), followed by *The Truth (with Jokes)* (2005). More recently Rod Dreher has written about the “woke” political left in his book, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (2020). Such books reflect why so many Americans are suspicious of *all* politicians, with the news media coming under censure as well. If anything else, this shows that people care about the truth; and society has a hard time being free and happy when lies are the order of the day. Lies make us cynical, jaded, distant, guarded, suspicious and untrusting. Lies deceive and subvert truth and present a false narrative. They paint a vision of life that does not comport with reality. A lying tongue is not a harmless thing, but sets forests ablaze (James 3:5).

Politicians lie for political advantage, obviously. They also tell lies that are called “high-minded” lies—for the good of the country. They know better than you. Consistories lie about a problem with the pastor, to keep the congregation from the scandal unfolding behind the scenes. They regard their deception as “high-minded”—for the good of the church. Believers are always mistaken when they put *their trust* or stake their hope on mortal men, whether they are called princes, presidents, or prime ministers (see Psalm. 146:3).

A Definition, but Definitions Are Not Enough

A common definition of lying is to call it “as a conscious discrepancy between thought and speech,” that is, it is a statement that is intentionally false. A lie is different from an unintentional error. Lies aim to deceive the hearers and (usually) to gain advantage for or protect the liars (or others). But is that an adequate definition. What is it to live in the truth?

All human beings are inclined to lie, whereas God hates deceit and falsehood. His truthfulness distinguishes him from us sinners: “God is not a man that he should lie” (Num. 23:19). Among the “six things the Lord hates: and the “seven that are detestable to him” are “a lying tongue,” “a heart that devises wicked schemes,” and a “false witness who pours out lies” (Prov. 6:16-19).

In biblical language truth means reliability. (Bible translations, in nearly all languages, adopt the word *Amen* (a Hebrew term for truth). God and God’s Word are reliable, and on his promises we depend. But people’s words are deceptive, unreliable, light, and vain. “Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception.” But “the words of the Lord are flawless . . .” (Ps. 12:2, 6). Reliability—versus mere intentionality—captures features of truth-telling (versus lying) as vital to walking with God and each other.

Devices of the Devil

Lying and deceit “are devices the devil himself uses,” says the catechism. They are tools from his workshop. Speaking of the devil, Jesus said, “There is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language” (John 8:44).

In the Apocalypse (Revelation) the devil, as the dragon, has two beasts working for him—one beast from the sea and one from the earth. The first one is political, brutal, and blasphemous. The second one is religious, cultural, and acts like a prophet. Both of them do the most harm with their mouths. The beast from the sea “was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months” (Rev. 13:5). The beast from the earth is deception personified: he looks “like a lamb,” but he speaks “like a dragon” and he deceives the inhabitants of the earth (Rev. 13:11, 14).

The beastly deception is very real today. Our whole culture is interested not in truth but in perception, not in substance but in appearance, not in character but in image. We are totally occupied with fads and fake values. Words are not simple servants of communication but tools of manipulation. And the seemingly miraculous technical power for transmitting messages is (mostly) at the service of the beast, just as it is in Revelation 13.

“The Truth Will Set You Free”

(John 8:32). Truth, like the light of day, frees us from the distortion of the night. As long as we linger in the domain of the dragon and the beast, we are either cynical or credulous; we do not know the truth. But when Jesus opens our eyes, we see the truth, we know the way, and we have the life. Suddenly we see things as they really are and for what they are really worth. We know God as our Father, Christ as our Liberator, and the Spirit as the One who leads us into the truth. And gradually he teaches us to love the truth and to speak the truth in love.

Children of the Truth

God’s people know the truth. God showed it to them; it was like a light that chased away all the apparitions that plague people who live in darkness.

Once we know the truth, we must remain “in the truth.” We must be truthful and reliable, not devious or deceitful. Under the Old Covenant, God said to his people, “These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts” (Zech. 8:16). In the New Testament the apostle Paul writes, “Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (Eph. 4:25).

In both these instances the Bible is concerned to have us behave truthfully to other members of the people of God. The ninth commandment itself says, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16), (Deut. 5:20), and in the Old Testament “your neighbor” and “your brother” are usually the same person (cf. Lev. 19:16-18 where “your neighbor” is “one of your people”). The question might therefore be asked, “Who else is my neighbor?” But that question was raised by an expert in the Law of Moses, and Jesus told him to learn from a “bad” Samaritan how to *be* a neighbor (Luke 10:25-37).

Tricks or Truth?

The catechism does not restrict our obligation to be truthful: “God’s will is that I never give false testimony against anyone, twist no one’s words . . . nor join in condemning anyone.”

Yet saints have stretched the truth or tricked their opponents—yes, told lies: the Hebrew pro-lifers, Shiphrah and Puah, told Pharaoh a story about the vigor of Jewish women in delivering babies, but God was kind to these women (Ex. 1:15-20). Other women who lied to their enemies and were loved by the Lord were Rahab—who said the spies weren’t with her, though she had hidden them under the stalks of flax (Josh. 2)—and the wife of a man from Bahurim—who hid David’s servants in the well and told Absalom’s men, “They crossed over the brook” (2 Sam. 17:20). These stories, together with Elijah’s lie (2 Kgs. 6), and David’s fib, retold by his friend Jonathan to an unreliable Saul (1 Sam. 20:6, 29-30), could be interpreted as stratagems or ruses permissible in the holy war. But, then, doesn’t war itself require such tactics—lies and deceptions—in order to get an advantage over an enemy? Even the apostle Paul, who could be real tricky in a debate, set up the Sadducees against the Pharisees when he cried, “I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6). That may have been true, but it was less than the whole truth. Nonetheless, we ask: Was he (with each and all of these others) not walking in the truth, fighting for the truth, and advancing the truth?

Law and Love

We fulfill the law by loving God and our neighbor (Rom. 13:10). One may not use love to relativize the law, but one must use love as the key to understanding God’s will. Thus, some of Dutch decent may have relatives who hid those who fled from the Nazis; and they misled the German soldiers with the words of Rahab and the ploys of the wife of the man from Bahurim. And so they obeyed their Lord.

Love is also the key to the many questions we raise in jest and sometimes in earnest when we contemplate what absolute truthfulness would do to our relationships when answering “How do you like the painting?” or “How do you like the food?” Reformed ethicists Smedes and Douma each observe that this commandment does not rule out a good joke, the high art of fantasy or the low art of the tall tale. Does it rule out the acting

profession? (When I was a child, my sister acted the role of Penny, our cousin the role of Jenny, and I played Butch, the dog. Should we have been punished for our “deception”?) What about many board or card games, where the rules of the game are deception? Could games of bluff survive if truthfulness were an absolute moral law? Must every wife tell a boring husband that he is a clod? Ought a parishioner, on leaving the Sunday service, tell the pastor his sermon was a tedious blend of trivia and platitude? (But it is the truth!) We will explore this further below.

Since human relationships are complicated and because love is the fulfillment of the law, all of us must, from time to time, tell a “tender lie”—if we may call it such, sometimes a boldface lie in order to protect life itself. If we may protect life with guns or fists, if necessary doing harm to those who would do harm, may we not use lies to protect life?

Love is also the fulfillment of the ninth commandment. Love walks in the truth, but it won’t use truth to enable evil-doers to do evil! Love, rather, “rejoices with the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6). But rejoicing with truth may also mean forgetfulness about the “record of wrong” because “love does not delight in evil” (vv. 5-6). Being inventive, love knows how to avoid the lie and the painful truth at the same time.

The Tongue Teaches—James 3:1-2

In our ongoing struggle to express the new person, the taming of the tongue may be the most difficult part: “If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check” (James 3:2). Therefore teachers, who do much talking and who have wide influence by what they say and how they say it, “will be judged more strictly” (v. 1).

James is speaking of religious teachers. Many young Christians would do much better to keep their mouths shut for five years instead of starting to teach so soon with so little. Liberal teachers will be judged for denying the basic truths of the Scriptures. But some orthodox teachers are so afraid of the truth that they basically bury their talent in the ground, fearing that God will harshly judge them for any deviation from the verdicts or conclusions of those who have gone before us. This leads to a stale Christianity that has little discernment for fresh insights.

All of us must “love the truth [and] speak it candidly,” as the catechism says. “For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth” (2 Cor. 13:8). Religious teachers (and authors) must be especially careful that in their descriptions of other (competing) religious groups and churches they know the truth and “speak it candidly.” Christians must be distinguished by their deep respect for truth. Our use of the tongue (and the personal computer and all social media) denies or demonstrates the cultivation of our Christian character.

The Tongue Leads—James 3:3-8

“We put bits into the mouths of horses” (James 3:3). These big animals can be led only when they are bridled. People, too, can go where God wants them to go only when their tongues are bridled. The tongue is only a little member, much smaller than the fist. But just as rudders steer big ships and just as small sparks make big fires, so the deeds of the tongue have great consequences (vv. 4-5). The tongue can sting with the fire of hell (v. 6) or drip with the poison of the old serpent (vv. 7-8). It is the tongue that can decide a person’s destiny: “For with your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:37).

The tongue has the power of fire. The fire originates in hell or in heaven. If someone’s tongue is fired from below, a world of restless evil will result (James 3:6). Gossip, slander, and lying are devilish sins not only because they originate with the liar but because they multiply evil like vermin. A gossip session is a murderous game. And when the session is over, nobody can put the broken pieces together again.

In an African village the tale-bearer (liar) was punished by the elder of the town: she had to scatter the feathers of a chicken along the way to her house. But after the wind had blown, she had to regather the feathers—all of them. And when she could not get them together again, she learned her lesson: evil words cannot be recalled; they go their way to wreak havoc.

The Holy Spirit is the fire from heaven. He not only appeared as “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3) when he descended on the followers of Jesus, but he uses the tongues of people to make them declare the “wonders of God” (v. 11). As a matter of fact, the fire from heaven is the only cure for the evil that, through the human

tongue, “corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6).

But are all lies the same? Should we not distinguish types of “untruth” versus malicious lies?

Harmless Lies

Over against the malicious lie are lies that have other motives and aims. The malicious lie aims to harm others either through false witness or by preventing others to know some flaw or sin or crime we have perpetrated. We lie to harm others; we lie to protect ourselves from harm—perhaps the shame of misdeeds we deserve to face and deal with. Some lies, however, merely oil the bearings of social relationships. We use them to reduce the friction in our rubbing against other people. They smooth the wrinkles in our social fabric. Examples:

1. *Polite lies.* A woman is invited to a party she does not want to attend. She responds: “I’d love to come, but I am engaged on the 15th.” A crude guest leaves after an insufferable visit; his hostess says to him: “We do look forward to seeing you again.” A person begins a letter to a man he despises, “Dear Ralph,” and ends it, “Cordially yours.” All of this deception is well meant not to deceive a neighbor, but only to keep unpleasantness from becoming impolite.

2. *Euphemisms.* In a world of rough-edged reality, however, our so-called harmless lies can harm, if only indirectly by cheapening some harsh realities which, well, are harsh. We like to soften the corners with words that do not cut so easily into the flesh. We “terminate a pregnancy” instead of “kill a fetus.” We have “meaningful relationships” instead of “commit adultery.” Pornographers cover up the ugliness of their business by calling their shops “adult bookstores.” And, of course, the ultimate euphemism was calling the Nazi killing of six million Jews “the final solution.” One could argue that euphemisms are not really helps but, as Mary Poppins sang, the “spoonful of sugar” that “helps the medicine go down.” Sometimes euphemisms are kinder ways to convey harsh reality, such as he “passed away” versus “smothered in his vomit and died.”

3. *Exaggerations.* We often inflate our words, not to hurt anybody, but to make them feel better and, maybe, to spice up our own conversation. An average woman becomes a “beautiful person.” An ordinary sermon becomes an “inspiration.” Someone tries rather hard and he is credited with an “incredible effort.” We sprinkle compliments to our friends with “Sensational!” and “Fantastic!” to describe what are only passable performances. Anything less than “terrific” has these days become a failure. A preacher once returned from a vacation and was asked if he had enjoyed myself. “Yes, he said, I had a pretty good time.” His inquirer responded: “What went wrong?”

4. *Jocularity and Acting.* We amuse each other through untruths in the way of jocularity. When a comedian tells jokes we know he or she is fibbing. My grandfather used to tell tall-tales, and we knew as he knew that it was all baloney—and that’s what made it funny. As a child I remember watching the short cartoon “Commander McBragg,” wherein, in short 90 second segments, the Commander would tell tall-tales of his exploits and heroism, always escaping certain death by a hairsbreadth, due to his brilliance and ingenuity. His colleague had to endure these impossible tales, but could not help getting caught up in the story (“Good Heavens, Commander! What *did* you do next?”), and could only at the conclusion of the story compliment the Commander for his cleverness—usually incorporating a terrible pun—to which the Commander would respond, “Quite.” Comedy is mostly built on fantasy, tall-tales, exaggeration, and the unexpected—these, too, are mostly harmless, as is acting in movies and theatre (within moral perimeters). Actors, playing a role, assume the character and persona of an invented person or a personage of history, which they know and the audience knows is “not real,” but we allow ourselves to “make believe” or “play” in order to be entertained. Acting is not lying, since it does not pretend to be anything other than pretense. Children do this naturally when at play; in fact, acting is part of childhood play. Who scolds their child for pretending to be a dog or the invented conversation between two girls playing dolls? Stories, novels, parables, etc. do the same thing. People invent stories that either teach or inform or entertain or do all these things at once. Of course, a joke can go too far—a practical joke, sometimes, can harm a person. Likewise, some humor aims to smear a person’s character or reputation. This is not harmless! But laughter is part of being human, a healthy part of our social life together.

5. *Games dependent on deceit.* I suppose we could mention as well “game-playing deceits” under harmless lies (but the word “lying” is perhaps too strong a word). In many games we must deceive in order to play. Every decent “Clue player” hopes to deceive their opponents. The game is boring if everyone knows what everyone else knows. What would happen to a football game if neither team tried to deceive the other into expecting an end-run when the pass was called for, or in baseball if the third base coach never gave off false signals? “Balderdash” is funny and fun because of the deceitful and made-up definitions of words.

6. *Glosses.* When we put a little phony luster on an ugly reality, or pull a false cover over a wretched fact, we are glossing. Uncle Joe is a drunkard; but Father tells the children: “Uncle Joe is lonely and once in a while he drinks too much.” The company has suffered disastrous losses; but the president tells the stockholders: “The Company is in good shape after some seasonal reverses.” A boy wants to pitch for his little league team; but he lacks the talent. The coach tells him that he is a bit small for his age and perhaps next year he will have grown enough to try out again. We make life a little easier for the people we deal with by making believe, for a moment, that the walls are off-white when, in fact, they are sad grey.

The harm that may come with “*harmless lies*”

Nonetheless, we must beware! Lying is habit forming. Many people lie from habit. It is an addiction. Many others are addicted to hearing lies. Therefore, without denying such a thing as “harmless lies,” most lying is not harmless at all. Even with so-called polite lies we must beware of the following hazards.

1. *Erosion of our “sense of truthfulness.”* The person who uses the harmless lie as an escape route from every uncomfortable conversation can soon become addicted to lying. His conscience may well be “gummed-up” with the “sticky residue” of harmless lies.

2. *Evasion of reality.* The “polite lie” is to communication what Vicodin is to pain. Used in emergencies, they might be detours around agony we are not equipped to cope with today. But as a habit, they both become patterns of evasion. The habitual white/polite liar is a person who “cops out” of risk and unpleasantness.

3. *Moral handcuffing.* The “polite lie” ties the deceived person down to the lie and prevents him from a free response to reality. Preventing a small pain for now, the “polite lie” can cause more pain later on.

4. *Nurture of cynicism.* The polite lie as a way of life gradually creates cynicism in both liar and deceived. Gradually nobody trusts the other to tell the truth.

Having said that, there is still a “but” to offer here.... But.... Not every “polite lie” is an evil thing—for we are called to *speak the truth in love* (Eph. 4:15); and brutal honesty in every situation isn’t loving your neighbor as yourself. Indeed, lying is habit-forming, so must be avoided as destructive. But must I tell a grieving set of aged parents, whose son died tragically when his tractor rolled over on him in a ditch, that the fruitcake they have given me is wretched, that I can barely swallow it down without heaving? Isn’t polite evasion or agreement (“yes, it’s good”) the way of love in such circumstances? Humans can be brittle creatures—we must handle with care.

***CHRISTIANS LIVING IN A SIN-STAINED WORLD:
Some Ethical Questions Christians Face Today***

Evening Class (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) – Dr. J. Mark Beach
April 22, 2021

Session #8: Truth-telling in an Age of Deceit

Truthfulness for Truthfulness Sake—*Always?*

Some people, like the philosopher Immanuel Kant, argued that the truth must be told always—boldly, bluntly, wholly, without reservation, regardless of the consequences. This is a fairly popular view in some Christian circles. This is an absolutist view—called unqualified absolutism. Here, in the conflict between life and truth, *truth trumps life*. Others opt for what might be called conflicting absolutism inasmuch as an evil world creates “no win” circumstances, and one must choose between *the lesser of two evils*. Here, *life trumps truth—but we are still guilty*. Another view, which many Christian ethicists opt for as the correct one (I among them), is called graded absolutism. Here, *life trumps truth as the greater of two goods*. Facing the unavoidable conflict between life and truth, we do right to opt for loving our neighbor to protect his life versus aiding an evil-doer to harm another’s life. There is no guilt. Instead, the intent and purpose of the law is fulfilled (cf. Hos. 6:6; Mt. 9:13; 12:7; Mk 7:11; Mk 14:4-9). This view recognizes that some laws have more moral weight than other laws. This will be the focus of this session.

Lies Told to Bad People

The great Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius taught that some people do not have a right to the truth from us. Anyone who has ever had an enemy is comforted by Grotius’ version of the “just lie.” Did Hitler have a right to know the truth about the Allies’ plan to invade Europe? No, we say, we must lie to the great liars of the world in order to protect the truth. Or, as Churchill remarked at Yalta, “in wartime . . . truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.” Does the devil, the prince of lies, have a right to our truth? Do those people who do the devil’s work? Tell a lie, then, to any person who has lost his right to truth and you tell a justifiable lie? Does this test work?

Were all the lies told to save the Anne Franks of Europe justified on grounds that the Nazis did not deserve the truth? Possibly so and probably so. *But* if you agree, you must face up to some hard questions before you conclude that *all* lies told to unworthy people are justifiable lies. One is this: Who has the right to judge when another person has lost his right to truth? Grotius, for example, believed that children and mentally retarded people had no right to truthfulness. How did he decide that these innocent people should be cut off from the community of truth? What prevents the genius, on the same premise, from deciding that all inferior people lose their right to truth? What prevents a business person from assuming that all tough competitors lose the right to truth? Responsible societies do not trust an elite to separate people who deserve the truth from those who do not. The society that tolerates a lying elite is a society fast turning to a jungle in which no person can act on the non-negotiable premise of a human community—the premise that people can trust each other to communicate in truthfulness.

Hitlers do arise on the surface of the earth’s scum, to be sure, and lies may be necessary to drown them. But when we justify such lies, we must have more to go on than the sheer fact that bad people do not deserve our truth. We cannot live with an ethic that invests every person with the right to decide when the people around him are good enough to deserve truthfulness. *We need a standard that helps us calculate whether our truth-telling prevents or helps evil-doers do evil, otherwise our truth-telling comes to participate in and advance evil rather than our neighbors’ good!*

Lies to Save Lives

We finally come down to the issue of *lie* versus *life*. This may be a workable test: if I can save another person's life only by telling a lie, I am justified in lying. And, by the law of self-defense, if I may lie to save a neighbor's life, I should be allowed to lie to save my own. In short, when a human life is pitted against truthfulness, let life have the day. Is this a guideline we can trust with everyone, without worry for loss of truthfulness in our world?

We feel confident about *lying to save life* because we have an undeniable intuition that destroying a human life is far worse than lying. Most of us simply feel that when it comes to life, we may lie boldly and grandly, and without qualms. We do not need an argument; we rely on our innate sense for what counts as more weighty.

Lying to save a life, however, is often a gamble. We are not dealing with legal contracts, as a rule, as if your life can be guaranteed by my lie. Situations in which a person lies to save a life are not always cut and dried. The Gestapo is at the door; you have two Jews in your attic and the Nazis are hunting them. You lie, because you *know* that if the Gestapo finds them, the Jews are dead. But consider an armed man trapped in a bank. He takes everyone in the bank hostage and threatens to kill them all. You tell him that he will be allowed to freely escape if he releases the hostages. You lie; you know he will be arrested. You lie with only a hope that your lie will save a life. You do not even have favorable odds—yet human life is so much more important than truthful words that even a reasonable chance of saving a life would seem to justify the lie.

Are we going to quibble about odds when life may be at stake? Would we not calculate that, if lying had a 51% chance of saving human lives, we would lie—on the ground that the odds in favor of life were good enough to outweigh the evil of lying? The value of a person's life, then, is so overwhelming that we should lie when lying has a reasonable chance of actually saving the life. Have we, then, found a safe test for justified lying? Most probably. It all depends, of course, on whether our feeling about the priority of life is true. In a world bent out of shape, we must sometimes—though not often—choose; and when we must, we are right to choose life even if it requires a lie.

Another important factor here (to return to our earlier discussion about the Nazis) is whether we are actually “loving our neighbor as ourselves” when we “aid and abet” an enemy to do evil to them, to perpetrate a gross injustice against them. (The aim of the ninth commandment is to protect our neighbor's good name. Are we, by our truth-speaking, willing to break the sixth commandment to protect our neighbor's life? Are we, for the sake of accuracy, to assist an evildoer to kill? We're not to protect our neighbor's name but not his or her life?) The ramifications here can be large. What “results” from our actions? May we ignore the *consequences* of our “truth-telling” for the persons threatened—both for themselves, their spouses, and their children? (After their daddy is carried away and shot—because you told the truth—are you going to take over the care of these orphans?) Or, if we choose not to speak the truth but remain silent (in order to lend no assistance to an evildoer—that is, we will not help an evildoer do evil) are we ready to bear the potential consequences of our silence, both for ourselves, our spouses, and our children? We will have to count the cost. Moreover, in some situations, such as war or when evil is on a rampage, do we owe “enemies” the truth? Isn't war itself based on deceiving the enemy? What soldier is supposed to spill his guts to the enemy? In fact, good military tactics often depend on deception!

The Case of Rahab

So, is Rahab a liar or a person who has chosen the right side in the great conflict of kingdoms which is already underway when the spies “spy out” the land? (see Joshua 1 & 2) (Notice, “spying” is a form of deception!) The goal of the spies: conquer these foes of God and this kingdom. Rahab opts to participate in the work of the spies by hiding them. They, too, after all, are “hiding,” deceiving the enemy about their whereabouts. We may not dismiss the fact that the Bible never rebukes her for her deception or talks about her “lie.” Quite the opposite; she is commended (Josh. 6:17, 25). She is counted among the “not my people” who become “God's people” (see Ps. 87:4). She is one of the mothers-of-Christ according to the flesh (Matt. 1:5); even as she is mentioned among the heroes of the faith in Heb. 11 (v. 31). James explicitly observes, by way of a question, “was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did [literally, *justified by works*] when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?” (James 2:25 NIV). Her “lie” is

not mentioned! Could it be because Scripture doesn't reckon her as being "guilty"? It seems so. Then, too, in hiding the spies, there is an implicit promise not to give them away. If she gives them away, she would be renegeing on an implicit pledge to them. Indeed, they have entrusted themselves to her to protect them from their foes, otherwise they wouldn't be hiding. So, if now (after hiding them) she betrays them (by giving them away), she has *lied to them*. It makes no sense that she acts to hide them from detection, an act of camouflage, participating with them in this act of deception, only to betray their whereabouts (either by guilty silence or a bold announcement of where they may be found). No, the second deception is as innocent as the first—all which, in these circumstances, is well and good as an act of self-defense or self-preservation. Therefore, the first deception (hiding them) is carried through and continued in Rahab's words ("lie") misdirecting those who are seeking the spies.

Truth-telling in context

In this connection, we do well to consider Dietrich Bonhoeffer's essay on "What Is Meant by 'Telling the Truth?'" in his posthumously published *Ethics* (1949; English 1955). Bonhoeffer took up the fight against Hitler in his native Germany. Bonhoeffer argued from a Nazi prison that truth-telling is a covenantal and contextual reality (*Ethics*, 326-334). His perspective brings wisdom to this important discussion, and deserves consideration.

Bonhoeffer maintains that the obligation to tell the truth is circumscribed by the type of relationship we have to the person with whom we are speaking, for not all relationships are of the same sort. "The truthfulness of a child towards his parents is essentially different from that of the parents towards their child. The life of the small child lies open before the parents, and what the child says should reveal to them everything that is hidden and secret, but in the converse relationship this cannot possibly be the case. Consequently, in the matter of truthfulness, the parents' claim on the child is different from the child's claim on the parents" (*Ethics*). The relationship of a father to his six-year-old son is different than his relationship to him when his son is, say, thirty-six years of age. The father's relationship with his employer is likewise different. This is the *covenantal* approach that Bonhoeffer is talking about—namely that our obligations (and implicit promises) to different persons vary according to the type of relationship it is. Your wife deserves (has a right) to know where you went after work, but your boss doesn't. Your six-year-old son does not deserve (or have a right) or need to know your current financial woes or marital troubles, but perhaps your thirty-six year old son needs to know these things. We must take into account the type of relationship we have to different persons, at particular times. "The question must be asked," then, "whether and in what way a man is entitled to demand truthful speech of others. Speech between parents and children is, in the nature of the case, different from speech between man and wife, between friends, between teacher and pupil, government and subject, friend and foe, and in each case the truth which this speech conveys is also different."

Bonhoeffer notes that truthfulness must always be in a concrete situation. "Telling the truth" is therefore not only about moral character, it is also about "correct appreciation of real situations and of serious reflection upon them." For example, how much do you say about a home situation, to whom? If a fifteen-year-old neighbor asks an eight-year-old: *How do your parents get along? I hear they fight a lot. Is that true?* [It is.] *What do they fight about? Tell the truth!* Must the eight-year-old do so? Does he have an obligation to "spill-his-guts" about his parents' problems to all whom shall ask? How so? Would life be workable if privacy is denied for the sake of full disclosure, for the sake of truth? Indeed, the fifteen-year-old neighbor has no right to the "truth" about that family. To divulge the truth would harm his family and betray an implicit covenantal trust of privacy regarding the family.

Truth in Satan's Hands

Bonhoeffer argues that the ethical—to act ethically regarding truthfulness—is attached to specific time and places and people. Relative to speaking truthful words (truthful speech) we find that the right words are always with "one's gaze and one's thought ... directed towards the way in which the real [a given reality or situation] exists in God and through God and for God." Right words for the right occasion requires wisdom besides truth. In fact, Bonhoeffer is concerned that we do not reduce truth-telling to specific cases, lest he be

misunderstood. For all our words are subject to the requirement of being truthful. But this is more than veracity of the contents of our words, for a person also needs to speak the truth in love. Truth can be used as a club or hammer. Truth can be used to harm, endanger, even to destroy. Truth can be spoken with an underlying intention to deceive. Flattery can be truth but aimed at something sinister. People can speak “hypocritically without uttering a material untruth.” Yet, in this form, true words are untrue, for I am deceiving, if in a skillful and veiled manner. Thus, again, our words need to do more than merely conform to facts. To whom we speak, the words we choose, what we unveil, depends on whom I am addressing.

Bonhoeffer observes that only cynics (people who regard and see everyone as acting from selfish motivations) think they can speak the truth at all time and in all places and to all people “in the same way.” They care not whom they hurt or wound. The truth is the truth. Fact is fact. Like it or not. Take that! These sorts of persons “don the halo” of devoutness to truth, and so they “can make no allowance for human weaknesses.” Truth is (pun intended) these sorts of people are destroyers of the bond of trust among people (and *trust, fidelity, reliability* is the point of the commandment). Such purveyors of “truth-telling” wound shame, desecrate mystery, break confidences, betray community, and laugh arrogantly at letting the chips fall where they may. “*I call a spade-a-spade. Whoever doesn't like it can lump it.*” They are dismissive of those who “cannot bear the truth.” Truth can be destructive for people. “*So be it,*” they sneer. This approach, argues Bonhoeffer, is “truth which is of Satan.” I call it, truth in Satan’s hands!

Truth Governed by Wise Love

What is awry here is that truth is not governed by love. This is truth wielded in order to harm. It lives on hatred of covenantal relationships in their multiplex forms. It is not creating community or protecting privacy or defending confidences or circumscribing shame. No, it spreads misery—by telling the truth. (Many gossips do this: their words need not be untrue; they need only spread and cast the spot-light on the shame.) This truth-telling acts in the role of God, executing his just sentence, but this loveless business is all of the devil.

Now, Bonhoeffer is no advocate of treating truth like Silly-Putty. He is aware that if we cast our truth-telling in forms specified for particular situations that one can seek to hide the truth behind such sentiments and completely destroy the idea of truth, making the gap between truth and falsehood “indistinguishable.” One could become coolly calculating toward others and deal out truth to others in morsels. Says Bonhoeffer: “It is important that this danger should be kept in view.” The counter to this danger is “attentive discernment of the particular contents and limits which the real itself [specific persons and circumstances before God] imposes on one’s utterance in order to make it a truthful one.” Even if this can be difficult, and require discernment, it is a far better path to take than that of the cynic’s approach. Words and utterances live within specific contexts. We cannot give that up. Words in combat or the military in general are not particularly apt for a romantic relationship (and vice-versa)—as just one example. Who falls in love with a person who barks orders and demands obedience? Words occupy habitats. Not all words (truth) are for all ears.

Bonhoeffer offers this example, which reaches back to some of what we observed earlier about his approach to this question.

[A] teacher asks a child in front of the class whether it is true that his father often comes home drunk. It is true, but the child denies it. The teacher’s question has placed him in a situation for which he is not yet prepared. He feels only that what is taking place is an unjustified interference in the order of the family and that he must oppose it [i.e., he must protect *the truth* about family privacy]. What goes on in the family is not for the ears of the class in school. The family has its own secret and must preserve it. The teacher has failed to respect the reality of this institution. The child ought now to find a way of answering which would comply with both the rule of the family [its truth for privacy] and the rule of the school [tell the truth to your teacher]. But he is not yet able to do this. He lacks experience, knowledge, and the ability to express himself in the right way. [Like: Sir, that’s an impertinent question. You seem to be making an accusation, not asking a question. I’m sure my father would be happy to take this manner up with you, face-to-face—with a hint of fist-in-your-face.] As a simple no to the teacher’s question the child’s answer is certainly untrue; yet at the same time it nevertheless gives

expression to the truth that the family is an institution *sui generis* and that the teacher had no right to interfere in it. The child's answer can indeed be called a lie; yet this lie contains more truth, that is to say, it is more in accordance with reality [and God's intentions in regard to the eighth commandment] than would have been the case if the child had betrayed his father's weakness in front of the class. According to the measure of his knowledge, the child acted correctly [i.e., he did not bear witness against his father to those who had no right to this information; he did not aid and abet this gossip].

So, yes, the child spoke a formal untruth but he respected the truth regarding the family. He did his best in such a sinful set of circumstances. The teacher's question was a far greater breaking of the eighth commandment than anything the child did in reply. Neither the teacher, nor the class, had any right to this information, this truth. It is naïve to reduce a "lie" to false information—it is not concrete enough. For the truth demanded is demanding truth apart from reality, from context. And it fails to reckon with the devilish ability for sinful people to manipulate the truth.

Truth as Conformity to God's Order for Creation

Bonhoeffer notes that the usual definition of the lie "as a conscious discrepancy between thought and speech" is wholly insufficient. So, making room for the jocular lie and such, what if the lie is defined as "a deliberate deception of another man to his detriment"? That definition disallows deceit in military tactics, which is absurd. Does such deception come under the moral sanction of the eighth commandment? Most Christian ethicists have denied this. The first definition fails to see that one can lie without there being a conscious discrepancy between thought and speech, as "when a notorious liar for once tells 'the truth' in order to mislead, and when an apparently correct statement contains some deliberate ambiguity or deliberately omits the essential part of the truth. Even a deliberate silence may constitute a lie, although this is not by any means necessarily the case."

"[T]he essential character of the lie," says Bonhoeffer, "is to be found at a far deeper level than in the discrepancy between thought and speech." The lie is primarily a denial of God (see John 8:44; 1 John 2:22). It contradicts the word of God. The lie lives at odds with God's order for creation—for the blessing and flourishing of life. The lie is anti-God and anti-creation. It wounds and destroys by deception and falsehood, and even by a sinful form of telling the truth—whether by speech or action (as in silence) or actions that communicate mischief. Thus, truth in a fallen world requires that we reckon with the fall and all its implications. Truthfulness requires the big context of love for God and neighbor. Mere correctness, superficially, can be untrue in the context of God's intention for our life lived together as human beings.

So, asks Bonhoeffer, how can I speak the truth?

1. By perceiving who causes me to speak and what entitles me to speak. Without a right and a cause to speak renders me an idle chatterer. Speech must be justified and occasioned by proper concern for others.
2. By perceiving the place at which I stand. Bonhoeffer notes in a letter regarding his unfinished manuscript that man *in statu corruptionis* [in the state of corruption] needs many things to remain concealed. God made clothes for man to hide his nakedness. We cannot eradicate evil, but we can hide ourselves and others from it; and hold it in check. God need not give full disclosure to his thoughts, neither must we do so. In fact, we do well to keep much of what we think to ourselves. The fall has ushered forth this need for concealment and secrecy.
3. By relating to this context the object about which I am making some assertion. This is to respect others in their vulnerability, which involves telling the truth in view of the need for secrecy, confidence, and concealing what is not proper for all ears.

So, yes, all truth is subject to certain conditions; it has its place, its time and its task, and consequently also its limits. "Betrayal," notes Bonhoeffer, "is not truth; nor are frivolity, cynicism, etc. What is concealment before others, however, is disclosed before God in confession.

As earlier noted, we cannot rely on an ethic in which we get to lie to enemies as we please. But, by the same token, also as earlier noted, we must calculate in some measure the consequences of our actions, and whether

truth-telling helps evil-doers do evil. We must aim for the good, and we must protect our neighbor's life against neighbors who need "truth" in order to do evil.

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Christian ethics keeps in play (as we saw in our first session):

- » Law/Exhortation/Principles
- » Love – all law must be governed and applied by love (never raw law); love does no harm to a neighbor (Rom. 13:10).
- » Justice – what we owe others as "others" (as people created by God); giving them their due; what they have a right to expect from us.