

Christians Living in a Sin-stained World: Some Ethical Questions Christians Face Today

Evening Class (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) – **Dr. J. Mark Beach**
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Session #1: Pathways to Moral Reasoning

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.
 - o 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. No 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 need 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 not 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 – but 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 (both 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.