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John Jefferson Davis

EVANGELICAL
ETHICS



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CHURCH TODAY

Fourth Edition

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—**Charles M. Wingard**, Assistant Professor of Practical Theology and Dean of Students, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

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To
Robin, Nathaniel, Elizabeth,
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FOREWORD

It is my honor to provide a foreword to this fourth edition of a modern classic in Christian ethics by my distinguished colleague Jack Davis. I have used earlier editions of this work as required reading in my seminary ethics courses, and the addition of a chapter on slavery, race, and racism will only make it more valuable to students, faculty, and other thoughtful readers everywhere.

Evangelical Ethics is first of all robustly biblical. In our trying to discern the right thing (perhaps the central task of ethics), what matters most is the witness of the Word of God in holy Scripture, and this is of ten ignored or viewed in a very selective way. Not so here. *Evangelical Ethics* is a gold mine of careful biblical research and teaching. Second, *Evangelical Ethics* draws deeply from history (each chapter begins with a historical section)—and widely from the church and beyond. *Evangelical Ethics* is in many respects a report not just from the author himself but from a broader community of discourse, including voices from whom we can learn even though we may not fully agree with them. Third, *Evangelical Ethics* is a model of careful reasoning and logic, of convincing argumentation. This is no shrill special pleading such as has characterized many writings on the controversial topics approached in this book, but a calm and convincing case.

The twelve “issues” covered in this book do not exhaust the list of critical concerns today. Each of us might wish to augment the table of contents still more. I often ask my students what they think might be on *God’s* list of the ten top ethical issues if we could ask him (answer: God has already provided such a list; it’s the Decalogue). Still, Professor Davis’s list of crucial issues does take us into most of today’s important ethical territory—and provides a model for an approach into other topical areas.

It is also important to note what Professor Davis acknowledges in his opening chapter. This is a book focused on issues, guidelines, and decision-making in ethics. Left aside is consideration of the character virtue that provides the capacity and inclination to decide wisely and act courageously. Left aside also is the role of community (*koinonia*, the “two or three gathered

in his name”) both in character formation and in decision-making. And finally, left aside is the role of the triune God in active relational communion with the moral agent. Lacking these three dimensions, ethics can easily become a dry and futile exercise, a law devoid of gospel.

I mention these other aspects of evangelical ethics not as a criticism of Professor Davis’s textbook but as a reminder that this great work needs to be read alongside some of his other books that provide an exhilarating entry into the presence of God and his church. My mentor Jacques Ellul once said, “I haven’t written fifty books but rather one book with fifty chapters.” So, too, *Evangelical Ethics* is an excellent stand-alone study—but in the context of Professor Davis’s other works, I believe it shines still more brightly and serves even more helpfully.

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Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
August 2015

PREFACE

I wish to thank John J. Hughes, Amanda Martin, Rick Matt, and Karen Magnuson of P&R Publishing for their fine editorial work and assistance in updating statistical information in this newly revised and expanded fourth edition of *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*; their help has been invaluable. A brand-new chapter on “Slavery, Race, and Racism: The Burdens of American History” has been added, which seems timely and needed in light of recent examples of racial unrest and violence in the large urban areas of our nation. The history of slavery and racist attitudes in American history, understood in the light of biblical teachings about the image of God and the pervasiveness of human sin, should provide Christians with the needed perspectives for promoting greater racial harmony and understanding in our churches, cities, and places of employment.

Statistical materials from the earlier editions have been updated, with newer research being referenced in areas of great current interest such as the possible causes of same-sex attraction and possible therapeutic responses in such circumstances. This new fourth edition of *Evangelical Ethics* has been expanded to include, for each chapter, suggested questions for individual reflection or group discussion; suggestions for further reading; and lists of key terms for the particular subject matter being discussed. A comprehensive bibliography has also been provided to indicate the extensive range of biblical, theological, historical, medical, and legal sources that have informed the ethical analysis for the various topics.

It is my hope that this new fourth edition of *Evangelical Ethics* will continue to help pastors, seminarians, college students, and church members bring an informed Christian and biblical understanding to the many vital ethical issues facing Christians today.

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DIMENSIONS OF DECISION MAKING

“In some of this research,” noted Dr. Robert Foote of Cornell, “I am reminded of a story where the pilot came on and said, ‘This is your captain speaking. We are flying at an altitude of 35,000 feet and the speed of 700 miles an hour. We have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that we are lost. The good news is that we are making excellent time.’”

This story, told by Professor Foote in testimony on in vitro fertilization before the federal Ethics Advisory Board, expresses in a humorous way the very serious dilemma facing modern man at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Technologically we are making “excellent time”; morally we at times appear to be lost.

Developments in modern medical technology have been outstripping our ability to understand adequately their long-range ethical ramifications. Does in vitro fertilization represent a welcome solution to the problem of infertility, or does it raise the specter of the further dehumanization of marriage and human sexuality? If the technology is available to parents for the preconception selection of the gender of their children, is it morally legitimate to use such methods? Under what conditions, if any, could sterilization be a legitimate contraceptive choice for the Christian?

Evangelical Christians are challenged to formulate their positions on what are literally matters of life and death. Is it ever morally justifiable to abort an unborn child because of anticipated birth defects? Under what conditions can artificial life-support systems be discontinued in cases of terminal illness? In today’s society, can capital punishment be applied in a truly nondiscriminatory way? Could a Christian ever be legitimately involved in a violent revolution? Do modern nuclear weapons make the traditional

arguments for a just war obsolete? These are some of the pressing issues that will be examined in this volume in the light of Scripture, human reason, and the empirical data of medicine, law, and the social sciences.

Cases and Issues

The focus in this work is on specific issues and cases that are likely to confront the pastor and Christian lay person today, rather than on a general discussion of moral virtues and dispositions¹ or the history of Christian ethics.² Although the latter considerations are important for a comprehensive Christian ethical stance, they are outside the immediate scope of this book.

Since the time of the Reformation, the subject of moral *casuistry* (the study of specific “cases”) has become less fashionable in Protestant circles. That in part represents an understandable reaction to abuses associated with practices of the medieval church, such as penance, priestly confession, the subtleties of scholastic theology and canon law, and the later excesses of Jesuitical speculation.

As the noted evangelical church historian Geoffrey Bromiley has observed, however, the principle of casuistry should not be thrown out with the abuse. “The commands of God have to be worked out in the stuff of daily life. . . . Some guidance must be offered even if in the last resort the Christian must form his own judgment and bear responsibility for his own act.”³

Although Christ condemned the casuistry of the scribes and Pharisees, which perverted the law of God through human speculation, he in no way minimized the role of specific obedience to the commandments of God, but made such specific obedience a test of the genuineness of the disciple’s love (John 14:21). Though obedience to the law of God can never be the basis for earning one’s salvation, nevertheless the clear teaching of the apostle Paul is that the law in and of itself is holy, just, and good

1. On virtues and dispositions in ethics, see Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), chaps. 16–25, especially 21–23; George F. Thomas, *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), chaps. 21–22; Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), chap. 6; William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), chaps. 4–5. On New Testament ethics, see C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law: The Relation of Faith and Ethics in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951).

2. On the history of ethics, see Raziell Abelson and Kai Nielsen, “Ethics, History of,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 3:81–117; and George Wolfgang Forell, *History of Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979).

3. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Casuistry,” in Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 86.

(Rom. 7:12). Genuine Christian love motivates the believer to fulfill the requirements of the moral law (Rom. 13:10).

John Calvin taught that the moral law plays a positive role in the believer's life. The law is the instrument for learning more thoroughly the nature of God's will and becoming confirmed in the understanding of it.⁴

In the post-Reformation period, notable English Puritan pastors and theologians recognized the need to provide believers with moral guidance in specific cases of conscience. The works of William Perkins (*Decisions of Certain Cases* [Latin, 1603]), William Ames (*De Conscientia* [Amsterdam, 1630]), and Richard Baxter (*Christian Directory* [1673]) are prime examples.⁵ Given the highly complex and rapidly changing conditions of life in the twenty-first century, it is both appropriate and necessary to recover the best elements in this tradition of Protestant pastoral and moral theology.

Biblical Authority

The teachings of Scripture are the final court of appeal for ethics. Human reason, church tradition, and the natural and social sciences may aid moral reflection, but divine revelation, found in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, constitutes the "bottom line" of the decision-making process.⁶ Informed ethical reflection will carefully weigh the various words of men, both past and present, but the Word of God must cast the deciding vote. Evangelicals believe that the canonical Scriptures are the very Word of God, the only infallible and inerrant rule of faith and practice, and consequently are the highest authority for both doctrine and morals.

The Bible functions normatively in evangelical ethics through its specific commands and precepts, general principles, various precedents, and overall worldview. Many of the specific commandments of Scripture (e.g., "Do not commit adultery") are directly translatable into our present context.⁷ General biblical principles, such as the sacredness of human life

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.7.12.

5. From F. Sieffert, "Casuistry," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1908), 2:438–39.

6. For evangelical expositions of biblical authority, see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 4 (Waco, TX: Word, 1979); Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983); John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

7. On biblical interpretation in an evangelical context, see Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology*, chap. 8; and A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963). The hermeneutical understanding presupposed in the present work is best demonstrated in the interaction with specific issues.

made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–28), have crucial implications for modern ethical issues not addressed explicitly in Scripture, such as in vitro fertilization and genetic engineering. Old Testament practices such as tithing, while not specifically commanded in the New Testament, can function as a precedent as the people of God seek to fulfill their stewardship obligations in the present age. By teaching foundational truths concerning the nature of God, man, good and evil, and the meaning and destiny of human life, the Bible provides a basic *worldview* within which the various data of the human sciences can be understood.⁸ It has been said that “good facts make good ethics,” but these “facts” must be seen within the proper framework if their true ethical significance is to be understood.

The understanding of Christian morals being advocated here exemplifies the *prescriptive* and *deontological* (Greek: *deon*, that which is obligatory) tradition in the history of ethics.⁹ According to this school of thought, Christian ethics is to be not merely descriptive of human behavior, but prescriptive in the sense of discerning the will of God in concrete situations, and the specific duties that follow from it. Evangelical ethics is concerned not with personal preferences and feelings, but with obligations that command the conscience.

There has been a widespread tendency in modern biblical scholarship to minimize the prescriptive element in New Testament ethics in favor of generalized appeals to Christian “faith” and “love” apart from the specifics of law. As Rudolf Schnackenburg has pointed out, however, “Jesus was not concerned only with interior dispositions, but wanted his demands to be interpreted as real commandments that are to be converted into action.”¹⁰ W. D. Davies has noted that in the mind of the apostle Paul, the exalted Lord was never divorced from Jesus the rabbi, and the Holy Spirit was never divorced from the historic teachings of Jesus.¹¹ Likewise in 1 John there is constant appeal to the commandments of the Lord, and frequent echoes of them.¹² The love of God shed abroad in the heart of the believer is indeed

8. On the importance of a worldview controlled by Scripture, see Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1963, 1978); Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1955); Gary North, ed., *Foundations of Christian Scholarship* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1976).

9. For a discussion of the deontological motif in Christian ethics, see Edward LeRoy Long Jr., *A Survey of Christian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 73ff.; and Norman L. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 20ff.

10. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 83; Dodd, *Gospel and Law*, 14.

11. W. D. Davies, “Ethics in the New Testament,” *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 4:175.

12. *Ibid.*

the dynamic motivation of Christian behavior, but this love demonstrates itself in harmony with, and not apart from, the specific commands and precepts of Holy Scripture.

Empirical and Deliberative Elements

Harmon Smith and Louis Hodges have written that there are two poles between which all Christian decision making must be done: “the reality of God on the one hand and the concrete, contingent situation of the actor on the other.”¹³ Biblical authority represents the “revelational-normative” dimension of Christian ethics; human reason, applying the biblical norms to the concrete situation in light of the specific data at hand, represents the “empirical-deliberative” dimension. Good principles and good facts are both necessary for sound decision making.

In the classic language of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the “whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*” (1.6; emphasis added).¹⁴ In this formulation human reason has a legitimate role in extending the general principles of Scripture to analogous circumstances not explicitly addressed in the canonical texts.

Cocaine abuse, for example, while not explicitly addressed in the Bible, is certainly inconsistent with the teaching that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and is not to be abused (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The principles of medical ethics that the physician is to “do no harm” and is always to treat the patient as an end and never as a means only¹⁵—so crucial in the treatment of comatose or incompetent subjects—are essentially applications of the spirit of the Golden Rule to the new challenges of modern medicine. This use of reason in evangelical ethics is similar to the deliberations of a civil judge who, being faced with entirely new circumstances in a pending case, attempts to apply existing law in the light of precedents and all the relevant data in order to serve the cause of justice.

While human reason plays an essential role in evangelical ethics, that role is not an autonomous one, independent of the authority of Scripture. Human reason, being impaired by sin, is not to serve as a separate norm as over against Scripture, but rather as the servant of divine revelation in

13. Harmon L. Smith and Louis W. Hodges, *The Christian and His Decisions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 31.

14. John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Richmond: John Knox, 1973), 195.

15. See Paul Ramsey, *The Patient as Person* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 35.

the application of biblical truth.¹⁶ Information from the social sciences, for example, may be relevant to discussions of homosexuality, but the evangelical ethicist will, in the words of J. Robertson McQuilken, maintain “a jealous commitment to the Bible first and last as the originating and controlling source of ideas about man and his relationships.”¹⁷ The Christian ethicist will seek all the facts relevant to the matter at hand, but will recognize the need to interpret those facts with a mind renewed by the Holy Spirit, and within a framework of meaning controlled by the teachings of Holy Scripture.¹⁸

Cases of Conflicting Obligation

In a sinful world, believers may occasionally find themselves confronted with conflicting ethical obligations. In the early church Peter and the other apostles faced conflicting demands for obedience, from the governing authorities and from God (Acts 5:27–29). After Rahab the harlot received the Israelite spies, she was met with a choice between telling the truth and preserving life (Josh. 2). Corrie Ten Boom, when hiding Jews in her home during the Second World War and queried by the Nazi authorities, “Are there any Jews in this house?” faced a dilemma similar to Rahab’s.

Some ethicists have distinguished between *prima facie* (“on first appearance”) duties and *actual* duties.¹⁹ *Prima facie* duties are duties, *other things being equal*. *Actual* duties are duties, *all things considered*.²⁰ Is such a distinction biblical? In a sinful world, is it always possible to find a course of action that is thoroughly pleasing to God, or is it sometimes necessary to choose between the lesser of two sins? Are there general principles from Scripture that can furnish guidelines for resolving cases of conflicting obligations? These and related issues will be addressed in the analysis that follows.

One unsuccessful answer to the problem of conflicting moral obligations is known as “situation ethics.” In this approach there can be no real conflict between two or more absolutes, because presumably there is only

16. Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1898), 106–76.

17. J. Robertson McQuilken, “The Behavioral Sciences Under the Authority of Scripture,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20, 1 (1977): 42.

18. See especially Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, on the crucial connection of fact and the framework of interpretation.

19. Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 154–60.

20. *Ibid.*, 155. See also Norman L. Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

one absolute: “love.” In each and every situation, one’s moral obligation is to take the most “loving” course of action, even if that should mean discarding traditional ethical standards.

Joseph Fletcher, the leading proponent of this school of thought, has little use for codes and rules. “Christian situation ethics,” he says, “reduces law from a statutory system of rules to the love canon alone.”²¹ Universal rules and principles are treated as love’s servants and subordinates, “to be quickly kicked out of the house if they forget their place and try to take over.”²²

This “situational” and incipiently antinomian perspective was not entirely new with Fletcher, but had been anticipated by earlier trends in neoorthodox theology. Emil Brunner, for example, in the widely read *The Divine Imperative*, had written that “we are united to our neighbor by the Command of love, which excludes all legalistic rules and every attempt to stereotype human relationships.”²³ A protest against legalism in the Christian life can easily become a rejection of the binding moral authority of the specific precepts of God’s written Word.

The fundamental difficulty with the “situational” approach, of course, is the absence of a definite criterion for what constitutes a “loving” course of action in any given situation. Harmon Smith asks, “How does a person know that he is doing (or has done) the loving thing in the situation?”²⁴ The question is very much to the point. Apart from the abiding norms of divine revelation, the moral agent is left to the vagaries of personal preference and the constantly changing “spirit of the age” to discern the “loving” thing.

The Bible clearly indicates that human beings, who possess sinful and fallen natures, cannot be left to their own devices to discern the will of God; the ability to rationalize selfish desires in the name of high-sounding principles is all too real. Paul Lehmann, for example, attempts to legitimize extramarital sex by appealing to the “fulfillment of human wholeness” and “free obedience to what God is doing in the world.”²⁵

James Gustafson relates a conversation with a student at a liberal seminary during the late sixties—a conversation that illustrates how “situationism” can lead to the trivialization of serious moral principle. “I get up in the morning and look out the window,” the student said, “to see what

21. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 69.

22. *Ibid.*, 78.

23. Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), 134.

24. Harmon L. Smith, *Storm over Ethics* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1967), 100.

25. Paul L. Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 138.

God is doing in the world. I read the *New York Times* to find out where he is doing these things today. Then I get with it.”²⁶

Evidently it did not occur to the student that reading (and obeying) the Bible has anything to do with discerning “what God is doing in the world.” The serious reader of Scripture is confronted by the statement of Jesus that *authentic* love for God is demonstrated by keeping his commandments (John 14:21). The Bible points the moral agent away from the short-term rationalizations of personal preference toward the long-term perspective of eternity—the perspective that alone provides the proper framework for evaluating man’s true and lasting interests.

The view advocated in this work regarding conflicting moral obligations could be termed “contextual absolutism.”²⁷ According to this perspective, there are many moral absolutes, not just one absolute of “love,” as in situation ethics. Examples of moral absolutes are provided by the Decalogue: idolatry, murder, blasphemy, adultery, stealing, and so forth are always morally wrong.²⁸

Contextual absolutism holds that in each and every ethical situation, no matter how extreme, there is a course of action that is morally right and free of sin. God promises that in every situation of temptation or testing there will be a way of escape so that the believer will be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13). This position differs from the “lesser-of-two-evils” position, which holds that in some circumstances any course of action open to the believer will be sinful to some degree.

In some cases the right course of action may require suffering or even martyrdom. Jesus Christ, who is presented as the believer’s moral ideal in the New Testament, did not commit any sin, but always obeyed the Father’s will, even to the point of suffering and death (1 Peter 2:21–22). Daniel and his friends were willing to be martyred rather than compromise their convictions by committing an act of idolatry (Dan. 3:17–18).

Following the course of action that is well pleasing to God may not always be easy in a sinful and fallen world, but such obedient and even heroic options can, by the grace of God, be found and followed even in the

26. James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 44.

27. The approach here is similar to the “graded absolutism” of Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics*, 81–101.

28. Many evangelical scholars would hold that the fourth commandment, concerning Sabbath observance, is not an absolute in the same sense as the other stipulations of the Decalogue: it was given with Old Testament theocratic Israel in view. On the matter of the Sabbath, see D. A. Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

most extreme conditions. Such unswerving commitment to discerning and obeying the will of God—including a willingness to pay the “cost of discipleship”—is much needed in the twenty-first-century American church, where believers are all too often tempted by the comforts and compromises of the surrounding culture.

The term “*contextual* absolutism” contains the implicit reminder that the moral absolutes of Scripture need to be understood and applied within their proper context. Some normal or *prima facie* duties may not be actual duties when all things are taken into consideration. As Charles Hodge, the famous conservative theologian of the nineteenth century, has noted, occasionally a higher obligation suspends a lower one.²⁹ Several examples may help to make this point clear.

There are a number of illustrations in Scripture of the principle that obedience to God takes precedence over the normal obligation (Rom. 13:1) to obey the government. The Hebrew midwives refused to obey the command of Pharaoh to kill the male Hebrew infants, and God blessed them for their courage (Ex. 1:15–17). In the early church the apostles refused to obey the orders of the Jewish authorities to refrain from preaching the gospel, replying, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Daniel and his friends were willing to suffer martyrdom rather than obey Nebuchadnezzar’s command to worship the idol (Dan. 3:17–18). When the laws of God conflict with the laws of men, human laws must yield to the higher authority of God.

The Bible endorses the principle that human life is of far greater value than physical property or possessions. One human life or soul is more valuable in God’s sight than the entire physical world (see Matt. 16:26: “What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?”). A fireman who breaks down the door of a burning home in order to save a child’s life is not guilty of breaking the eighth commandment’s prohibition of stealing, which normally applies to the willful destruction of another’s property. In such an emergency, any reasonable person, if asked, would give permission for the destruction of property in order to save a life. One can suppose that an implied consent justifies the fireman’s action.

Cases involving possible conflicts between telling the truth and saving lives are more difficult to analyze. When Rahab the harlot (Josh. 2:1–7), for example, spoke falsehood to protect the Israelite spies, was she choosing the “lesser of two evils,” or a course of action acceptable to God?

29. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1872; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 3:442.

Charles Hodge has pointed out that in such cases one's *definition* of a lie is crucial. Not every act of deception is the moral equivalent of a lie; a lie involves "an intention to deceive when we are expected and bound to speak the truth."³⁰ In certain contexts full disclosure is not expected. In football, for example, a quarterback is not expected to reveal his plays to the opposing linemen; he intentionally tries to deceive the defense when he fakes to the fullback but passes to the wide receiver. In warfare, opposing generals do not expect their counterparts to willingly reveal their battle plans; deception by camouflage and other means is the "name of the game."

It could be argued that Rahab, living in the context of war (the invasion of Canaan), and having shifted her allegiance from the king of Jericho to the God of Israel as her true King, had no obligation to make full disclosure to the soldiers. Her higher duty to protect the lives of the servants of God suspended the *prima facie* duty to tell the truth, and her course of action was acceptable to God. In the New Testament, Rahab is cited as an example of faith for receiving the spies and sending them out another way (James 2:25). Nowhere in Scripture is Rahab condemned for her action. On this construction Rahab fulfilled the moral absolute that applied in this wartime context, namely, to save the lives of God's people; and her actions, rather than being the lesser of two evils, were actually good.³¹

Christian Ethics and Law in a Pluralistic Society

For the Christian the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God, the final authority for faith and practice. The believer lives, however, in a pluralistic society, which does not officially recognize the authority of the Scriptures. To what extent should Christians attempt to have their moral convictions reflected in American law and public policy? Would such attempts constitute an inappropriate effort to "impose" alien moral standards on unbelievers or those of other faiths? Is "legislating morality" an inherently unworkable concept?

Such questions are far from academic. Contemporary issues such as abortion, pornography, "gay rights," and state-sponsored lotteries—to name a few—make such questions urgent ones for the Christian community. Historically, the Judeo-Christian values derived from the Bible have

30. *Ibid.*, 443.

31. For an alternative view that every lie is inherently sinful, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2.110, and James Strong, "Lie," *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, ed. John M'Clintock and James Strong (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1878), 423–24.

formed the basis for civil law in Western civilization.³² Since the Second World War, however, that basis has increasingly been contested and even repudiated by secular humanists. The following analysis is an attempt to outline some basic guidelines for evangelical action in this complex area of biblical values and public policy in a pluralistic society.

In our American context discussions of “legislating morality” inevitably involve the concept of the “separation of church and state” derived from the First Amendment. The amendment does not actually contain the words “separation of church and state,” but declares that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”³³ In recent years the federal courts have taken this to mean a virtual separation of Christian *values* from government rather than the separation of church and state as *institutions*, but that is, as we shall see, an understanding quite foreign to the intention of the framers of the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

An examination of American legal and constitutional documents before and after the enactment of the First Amendment in 1791 makes it clear that the framers never intended to exclude Christian values from law and public policy.³⁴ Maryland’s state constitution, enacted in 1776, specified as a test of officeholders a “declaration of belief in the Christian religion.”³⁵ Article 38 of the state constitution of South Carolina, formulated in 1778, was even more specific, stating that “the Christian Protestant religion shall be deemed the established religion of this state.”³⁶ The founding fathers saw no conflict between such practices of the states and the First Amendment. The Establishment Clause was intended to prevent the U.S. Congress from establishing any one *denomination* as the preferred American church, but the amendment left the *states* free to do so if they wished. The state of Massachusetts, for example, continued to have an established state church until 1832, a generation after the adoption of the First Amendment.

U.S. Supreme Court decisions prior to 1947 reflected this historically

32. See Harold J. Berman, “Religious Foundations of Law in the West: An Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 1, 1 (1983): 3–43, for a helpful survey of the data.

33. For constitutional interpretation in this area, see Ronald B. Flowers, “The Supreme Court’s Three Tests of the Establishment Clause,” *Religion in Life* 45 (1976): 41–52, and “The Supreme Court’s Interpretation of the Free Exercise Clause,” *Religion in Life* 49 (1980): 322–35.

34. For a careful study of First Amendment issues and historical interpretation, see Robert L. Cord, *Separation of Church and State* (New York: Lambeth Press, 1982).

35. Jack R. Van Der Slik, “Respecting an Establishment of Religion in America,” *Christian Scholars Review* 13, 3 (1984): 226.

36. *Ibid.*, 227.

correct understanding of the framers' intention.³⁷ Justice Joseph Story, in a unanimous decision, *Vidal v. Girard's Executors* (1843), could state that "the Christian religion is part of the common law." The Court clearly understood that the First Amendment was intended to rule out preferential treatment for any single Christian denomination, rather than excluding Christian influence as such.

In an 1890 decision, *Church of Latter-Day Saints v. U.S.*, the Court held that the Mormon practice of polygamy was illegal, being "contrary to the spirit of Christianity." In *Church of Holy Trinity v. U.S.*, the Court could say that "this is a Christian nation." As late as 1931, in the case of *United States v. Macintosh*, the Court could state that "we are a Christian people, according to one another the equal right of religious freedom, and acknowledging with reverence the duty of obedience to the will of God." It was only as recently as 1947, in the case of *Everson v. Board of Education*, that the concept of "a wall of separation between church and state" began to take on a perverse life of its own and a meaning quite foreign to the intention of the founding fathers.

If the First Amendment, then, is no barrier to Christian attempts to influence public policy, are there biblical principles that can furnish guidelines for such action? How much Christian morality should be legislated? Is there common moral ground between the believer and the unbeliever? These are only a few of the many questions that naturally arise in this difficult but timely area.

The biblical teachings concerning the *image of God* and *general revelation* are certainly germane to such discussions. All men and women are in fact created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26–28) and, whether they acknowledge the fact or not, live in the moral universe created by God and have an inborn awareness of God's moral requirements. God reveals his moral will for mankind not only in the special revelation given in the Bible, but also in the general revelation of nature and conscience (Rom. 1:18–32; 2:14–15).³⁸ The apostle Paul clearly teaches that the unbeliever, entirely apart from the Bible, has not only an awareness that God exists, but also an awareness of the fundamental demands of God's moral law. One does not

37. The Supreme Court citations are from Leo Pfeffer, "The Deity in American Constitutional History," *Journal of Church and State* 23, 2 (1981): 215–39.

38. On the concept of general revelation, see Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); S. Lewis Johnson, "Paul and the Knowledge of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (1972): 61–74; H. P. Owen, "The Scope of Natural Revelation in Romans 1 and Acts 17," *New Testament Studies* 5, 2 (1959): 133–43.

have to be a Christian to be intuitively aware that murder, stealing, adultery, and disrespect for parents, for example, are contrary to the divine will. Even though this moral awareness is distorted and suppressed by a sinful human nature (Rom. 1:18), it is nevertheless still present and can provide a point of contact in the discussion of public policy issues with moral dimensions.

History also teaches that God calls nations to account for the violation of the basic moral principles revealed in creation and conscience. God sent judgment upon the generation of the flood (Gen. 6–7) and upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18–19). Amos denounced the war atrocities committed by one pagan nation against another (Amos 2:1). Jonah was sent to announce God’s judgment against the pagan city of Nineveh (Jonah). Not having the written revelation of God was no excuse; they were sinning against the light of nature and the moral law engraved upon the heart (Rom. 1:18–32; 2:14–15).

The moral wisdom of God’s general revelation has been confirmed in history by the studies of anthropologists. On the basis of his extensive studies of both ancient and modern civilizations, the British anthropologist J. D. Unwin concluded that the whole of human history does not provide a single example of a society that achieved and consistently maintained a high level of culture without adopting heterosexual monogamy as the standard for marriage and family life.³⁹ Societies that adopted more permissive sexual practices entered into periods of decline in art, science, religion, and military power. The “track record of history” has confirmed the wisdom of the moral standards revealed not only to believers, in Scripture, but also to all peoples, through general revelation.

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, the following general principle may be stated: Where Scripture indicates that unbelievers can have moral awareness on a given issue through *general revelation*, then it may be appropriate for Christians to press for legislation in that area.⁴⁰ For example, laws prohibiting the killing of innocent human life and forbidding homosexuality as a way of life are consistent with the basic moral intuitions of believers and unbelievers alike, according to Romans 1:18–32 and 2:14–15. In such cases the unbeliever *ought* to know better, even though in some instances the unbeliever will deny in very vocal terms the voice of

39. J. D. Unwin, “Monogamy as a Condition of Social Energy,” *Hibbert Journal* 25 (1927): 663–77.

40. For a discussion of the view known as “theonomy,” which holds that Christians, given the opportunity, should seek to have the civil penalties of the Mosaic law (e.g., capital punishment for homosexuality) reflected in American criminal statutes, see Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology*, 266–70. The view adopted in the text is not that of the “theonomic” position.

conscience. Other behavioral standards, such as attendance at Christian worship, are not mandates of general revelation, but presuppose special revelation and a personal faith commitment, and hence are not appropriate subjects for civil legislation.⁴¹

Christians seeking to influence law and public policy must be sensitive not only to basic biblical and theological principles, but to practical considerations as well. Would the proposed law be enforceable? If not, the actual effect of legislation might be to undercut respect for the rule of law and the credibility of Christian political action. The unsuccessful attempt to outlaw the production and sale of alcoholic beverages during Prohibition is an example.⁴² The enforceability of a given law presupposes a significant degree of *community consensus* regarding its justice and wisdom. At times, however, a prophetic minority may be called to *create* a consensus on a given issue where none exists, as did the abolitionists in the nineteenth century. In certain controversial areas where matters of fundamental justice are at stake, legal change may come first, and community consensus later, as with the civil rights movement in the sixties. The historical examples illustrate the variety and complexity of the circumstances that confront Christians who work for change in the public arena.

One might also consider the criterion known as “clear and present danger.” That is to say, at any given time there may be a whole spectrum of moral issues in society that could be the focus of efforts to change the laws. Given limited time and energy, however, an individual or a church will need to focus on issues that have special urgency or crucial implications for the body politic. Both state-run lotteries and abortion, for example, are public policy issues with moral dimensions. But abortion is literally a matter of life and death, while lotteries are not, and hence the former concern deserves a higher place in the list of priorities for social action, other considerations being equal.

Christians seeking to influence public policy will recognize both the value and limitations of civil law as an instrument of social change. The believer will not (or should not) have *utopian* expectations of what laws can accomplish; only the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit can produce radical transformations in the human heart. At the same time, law not only restrains violent behavior, but serves as an educator. As Lynn

41. See chapters 5 and 6 of the present volume for a discussion of abortion and homosexuality, including the political and legal dimensions of these problems.

42. For a discussion of the problems connected with the Prohibition experiment, see Paul Johnson, *Modern Times* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 209–12.

Buzzard has observed, “Law not only expresses what is, but is a summons to what ought to be.”⁴³ Civil laws that are consistent with the teachings of Scripture point society to a higher standard of righteousness, which is fulfilled only in Jesus Christ. Such laws remain a worthy object of Christian concern and social action.

Key Terms

contextual absolutism. The ethical position that Scripture reveals absolute moral principles that must be understood and applied within their proper contexts.

deontological. An approach to ethics that focuses on commands, rules, and normative principles as the basis for right actions.

eudamonism. An ethical theory that posits the view that the basic goal of human life and action is to achieve happiness; as, for example, in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*.

situation ethics. An ethical theory, associated with Joseph Fletcher, that argues that there is only one absolute: to do the most “loving” thing.

Stoicism. A school of ancient Greek ethics that taught that the key to happiness was based not on favorable circumstances, but rather on adopting an attitude of acceptance and detachment in the midst of any circumstance.

utilitarianism. An approach to ethics that focuses on the results of an action to assess its goodness or badness; as in the maxim associated with John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, act so as to produce “the greatest good for the greatest number.” Also known as *consequentialist* ethics or *pragmatism*.

virtue ethics. An approach to ethics that focuses on human character and the qualities that contribute to human flourishing—as, for example, the virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control in classical Greece, or the virtues of faith, hope, and love in Christianity.

Study Questions

1. What is meant by a *deontological* approach to Christian ethics? How does such an approach, which focuses on divine commands found revealed in Scripture, differ from what is sometimes called “legalism” in the Christian life?

43. Lynn Buzzard, “There Oughta Be a Law,” *Eternity*, October 1978, 22.

2. Is it always possible for a Christian to do something that is morally right and free from sin in every situation, even in cases of “ethical conflict”? How are such apparent conflicts (e.g., between telling the truth and preserving innocent lives) to be resolved?
3. How would you evaluate the claim of “situation ethics” that the only moral absolute is to do the “loving” thing in any situation? How is Fletcher’s definition of “love” different from a biblical definition of love?
4. How should Christians attempt to influence public policies and laws in the context of a pluralistic society and the “separation of church and state”? Should, for example, Christians make a distinction between definitions of marriage for *Christians* in the *church*, and the legal definition of marriage for a secular state?

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