CHOOSE BETTER

FIVE BIBLICAL MODELS FOR MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents,

John and Trudy Gordon,

whose examples of Christian virtue we took for granted
when we were young children but admired sincerely
and gratefully as we matured.

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PREFACE

If you ask most people what “ethics” is about, they will say that it is about distinguishing right from wrong, and there is surely some truth to this answer. Unfortunately, the answer is also limiting and implies that “ethics” is merely or primarily a matter of getting the right answer to some specific question about a moral choice. Ethics is much more comprehensive than this, however. Ethics is the study of how to live and how to live well. From the Greeks, we derive the term *axiology*, which means the study of what is worthy or worthwhile, presumably in all of life’s endeavors (thus including what we might call *aesthetics* or labor-leisure issues in the field of what we might call *ethics*).

Human Choices in Light of Human Nature

Within a theistic framework, ethics is about living as God our Maker intended us to live. The ethical task is to think, in a disciplined and faithful way, about human *choices* in light of human nature, the human condition, human potential, and the divine creational mandate for humans. In this broader sense, every decision we make in life is “ethical”; it either contributes to or detracts from human life as God created it. “Business ethics,” by such an understanding, comprehends far more than issues of ethical compromise or

bookkeeping shenanigans—it also includes thinking about labor itself, commerce itself, and economics itself (not to mention mass consumerism), within a genuinely theistic framework, and considering how we ought to set about achieving God's purposes for labor, society, and economics.

To think about human choices in terms of human nature, for instance, we immediately recognize that thinking about choices is *itself* a reflection of human nature. The other creatures function primarily, though not exclusively, by instinct. They are not equipped, as we are, with the powers of imagination (to imagine currently unavailable options or possibilities) or the powers of assessment. Beavers, for instance, do not assess the effect that damming streams will have on the forest; they do not realize, and cannot realize, that the long-term effect is to flood the forest, deprive the root system of oxygen, and ultimately kill the trees (and eliminate the beavers' habitat!).

Humans, by contrast, do have this power of assessment, and can therefore make such assessments about long-term effects, *before* (or after) building bridges, dams, or highways. Indeed, compared to the other creatures, humans have comparatively few instincts. We are born, apparently, with a suckling instinct, a gag reflex, and a fear of heights or falling, but with few others. Our behaviors are determined by training and by reflection (whether cultural or individual). Socrates, therefore, understood human nature correctly when he observed that "the unexamined life is not worth living *for a human*."[1] Among the creatures, only humans have the capacity to examine, ponder, and compare choices. This is why Mark Twain rightly observed that the human is the only creature who *can* blush and the only one who has *reason* to.

Thus, participating in the ethical enterprise is itself a humane act. When you find yourself asking whether you should have your aging mother come live with you or whether you should put her

1. Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 38a. Emphasis mine, because so many translations of the *Apology* inexplicably omit this important phrase from the original Greek.

in a home with medical care, even before you answer the question, you are doing what only humans can do, because the other creatures do not raise such questions. When you wrestle with whether you will permit your daughter to train for gymnastics five afternoons a week, you are functioning as a human, even before you arrive at an answer. That is, it is ethically right to raise such ethical questions, even before you answer them. Ethics is therefore not merely about answering choice-questions correctly; it is also about *asking* them in the first place and learning to ask the kinds of questions that might yield good answers.

Ethics, as I construe it, constitutes the *disciplined reflection on human choice-making*. As such, it seeks understanding, organization, and scholarly discussion. It is responsive to (disciplined by) pertinent information from related disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, and theology, and it is also responsive to (disciplined by) scholarly give-and-take—interactions with those whose views of some matters differ.

The Choice between Good and Better

Since I regard ethics as the disciplined reflection on choice-making, I also regard choice-making more broadly than do some. We do not ordinarily merely choose between "good" and "evil"; we just as frequently choose between "good" and "better."

It was not wrong or evil for Martha, for example, to be involved in "much serving" (Luke 10:40). In and of itself, serving others is commended throughout the Scriptures. But in this particular circumstance, Mary had made a *better* choice. By attending to Jesus's instruction, she had "*chosen* the good portion" (v. 42), so her choice was praised in comparison to the choice of Martha. One choice was good—the other was better.

Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote many letters to the churches, and yet he would have preferred to have been personally present, as he said to the Galatians: "I wish I could be present with you now and

change my tone, for I am perplexed about you" (Gal. 4:20). Writing a letter was good; visiting the Galatians would have been better (see also 1 Thess. 2:17; 3:10; 3 John 1:14).

The ethical task is designed, therefore, not merely to distinguish good from evil but to distinguish good from better. Virtually by definition, an individual who habitually makes the better choice throughout life lives a better life than does another individual who habitually makes the less-good choice.

Background to the Models

Many years ago, I appreciated reading Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church*, an articulate, well-organized presentation of different functioning "models" of ecclesiology and church life. Dulles's ability to conceptualize models (or *heuristics*, or *paradigms*, as some might call them) was very helpful to me, and I suspect his influence may account for my endeavor to understand Christian ethics in terms of ethical models. I have found it helpful to think not only in terms of ethical *issues* but also in terms of ethical "models"—*ways of asking questions about life and its options*—within a Christian theistic framework. What follows is an introductory study of five models of Christian ethics, models that are derived from the Christian Scriptures and that have substantially influenced the Christian church.

During my seminary years, I found Professor John M. Frame's classes to be challenging and stimulating. His teaching on perspectivalism influenced me at a formative time, and I suspect his influence on my thinking in this area is far more comprehensive than I am consciously aware. One aspect of his perspectivalism is its ecumenical orientation—that being reared and catechized in a particular tradition within the church shapes one's perspective and that often what appear to be disagreements within the church are actually differing perspectives that each have a measure of truth and insight. Professor Frame is not a relativist; nor am I. To acknowledge the insight of a given perspective is not to affirm that every perspective is right or

equally valid.[2] In what follows, I attempt to acknowledge that different aspects of the Christian tradition have made particular contributions to the entire church's ethical reasoning. Differing traditions "model" the ethical enterprise differently, and the combination of these models yields more fruit than any one would yield by itself.

In my early years of teaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, my interest in ethical models grew. There were already two ethicists on faculty: Stephen Mott and Jack Davis, each of whom had great command of the discipline. Each tended to work in the area of ethical *issues* (as do most ethicists); Jack had a special interest in medical ethics in those years, while Stephen was more interested in social and economic issues. So the seminary needed no one else to teach in the area of ethical issues, and I began working in the area of ethical hermeneutics or models. This ultimately resulted in my teaching a class on a biblical theology of ethics, during the course of which I recognized that there were five different models of ethics within the Scriptures themselves: imitation, law, wisdom, communion, and warfare.

The Five Models

The five models of ethics may be thought of as *question* clusters. Each model asks a different set of questions, and each of these sets of questions brings its own insight to the ethical program.

The law model, for instance, asks whether a potential behavioral choice is either prescribed or proscribed by God in Holy Scripture —whether the behavior is required or forbidden. By comparison, the wisdom model asks what kinds of effects and consequences that

2. It is not my concern here to enter into critical discussion of the merits/demerits of Frame's perspectivalism. I do note, however, that he frames the matter in philosophical terms (normative, situational, and existential), which has probably left some laypeople unpersuaded (or unpersuadable?) of his views. My selection of five models that manifestly appear in Scripture may be more attractive or palatable to some. See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008).

potential behavioral choice is likely to have. Biblical proverbs *commend*, whereas biblical laws *command*. The wisdom literature routinely discusses the likely consequences of certain behavioral choices and thereby invites us to consider the effects of different behavioral choices. Its approach to the ethical task is therefore more contemplative, and less urgent, than that of the law model. The law model recognizes that there are moments in life when such contemplation may very well be a luxury we cannot afford to indulge. Certain behaviors, whose consequences are virtually always catastrophic, are prohibited outright.

My point throughout this work is that the five models derived from the Holy Scriptures are complementary (like a string quintet; try Schubert's in C Major) and that, therefore, we gain the fullest ethical perspective when we permit each of the models to bring its own particular cluster of questions to bear on the matter at hand.

To put it another way, each of the five models is like a different tool in the hand of a mechanic. Each of these tools, while performing a different function, works toward the same goal. The goal is a well-functioning automobile, but it cannot be achieved with only screwdrivers, or only wrenches, or only pliers. A number of tools is necessary, ordinarily, to complete a single job. Similarly, each of the ethical models that are found in the Holy Scriptures is necessary, yet insufficient in itself, to inform the ethical task.

We encounter many apparent "dead ends" in Christian discussions of ethics because we bring too few tools to the task. We ask, for instance, only law model questions, or only wisdom model questions, without asking other, equally important questions. In this book, my intent is to provide a brief, working discussion of the various major ethical models found in the Scriptures, in the hope that readers will become familiar with them, both conceptually and functionally.

The Structure of This Book

The first chapter of our study consists of an abbreviated discussion of the five models, so that each of the five may be set in comparison

to the others. The following five chapters comprise more specific discussions of each of the models in turn, to demonstrate how one might employ them.

It need hardly be said that thinking rightly about life does not mean that one will live rightly. Marksmen do not always hit their target, even when it is well-defined and clear to them. Similarly, neither I nor my readers will necessarily live in a manner more consistent with God's purposes simply by thinking rightly about these matters. Indeed, moral vision is different from an ethical system; moral and ethical vision also include motivation, which tends to flow out of the understanding that evil is truly evil, destructive, and abhorrent, whereas virtue is lovely and life-giving. Refining our ability to think correctly about ethics does not assure that we will be moved to love, embrace, or pursue the ethic we thereby discover. However, it is unlikely that we will live well *without* thinking well, so we ought to make whatever efforts we can to understand the ethical enterprise better.

This short volume on ethics is not designed to enter (or settle) the more technical arena of professional or academic ethical theory. Its intention is practical and ecclesiological—to help practicing Christians to think more thoroughly Christianly about the choices we face in life. To this end, I have deliberately avoided cluttering the manuscript with footnotes that enter into those more technical discussions. I am, however, deeply grateful to the various authors in the technical study of ethics, and I have been influenced by some of them in all that follows. For the sake of my intended readership, however, I deliberately resist interacting with that scholarship in this book.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book grew out of lectures I originally gave at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in the late 1980s and early 1990s in a course entitled "A Biblical Theology of Ethics," in which I attempted to trace how the Holy Scriptures addressed human behavior by following the unfolding of biblical revelation historically. In the process, I discovered what I thought were five different ways in which biblical revelation addressed human choice-making. The students in that course for several years made many helpful comments and raised many thoughtful questions (and an occasional eyebrow). Several suggested that the models would/could/should prove very helpful for laypeople, so I reworked the material, undertook to teach it orally in several churches over the years, and included much of it in the humanities courses I taught for many years at Grove City College. One former Gordon-Conwell student, Dr. A. Craig Troxel at Westminster Seminary California, has particularly ~~nagged~~ encouraged me to put the material in writing that would be accessible to laypeople and to church officers. If the publication does not please him, I trust it will at least placate him.

P&R Publishing was again a pleasure to work with (this is the third book I have published with P&R). Dave Almack was very encouraging in our early discussions, and Amanda Martin and Joy Woo made many editorial suggestions that have greatly improved the project.

1

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIVE MODELS

The Bible is a big book, and the Christian view of life is large and comprehensive. Therefore, throughout the church's history, various individuals and groups have endeavored to summarize the nature and practice of Christianity. Such summaries are intended to organize and clarify a reality that otherwise may appear too hard to grasp. What is true of Christianity in general is also true of Christian-theistic ethics. A genuinely Christian ethic is an expansive and potentially complex reality, a reality that may also need some sort of summary to provide organization.

I refer to these organizational efforts as *models*. According to the 1987 *American Heritage Dictionary and Electronic Thesaurus*, a model is "a tentative description of a system or theory that accounts for all of its known properties." I would suggest that five such descriptions of Christian ethics have endured throughout the church's history, assisting many in their efforts to live in a theistic manner. These models are the imitation model, the law model, the wisdom model, the communion model, and the warfare model.

The Imitation Model

The imitation model understands human life to consist, ideally, in our being like God on a creaturely scale. The human is understood to have been originally created in God's image, with the potential capacity to reflect many of God's praiseworthy attributes (except for what the theologians call the *incommunicable attributes* of God, such as omniscience) and many of his deeds (again, except for those that are distinctive to him as Creator or Redeemer). Compared to the law model below, the imitation model perhaps emphasizes more what one *is* than what one *does*, though the creature is also called to imitate God's works. Functionally, the imitation model requires learning about God and what is praiseworthy about him (especially as he has revealed himself in the incarnation of Jesus Christ) as a means of developing a vision for living. The imitation model asks and answers the following question: Does this decision allow me (or us) to emulate God or to cultivate human traits that reflect his image? The imitation model is reflected in many traditions historically, including the Augustinian tradition, aspects of medieval monasticism, and aspects of continental Pietism.

Among the comparative strengths of this model are the following:

- Biblical-theologically, this appears to be a model that adjusts well to the distinctions between the state of innocence and the fallen state.
- It restores doxology to ethics.
- It facilitates very well a discussion of becoming, as well as doing.

Among its relative weaknesses are the following:

- It does not contain (explicitly) the (helpful) prohibitions that are such a helpful and necessary aspect of the law model.

- Catechistically, it is probably a tad slower than the law model. To catechize by this model, one would
  - study and teach the communicable attributes of God and his imitable works;
  - study and teach why those attributes are praiseworthy, with special emphasis on their praiseworthiness as revealed in the acts of redemption;
  - study and teach why it is so important to us, as creatures and as sinners, that God has such attributes;
  - study, teach, and consider ways to be more like God and less unlike him;
  - study and teach what God's primary works are (creation, providence, redemption), in an effort to determine how we can imitate them.

The Law Model

The law model understands human life to consist, ideally, in our obeying God, who has rightful authority to order his creation as he wishes. God sustains the relation of Lawgiver and Judge to his creation, and the creature must acknowledge this relation by obeying God's commands and wishes. Therefore, the law model seeks to answer the following question: Has God, in Holy Scripture, commanded or prohibited this behavior? This model was extremely influential during the Protestant Reformation, and many of the catechisms produced by the Reformers contained an exposition of the Decalogue as a guideline for living. Roman Catholic catechisms also contain an exposition of the Decalogue, and thus promote a law model approach.

The law model understands and orders human life primarily by studying and applying biblical laws or commandments. The expositions of the Decalogue found in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly are good and influential examples of the law model, as are similar expositions in Luther's Small Catechism and in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Among the comparative strengths of this model are the following:

- The prohibitions contained in divinely revealed law are a great protection for a fallen race.
- A discussion of our obedience to God's laws greatly facilitates a discussion of the limits of the legislative authority of creatures and creaturely institutions. Thus, it is not at all surprising that there is such a clearly articulated statement about "Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience" in the Westminster Confession of Faith.
- The Decalogue can be perceived, conceptually, as an expression of the two "great" Old Testament commandments: love God and love your neighbor.
- The specificity of biblical legislation is a substantial check on subjectivism.

Among its relative weaknesses are the following:

- Fallen human nature being what it is, the law model's proponents are often perceived by outsiders as pharisaical, legalistic, self-righteous, and judgmental, and this perception has some substance to it.
- Compared to the imitation model, for instance, the law model emphasizes what one *does* more than what one *is*, which can sometimes produce a fairly un-Christlike person who has nonetheless checked off the list of dos and don'ts.
- Compared to the wisdom model, it can be attractive (and stunting) to an immature believer, whose judgment needs to mature. Such an individual may be more comfortable with having his or her behavior directed exclusively by law rather than by wisdom.
- Biblical-theologically, it imposes itself into the state of innocence (both pre-fall and in the glorified state) in a manner inconsistent with the biblical testimony.

- Similarly, its practitioners sometimes tend to eternalize covenant stipulations that are not, in their biblical form, designed to be eternal or universal.
- It can lead to somewhat heated discussions about ethical choices if it excludes other models. In such cases, all differences are perceived as matters of obedience or disobedience, rather than, for example, matters of wisdom. Those who are reared in a law-model-dominant tradition (e.g., the Pharisees in the first century, or my own Reformed tradition in the twenty-first) tend to *command* what other traditions *commend*, sometimes requiring without convincing biblical warrant such things as attending two services each Sunday, reading one's Bible daily (or at all, for that matter), practicing family "worship," and so on.

The Wisdom Model

The wisdom model understands life to consist, ideally, in making wise choices moment by moment, day by day. The human is understood to have the ability to observe, and to learn from observing, that there are choices that contribute to (or detract from) order, health, and faith. Thus, the wisdom model answers the following question: What is the likely outcome of my/our doing or not doing this? The wisdom model was perhaps more common before the invention of the printing press in Europe (after which people could learn from reading the Bible, whereas before people learned from listening and observing).

The wisdom model understands and orders life by promoting the development of wisdom—that human faculty by which we strive to make wise practical choices, moment by moment. It is, of course, the model promoted by the book of Proverbs.

Among the comparative strengths of this model are the following:

- It promotes learning from both natural and special revelation.

- It promotes the development of judgment and discretion, as well as learning by trial and error.
- It accounts for that broad area of life in which believers may *commend* certain practices to one another without feeling obligated to *command*.
- The wisdom model permits believers to recognize that differences of opinion in some areas are *not* matters of obedience or disobedience.
- This model facilitates a discussion of ethical matters with those who do not necessarily recognize the authority of God speaking in Holy Scripture and may, therefore, promote a common basis for ethical conversation with unbelievers.

Among its comparative weaknesses are the following:

- It does not contain (explicitly) the (helpful) prohibitions that are such a helpful and necessary aspect of the law model.
- It is more useful for those who are more mature, less useful for those who are less mature.

The Communion Model

The communion model understands human life to consist, ideally, in communication with God. The human is understood to have the unique ability, among creatures, of linguistic communication—of being able to address and be addressed by God. For the communion model, prayer is not something one does occasionally, in moments or seasons of special need. Life itself is prayer, a fellowship with God. Therefore, we may employ the communion model to answer the following question: How might this option enhance or inhibit my (or our) communion with God? The communion model is also well represented historically; it profoundly influenced most forms of monasticism (in many of which speaking with humans was forbidden, in order to assure that one communicated exclusively with

God) and Pietism, and it has been embraced often by Christian communions in the East.

Among the comparative strengths of this model are the following:

- It accounts for the frequency with which prayer is urged throughout the Scriptures.
- It promotes a relational understanding of life, and a vertical relation at that.
- It promotes an awareness of the reality that, beyond revealed law, there are decisions we make that either promote or disrupt communion with God.
- It may be especially valuable in an era in which quiet time for meditation and communion with God is encroached on so frequently by communications from his creatures (telephones, cell phones, email, and so on).

Among its comparative weaknesses are the following:

- It does not contain (explicitly) the (helpful) prohibitions that are such a helpful and necessary aspect of the law model.
- Its subjectivity, without the aid of the objective teaching of Scripture, could quickly engender mysticism.

The Warfare Model

The warfare model understands life as consisting of a war, in which we are enlisted as soldiers for one side. Our duties are then thought of as both defensive and offensive, as both resisting the attacks of the enemy and attacking the enemy ourselves, gaining new ground. The warfare model helps us answer the following question: In the often invisible, yet real warfare between the forces of good and evil, will this decision likely serve the forces of good or the forces of evil? Luther was especially aware of this model (undoubtedly aided by the attempts of the Roman Church to take his life), as were the

English Puritans. William Gurnall's *The Christian in Complete Armor* is a classic statement of this model.

The warfare model understands life as a conflict—ultimately a conflict between the "seed of the woman" and the "seed of the serpent" of Genesis 3. Each individual, by this model, is encouraged to recognize the need for both defensive and offensive activity. Defensively, believers are encouraged to be ready, to be watchful, and to be alert to areas of particular vulnerability; offensively, believers are encouraged to attack the Enemy, taking ground from him.

Among the comparative strengths of this model are the following:

- It cultivates an awareness of the conflict in which we find ourselves as participants.
- It arouses an appropriate sense of holy indignation that other parties are attempting to destroy and injure the saints.
- It encourages an awareness of the importance of preparation prior to conflict.

Among its comparative weaknesses are the following:

- It does not contain (explicitly) the (helpful) prohibitions that are such a helpful and necessary aspect of the law model.
- Some may abuse it to excuse their sin ("The devil made me do it").
- Some who are influenced by this model may perceive other humans as "the bad guys" and themselves as "the good guys" in the apocalyptic struggle, leading to precisely the kind of false religion that Christ warns against in the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee.

These five ethical models would not have enjoyed enduring influence unless there were some element of truth in them. Each naturally flows from the teaching of Scripture, and a truly biblically informed life will employ each model. Since each of these models arises from

the Scriptures, each is ultimately compatible with and complementary to the others. Each, however, frames questions differently, and each, therefore, brings an important contribution to the Christian attempt to evaluate and order life biblically. Each of these models, while profoundly rich in itself, is nevertheless incomplete without the others.

Their interwoven character is profound, however, and each leads us to the others. For instance, if the law model *commands* us to "get wisdom" (Prov. 4:5), we cannot fulfill the law model without employing the wisdom model. If the imitation model requires our imitation of God, we find that Christ, in his incarnate state, did nothing on his own authority, but rather that which the Father had *commanded* him (see John 8:28). The wisdom model urges the wise of heart to "receive *commandments*" (Prov. 10:8). Indeed, when one considers the threatened curse-sanctions of the Sinai covenant ("But if you will not obey . . . then all these curses shall come upon you"—Deut. 28:15), it was unwise (wisdom model) for the Israelites to be disobedient (law model). Examples such as these could be multiplied—the point is that these models are not mutually exclusive. One cannot really function within a single model without being driven to the others.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Consider the ethical models described in this chapter. Which were most familiar to you? Which, if any, were unfamiliar?
2. Based on these initial descriptions, which model do you tend to draw on most often when evaluating ethical questions or dilemmas?
3. How do each of these five models challenge common secular understandings of ethics?
4. What is the significance of each model's reliance on the others? How do they support and guide one another?

5. Complete the following sentences and discuss with a group: My family of origin emphasized the _________ model when I was growing up. My family of origin neglected the ________ model. Give examples to flesh out your discussion.

Case Study

Develop a case study to revisit throughout this book: in brief, a situation in which an ethical decision must be made. It may be drawn from your own experience, a news story, a letter to an ethicist, a work of fiction, or some other source. It may be straightforward or complex, weighty or (seemingly) inconsequential. (In addition, if you're working through this book in a public setting, make sure it's something you're willing to share.) Jot down a few notes so you'll be able to remember the details when you return to your case study at the end of the next chapter.