

## THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF ETHICS

Larry Pettegrew  
Professor of Theology

*Systematic theology must serve as a foundation for any set of moral standards that pleases God and fulfills human nature. Establishing such a set is difficult today because of the emergence of the postmodernism which denies the existence of absolute truth, absolute moral standards, and universal ethics. Advances in science, medicine, and technology increase the difficulty of creating a system of Christian ethics. The inevitable connection between ethics and systematic theology requires that one have a good foundation in systematic theology for his ethics. A separation between the two fields occurred largely as a result of the Enlightenment which caused theology to be viewed as a science. Since the study of a science must be separate from a religious perspective, theology underwent a process of becoming a profession and the responsibility for educating theologians became the responsibility of the college rather than the church. This solidified the barrier between theology and ethics. Who God is must be the root for standards of right and wrong. God's glory must be the goal of ethics. Love for God must be the basis for one's love for and behavior toward his fellow man. Other doctrines besides the doctrine of God, especially bibliology, play an important role in determining right ethical standards.*

\* \* \* \* \*

One of the most popular American movies last year was based on a book by John Irving entitled *The Cider House Rules*. *The Cider House Rules* tells the story of a young man eager to discover what life is like outside of the orphanage in which he has spent his childhood years. He ends up working on an apple farm where numerous ethical and moral issues confront him. According to a glowing recommendation from the *Houston Post*, "*The Cider House Rules* is filled with people to love and to feel for. . . . The characters in John Irving's novel break all the rules, and yet they remain noble and free spirited."<sup>1</sup>

The story and the American public's positive reaction to it illustrate a number of serious ethical questions. Are rules often irrelevant? Are most standards

---

<sup>1</sup>John Irving, *The Cider House Rules* (New York: Ballantine, 1985). The quote from the *Houston Post* is from the back dust jacket of this edition of the book.

out of date? Do standards of right and wrong vary according to the circumstances? How can one decide what is right and wrong in any given situation? Is it possible that different communities can have equally valid, but contradictory standards?

Ethicists have proposed answers to these questions. Some have insisted that the essence of ethics is obedience to laws (deontological ethics). Others have said that the essence of ethics is the pursuit of some human good, such as happiness or pleasure (teleological ethics).<sup>2</sup> Religious people believe that ethics is “the study of the way of life that conforms to the will of God—the way that is good, that pleases God and fulfills human nature.”<sup>3</sup> But how does anyone know what pleases God? Even Christians who claim that the Bible is their guide are seemingly able to derive different ethical systems from it.

The purpose of this essay is to emphasize that every Christian needs to be a student of Scriptures to the extent that he comprehends a systematic theology that becomes the foundation for his moral standards, decision-making process, and manner of living. Douglas Groothuis says it well:

Theology is not merely an endeavour of academic theologians, but the concern of every Christian who desires to understand and apply God's truth for life and make it known to others. Consequently, our theology affects all that we do, whether or not we have thought it through systematically. It directs our sermons, our evangelism and apologetics (or lack thereof), and our personal and social ethics. In other words, it is indispensable and inescapable. This underscores the urgency of developing a theology that is both faithful to Scripture and which speaks forcefully and truthfully to our postmodern situation.<sup>4</sup>

## **THE DILEMMAS CONFRONTING CHRISTIAN ETHICS**

### **The Dilemma of Postmodernism**

“When the foundations are being destroyed,  
what can the righteous do?” (Ps. 11:3)<sup>5</sup>

Many observers of the social scene have concluded that the Western world has been going through a change from modernism, based on the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, to postmodernism. Neither modernism nor postmodernism is a

<sup>2</sup>For helpful surveys of ethical systems, see John S. and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1993) 17-45; Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 17-132; Morris A. Inch, “Ethics,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 375.

<sup>3</sup>David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 15.

<sup>4</sup>Douglas Groothuis, “The Postmodernist Challenge to Theology,” *Themelios* 25/1 (November 1999):4-5.

<sup>5</sup>All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated.

friend to biblical Christianity, but “the transition from the modern era to the postmodern era poses a grave challenge to the church in its mission to its own next generation.”<sup>6</sup> Three foundational features of the belief system of postmodernism illustrate the complexities of developing a theology for ethics in the modern world.

### **No Absolute Truth**

First, postmodernists believe that there is no absolute truth. Truth is constructed, not revealed or discovered, and it is peculiar to each society. Postmodernist Michel Foucault writes:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power. . . . Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.<sup>7</sup>

Seemingly this is what most Americans believe. According to recent Barna polls, sixty-six percent of Americans believe that “there is no such thing as absolute truth.” Among young adults, 72% do not believe absolutes exist. Even worse, however, is the fact that 53% of those who call themselves evangelical Christians believe that there are no absolutes.<sup>8</sup> This would mean that about half of those say that they believe in salvation through Jesus Christ, and who might be able to sign a doctrinal statement proclaiming the inerrancy of Scripture, do not believe in absolute truth.

### **No Absolute Moral Standards**

The moral standards of Americans are as alarming as their epistemological views. Specifically, 68% of Americans, according to a 1969 Barna poll, believed that sexual relations before marriages were wrong. But in 1992, only 33% rejected the idea of premarital sex. One study reported in Veith claimed that 56% of single “fundamentalists” engaged in sex outside of marriage, which is only 1% less than those who considered themselves theologically liberal. Forty-nine percent of Protestants and 47% of Catholics consider themselves “pro-choice.” Some 49% of evangelicals and an amazing 71% of Roman Catholics say that they believe in

---

<sup>6</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 10.

<sup>7</sup>Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism, An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Cahoon (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996) 379.

<sup>8</sup>Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994) 16.

euthanasia.<sup>9</sup>

### **No Universal Ethics**

Since there is neither absolute truth nor absolute moral standards, universal ethics no longer exist, according to postmodernists. Ethics have shifted from universal to community. Each community, each group, each sub-group, each minority segment of society, should operate on the basis of an ethical system which best suits it.<sup>10</sup> Stanley Grenz, an evangelical observer of postmodernism, comments,

[T]he center of ethics is shifting away from the individual actor and the quest for the one true, universal ethical society. The new focus is on the community in the midst of which and according to the ideals of which personal character finds its reference point. In the end, the newer voices assert, ethical judgments arise from and must be articulated in accordance with the belief structures of the community in which a person lives.<sup>11</sup>

Ideally, this would mean that the supreme ethical value in society is tolerance. "Under the post-modernist way of thinking," writes Gene Veith, "the principle of cultural diversity means that every like-minded group constitutes a culture that must be considered as good as any other culture."<sup>12</sup> In the long run, though, tolerance will certainly be smothered by each community's pursuit of power.

### **The Dilemma of Scientific, Medical, and Technological Advances**

The perplexities of ethics in a society impacted by postmodernism are magnified by the advances in science, medicine, and technology. Timothy Demy writes,

Science and technology have brought enormous medical advances and benefits to humanity. The ability to diagnose, prevent, and treat many medical conditions has enriched and saved millions of lives. . . . No reasonable individual would suggest abandoning such progress. Yet advances in medicine and technology do raise new

---

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 17. According to a recent *Christianity Today* article, American young people are engaging in sex at younger ages. In 1972, 5% of 15 year-old girls and 20% of 15 year-old boys had engaged in sexual intercourse. In 1997, 38% of 15 year-old girls and 45% of 15 year-old boys had engaged in sexual intercourse. According to this article, however, "As bleak as this picture appears, some encouraging trends can be seen" (Paula Rinehart, "Losing Our Promiscuity," *Christianity Today* 44/8 (July 10, 2000):37).

<sup>10</sup>See for example, Sandra Harding, "From Feminist Empiricism to Feminist Standpoint Epistemologies," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 616-37, and Susan Bordo, "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 638-64.

<sup>11</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, "Christian Integrity in a Postmodern World," in *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought*, ed. by David S. Dockery (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 399.

<sup>12</sup>Veith, *Postmodern Times* 195.

ethical issues that need to be continually refined.<sup>13</sup>

New ethical dilemmas include genetic engineering, genetic testing, gene therapy, cloning, fetal-tissue research, and euthanasia. These have been added to other issues such as abortion, capital punishment, war/pacifism, civil disobedience, sexual morality, homosexuality, pornography, penology, birth control, divorce, and remarriage. The specific questions that come with the new ethics of modern life are complicated, sometimes bizarre, and almost unending. Grenz says,

In short, we are confronted by the greatest issues humankind has ever faced at a time when the moral fiber of our society appears to be at its weakest. Ethical questions are assaulting us at breakneck speed at a time when people have lost their sense of mooring, their sense of stability and their sense of possessing some platform on which to stand as they make moral decisions.<sup>14</sup>

How then can we confront and solve the dilemmas of postmodernism and the advances in technology and science? How must a Christian formulate a correct ethical system?

### **ETHICS: THEOLOGY IN ACTION (Prolegomena)**

The answer to these questions is the thesis of this essay. Every Christian needs to commit himself to understanding the basics (at least) of a systematic theology, drawn carefully from the Bible,<sup>15</sup> which becomes the foundation for his moral standards, decision-making process, and manner of living.

### **The Pre-Enlightenment Idea of Theology**

We live in an era, however, when systematic theology is denigrated, minimized, and ignored. Theology to some is only the handmaid of experience. Margaret Poloma, for example, in an article on the "Toronto Blessing," writes that "religious experiences . . . can shake our ecclesiastical walls and cast a glaring light on the inadequacy of our theologies."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, theology is often considered as irrelevant for Christian living and ministry. David Wells' account of the incident

<sup>13</sup>Timothy J. Demy, "Technology and Theology: Reality and Hope for the Third Millennium," *Issues 2000*, ed. by Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) 45.

<sup>14</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997) 17.

<sup>15</sup>Some Bible teachers believe that systematic theology has multiple sources. Though this paper is not the place to take up this issue, this writer believes that systematic theology ultimately has only one source—the Christian Scriptures (2 Tim 2:15; 3:16-17).

<sup>16</sup>Margaret Poloma, "The Spirit and the Bride: The 'Toronto Blessing' and Church Structure," *Evangelical Studies Bulletin* 13 (Winter 1996):1.

that motivated him to write *No Place for Truth* is all too familiar to those who teach beginning theology. After Wells' introductory lecture on the importance of theology, "an obviously agitated student who had come forward" told him how grateful he was for the lecture.

He told me that he was one of those I had described who felt petrified by the prospect of having to take this course. As a matter of fact, he said, he had had a mighty struggle with his conscience about it. Was it right to spend so much money on a course of study that was so irrelevant to his desire to minister to people in the Church? He plainly intended no insult. As a matter of fact, this confession, which I rather think he had not intended to blurt out, had begun as a compliment. That was the day I decided that I had to write this book.<sup>17</sup>

What is the origin of the idea that theology is irrelevant for Christian living? Certainly not the Scriptures. The apostle Paul makes the case for the practical value of theology when he groups together "reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness" with "doctrine."<sup>18</sup> Doctrine is part of the Scriptural process that makes the man of God "perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

To hear that theology is irrelevant to Christian living and ministry also would have bewildered the pre-Enlightenment theologians. To many of them, ethics was theology in action. In the Pietist tradition, William Perkins wrote, "Theology is the science of living blessedly forever. . . ." <sup>19</sup> William Ames, the student of Perkins and the teacher of many of the Puritans, wrote that theology is the teaching of "living unto God."<sup>20</sup>

Many of the pre-Enlightenment theologians, in fact, had major sections in their theology books on ethics.<sup>21</sup> The great Baptist theologian, John Gill, for

<sup>17</sup>David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 4.

<sup>18</sup>Systematic theology is larger than "doctrine," in that systematic theology synthesizes the doctrines of Scripture and demonstrates how they are related. "To systematize," writes Thomas Oden, "is to arrange, coordinate, organize discrete aspects of a system into a meaningful or working arrangement" (Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology: The Living God* [Peabody, Mass.: Prince, 1998] 328). But doctrine is the essence of systematic theology.

<sup>19</sup>William Perkins, *A Golden Chain*, 1616 edition, 11, quoted in F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971) 53.

<sup>20</sup>William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. by John D. Eusden (reprint of 1629 ed., Boston: Pilgrim, 1968) 77.

<sup>21</sup>According to David Jones, "Ethics and dogmatics have been treated as separate disciplines only since the late sixteenth century. In the Reformed tradition Lambertus Danaeus published his *Christian Ethics* in 1577. The better-known Lutheran theologian Georgius Calixtus followed suit with *Epitomes Theologiae Moralis* in 1634. The same development may be observed in Roman Catholic moral theology around 1600" (David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994] 7 n.1). Of course, during this era specialized books on ethics were not intended to minimize theology or separate theology from ethics. On the other hand, another possible cause for the distancing of ethics from

example, divided his *Body of Divinity* into two parts. The first section was entitled, “A Body of Doctrinal Divinity.” This section, over 600 pages in length, developed the various doctrines as might be expected. Following “A Body of Doctrinal Divinity” came a 300-page section entitled “A Body of Practical Divinity.” In this section, Gill discussed such issues as worship, contentment, patience, sincerity, prayer, duties of husband and wife, and the duties of parents and children.<sup>22</sup>

Many readers of John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are also pleased to find so many insights into practical Christian living—not what they might have expected from a great work on systematic theology. In fact, one of the finest devotional books available today is the little *Golden Booklet of the Christian Life*<sup>23</sup> that is excerpted from the *Institutes*. Though Calvin, Gill, and the other pre-Enlightenment theologians could not foresee the technical ethical issues of the twenty-first century, they were committed to the value of theology for life.

### The Enlightenment Idea of Theology

The Enlightenment, however, “transformed the intellectual map of Europe.<sup>24</sup> In brief, the Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century European intellectual development which continued the scientific spirit of the thought of Descartes, John Locke, and Isaac Newton. Enlightenment thinkers distrusted tradition (including the Bible) “in matters of intellectual inquiry, and believed that truth could be attained only through reason, observation, and experiment.”<sup>25</sup> The result for theology was that theology began to be treated as an academic science. The word, “science,” (*scientia*) has been used in defining theology at least as far back as Augustine. But it is clear that the pre-Enlightenment theologians understood science in the sense of the analyzed and synthesized doctrines of Scripture studied in connection with Christian living. Perkins’ definition above is a prime example: “Theology is the science of living blessedly forever.”

### The Definition of Theology

In the post-Enlightenment era, “science” took on the connotation of a specialized field—that which is called “science” today. And some of the definitions

---

theology might be the theological studies of the post-Reformation Protestant scholastics, both Reformed and Lutheran. For a study of these Lutheran theologians, see Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970). The German Pietist movement arose in part as a response to their lack of emphasis on Christian living.

<sup>22</sup>John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* (London: Tegg and Co., 1839; reprint, Atlanta: Turner Lassetter, 1965).

<sup>23</sup>John Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

<sup>24</sup>*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., s. v. “The Enlightenment,” ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997) 547.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 546.

of theology, even those devised by evangelical heroes, describe theology in terms of inductive science, rather in relation to living. W. G. T. Shedd wrote that theology “is a science that is concerned with both the Infinite and Finite, with both God and the Universe. The material, therefore, which it includes is vaster than that of any other science. It is also the most necessary of all the sciences.”<sup>26</sup> Charles Hodge writes, “Theology, therefore, is the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation, with the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.”<sup>27</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote: “Systematic Theology may be defined as the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works.”<sup>28</sup>

This writer has no desire to minimize the greatness of these theologians and their books. They all wrote much about Christian living and regularly applied theology to ethics. They have been greatly used by God in the lives of Bible-believing Christians. But is systematic theology a science? In some ways, yes. Thomas Oden writes,

Insofar as it seeks to make accurate observations, test evidence, provide fit hypotheses, arrange facts in due order, and make reliable generalizations, the study of God may be called a science. It employs both inductive and deductive argument. It relies upon the same primary laws of thought and the same categories of reason upon which all scientific inquiry depends.<sup>29</sup>

But in other ways, theology ought not to be thought of as a science. For one reason, “science means for so many the ruling out of all forms of evidence that do not submit to naturalistic observation, quantification, and measurement.”<sup>30</sup> For another reason, defining theology as a science misses the emphasis on living blessedly through theology, and seems to relegate the study of theology to the mythical ivory tower of the academic world. In this way, defining theology as a science misses the needed emphasis on living blessedly through theology and too much reflects Enlightenment thought.

### **The Neutrality of Theology**

One of the main theses of the Enlightenment was that every discipline of academic study should be studied from a neutral, non-religious perspective. J. Andrew Kirk, in his discussion of liberation theologians, makes this point:

---

<sup>26</sup>W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889) 1:16.

<sup>27</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (reprint of 1885 ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 1:19.

<sup>28</sup>Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947) 1:16.

<sup>29</sup>Oden, *Systematic Theology* 351.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 354.

Since the Enlightenment, theology, like every other discipline, has sought to gain independence from the control of the church in order to pursue its studies according to its own canons and methods. To do this it unhesitatingly accepted the 19th-century emphasis on the inviolability of the scientific method. It isolated itself in the theological faculties of the state universities (especially in Germany) and insulated its work from the daily life and mission of the Christian community.<sup>31</sup>

Postmodernists today do not advocate neutrality, to be sure. Still the modernist idea that academic disciplines, including theology, should be approached from a neutral perspective has had long-lasting results.

### **The Professionalization of Theology**

One result of the Enlightenment idea of academic neutrality was the professionalization of theology. The change to academic professionalization in America was dramatic around the end of the nineteenth century. As Mark Noll has shown, “as late as 1875, virtually every American who could be called an expert in the study of Scripture sustained some kind of a denominational connection and devoted the results of biblical scholarship primarily to the ongoing spirituality of the church. Change was dramatic.”<sup>32</sup> After the change to professionalization, by and large theologians no longer felt responsible to their religious constituency, but looked to their academic peers for approval. In many instances, theology became an essential part of the academy rather than the church. The trend was therefore to divorce ethics from theology. Thus in the present era, “morality has come to be construed as independent of God, so much so that the majority of moral philosophers today would without hesitation affirm that even if God exists, morality can exist apart from God—an ontological critique—and, if the precepts or dictates of morality can be known at all, they can be known apart from religious orthodoxy or theological reflection—an epistemological critique.”<sup>33</sup>

### **The Education of Theologians**

Accompanying the divorce of ethics from theology was a significant change in the education of pastors in America.<sup>34</sup> Before the Revolutionary War, young men prepared for the ministry by living in the homes of older ministers. Though this kind of pastoral training was somewhat successful, not all of the older ministers could provide the breadth of training the younger pastors needed. Gradually, therefore, church leaders turned to the college to provide the theological education. The change to the academy for theological education also increased the impact of

---

<sup>31</sup>J. Andrew Kirk, *Theology Encounters Revolution* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1980) 127.

<sup>32</sup>Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986) 33.

<sup>33</sup>David J. Baggett, “Theistic Ethics: Toward a Christian Solution,” *The Asbury Theological Journal* 54 (Fall 1999):5.

<sup>34</sup>Haddon Robinson, “The Theologian and the Evangelist,” *JETS* 28/1 (March 1985):3-4.

theological liberalism. Professors in the colleges and seminaries were often enamored with the latest scholarship that came from the Continent, and the critical views taught in the classroom filtered down through the students to the churches.

Eventually, many earnest Christians became disgusted with the attacks on the Bible and the fundamentals of the faith by those who called themselves Christian theologians. For these, theological seminaries were perceived as cemeteries, and theology was viewed as something significant only to the philosophers.

The point of this survey is to clarify that it was the negative external influences that made theology irrelevant to ethics, not theology itself. As Allister McGrath says, "It is . . . important to appreciate that the tension is . . . not primarily between *theology* and spirituality, but between *modern western concepts of theology* and spirituality."<sup>35</sup> Theology should be the foundation of all correct living. "Like Siamese twins, ethics and doctrine are closely connected. How we should live and what we should believe are in fact inseparable."<sup>36</sup>

## **ETHICS: THEISTIC IN ESSENCE (Theology Proper)**

### **The Source of Ethics: God's Being**

According to postmodernism, standards of right and wrong are power issues. Rules and regulations have been invented by some power group, often the white European males, to maintain the power of their community over other communities. To cover up their power grab, the power group often pretends that their ethical system comes from a god. But, "if morality is rooted in a God who doesn't exist," writes David Baggett, "then morality is largely illusory; . . . [M]orality is either purely conventional, or a way to keep the proletariat in line, or a repression of our best instincts, and the list goes on."<sup>37</sup> In other words, if truth and values are free-floating, disconnected from God, people can create truth and values for preservation and self-promotion. This eventually will lead, not to toleration, but "warring factions and isolated depraved individuals,"<sup>38</sup> where everyone does what is right in his own eyes (cf. Judg 21:25).

According to biblical Christianity, however, God decrees standards of right and wrong. The Creator God actually determines ethical values. "As the one who values truly, God is the standard for value, and this God calls us to value after the manner our Creator values."<sup>39</sup> This answers the age-old question of the philosopher: Is "the . . . holy . . . beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is

<sup>35</sup>Allister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 27.

<sup>36</sup>Roy B. Zuck, ed., *Vital Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994) 9.

<sup>37</sup>Baggett, "Theistic Ethics" 6.

<sup>38</sup>Veith, *Postmodern Times* 198.

<sup>39</sup>Grenz, *The Moral Quest* 258.

beloved of the gods.”<sup>40</sup> Robert Reymond replies,

Now the Christian has a ready answer to this question. Not only is the God of Christian theism the Governor of the world; He is also the final Legislator. It is His will that establishes the rightness or wrongness of all human deportment. His will determines the norms of morality. *Nothing is right or wrong in and of itself.* An act is right if God says it is right, wrong if God says it is wrong. There is *no* law outside of or above God which distinguishes between piety and impiety. Hence, for the Christian the answer is obvious—a thing is holy *because* God loves (decrees) it as such.<sup>41</sup>

What God decides is holy and moral and required of human beings is thus neither based on some standard outside of God, nor arbitrary. God wills certain values because they reflect His nature. Because He is just and merciful, for example, He requires these values in human beings. Christians are to be holy because God is holy (1 Pet 1:16).

### The Goal of Ethics: God’s Glory

Not only is God the source of ethical standards, His glory is the goal of ethics. We are familiar with the catechism’s questions and answer: “What is the chief end of man?” “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”<sup>42</sup> Paul encouraged the Corinthians, “Whether therefore you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” And how do believers glorify God? In what has been called “the most profound treatise on the glory of God,”<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Edwards explains that God’s supreme end in creating the universe was that there might be “the emanation of God’s glory; or the excellent brightness and fullness of the divinity diffused, overflowing, and as it were enlarged; or in one word, *existing ad extra.*”<sup>44</sup> God wanted to share His knowledge, holiness, and happiness with humans. Edwards continues,

In the creature’s knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in, and praising God, the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged; his fullness is received and returned. . . . The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God, and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole *is* of God, and *in* God, and *to* God; and God is the

<sup>40</sup>Plato, “Euthyphro,” *The Works of Plato*, ed. by B. Jowett (New York: Dial, n.d.) 3:77.

<sup>41</sup>Robert Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) 82.

<sup>42</sup>“The Westminster Shorter Catechism,” *Creeds of Christendom*, ed. by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 3:676.

<sup>43</sup>Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* 21. Jones’ discussion of the glory of God and his use of Jonathan Edwards’ works are very helpful.

<sup>44</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” *Ethical Writings*, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. by Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1989) 527.

beginning, middle and end in this affair.<sup>45</sup>

We glorify God, therefore, by enjoying His Godness—by coming to know Him in a personal way through Jesus Christ His Son, and by sharing His values.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Motive of Ethics: Love for God and Man**

The motive for proper ethics is also theistic. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt 22:37-40). Theologians have pointed out that love for God is composed most perfectly of a complex of affections traditionally referred to as satisfaction and good will. In William Ames’s explanation, “The Love which is satisfaction is that affection by which we approve of all that is in God and rest in his supreme goodness. . . . The love which is good will is the affection which bids us yield ourselves wholly to God.”<sup>47</sup>

On the basis of our love for God, we can then love man. In other words, love for mankind is not free-floating, but is grounded in our love for God. Jonathan Edwards writes,

Love to God is the foundation of gracious love to men. Men are loved either because they are in some respect like God, either they have the nature or spiritual image of God; or because of their relation to God as his children, as his creatures, as those who are beloved of God, or those to whom divine mercy is offered, or in some other way from regard to God.<sup>48</sup>

### **ETHICS: TRANSCENDENT IN DOCTRINE**

The other doctrines of theology also play a vital part in the foundation of one’s ethical system. These include bibliology, anthropology, hamartiology, soteriology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. A brief description of their roles follows.

#### **Bibliology**

The doctrine of the Bible is vital to ethics. The second question of the

---

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 531.

<sup>46</sup>See also John Piper’s discussion, *Desiring God* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1986) 14-50.

<sup>47</sup>Ames, *Marrow of Theology* 251.

<sup>48</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings* 133-34.

Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?” And the answer is, “The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.”<sup>49</sup>

As certain as this is, a few important problems yet confront the student of Scripture developing his ethics.<sup>50</sup> The Bible does not deal directly with numerous ethical problems that exist in the twenty-first century. Many new societal structures such as trade unions and the internet, and ethical problems such as genetic engineering, have only recently surfaced. The writers of Scripture obviously could not have considered these issues. Moreover, the Bible is not written to be an ethical textbook, systematically dealing with every legal, social, and ethical problem that can be imagined. Furthermore, the changing of dispensational conditions raises the question of what in the OT Mosaic Law continues as a law code for the NT Christian.

So how does the Bible give ethical direction?<sup>51</sup> First, there is prohibition. The Bible says, “Don’t do something,” and we must not. “Thou shalt not murder,” for example, is an important prohibition for medical ethics. Second, the Bible records permission. This can be complex because many things are permitted which Scripture does not specifically mention. Whether believers are permitted to smoke a pipe, or to attend a rock and roll concert, for examples, must be based on broader biblical principles. Third, there are commands, such as Gal 6:10: “While we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” Fourth, there is precedent: “Have you never read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered the house of God and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?” (Matt 12:3-4). Fifth, there is example. David’s mighty men were praised for their courage in bringing water from the well in Bethlehem (2 Sam 23:13-17). An action is thus condoned by praise.

### **Anthropology and Hamartiology**

Anthropology is also vital in ethics, specifically in discovering the meaning and importance of being made in the likeness and image of God. Hamartiology, the doctrine of sin, explains that we live in a society that has been devastated by man’s fall into sin. All the ills of society, all the injury of man to man, all of the criminality

---

<sup>49</sup>“Westminster Shorter Catechism,” *Creeeds of Christendom* 3:676.

<sup>50</sup>See I. Howard Marshall, “Using the Bible in Ethics,” in *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics*, ed. by David F. Wright (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1979) 40 ff.

<sup>51</sup>John Frame suggests four specific ways in *Medical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 12-18; David Jones gives seven in *Biblical Christian Ethics* 62-68.

and disorder can be traced back to the Fall (Genesis 3).<sup>52</sup> Moreover, because of sin in the universe, we have to deal with what sometimes appears as conflicting duties—another major problem in constructing a proper ethical system.

### **Soteriology**

Because of personal sin and depravity that infects every part of our beings, we cannot meet God's standards without His grace. Ken Boa writes,

The Bible reveals God's character and it also shows that all men have true moral guilt—they fall short of God's standard. However, the Bible also reveals that God himself has provided a solution to this moral dilemma through the substitutionary work of Christ. He offers release from sin's dominion and provides a way of reconciliation with the holy God.<sup>53</sup>

Then through the process of sanctification, God renews the redeemed into the image of Christ.

### **Pneumatology**

Meeting God's ethical standards is more than just legalistically trying to follow biblical laws or principles. The indwelling Holy Spirit reminds believers of biblical principles and enables them to fulfill them with the proper heart attitude. Thus, walking in the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit are integral parts of godly ethics.

### **Ecclesiology**

God has provided the local church as a means of helping Christians to live the godly life. Public prayer, the ordinances, teaching of the Word, and other means of worship, help them to live as God desires. Even church discipline has as one of its major goals the conforming of the believer to the image of Christ. Perhaps nothing is more important for one's personal ethics than fellowship with a loving covenant people, encouraging, admonishing, and holding one another accountable.

### **Eschatology**

In the millennial kingdom, God's ethical program will find its pre-eternal state culmination as Jesus Christ Himself rules over this earth. But even then, men

---

<sup>52</sup>See further, Harry Blamires, *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988) 55.

<sup>53</sup>Ken Boa, "What Is Behind Morality?" in *Vital Contemporary Issues* 23.

and women will show themselves as sometimes unwilling to live as God requires. At the end of the kingdom, Satan will lead unregenerate mankind in a massive rebellion against the King. In the eternal state, however, redeemed men and women will no longer sin. Their values and ethical systems will be without flaw, because of the marvelous grace of God.

### CONCLUSION

We live in a society that increasingly is denying the existence of God, absolute truth, and absolute moral standards. What should be our response to our society's deteriorating value system? I have argued in this essay that the true and universal ethical system is based on a theology based on the Christian Scriptures. I have also argued that we cannot sell out to the culture. As Alister McGrath has written,

[G]ood doctrine makes for good ethics. . . . And doctrine seeks to preserve Christian distinctiveness, to present Christianity from submerging in the swamp of liberal American culture. We must not be afraid to be distinct. As Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, we must shine out as stars in the darkness of the night sky.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup>Alister McGrath, "In What Way Can Jesus Be a Moral Example for Christians?" *JETS* 34/3 (September 1991):298.