CBC Sunday School
Christian Ethics: Toward a Distinctly Christian Ethic
December 5, 2021

I. Discussion Question

Your friend is a practicing homosexual and wants you to attend their wedding. How do you respond? What biblical truths and Christian ethics shape your decision?

II. The Necessity of Christian Ethics
- A. Any ethical system, if it is to have any real bearing on us, requires absolute principles.
  1. Secular ethics seek to find absolutes somewhere other than God and His Word. Rejecting Scripture, secular ethics seek authority elsewhere. For example:
     - a. Human subjectivity – relativist ethics
     - b. Empirical world and cause and effect – consequentialist ethics
     - c. Authoritative words, logic, or reason – deontological ethics
  2. All of these have proven to be inconsistent, fallen, unreliable, conflicting, etc.
  3. The secular world searches for a trustworthy ethic, but will fail without God. They are all lacking, seeking something more.

- B. Christian ethics present a coherent system, incorporating all perspectives, wherein we can expect to find a consistent ethic between and in the law, the self, and the world, because God has ordained and created all three realms. All bear the mark of His character and being, thus presenting a consistent, reliable ethic. These perspectives need not conflict, but can complement one another.

  1. God's ethic can be found in the self, in image-bearers (relativist perspective).
     - a. Genesis 1:27 – We are created in His image, carrying His ethic.
     - b. Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10 – We have the new self, image of Christ.
     - c. From a Christian worldview, we can affirm that sound ethics might be derived from within ourselves, and from within a community, because we are image bearers. As Paul says in Romans 2:14, they may be a law unto themselves.
     - d. If a community is grounded in God, and controlled by His Spirit, it especially can produce a healthy and beneficial ethic.
     - e. Even sinful communities create ethical standards that are consistent with the character of God. Even among criminals, there are "codes" that reflect something of God's character and heart.

  2. God's ethic can be found in the world He created (consequentialist perspective).
     - a. Psalm 19 – Creation preaches the glory and reality of God and His will.
     - b. Romans 1:18-20 – Creation reveals the divine nature of God.
     - c. Because we live in a created and ordered world, we can anticipate some type of just or good pattern of cause and effect.
     - d. Not only that, but because God created the world, we should be able to derive a workable ethic from the natural operations of cause and effect.

e. However, if God is not incorporated, a consequentialist ethic, derived from the operations of the world, can be cruel and oppressive. That is, it can quickly devolve into "survival of the fittest," "might makes right," and "the ends justify the means."

3. God's ethic can be found chiefly in Scripture (deontological perspective).
   a. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 – Scripture is to guide us in all our doing, thinking, being.
   b. 2 Timothy 3:15-17 – God's inspired Word equips us for every good work.
   c. 2 Peter 1:19-21 – The prophetic word lights our path, teaching us how to live.
   d. Given clear divine commands and teaching, this is the perspective that grounds all other ethical perspectives.
   e. What is taught in the commands of God should be reinforced by those who bear His image, and evidenced in the world He created.
   f. Beyond that, the *imago dei* within, and the natural revelation around us, both assist to help us perceive the divine commands of God. They all work together to communicate a divine ethic.
   g. Only when we trust in God can we trust that a normative law is good and transcendent, binding and beneficial. Without God, laws are simply manmade, and questionable as to whether or not they are worthy of obedience. Secular, non-divine commands are inherently arbitrary, for they do not come from a transcendent source.
   h. In fact, a normative law without a good God will also be oppressive, for it cannot be fully good.
   i. Only divine law, and divine consequences, and people bearing a divine image, can produce a stable and reliable ethic.

III. The True Foundation of Christian Ethics
   A. Christian Virtue
      1. Virtue ethics ask three interrelated questions:
         a. Who are we?
         b. Who are we to be, or become?
         c. How do we get there?
      2. Other ethical systems focus entirely on "doing the right thing."
      3. Virtue ethics question whether we are capable of doing the right thing. That is, virtue ethics focus on the more fundamental question of who we are.
         a. Who is the person making the decision?
         b. Do we even have the ability to do the right thing?
         c. If we are right in our being, we will be right in our deciding and acting.
         d. Virtue ethics is about character before it is about outcomes.
      4. Proponents of virtue ethics:
         a. Plato: Argued that being good is not a matter of doing good, but of having a well-ordered soul.
            i. Argued for four chief virtues: courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom.
            ii. Virtues are those characteristics that enable us to achieve "happiness."
            iii. Right-being leads to well-being.

        b. Aristotle: Argued that the happy or virtuous man is one of a settled character. The "magnanimous man" is the ideal: one who is poised, stable, non-dramatic, contented, unhurried, and deliberate.

        c. Stanley Hauerwas: Christian professor at Duke University, and one of the most prominent proponents of Christian virtue ethics.

           i. Character orders a person's desires, affections, and actions.

           ii. Only when the right (i.e. Christian) beliefs are held will someone see and respond to situations properly. Christian character and beliefs are determinative.

    5. Other ethical systems don't sufficiently account for the moral person.

        a. Secular ethics might be able to tell you what good to do (law).

        b. Secular ethics cannot change you so that you are able to do good (gospel).

    6. Consider: Christian ethics may actually be more concerned with who we are and who we are becoming than with the momentary question of what we do in each situation.

        a. Character formation is more important than "making the right choice."

        b. Character formation happens through thousand of thoughtful choices that reinforce priorities, values, ideals, etc.

        c. The story of Scripture seems to be most concerned with forming a people over time, who will be righteous in the end.

           i. Think of the stories of David, Abraham, and Moses, or even of Paul and Peter. Or think of Israel and the Church. These are all stories of formation into holiness over time, with many sins along the way.

           ii. God is patient. He grows a people into His perfection. He does not create a people who only and always make the right choices.

           iii. This perspective does not excuse poor or sinful choices. We grow into Christ as we increasingly make more Christlike choices.

B. Christian Virtue Personified

    1. All proper ethics are personified in Jesus Christ.

        a. Jesus is the only perfectly ethical, sinless person who ever lived.

           i. Hebrews 4:15

           ii. 1 Peter 1:18-19; 2:22

           iii. 2 Corinthians 5:21

           iv. Isaiah 53:9

           v. 1 John 3:5

        b. The New Testament commands us to be like Christ.

           i. Matthew 6:33

           ii. Colossians 3:17

           iii. Ephesians 4:22-24

    2. As we are made like and conformed to Christ, we grow into ethical maturity.

        a. True virtue/ethics comes from maturity into Christ over, time.

           i. James 1:4

           ii. 2 Peter 1:3-4

           iii. Philippians 2:12-16

        b. We are not to become more "like ourselves," but more like Him. Our hope is in being like Christ in the end.

          i.   Romans 13:14
         ii.   2 Corinthians 3:18
        iii.   1 John 1:1-3

    c. Proper ethics requires radical inner, moral change. This must come from God and His Spirit, making us like Jesus.
          i.   Jeremiah 31:31-34
         ii.   Ezekiel 36:25-31
    d. The gospel is the source of all true ethical actions, for the gospel changes us to be like Christ, enabling us to live ethically before God.
    e. True happiness, fulfillment, and virtue is found in Christ, and being like Him.
    f. Our moral/ethical life is determined by allegiance not to a system or code, but to an historical person, who is the source of all well-being.
    g. Our ethics must be all about Jesus, through Jesus, by the Spirit, for the glory of God.

IV. Applying a Christian Ethic

A. Utilizing All Ethical Perspectives
    1. In any situation, to determine an ethical response, we as Christians incorporate multiple ethical perspectives.
    2. In any situation we may ask:
        a. First, what does Scripture say?
        b. Second, how might we achieve the best outcome?
        c. Third, how must I behave to best love God and neighbor?
        d. Most importantly, what is most like Christ, our standard of ethical character?
    3. Any action that does not rightly address all of these may not be sufficiently Christian.

B. Application – Discussion
    1. Going back to the discussion at the beginning: Your friend is a practicing homosexual and wants you to attend their wedding. How do you apply a Christian ethic and determine a best response? How do the deontological, relativist, and consequentialist perspectives inform your response? What would be a Christlike response?

    2. Your boss demands that you do some work which you know to be unethical, maybe even illegal. Disobeying their command will cost you your job. How do you respond, taking all ethical perspectives, including the ethics of Jesus, into account?