

10 PROCESS

We have considered some of the most important forces and factors with which the Christian must come to terms as he tries to decide and do what is right. They are: corruption, motivation, norms, forms, reason, resources, failure, improvement, and conscience. We have explored these items individually and noted some of the ways in which they relate to one another.

At this point we need a process, an orderly and systematic method which puts these things together and makes an operable ethical system. In this chapter such a process is described. It consists of a conventional problem-solving method into which the basic components of Christian ethics have been inserted. The form into which this process has been integrated is a step-by-step operation, concrete and practical in nature, by which the serious Christian can make the kinds of analysis and application that the ethical task requires.

This process is offered with the conviction that it is both sound and effective, that it is a useful way to work through difficult and confusing moral issues. It is not, however, the only way; other approaches may be equally valid and workable. God has nowhere revealed a complete ethical process, though He has

supplied us with necessary truths about Himself and ourselves. In Christian liberty and on the basis of "sanctified" common sense, we are to develop or adapt an ethical method which incorporates these truths and which works satisfactorily for us.

A process of this kind is necessary only for exceptionally complex and ambiguous ethical questions. For the vast majority of our ethical decisions, the detailed or involved process described below is unnecessary. We have a moral standard, that is, clear and confident convictions about right and wrong, in most areas of life. In at least nine out of ten ethical decisions conscience applies the moral standard, and no further thought or research is necessary. We know almost reflexively what we ought to do or avoid from the moral standard. Doing what we believe is right may not always be easy, but knowing what is right is quite automatic in most cases, as the conscience reads and interprets the moral standard.

However, in some situations we do not know clearly and readily what we ought to do. We are confronted by alternatives about which Scripture does not speak explicitly or with finality. Our moral standard is not formed or informed about the matter. We are confused by conflicting views and values which others express. We must cross new and uncharted territory. Although this may happen only in a minority of cases, it does happen. When it does, we need a process, an organized method of exploring the question and determining God's will.

In those rare instances we need such a process urgently. Otherwise we may act impulsively or intuitively, which is simply unwise. Impulses and intuition are too easily swayed by the worst elements in and around us. To act responsibly we need to utilize the best available information and guidance, and this almost inevitably involves a process.

1. *Seek the Spirit's Guidance and Strength*

As has been stated, evangelical ethics is, above all, ethics of the Holy Spirit. In the struggle to arrive at a perception of right and wrong in a confusing situation, we have more to go on than some written guidelines and our own judgment. We have a Person, a living, loving, divine Person—the Holy Spirit. He is present with us in the struggle, communicating, influencing, and encouraging. Jesus refers to Him as the Counselor who will lead us into all truth.

It is not just a pious platitude that Christian ethical reflection must begin, continue, and end with the Holy Spirit. As we go about the task of investigating, weighing, and deciding, we should be aware of the Spirit's presence. We should specifically request His involvement, confessing our dependence upon Him. In Scripture He offers us His help. He promises to listen and respond to our requests for spiritual and moral assistance of any kind. We should take Him at His Word and act on the basis of His promises. Throughout each step of the process we should review in prayer with Him all the input that we receive from outside sources as well as our own thoughts and insights. We should keep in close and continuous contact with Him, make Him our partner in the process. No other factor is more vital to wise and true ethical response than the presence and influence of the Spirit.

The Spirit is also an indispensable source of strength. To do what we recognize as God's will always requires more moral strength than we possess. In many cases it requires extraordinary courage, determination, and selflessness. For this, too, we should be reaching out to the Holy Spirit consciously and consistently. We should admit our weakness and rely confidently on Him to provide the needed strength. Only what we do by His power and guidance can be considered good, in the strictest sense of the word. If we neglect this first step—involving the Spirit—the rest of the process is certain to break down.

2. *Analyze and Research the Issue*

The second step consists of rational inquiry, in which we gather information about the problem at hand and interpret it to the best of our ability. It includes taking advantage of the study and experience of others by reading what they have written on the subject or by consulting them. Our purpose in this step is to try to understand the issue or problem as clearly as possible, to become aware of its extent, complexities, implications, as well as the various possibilities and alternatives related to it. Not only the issue in general but also our particular situation must be investigated. We should also try to determine how one's individuality, as well as that of others who are involved, affects the moral character of the issue.

A serious difficulty in carrying out this step is the overwhelming mass of material which is available on many issues with which

we must deal. Information, interpretations, opinions, conclusions—many of which are divergent or even conflicting—are there in great profusion, bidding for our attention and acceptance. Consequently, we must learn how to select carefully and wisely among the available materials. Since we cannot explore everything, we must become skilled in determining in advance which sources are likely to be most reliable and useful. Such skill is, hopefully, gained in the course of formal education. However, it may also be acquired by experience and in informal learning situations.

Another essential skill in analyzing and researching a moral issue is the ability to distinguish between facts, opinions, and interpretations. Usually these are intermingled in the reports and comments on moral issues which we study. They need to be distinguished and sorted out, for they have different kinds of authority and value. Furthermore, we need to be able to uncover the presuppositions and biases of the persons whose work we consider, and determine how these affect their work.

Frequently, when trying to understand an unfamiliar area about which you have to make an ethical decision, it is necessary to rely on a knowledgeable and experienced person who can guide you. Such a person can direct you to the most relevant and accurate information, can help you to recognize some of the key questions, and can serve as a sounding board for your ideas and conclusions as they are formed.

In choosing such a person, it is extremely important to know his beliefs and values. Despite claims which are often made to the contrary, these do affect a counselor's selection and interpretation of data, as well as his recommendations. Without realizing that it is happening, a counselee's or a student's moral standard will often be revised into that of the counselor or teacher. Evangelical Christians who wish to retain their belief and value systems will do well to rely for expert help on other evangelical Christians. (On the other hand, it is also advisable to get a viewpoint different from one's own. Evangelical Christians have no monopoly on expertise or truth. The limitations of one's own moral tradition are often more obvious to the outsider than to the insider.)

Very early in the ethical process it is necessary to come to an adequate understanding of the issue, through research and rational analysis. In the absence of good information and interpre-

tation about the problem, one may make poor decisions and take harmful courses of action, with the very best of intentions.

A dramatic example of this is the kind of assistance given to poor and underdeveloped nations after World War II. Confronted by widespread infectious diseases among the people of these countries, the United States and other "advanced" nations supplied them with large quantities of antibiotic medicines, thus saving millions of lives. What we did not realize, because of inadequate research, was that these nations were woefully undersupplied with food. By saving many lives with medicine, we had in fact merely increased the number of those who would die of starvation. Reducing the death rate without proportionately increasing the food supply was not exactly a kindness. Valid moral decisions must be based on adequate information and insight, and this requires analysis and research.

3. *Come to Terms with Corruption in Self and Others*

The presence and power of sin intrudes prominently into the decision-making process. We need to be aware of this and to have a healthy respect for it. Although the guilt of our sin is completely forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ, the power of sin is still active within us, confusing and misleading. In ways that are often very subtle and difficult to discern, the power of sin tries to make good seem evil and evil good. The best, wisest, and most pious Christian persons whom we consult are also sinful, capable of misleading and of being misled. As ideas and views are forming about a moral issue, as information and influence come our way from other people, we must be willing to ask some hard and embarrassing questions: In what way and to what extent may this be twisted, distorted by sin, corrupt, of the devil?

One important way to test an idea, view, or value for corruption is to compare it, in presupposition, implication, and substance, with God's revealed will in the law. The problem is that many of the most troublesome issues which we confront are dealt with only indirectly or obliquely in Scripture. However, by careful study and inference we will be able to discover areas of contact and similarity. We will be able to detect or at least to sense deviation from God's will.

In addition to the written Word of Scripture with which to test for corruption, we also have the Holy Spirit within. He illuminates and judges the components of moral decisions as they are

forming. As we deal with information and views about moral issues, we should submit them to Him in prayer and contemplation, asking Him to expose and condemn whatever is wrong. Scripture and the Spirit keep us alert to the presence of corruption and thus able to minimize its influence.

4. *Identify, Interpret, and Apply Biblical Norms*

Discovering biblical norms can be very challenging. In this part of the process we are trying to find guidance in the Bible for issues which are not discussed there directly or in detail. We are working with issues and points of interpretation about which there may be no clear consensus even among sensitive, committed, and informed evangelical Christians. To identify, interpret, and apply biblical norms under these circumstances is a delicate and somewhat tenuous operation. However, it must be undertaken. Otherwise, instead of depending primarily on God for guidance, we will be depending on ourselves or other equally limited and corrupt human beings, and that would be dangerous.

What kind of biblical norms can we hope to find in cases like this? Perhaps the best way to describe them is to say that although they may be sufficient and even convincing, they are not absolute.

As may be recalled from chapter 3, biblical ethical norms are, first of all, a model of Christian personhood. By a large number of biblical commands and moral examples regarding many areas of life, God creates in us a sense or a feel of His will. On the basis of what He has revealed in these areas, we can often predict quite accurately what His will is also in those areas not discussed specifically in Scripture.

Furthermore, we can arrive at valid moral principles and rules. This requires not only a sensitive, inferential interpretation of relevant Scripture, but also careful analysis of the context of the moral issue. *Principles* are general guidelines ("Conserve nonrenewable energy resources"). *Rules* are more specific ("Keep the thermostat at 65 degrees or lower"). If we have examined both Scripture and the moral issue diligently and have been open to the Spirit's guidance, we will emerge with direction from God which is an adequate basis for action.

The level of certainty may vary. On one issue we may come to a very clear and confident conviction about what the will of God is. On another we may be less sure that we have perceived God's

will accurately. On still another we may have serious questions about the correctness of our moral judgment. In the latter case, one would prefer not to have to act, in order to wait for greater clarification and confidence, but that is not always possible. Often we must act even in the face of ethical and moral uncertainty. God has not promised always to lead us to absolute ethical norms, but He has promised direction sufficient to enable us to live responsibly in this confusing and sinful world. More important, He promises grace to cover the ethical and moral mistakes which we inevitably make, no matter how conscientiously we may try to avoid them.

The element of uncertainty in these ethical norms should be reflected in the way that we use them. Since God has not spoken explicitly and unequivocally on these issues, we cannot be dogmatic about them. We may and must be sure enough to decide and act ourselves. We may feel confident enough to try to persuade others to accept and live by these norms, too. However, we cannot demand that others accept our perception of God's will in these ambiguous areas. We must respect the right and responsibility of others to identify and formulate ethical norms for themselves, and to come to conclusions different from our own.

Furthermore, we should be willing to consider the ethical views of those who disagree with us; we should examine the Scriptural and factual bases of their views and compare them with our own. The element of uncertainty makes an attitude of humility and openness on our part most appropriate. Nevertheless, the conclusion to which we have come by our own prayer, study, and reflection is authoritative and binding for us until and unless we are convinced differently from Scripture or other valid sources.

In this connection it may be well to restate some basic guidelines for interpreting biblical ethical norms. These were discussed more fully in chapter 5: (1) New Testament material has precedence over Old Testament material. (2) Clear imperatives have more authority than moral examples. (3) Clear imperatives have more authority than directives inferred from doctrines. (4) Historically and culturally conditioned commands must be distinguished from those which are binding for all times. (5) Ethical norms should be based on at least several clear passages of Scripture.

Here, as in the previous step of the process, the assistance of a

knowledgeable and experienced person can be invaluable. Many Christians need help locating and understanding the biblical material which speaks to the moral issue which they are pondering. They also need help selecting works which comment on these Scripture passages. All Christians can benefit from ethical discussion with other competent Christians as they are searching out God's will. Such discussion provides them with the opportunity to clarify and test the validity of their own position. Although we must all, ultimately, make our own ethical decisions, it is only prudent to take advantage of the best available counsel and aid.

5. *Examine, Correct, and Strengthen Motives*

Motives can make or break an ethical decision. They profoundly affect the quality of a moral action. As a critical factor in the process, they require close scrutiny, delicate adjustment, and solid support.

To properly investigate and evaluate our own motives we must be not only candid but even downright suspicious. We have to ask some deep and unsettling questions: What is moving me as I make this decision or take this course of action? Are my professed reasons the real reasons? Or are they just a cover for other, less admirable motives which I do not like to admit even to myself? Am I really most concerned to honor God and help people and only secondarily to please or serve myself? To what extent are my motives mixed, that is, permeated with selfish, loveless, godless impulses? To what extent is the devil moving me, rather than God?

Questions like these inevitably turn up evidences of sinfulness. But this does not mean that they reveal *only* sinfulness. The Holy Spirit and the new person are also alive and effective within us, generating authentic motivation. However, mingled with and often overshadowing these are unworthy motives originating from the old person and the enemy. Once we face up to these corrupt motives, God forgives and counteracts them.

In addition, God reinforces the proper motivation which grows out of faith, love, and self-acceptance. He does this by presenting Christ to us in the gospel, by offering us love, reconciliation, and transformation through Him along with a new vision of what we can become. Along with Christ God gives us the Holy Spirit, who penetrates the depths of our being, adjust-

ing, purifying, and energizing us. In the final analysis God is not satisfied only to be our motivator; He also wants to be our chief motive. By honest probing into our motives, we can facilitate His functioning in this way.

6. *Establish Suitable Goals*

A goal is something we hope to accomplish through a specific course of action. Ordinarily it involves a change which we intend to make in a given situation. Our goal should be consistent with and expressive of the directive we arrive at as we identify, interpret, and apply biblical norms. In fact, the goal is the concrete application of that directive or norm.

Several examples may clarify both the relation and the distinction between norms and goals. Suppose that the problem or issue with which you are dealing is an unhappy and disappointing marriage. Your question is: What should I do about this marriage? What does God want me to do? First, you must identify the relevant biblical norms according to the procedure described in step four. Your reading of that norm might be: cherish, preserve, and improve your marriage. However, in order to follow that norm with any degree of success, you must first translate it into concrete and practical changes that you propose to make in your marriage to follow God's will. Such steps might be: restore communication with my spouse; revive affection and respect; eliminate causes of tension. Goals are proposed revisions in attitude and behavior derived from biblical norms.

Another example, this time related to a social issue, also illustrates how goals may be derived from norms. An urgent need which should be stabbing the conscience of every Christian in the Western world is that of hunger. What should we do about the growing multitudes in underdeveloped nations who are starving? If we listen to Scripture on this issue, we will hear the norm loud and clear: Feed the hungry; get help to them; assume responsibility for them. However, this is still very general and, consequently, vague. To give focus and clarity to our response, we must translate the biblical norm and directive into a definite and manageable thesis. This may involve addressing only one or two aspects of the problem. With regard to world hunger, our goal might be to get food to starving Africans as soon as possible, or do something to avert future famines there, or both. We are

far more likely to respond and to respond effectively to a moral issue if we formulate a definite goal on the basis of the biblical norm.

To be suitable, a goal must not only be specific and consistent with God's will, it must also be feasible and attainable. It must hold some realistic promise of being accomplished. Although it is healthy and stimulating to elevate our sights and establish lofty and challenging goals, it is counterproductive to set them too high. In deciding what we ought to do, we must express this in terms of what we are able to do. As Christians we have good reasons for being optimistic to the point of daring, because we are assured of God's own involvement and support in the good that we undertake in His name. However, this should not be construed as encouragement for reckless and unreachable goals.

A critical factor in goal setting is assessment of probable consequences. As we determine the target of our moral effort, we should try to anticipate both the short- and long-range results of the goals under consideration. New problems can be hidden in many proposed solutions. The case mentioned in step two, above, is a tragic example of this. The laudable purpose of healing disease and relieving the suffering connected with it eventually created a larger and even more pathetic problem—mass starvation.

Conversely, the selection of a worthy long-term goal may have painful immediate consequences. A friend of mine was born deaf. His parents decided that they ought to prepare him to function as much as possible like a hearing person. This meant that he was not permitted to learn sign language or associate with the deaf community. Rather, he was forced to become proficient at lip-reading and speaking, in order to get along in the hearing community. This involved a considerable amount of frustration and pain in early childhood. However, he became so proficient at lip-reading and speaking that he was able to complete conventional schooling through the high school level with good grades. He was able to operate comfortably in the hearing community, to hold a job which, ordinarily, only a hearing person could hold. Some people did not even realize that he was deaf. The goal which his parents selected was ethical as well as educational. They wanted to do what would be best for him. They selected a goal on the basis on long- rather than short-range consequences, and their judgment appears to have been sound.

7. *Determine and Employ Appropriate Means*

Once we have arrived at a suitable goal, we must devise a way to reach it. Usually there are a number of possibilities. In selecting a means, the Christian is concerned that the means itself be moral, consistent with and expressive of God's will. No matter how worthy the goal, it is wrong to attempt to reach it by evil means. *The end does not justify the means.* For example, it would not be right or appropriate to provide food for victims of famine by means of lying, cheating, stealing, killing, and so on. In an extreme case it might be necessary to resort to an evil means, but the means would still be evil.

This raises the issue of what is sometimes called "the principle of the lesser evil." In this corrupt and complicated world, we do not always have a choice between good and evil alternatives. Sometimes all the alternatives appear to contain clear and serious evil. For example, in order to save someone from a murderous assailant, we may lie about that person's whereabouts. Under such circumstances is the lie good and right?

Some ethicists would say yes. Because it was done to help and protect someone in great danger, the lie in this case was not only permissible but actually good. However, Christians who believe in absolute biblical ethical norms say no. They claim that lying is always a sin, even when done in a desperate situation and in order to avert suffering or death. The person who tells a lie even under these circumstances must humbly bow under the judgment of God's law on account of it and cast himself on God's mercy in Christ.

Faced with a moral dilemma in which we must choose among several evils, we select the alternative which is least evil. However, in so doing we must not assume that we or the action are justified because it was the lesser evil. If we are justified, it is only because we acknowledge it penitently as sin and accept God's pardon for the sake of Jesus' sacrifice.

To be appropriate, a means, like a goal, must also be feasible. It must be workable, sensible, likely to succeed. There is no virtue in setting off on some grandiose scheme that is certain to fail. Ethical and moral responsibility exclude empty heroics. Sober, rational investigation and analysis, together with careful planning and preparation, can lead to the adoption of feasible means.

The goals mentioned above for improving a troubled mar-

riage might be attained through a variety of means. Communication might be facilitated and tension relieved by a skilled and sensitive counselor, or by a marriage enrichment experience. A changed lifestyle which enables the spouses to spend more time together may rekindle closeness. Reducing expenditures may relieve tension over financial problems. More frequent and imaginative expressions of affection may revive love and passion. Avoidance of hurtful and offensive behavior and faithful observance of commitments may restore trust and respect.

Appropriate means for feeding the hungry of the world might be lowering one's standard of living and contributing the money thus saved to the hungry. Or it might be to study agriculture, become an expert in food production, move to some famine-plagued area, and there try to avert future famines. Or it might be to write a book or play to awaken the consciences of others to the needs of starving people and to elicit a supporting response from them.

Obviously, in the selection of means, one's own abilities, resources, opportunities, responsibilities, and roles play a decisive part. The concept of Christian vocation is relevant at this point. God ordinarily calls us to serve Him and other people in our existing relationships and roles. Occasionally He calls individuals to leave their present context to serve in a new place and a new way, but that is the exception. Before looking outside our present situation for means with which to respond to a moral challenge, we should explore the opportunities within that situation.

For example, as a professor of theology, I can probably do far more to alleviate world hunger by teaching, speaking, and writing on the subject than by trying to show people elsewhere how to increase their food production. My financial contributions are far more valuable than my personal presence and involvement in a famine area. However, if I were a young person choosing a career, especially if I had an interest in and aptitude for agricultural science, I might feel called by God to choose a different means of trying to do something about world hunger.

8. *Draw Upon Spiritual and Moral Resources*

In order to make good ethical decisions and then live by them, we need to be spiritually and morally strong. This will happen only if we use the resources that God has provided, the media through which He conveys His guidance and power to us. Espe-

cially when working through a difficult moral issue, we need to draw heavily upon His Word and sacrament and make much use of prayer.

Unfortunately, the opposite often happens. We become so preoccupied with the issue before us that we are distracted from God and the help that He makes available. We become so aware of the problem and anxious about it that we overlook solutions close at hand. Every ethical decision, especially one which troubles and confuses, is an invitation from God to turn to Him and to draw on the resources which He provides.

In addition to God's Word, the Lord's Supper, and prayer, the fellowship of His people is a vital spiritual and moral resource. Not in isolation, but in the community of believers, we should discuss, explore, and resolve our ethical problems. We should test our values, views, and conclusions against those of other informed and experienced Christians. We can find inspiration and encouragement in the moral example of our brothers and sisters in the faith. We can count on them for correction and admonition when we need it. To a significant degree our moral and spiritual strength depends on our use of these resources.

9. *Conduct Adequate Evaluation*

Rarely do we progress or improve in any area without some kind of evaluation. Ideally this will include constructive criticism from others as well as self-evaluation. In order to do better we must become aware of our mistakes so that we can avoid them in the future. We also need to know what we are doing that is correct so that we can reinforce these areas of strength and build upon them. An athlete will listen to his coach and his teammates. He will also study his own performance at practice, during a game, or on film.

Our ethical performance, too, requires evaluation. After we have made a decision and acted upon it, we should review what has happened and reflect upon it. Was it wise, honest, effective? Where were our reasoning and interpretation faulty? Where were they sound? Where were we misinformed? Where were we accurately informed? At what points, if any, were we rationalizing? What aided or interfered with the implementation of the decision? What did we do that was valid and responsible? What were the consequences? How accurately did we anticipate them?

The purpose of evaluation is not to grieve over our mistakes or gloat over our successes, but rather to learn from experience.

10. Rely on God's Forgiveness

Whether the evaluation is positive or negative, what we need more than anything else in the world is God's forgiveness. Even when we make correct decisions and act upon them conscientiously, our performance is still inadequate, acceptable to God only because of His mercy in Christ. However, in many cases we make very bad decisions or fail to act upon our good decisions. Because of this we are guilty before God and under His judgments. Only through the forgiveness of sins can we or our ethical performance stand before Him. We can be sure that God accepts us not because we are ethically brilliant or morally successful, but rather because His Son died for us.

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It is fitting that we conclude on this gospel note. As we stated at the beginning, an evangelical ethic is centered in the gospel of God's forgiving love in Jesus Christ. For direction, for the power to change, as well as for making our performance acceptable, we rely upon Him. He is not only our Savior from sin but also our model and motive for new personhood. In the ethical task we do employ other gifts of God beside the gospel—the law and human reason, for example. However, they are always auxiliary and subordinate to the gospel. The gospel is the mainspring of the Christian life, as well as the object of saving faith.