
5 REASON

God rarely, if ever, does for us what we can do for ourselves. As we go about making our moral decisions, He expects us to use a basic faculty that is already a part of us: reason or intellect, and its products which are knowledge and experience. He also expects us to take advantage of what others have accomplished by the use of reason, their knowledge and experience, the insights and findings of various fields of learning as they relate to our ethical decision. Psychology, medicine, sociology, and history may shed valuable light on the matter about which we are trying to make a moral decision.

Ethics may be defined as rational reflection about what is right and wrong to do. Christian ethics is not only a rational exercise or even primarily a rational exercise. Rather, it is revelational. As was indicated in previous chapters, we know not only norms and motives, but also the full extent of our corruption, not by reason, but by God's self-disclosures in Scripture and in Christ. The dominant and controlling factor in Christian ethics is not reason, but revelation. However, reason does have a role to play in this as well as in the other theological disciplines—a role which, though limited, is valuable and even vital.

I. REASON GATHERS INFORMATION

A. Facts

By a process of rational inquiry we can and should gather as much information as possible about the ethical problem under our consideration. We should read the available literature and consult experts in the field, if possible. Our purpose at this point is not to make a moral judgment, but to explore; not to search for answers, but to discover what the questions are.

If, for example, you are trying to make a decision about an unwanted pregnancy, whether this is a personal decision (should I [or my spouse] have an abortion?) or a social decision (should I support or oppose an anti-abortion amendment?), then find out what you can about abortion. What actually happens when an abortion is performed at various stages of pregnancy? Inquire into the medical, psychological, historical, sociological, and legal facts. To make a valid moral decision you must have an adequate understanding of the problem, and you acquire such understanding through the use of reason.

B. Options

An extremely important part of this rational inquiry is the search for alternatives. To decide what we should do, we must first of all be aware of the range of possibilities. *Ethics, like politics, is the art of the possible.* It is futile to decide upon an option which is not really open to you. It is tragic to choose one course of action when, unknown to you, another far better and more desirable course is available. In the case of an unwanted pregnancy, for example, what are the alternatives to abortion? What are the various methods of performing an abortion? Some alternatives are morally preferable to others.

C. Background

Another type of information and understanding essential to the ethical process has to do with the background of the people involved, and this usually involves self as well as others. My history as a person—family background, religious training, edu-

cation, professional experience, and so on—all affect my perception, inclination, and reactions in any situation requiring moral decision. The same, of course, is true of everyone.

Furthermore, my personal interest or stake in the case will also have its effect. For example, if I through various influences in my background have come to believe that a fetus is a human being with an eternal destiny, or if I and my spouse have been waiting five years to adopt a child, I will probably perceive and judge abortion negatively. On the other hand, the person whose background has helped form the opinion that a fetus is merely a mass of tissue, or who is pregnant, unmarried, and afraid of childbirth, may have a positive view of abortion.

In any moral decision it is important to know the persons involved as persons so that one can appreciate how their uniqueness affects or is affected by the decision. This too is, at least in part, a rational process involving investigation, reflection, and evaluation.

II. REASON IDENTIFIES KEY ISSUES

Beneath every moral question that we have to answer there are additional, deeper questions. These questions beneath the question are usually called "moral issues." For example, beneath the question, "Should I or should I not have an abortion?" are additional, highly significant questions of a more general nature: Does a fetus have a right to life? Is a fetus a human being? Does a woman have the right to control her own reproductive processes? Should an unwanted child be born?

This process of digging out the underlying moral issues is an intellectual exercise which requires some aptitude and training. Although it is possible to do this kind of rational analysis alone, it is probably best done in discussion with one or more concerned persons.

There are various ways to work through the basic issues. Those involved in the discussion may simply mention or list them and then briefly describe them. Or, the process can begin with a discussion of the alternatives. In the case of an unwanted pregnancy, for example, the alternatives may be: (1) abortion; (2) bear the child and put it up for adoption; (3) bear the child and keep it.

Then, reasons for each option may be listed and discussed. Reasons given for abortion might be the mother's physical and mental health, family finances, overpopulation, and the like. Reasons for bearing the child and putting it up for adoption might be the sanctity of life, the great demand for adoptive children, the right to life, and so on. Reasons for bearing the child and keeping it might be the sanctity of life, trust in God's promise to sustain and provide, responsibility to care for one's own, and so forth. These few descriptive sentences by no means give an adequate impression of the rational process by which moral issues may be identified. This is best learned by doing, the experience of serious moral reflection and discussion of real cases.

Once the issues have been identified they must be evaluated. Which reasons given for each alternative are most important? In these main reasons you will find the key issues. In a case of unwanted pregnancy the key issues might be the mother's rights (to mental or physical health and to self-determination) versus the fetus's rights (to life and protection and a relationship with God). This is as far as reason can go in dealing with moral issues. Having identified key issues, the conflicting values which constitute the moral problem, reason must rest. The final determination of which issues or values should have priority in the decision comes from beyond reason.

III. REASON ANALYZES ELEMENTS

There are four basic elements in every ethical decision. While the decision is being made and after it has been made it is extremely valuable to analyze it in terms of these elements. Once again this is primarily a rational exercise.

A. Goals

What is the goal or purpose which I hope to accomplish by this decision? In chapter 3 we considered norms, the ethical principles and model which God has given us in Scripture. These norms, for the most part, tell us God's will in rather general terms. As we make our moral decisions we have to translate

these norms into very specific goals. We must express them in terms of the concrete problems of our lives and our world.

For example, the person faced with an unwanted pregnancy might find in Scripture the following norms: respect, cherish, and protect prenatal human life; be more concerned about the interests of others than of self; Christians should care for their own people. From these general directives the Christian might (and, I believe, should) select an alternative to abortion. The goal would be to bear the child and keep it, or, in an extreme case (unmarried mother, severe poverty, or health problems) give it up for adoption.

In this particular case, the translation of the biblical norms into life goal is rather simple. In another case, it might require a considerable amount of rational analysis and imagination. For example, if my concern with regard to unwanted pregnancy were social rather than personal—how to foster appreciation, respect, and protection for prenatal human life in our society with its permissive abortion policies, for example—I would have to think through very carefully what my specific goal ought to be.

In selecting and formulating a goal I must be realistic. If the goal is not feasible or attainable, there is little point in attempting it. After careful analysis, in this case, I might decide to work for the passage of an anti-abortion amendment. Or, if that seems unattainable, I might make my goal to try to persuade young people, especially women, to adopt a pro-life position.

God gives us ethical norms by revelation in Scripture, many of them general in nature. Converting these into specific life goals requires rational effort—analysis, interpretation, and application.

B. Means

Once I have specified my ethical goal in a given situation, I have another vital decision to make. How will I accomplish that goal? What means will I use to attain it? This decision, too, is made largely on the basis of rational thought and study of the views and experiences of others. First, I inquire into the available means for accomplishing my goal. I assess their probable effectiveness. I also evaluate them morally, for it is true that the end does not justify the means. It is wrong to try to accomplish

even a very good goal by a means which is evil and unworthy. My means no less than my goal must conform to the will of God. This analysis and evaluation of means is the work of my intellect, my reason.

If I (or my spouse) decide to bear and keep the child of an unwanted pregnancy, we must still decide how best to go about this. What spiritual, emotional, and financial resources can provide needed support? What arrangements in the home and family can best accommodate mother and child and promote family unity? These are practical, rational decisions.

Or, in my social concern about abortion, if I decide to work for an anti-abortion amendment, how will this be best done? By contributing money, becoming active in a pro-life organization, writing letters to legislators? Or, if I decide to try persuasion (instead of legislation), what is the most promising way for me to do this? By contributing money, giving public addresses, writing pamphlets, articles, books, working in youth groups? Rational inquiry and reflection assist me in the selection of means as well as in the definition of goals.

C. Motives

Motivation for Christian moral behavior does not come from human reason. As we noted in chapter 2, it is the gift and work of God. In fact, the dominant motivating factor operating in the Christian is to be God Himself, the Holy Spirit. As we decide and act morally, however, other types of motivation also affect us and may even dominate us. Our motives are inevitably mixed and the elements of the mixture are not always evident to us. The real reasons why we decide and act as we do are often quite different from those we talk or think about.

To uncover and evaluate our motives is, in part, a rational process. As we reflect on and discuss the moral issues in a decision that we face, we can at the same time investigate the motives that relate to these issues. Hopefully, if I and my spouse decide against abortion and in favor of bearing and keeping the child it will be primarily out of regard for God and His will, and out of love for the fetus and others. However, other, less worthy motives may also enter and even take over—the desire to avoid feelings of guilt, the desire to evoke sympathy and admiration in others, or a martyr complex.

Or, if I decide to participate in anti-abortion or pro-life campaigns, this might, in part, be motivated by hatred of women, exhibitionism, or a messiah complex. Thoughtful introspection and the assistance of wise and perceptive counselors may help me to discover sinful and unworthy motives and the need for strengthening appropriate motives.

Reason cannot correct or strengthen basic Christian motivation. That can be done only by the Holy Spirit. However, reason can discover and understand motives, and that is a vital preliminary step.

D. Consequences

On the basis of research and reflection one can also reach an understanding of the probable consequences of moral decision and action. While consequences are not the only criteria of the moral quality of an act, they are an important consideration. To know what I ought to do in a given case I should try to determine what is likely to happen as a result of the alternatives under consideration. By a study of similar cases as well as the case at hand I should be able to estimate the consequences as fully as possible—long range as well as short range consequences, indirect consequences as well as direct ones.

What effect, for example, does abortion have on mothers, fathers, families, the medical profession, society in general? What effects can be foreseen on all of these as a result of bearing children of unwanted pregnancies? On the basis of the unique factors of this case—the particular persons and circumstances—what consequences are most likely? To decide and act without sufficient regard for consequences would be, in most cases, totally irresponsible.

IV. REASON FORMULATES PRINCIPLES AND RULES

A. Reason and Revelation

Human reason is not the source of the principles by which Christians should make moral decisions. The source is God and His revelation in Scripture. Indeed, there is a certain inborn sense of right and wrong which reason can recognize and to

which it can respond. However, this natural knowledge of God's law is both fragmented and distorted, and the response of human reason to it is also unsatisfactory. To know what we should do, as was explained in our discussion of norms, we must consult Scripture.

The study of Scripture is, in many respects, a rational process. It is a matter of understanding words and sentences, of interpreting and relating concepts, and of applying them to life. The study of Scripture also involves literary and historical analysis.

In this study of Scripture reason must not be put above God's revelation; we must not attempt with reason to criticize or improve upon the content of revelation. Reason must remain the servant of revelation, humbly trying to perceive, assimilate, and communicate the content of God's Word. Even when confronted with difficulties and apparent contradictions in Scripture, reason is to remain in its position of humble servitude.

Limited though it is, the role of reason in the study of Scripture, and specifically in the identification of ethical norms, is a vital one. To conclude what Christians should and should not do in the twentieth century from what Scripture says and implies about right and wrong is a challenging and sensitive intellectual task. It is, of course, far more than merely an intellectual task. Ultimately, the Spirit Himself opens the Scripture and communicates its meaning to us. However, He does this, not apart from, but through serious and thoughtful study.

As we search Scripture for moral direction, we should also take advantage of the learning and wisdom of others. We should consult pastors, professors, biblical scholars, and other knowledgeable and experienced believers, and consider their understanding of biblical ethical norms. We should test our own perception of God's will against theirs, and be open to the instruction and enrichment which God can provide through them.

B. Observing Priorities

Ethical principles are derived from Scripture by a process of study and interpretation. Some of the complexities with which one must deal in carrying out this process have already been discussed. Another difficulty when considering biblical principles is the matter of priorities. Biblical materials about ethical norms are not equally authoritative. We must be able to recog-

nize those which take precedence and let them be our primary guides.

1. New Testament material has precedence over Old Testament material. The Old must always be interpreted in the light of the New. One illustration is the statements in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which appear to sanction easy divorce, but which should be subordinated to the more rigorous teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19:3-9. In general, only those commands and directives from the Old Testament which are reaffirmed and reinterpreted by Jesus or the apostles should be regarded as normative.

2. Clear imperatives have more authority than examples. Moral examples, both positive and negative, of what biblical characters did or experienced should be regarded as illustrations rather than as declarations of ethical principles. If a principle is stated clearly elsewhere in imperative form, an example may make it memorable or concrete. However, it is questionable to articulate a principle on the basis of an example alone. Examples tend to be ambiguous and limited in scope.

The story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is an example of an unmarried male slave refusing to have sexual relations with his master's wife. What does this say about a female slave's response to her master's sexual advances, or a free unmarried man's response to the advances of a free unmarried woman, or *vice versa*? Examples from Scripture are best used as illustrations of principles stated clearly elsewhere in Scripture, and should not be regarded as authoritative in themselves.

3. Clear imperatives have more authority than directives inferred from doctrines. We may, and often must, infer principles from doctrines. In many areas requiring serious ethical decisions we simply have no clearly applicable biblical commands by which to go. Indeed, it is necessary to infer principles from doctrines; they are binding in that they are often our best understanding of God's will for us in a situation. We should, however, acknowledge the difference between these and explicitly stated principles.

For example, on the basis of several biblical doctrines I may and do infer the following principles which apply to unwanted pregnancy: respect, cherish, and protect prenatal human life. (How I arrive at this principle will be described below.) If I am convinced that this is God's will as revealed in Scripture, I must act accordingly and, also, share this conviction with others.

However, I should not claim that God has said in so many words, "Do not abort." This particular principle, because it is implicit rather than explicit, does not have quite the compelling authority as, for example, the commandment against taking God's name in vain.

4. Historically and culturally conditioned commands must be distinguished from those which are clearly intended to be binding for all times. Several examples of historically and culturally conditioned commands have already been given—a man should become a father by his brother's widow; women should not wear jewelry or fine clothing. This distinction requires some competence in biblical and historical scholarship—and even experts do not always agree. However, the Christian, with the best help available, must decide which biblical commands still apply and which do not.

5. Ethical principles should be based on at least several clear passages of Scripture. A deficiency either of breadth or clarity renders the biblical base of an ethical principle suspect. An isolated reference or a number of obscure references to some aspect of God's will should not be regarded as normative.

C. Responding to the Context

From Scripture, by a process of study and interpretation, and also guided by the Holy Spirit, we seek a sense of God's will for every aspect of life. We seek ethical norms, direction, a model. We seek to discover by a process which is largely rational that which is given in revelation, in Scripture. And we can be confident that what we seek we will find, although, perhaps, with varying degrees of certainty. However, before we can articulate this sense of God's will either as general principles or more specific rules of conduct we must relate the principle to its context, the situation of the moral decision. Moral principles and rules, to be meaningful, must be stated in terms of the context, that is, in terms of the persons, problems, and possibilities which are under consideration. The context does not provide us with the substance or content of our moral principles and rules, but it will, in part, determine the form in which they are expressed. The substance comes from revelation, Scripture. The form, at least in some cases, is determined by a rational examination and assessment of the context.

Moral principles and rules are similar to, but also different from the moral ends or goals described above. They are similar in the sense that principles and rules, like goals, are expressed in terms of the life context. Like goals, principles and rules also represent movement from the general to the specific, from broad biblical norms to more particular application. The difference is that a moral goal is the purpose or objective which you select *in one given situation*. Principles and rules, on the other hand, express a perception of God's will for *a variety of similar situations*.

Principle: Respect, cherish, and protect prenatal human life

Rule: Do not submit to or perform an abortion

Goal: I will bear and rear *this* child

We do not require moral principles and rules for all decisions. In chapter 3 we noted that the concept of *norm* may be defined as a model or pattern. From Scripture we receive an impression of the kind of persons that we as Christians are to be. The model of Christian personhood is God Himself, as revealed in the man Jesus Christ. What Jesus is and did becomes a pattern for us.

Additional details of the model for the Christian are sketched in the various moral concepts and directives presented in the Bible. This model—drawn in Scripture and etched on our consciousness by the Holy Spirit—is sufficient guidance for most of the moral decisions that we must make. Without much analysis and reflection we sense from this model what we are to do and not do in our daily lives.

However, there are some decisions so complicated, ambiguous, and far removed from matters referred to in the Bible that we can deal adequately with them only on the basis of carefully worked out principles and rules. These normative components, although derived by inference from scriptural truths and teachings, must be formulated in terms of the context.

The abortion issue may serve as an example. As was already indicated, there is, in my judgment, no unequivocal prohibition of abortion in Scripture. Easy and safe abortion was not available in the biblical era. There is no reference to the practice of abortion in Scripture. How, then, may we discover and articulate the will of God for us in this matter? I believe there is sufficient relevant material in Scripture from which we can formulate a

moral principle as well as some rules about abortion. While the discussion that follows is extremely brief it may serve to illustrate a process by which ethical principles may be derived from Scripture.

That human life is the creation of God is the unanimous testimony of Scripture. Prenatal human life is specifically attributed to God's deliberate creative activity in Psalm 139:13-18. The personal interest of God and His involvement in the life and the future of the fetus are described here in moving terms. Furthermore, in Luke 1:15 the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that the son who will be born to his aged wife will be filled with the Holy Spirit (a uniquely human experience) "from his mother's womb."

This phrase sometimes means simply "from birth." However, later in this first chapter of Luke (vv. 41 and 44), the fetus that was the fulfillment of this promise is said by his mother to have "leaped for joy" at the presence of Mary who by now was pregnant with Jesus. Since we are told that as Elizabeth said this she was "filled with the Holy Spirit," we should not dismiss her statement as pious speculation. In Jeremiah 1:4-5 the Lord assured the prophet that He *knew* him (a word signifying a close personal relationship) before he was born or even (fully) formed in the womb.

Passages like these seem to argue for the "humanness" of the fetus. God's interest in and involvement with the fetus is comparable to His interest in and involvement with postnatal life. The fetus is created, known, loved by God, capable of a relationship with Him and response to Him—factors which suggest human status. If God reacts to a fetus as to a human being, should not we do the same?

Human worth and dignity seem to be attributed to the fetus by these passages, and consequently, the fetus comes under the protection of the commandments against hurting or killing innocent human life. On the basis of such information and interpretation I arrive at the principle mentioned above: respect, cherish, and protect prenatal human life.

However, there is also a passage which appears to distinguish sharply between the value of a fetus and the value of an adult human being (Exod. 21:22). Here a case is given of a pregnant woman who miscarries as a result of an injury accidentally inflicted upon her by another person. For the loss of the fetus only

a fine was to be paid to her husband. However, for injuries sustained by the mother herself, retribution was to be exacted according to the *lex talionis*, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Exod. 21:24).

Although the differences in punishment does suggest that the value of a fetus's life is less than that of the mother, this does not prove that the fetus is less than human. The punishment for killing one's slave was also less than that for killing a free person (Exod. 21:20-21). However, nowhere does Scripture state, implicitly, or allow that a slave is less than human. Consequently, Exodus 21:22 does not undermine the principle about respecting, cherishing, and protecting prenatal human life.

From this principle rules may be formulated. Rules are specific applications of principles to concrete situations. Reflection on the principles stated above and on present abortion policies and practices yields a number of moral rules, some negative and some positive. Some examples of each are as follows:

Prohibitions

- Do not perform an abortion (except, perhaps, to save the life of the mother).
- Do not submit to an abortion (except, perhaps, to save your life).
- Do not approve an abortion.
- Do not support agencies that provide abortion services.
- Do not neglect or endanger prenatal human life.

Imperatives

- Regard even unwanted pregnancy as God's work and gift.
- Regard even a deformed or defective fetus as God's beloved human creation.
- Bear and love even the child whose conception was not desired.
- Support—spiritually, emotionally, and materially—women who are coping with unwanted pregnancies.

As we have seen, the role of reason in moral decision-making, though limited, is vital. By means of rational effort we gather information, identify key moral issues, analyze basic elements of the decision, and formulate moral principles and rules. In all of this, reason must remain the servant of revelation, Scripture. We

do not, but God does, through His word and Spirit, define right and wrong. He motivates us to follow His will. However, to understand, interpret, and apply this revelation to our contemporary scene is a complex and demanding intellectual task. In moral decision-making it is as wrong to use our reason too little as it is to use it too much.