

# Christian Ethics for Today:

An Evangelical Approach

Milton L. Rudnick

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TO ROB

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**Hendrickson, Philip**

**From:** Milton Rudnick  
**Sent:** Tuesday, October 09, 2012 3:56 PM  
**To:** Hendrickson, Philip  
**Subject:** Re: Concordia request

I am happy to grant this request.

Milton L. Rudnick

On Oct 9, 2012, at 11:39 AM, Hendrickson, Philip wrote:

Dear Dr. Rudnick,

Please allow me to introduce myself: I am the library director at Concordia University in Seward, Nebraska. I am writing to you on behalf of a faculty member regarding one of your books that she would like to use in class this spring.

The instructor would like to use "Christian Ethics for Today: an Evangelical Approach" in her class. However, since the book is out of print, students may have a difficult time locating a copy. Also, this class will be taught online, so the students could be located anywhere. Our library has the book, but it would not be possible to mail one copy of the book to all the members of the class.

We would like to scan the book and make a digital copy available on the course site, which only students in the class would be able to access. This is only for academic use: the public would not be able to see it. We are willing to discuss an appropriate licensing payment for this use, if that is your wish.

May we have your permission to scan our copy of "Christian Ethics for Today" and post it on a course site this spring?

Thank you for your consideration. God be with you,

Philip Hendrickson

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## PREFACE

For more than a decade I have been teaching ethics to college students, and have searched in vain for a suitable textbook. There are, of course, a number of works which discuss ethics from an evangelical perspective. For various reasons, however, they have not worked well for me and my classes. Some have been too challenging, technical, or sophisticated to serve as an introductory text for college students. They have assumed a degree of theological and philosophical expertise not often found in undergraduates. Others have seemed superficial or simplistic, and this is just as much a problem as the opposite extreme.

Ethics is a demanding, complicated, and ambiguous field of study. It deals with some deep, dark, and very sticky questions. To be helpful to students, a textbook must be both comprehensible and sufficiently comprehensive to enable them to cope with the issues and problems which they confront. One of my goals in preparing this book has been to meet these criteria.

Another consideration which is very important is theological adequacy, for Christian ethics is a theological discipline. Although it is also related to philosophy, the relation to theology is

intellectual and professional stimulation as well as a testing ground for this material. In addition, I owe thanks to James B. Nelson and Wilson Yates of United Theological Seminary, New Brighton, Minnesota, with whom I have recently studied. Although their theological and ethical orientations are different from mine (and from one another's) they have helped me with the basic skills of ethical reflection and have offered valuable criticism. My wife, children, friends, and colleagues have been a source of deep personal encouragement. I am grateful to all.

Milton L. Rudnick  
St. Paul, Minnesota

closer and stronger, at least in a Christian academic community. To be theologically adequate, in my judgment, an ethical approach must be consistent and compatible with one's theological orientation. More than that, the ethical approach must grow out of the very heart and center of his theology. This explains another kind of difficulty that I experienced with some textbooks on Christian ethics. The theological orientation and even the theological substance diverged from my own to the point that their usefulness was seriously impaired.

My own theological orientation is a supreme commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, both as the object of faith and as the central and integrating theme of the Christian message, and to Scripture as God's own inspired and infallible witness to that gospel. It is from this perspective that I think and write in ethics as well as in theology. I hope that others who share this perspective will find this book useful. I also hope that some whose convictions and orientation are decidedly different from mine will find this to be a clear and meaningful statement of that with which they take issue. My own experience in the formal study of ethics reveals that few who teach and write in this field work from the approach which I employ here.

In the jargon of ethicists, I am a rules-deontologist with a contextualist bent. Most teachers and authors in the field of Christian ethics (and, consequently, most students) are committed to some form of teleological or contextualist ethics. Those committed to teleological ethics determine right and wrong primarily from anticipated results, while those adhering to contextualist ethics determine right and wrong by analysis of the context, by attempting to discern what God is doing or what He wills in a given context. The Christian rules-deontologist, while attentive to future results and the present context, seeks direction primarily from divinely revealed and universally binding principles of conduct. Since so few rules-deontologists are writing these days, some teleologists and contextualists may appreciate a fresh expression of this position for purposes of comparison and discussion.

I would like to express gratitude to the hundreds of students who, over the years, have participated with me in the study of Christian ethics, and who, in some cases, have consulted with me about their personal ethical decisions. They have provided much

# INTRODUCTION

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## I. DEFINITIONS

The serious discussion of almost any subject requires a definition of terms. This is especially true when the subject is ethics. How would you define the term *ethics*? What images, concepts, or actions does this word evoke in your mind? What mood or overtones do you associate with it? How does "ethics" compare with "morals" or "morality"? In what ways are they alike? In what ways are they different?

On the one hand, most people have a general impression of what ethics is about. They know that right and wrong are associated with it, perhaps also rules and standards of conduct. Conscience seems to belong in there somewhere. However, without a considerable amount of previous thought and experience, not many can produce a sufficiently complete and precise definition. It is especially difficult to distinguish between ethics and morals. They are often used synonymously, even by the experts. And yet, somehow, they have a different ring and feel. How shall we denote this difference?

Any definition of terms tends to be somewhat arbitrary. Ulti-

mately words mean, for us, what we want them to mean, and their meanings may vary from situation to situation. The word *screw*, for example, may mean "to fasten with a threaded metal pin," or "to cheat," or "to make a mistake," or "to engage in the sex act." So, to define a term is more a descriptive task than a prescriptive one. A definition tells how a term is used, and what it means, in a given frame of reference. It does not attempt to say how it must be used or what it means in all situations. The definitions given below explain the way several key terms are used in this book. They are offered, by way of introduction, to focus the reader's thoughts.

#### A. Ethics Is Theory

*Ethics*, as the term is used here, is theory. It is an intellectual exercise, a process of reflection, analysis, decision, and evaluation. The purpose of the ethical enterprise is to decide what is right and wrong to do. Its primary concern is proper conduct, but it also gives consideration to the attitudes and motives from which conduct issues. In order to do ethics, as it is perceived in this book, one must have an adequate set of principles, guidelines, directives, and a workable process by which the principles are applied to the problems and issues which he confronts. Ethics, understood in this way, happens in the head as well as in the heart. It involves thought and judgment as well as commitment.

#### B. Evangelical Ethics

An evangelical approach to ethics is a method of determining right and wrong which grows out of a particular understanding and interpretation of the Christian message. Evangelical ethics is, first of all, Christian ethics. Of course, it is possible to develop workable ethics from the assumptions and beliefs of other Christian perspectives, and from non-Christian religions. It is even possible to develop ethics without relation to any religious point of view. Much, in fact, most ethics is built on philosophical rather than religious foundations. However, here we present an approach which is religious rather than philosophical; Christian

rather than non-Christian; and evangelical rather than liberal, neo-orthodox, or Roman Catholic, for example.

#### 1. Christocentricity

In order for ethics to be evangelical, it must reflect the basic emphases of evangelical Christians. First of all, it must be Christocentric. That is to say, evangelical ethics must keep Christ and His redemptive work in the center of the discussion. Christ must be regarded, not only as the source of forgiveness and eternal life, but also as the source of ethical guidance and the source of the power to change. To put it in traditional theological language, not only justification but also sanctification must be recognized as the gift and work of His grace.

A vital aspect of Christocentricity as evangelicals perceive it is the distinction between law and gospel. For our ethical reflection to be valid we must carefully observe the difference between what God demands and what He gives, as well as the relations between them. Similarly, we must be aware of the differences between them. Evangelicals are by no means the only Christians who are committed to Christocentricity and the law-gospel dichotomy. However, these emphases are more prominent among them than among others.

#### 2. Scripture-based

The other basic emphasis that should characterize evangelical ethics is a very high view of biblical authority. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the heart of the message as well as its unifying element. Scripture is its source, the divinely inspired record of God's atoning love for us in Jesus Christ. It is also the revelation of His will for us. To understand what we should do or avoid in life, as well as to know what we should believe, we consult the Bible. Evangelical ethics as well as evangelical theology should be based solidly on Scripture. The Bible is the only source and norm of Christian teaching and practice.

#### 3. Diversity

The approach to ethics developed in this book seriously attempts to reflect these emphases. To the extent that it succeeds it can properly be called "an evangelical approach to ethics." It is an evangelical approach, not *the* evangelical approach to ethics. There is no single, definitive treatment of evangelical ethics, and



not all evangelical ethicists agree with one another. There is, in fact, wide diversity among evangelicals, for various reasons. Individual human uniqueness accounts for some of the diversity. No two human beings perceive, understand, or explain anything in precisely the same ways. And certainly, denominational differences cause some of the varying perspectives.

Furthermore, the data is less complete in ethics than in the other theological disciplines. To a large extent ethics deals with questions and problems about which we have no explicit, unambiguous biblical testimony. This means that in doing the work of ethics we must operate with inference and human opinion and judgment more extensively than in the other disciplines. People are inclined to disagree even more about their opinions and judgments than they are about what Scripture says and means.

Then, too, not all ethicists hold to the same view of Scripture. Some regard all of Scripture as God's inspired and binding revelation (the position assumed in this book). Others feel that the authenticity and divine authority of a given passage must be established by historical-critical analysis.

Finally, the basic approach of evangelical ethicists may vary. This book takes what is called a rules-deontological approach, an approach that says we must determine right and wrong by means of divinely given ethical directives. Other ethicists, including some evangelicals, take a teleological approach, which determines right and wrong on the basis of expected results. Still others are contextualists, who attempt to determine right and wrong largely, if not exclusively, by analysis of the context.

To complicate the picture still further, we must admit that even ethicists of the same confessional commitment, using the same basic approach, and operating with the same view of Scripture do not always come to the same conclusions.

#### 4. *Maintaining perspective*

I point out this diversity in the interest of maintaining a proper perspective. In this book I present directly and unequivocally the approach which to me best seems to express what Scripture and evangelical theology teach about knowing and doing what is right. Then I plug these elements into a problem-solving process which facilitates their application to daily life. Although I try to indicate the difference between my judgments and God's revealed truth, this may not always be as clear as it

should be. Furthermore, I make no claim to infallibility. As with the theological and ethical work of any individual, this material should be tested against Scripture for accuracy and adequacy. It is certain that some ethicists, especially those from different backgrounds, operating with different assumptions and methods, will take issue with much that I have written.

### C. **Morality Is Practice**

We must define two other basic terms: *morals* and *morality*. These terms refer to practice; the practical application of ethical decisions to daily life. The distinction between ethics and morality is the difference between theory and practice, or the difference between deciding and doing. By means of ethical reflection and analysis I come to a conclusion about what I should or should not do. My morality or immorality is revealed in the extent to which I live by that conclusion.

Good morals do not always follow good ethics. Theory is not always put into practice. A person may be brilliant, and skilled and sensitive in ethical reasoning, and yet may act immorally. To know the good is not necessarily to do it. On the other hand, a person may be inept at ethical reflection and inarticulate in ethical discussion, and yet lead an obedient Christian life—he might be a poor ethicist but a moral person. Morality happens in the life and conduct, while ethics, as we mentioned, happens in the head and heart.

## II. TRENDS

Like everything human, Christian ethics is in movement. To get a sense of where we are currently in the area of Christian ethics it is important to realize where we have been as well as observe the direction in which we seem to be headed.

### A. **The Fact of Ethical Change**

Ideas of what is right and wrong, at least about some things, change from generation to generation. This is true not only of society in general, but of Christians in particular, even Christians of the same confessional commitment, and even of Christians

who cherish their tradition and encourage conformity to it. Indeed, when members of a later generation use the same ethical approach as their forefathers, they may come to different conclusions. In some cases these changes appear to be for the better, but in others they may seem to be for the worse.

When I was younger there was a large consensus (although it was not unanimous) among evangelical clergy that contraception was morally wrong. Few clergy today agree with those views and judgments. What brought about the change? What is the nature of the change? Is it moral laxity, decline of standards, lack of earnestness, accommodation to worldly values? Not necessarily. To some extent, at least, change may be the result of a better understanding of the issues and a more careful interpretation of Scripture.

In some cases moral standards have become more rigorous. For example, previous generations of clergy and laity were largely tolerant of racism. Racist remarks and discriminatory policies were prevalent in evangelical churches and few regarded this as wrong. While much room for improvement remains, today consciences are much more sensitive to the evils of racism, and racist policies in many evangelical congregations and schools have been rescinded. Certainly part of the impetus for change was pressure from society. However, anyone who has lived through the transition can testify to the impact of biblical and ethical study.

The fact of ethical change is undeniable. It is inevitable and, in many cases, desirable. Times and circumstances change. The significance of things may change. New light may be shed both on moral issues and on the meaning of Scripture passages which speak to the issues. While Christians must be on guard against moral laxity and erosion of moral values, they must not resist and reject all ethical change.

### B. The Current Ethical Revolution

However, the "new morality" that we have been experiencing since the 1960s is not this type of natural and necessary updating of ethical views on the basis of new information. It is more than a revision of some ethical conclusions. It is, in fact, an ethical revolution in which the principles of Christian ethics have been assaulted and repudiated by many. In fact, the basic process by

which Christians for centuries have arrived at ethical decisions has been replaced by radically different approaches.

The problem is not simply that people are sinning more and obeying less. The problem is, rather, that a growing number of people in the world, as well as in Christian circles, refuse to consider many types of behavior as sin. These people insist on approving certain activities and attitudes though they are clearly identified as sin in Scripture. Homosexuality, self-assertion, and revolution are some examples. Conversely, virtues and values commended by Scripture, such as chastity, non-retaliation, and self-sacrifice, are scorned by some of the same people. What we are confronted with is not merely deviation from Christian moral standards but a wholesale rejection of these standards, and, in some cases, the rejection of the notion that revealed, enduring, binding moral standards exist.

The result is a radical ethical relativism bordering on anarchy. Each person feels free to decide for himself what is good and what is evil. Right and wrong are reduced to personal preference or opinion. "If you enjoy it, it is good," many would say. Others with more social sensitivity might put it this way: "If most people in a given situation enjoy it or benefit from it, it is good." In all fairness it must be said that few Christian ethicists, even those who question the concept of divinely revealed ethical norms, come out in favor of this kind of pleasure-centered and self-centered approach. However, without intending to, they appear to be encouraging it. To deny that God has given us clear and binding ethical guidelines is to invite ethical confusion and revolt.

### C. The Counterrevolution

The revolution in ethical theory and moral practice has not gone unchallenged. It has, in fact, provoked something of a counterrevolution. At both the scholarly and popular levels critics have taken issue with the theoretical basis as well as the practical consequences of the new morality. Pastors have preached against it; teachers have taught against it; authors have written against it. Furthermore, the polemic against the new morality has been combined with a reaffirmation and defense of conventional Christian ethics and morality.

The resurgence of conservative religious movements with

strict moral codes may be, in part, a reaction against the ethical revolution. Political movements of the far right with their law-and-order emphasis may also represent such a reaction. The phenomenon of Bill Gothard's Basic Youth Conflicts Seminars is clearly a counterrevolutionary measure. In these meetings large crowds gather to listen to long lectures by Gothard in which he spells out a very extensive, specific, and conservative moral code he claims is derived from the Bible. In his presentations Rev. Gothard describes his program as a campaign to turn America back to conservative religion and morality. The large and appreciative response he receives reveals the alarm and disenchantment many feel regarding the new morality.

#### D. The Search for Direction

Confused and frightened by a rapidly changing world, the collapse of traditional values and institutions, the overwhelming possibilities of the new technologies, and conflicts in self, families, and society, many people want to know what they ought to do. They sense that they need help in trying to decide what is right and what is wrong. Those who are Christians quite naturally look to their churches and spiritual leaders. However, they may not be receiving all the help that they desire or need.

In my judgment, many evangelical pastors and educators are not well prepared for ethical leadership roles. The situation is improving; however, too often in professional curricula, courses in Christian ethics have been electives. Although we expect our pastors and educators to lead good Christian lives, and although we also expect them to help others do the same, we have not always provided them with the knowledge and skills which facilitate this. Because sanctification in the Christian is the work of the Holy Spirit, we apparently assume that it will happen without the disciplined reflection that ethics involves. Some still actually express suspicion of and contempt for the formal study of ethics. Who needs it? Doesn't a sense of right and wrong come "naturally" to a Christian? Or, can't we resolve all of our ethical dilemmas by the Golden Rule? Isn't ethics legalistic?

This book was written out of the conviction that ethics can be evangelical and that evangelicals ought to be more concerned about ethics. It is designed to assist those who are seeking ethical direction themselves and who, in some cases, wish to prepare

themselves for ethical leadership roles. Many of my students are studying to be pastors, teachers, and directors of Christian education. Others, whose vocational goals are outside the professional service of the church, simply wish to equip themselves spiritually and intellectually to make responsible, valid, and God-pleasing life decisions. My hope is that this material will be helpful to those who are seeking direction.

#### E. Answers or Questions?

Despite my commitment to the deontological (rule-based) approach, I do not view ethics so much as a set of answers, but as a way of asking questions. Rather than attempt to provide readers with solutions to all or even some of their ethical and moral problems, my goal is to present a process of inquiry by which they can arrive at their own solutions. My views and conclusions on certain issues will become evident, but only by way of illustration, to indicate how the process works. Ultimately, we must all make our own ethical decisions.