



Making Moral Decisions

SESSION 4

| *Must Christians Agree about Moral Issues?*

Introduction

Perhaps this is a question that ought never to be asked! While obviously it is possible to have various judgments about aesthetic matters, our first impulse is to assume moral matters are different—that judgments about right and wrong are universally applicable, should never change, should not vary from place to place, and cannot ever be a product of whim or fancy. What, indeed, can morality mean if it is no more binding than preferences in food, differences of judgment about art work, or the choices we make about recreational activities?

Moral Judgments Do Vary

It is simply true that moral outlooks vary, even among Christians, from one historical period to another and from one group or branch of the Christian movement to another. This variation indicates that Christians are not the product of a “cookie-cutter” process that turns out members who are all alike and who all make exactly the same decisions about how to behave. The fact that Christians at times vary in their moral judgments does not mean that some are renegades or somehow unfit for the kingdom while others achieve total righteousness. Moreover, it does not render moral judgments meaningless. It simply means that it is important to understand the extent to which differences have a place in arriving at a moral witness with credibility. No group should claim to be Christian solely on the basis of its moral stand.

One of the interesting things about the earliest creeds and confessions of the church—like the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed—is that they make no mention of moral rules. Early Christians believed that morality was



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important, but they did not put moral rules into their statements of faith. With the passage of time creeds grew longer and longer, and they began to contain sections about moral behavior. For instance, the Scots Confession of 1560 has a section titled “The Works Which Are Counted Good Before God.” Following a short description of behavior that is due God (the first kind of obligation), we read about works of a second kind:

To honor father, mother, princes, rulers, and superior powers; to love them, to support them, to obey their orders if they are not contrary to the commands of God, to save the lives of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed, to keep our bodies clean and holy, to live in soberness and temperance, to deal justly with all men in word and deed, and, finally, to repress any desire to harm our neighbor, are the good works of the second kind, and these are most pleasing and acceptable to God as he has commanded them himself.

It is obvious that those Scots knew the Ten Commandments, but they took the liberty to expand upon them in some important ways. The most obvious addition is the warning to obey political rulers, which is stated even more categorically in a section on the civil magistrate.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen, which was pivotal in the German Confessional Church's resistance to Nazism, offers an instructive contrast to the various church documents and creeds that appear to require complete subservience to temporal authorities. It had a crucial moral meaning in the context in which it was written, but it offers relatively little specific behavioral guidance other than the imperative to resist making the church subservient to totalitarianism.

Dealing with Moral Differences

There are bound to be matters over which members of the church have different opinions. In just the comparatively brief period of American history, sharp and divisive differences of opinion have involved whether or not slavery is legitimate or whether racial segregation is contrary to the gospel. Christians were adamant on both sides of these controversies, and several American denominations were split apart because they could not agree. Today we face differences of judgment over other issues, and the impulse to split apart on the basis of moral judgment continues.

In thinking about how to deal with differences in moral judgment it might help to step back and see how the Christian movement as a whole has come to deal with the moral question of using violence as an instrument with which to create or defend political order. Christians have never reached a common mind as to the moral legitimacy of war. Early Christians were pacifists but also something of political outcasts; when the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire, most Christians abandoned the ideal of nonviolence as they assumed responsibility for maintaining civic order. In the Middle Ages the knight warrior was highly honored and Christians undertook crusades against the development of Muslim faith in the Holy Land. In contrast the so-called peace churches like the Mennonites and the Quakers arose to reemphasize the prohibitions of violence in many parts of the Bible. Along the way a theory of the "just war" developed to spell out when and how violence might be legitimately used. For a long time these differences of opinion about our moral duty to peace and our moral justifications to use violence under "just" circumstances tended to be most obviously manifested between different Christian groups, but more recently we have come to see these

contrasting (moral) opinions within other groups. Most mainline churches are on record as affirming the validity of conscientious objection to participation in war even though they also affirm the use of military action for just causes. Perhaps someday we will see a consensus about these issues, but at the present time these differences are a clear illustration of how Christians have come to accept and tolerate disagreement about a major moral issue without separating into different groups.

There are always some who do not accept such differences in judgment. During the height of the Vietnam War, I was interviewed twice for teaching jobs and asked my opinion about the war. Feelings were high at the time, and there were many demonstrations against the war. My answer was that while I opposed it because of my pacifist inclinations, I could see why other Christians supported it. I later discovered that I was rejected for both positions because I would not make opposition to the war in Vietnam a litmus test of moral correctness—or to use the technical terminology, a *status confessionis*. Some of those who questioned me were deeply convinced that this was a crucial test of fidelity and that there could be only one right position on this issue. Recently, judgments about military action in Iraq and Afghanistan probably find a larger group opposed to a particular conflict. Hence, treating opposition to more recent wars as a test of moral legitimacy might seem more plausible, but that would still not be sufficient grounds for using this as a test of suitability for being considered faithful.

Reaching a moral consensus about using torture as an instrument for obtaining information about the hostile intentions of enemies (which bears the curious designation "intelligence gathering") might be more possible than reaching a moral consensus about just war. But that consensus would bear the weight of being a categorical judgment only if the matter gets thoroughly discussed in dialogue between the contending views and emerges as a commonly acknowledged position. It may well be that this is a matter so momentous in its consequences that it calls for something like the Barmen declaration. But even if that happens, the question remains whether those who do not agree should be written out of the church. Meanwhile, Christians can morally reject torture with ample warrant and without contending they alone are right.



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Some Moral Differences in Historical Perspective

Years ago the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accepted polygamy. This practice has long since been repudiated by that group, but at one time this practice was highly controversial. There are sections of the Bible that can be used to warrant such a practice, though there are also flat repudiations as well. The Mormons, except for splinter groups that have no official standing in that tradition, have changed their view of this practice. What brought about their change? Has it not been, at least in part, a response to the views of the great majority of Christians that polygamy is unacceptable? The older men who constitute the top leadership of the church and who bring about changes by fiat may claim to have a direct instruction from God for doing so, but the role of cultural pressures in the redirecting of the moral stance cannot be discounted. More recently, the same group has changed its attitude on matters of race.

One thing we learn from this is that God works through whole communities and even through the impact of contending views of different communities to bring about adequate perceptions of the divine will for human beings. Culture is not necessarily some alien entity that stands over and against a privileged perception of God's will, but it is one avenue through which the will of God comes to be known and responded to. The Bible is a record of revelation that was given through the experience of a pilgrim people whose cultural experiences were of central importance; the Bible is not primarily a compendium of entirely privatized experiences or the dictates of leaders.

Or, to cite another illustration, consider how several denominations have dealt with the problem of alcoholic beverages. Those that went west of the Alleghenies to serve the people and were active on the frontier took a

strong stand against liquor because it had such a terrible impact on life on the frontier, particularly when made under crude conditions. They supported abstinence and prohibition on moral grounds, and they were eventually sufficiently influential to get a constitutional amendment passed banning liquor from the country. From our perspective today this appears to have been a quaint and unsatisfactory policy. Yet for years after the nation repealed prohibition, many denominations required their clergy to take a vow of abstinence from alcohol. Today, there is a common acceptance that Christians can rightly differ in their judgment about whether or not drinking alcoholic beverages is morally suitable. This is a matter about which Christians may, and do, legitimately differ. It would not be wise to attempt to eliminate this difference by the arbitrary imposition of some uniform behavior imposed by fiat. On the other hand, it is not wise to ignore the problems that the misuse of alcohol causes in our society.

Today the headline issues over which people line up and contend that their moral position is the only one right position are primarily abortion and sexuality. This is possibly the case because these are matters about which cultural mores are changing—not because the Bible insists that they are by their very nature the right front-burner items. The experience of change often disquiets people, and they turn to whatever authority they most depend on to find reasons for opposing change (or reasons for accepting it). There are many more biblical passages that prohibit the charging of interest for money lent to members of the same faith community than there are biblical passages prohibiting either abortion or homosexuality. That doesn't mean that abortion and homosexuality are necessarily unimportant, but it does mean that to focus on them as litmus tests of moral correctness is more of a culturally induced stance than a matter of taking the entire Bible seriously.

Disagreement without Division

Declaring any form of behavior to be a flat and unequivocal transgression usually means using only those parts of Scripture that deal with morality in terms of rules and neglecting the parts of Scripture that utilize cases and ideals as guides for conduct. The trouble with these litmus tests is that they develop in *particular* circumstances and are applied as though they are good for *all* time, applicable without attention to the situation and

beyond thoughtful discussion. To give them primary, if not overwhelming, attention tends to make churches unattractive to persons of a more compassionate and thoughtful temperament. They threaten to turn contemporary Christianity in a group of modernized Pharisees—making morality the test of faith rather than faith the source of morality. This makes morality into a form of idolatry—not the overt worship of a physically constructed idol—but nevertheless a way of giving ultimate allegiance to some human and culturally erected norm that has importance but should not be the sole measure of what it means to be faithful.

Some churches—not all of them, and not every leader even in those churches—would use ecclesiastical sanctions to bring about moral conformity. Those who would impose such sanctions to enforce conformity to particular standards of behavior are not usually motivated by the desire to exercise power with relish. They simply feel it is important to give a particular moral stand a pivotal role. A united voice on a single issue provides visibility and perhaps even clout. Because contentious disagreement seems to weaken moral seriousness, many believe that tolerating views that differ from each other is a recipe for undermining the witness of the Christian community. There is possibly a little of this feeling in every one of us. Being in a position to call the moral shots is alluring, even for prophetic types. And who does not

get tired of debates and conflicts that are all too slow in arriving at a moral consensus?

To be on guard against this temptation requires patience and forbearance and the acknowledgment that none of us are given to moral omniscience, even if we manage to get everybody on our side of the argument. Two or more people who are faithful in different ways may be a more important source of guidance than two or more people who replicate each other in a lockstep fashion. Having differences does not mean that the issues at stake do not matter; rather, it suggests that we are prompted to explore the deeper understanding of God's will than any one position can itself articulate. This means that being moral and arriving at sound and helpful moral positions involves participation in a supportive community in which differences are respected and hence interface with each other in thoughtful ways that point beyond themselves to a still more inviting whole. Thus, we cannot leave the question of morality merely by noting that Christians differ in their moral judgments; we must look at how they can work together in community even when they differ.

About the Writer

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