



# Making Moral Decisions

## SESSION 5

### | *The Communal Nature of the Moral Life*

## Introduction

The fact that Christians often differ in their judgments about particular matters of right and wrong might lead to the conclusion that morality is a merely private matter and that individuals are entitled to any view that suits their fancy. That conclusion is just as wrong as the view that the Christian community must achieve total agreement about moral matters and therefore can impose a single fixed set of rules on everyone (even, sometimes, on those who are not Christians). Either view is erroneous and based on a false dichotomy between anarchy and conformity, between offering no moral guidance and offering moral guidance in such strict and absolute ways as to destroy the very freedom that renders morality a form of grateful response to God.

## The Importance of Community

No single individual can possibly be morally omniscient, or “wholly Holy.” We need companionship in the pilgrimage of faith. Only through such companionship do we test our impulses and become aware of both our achievements and our shortcomings. Only in community does the experience of being accepted get reflected in the acceptance of others. Only in community is our reasoning affirmed if valid and challenged if wrong.

It is impossible to achieve moral maturity all by oneself. All that has been explored as the nature of moral life can be assimilated only in the context of interaction with others. The prophets could not have been prophets without being related to the covenanted community. Their judgments presumed the corporate nature of fidelity and were neither valid nor legitimate as merely



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individualistic rants. Likewise, the church rather firmly decided that monasticism should be communal—as it is even for those like Thomas Merton, who pursued solitude on the grounds of the monastery but acknowledged the guidance of the Order and its abbot. This is not to say that all individual insight is wrong; it is only to say that it must be tested with a community of faith before it can be fully trusted

## The Tension between Private Freedom and Community Rules

Many of the most troubling problems in the life of various Christian groups stem from the tensions between the exercise of private judgment and the desire of the community to uphold specific moral standards. One way of trying to deal with this continuing tension is to impose church sanctions in the effort to enforce conformity. For example, some (but by no means all) Roman Catholic bishops order the Eucharist to be denied to those (usually politicians whose stand is public) who do not support

the church's strict opposition to abortion. Denying the Eucharist to those who disagree with a particular moral doctrine of the church may not be terribly effective in a society in which the church does not have official standing, and it often erodes the public appeal of the church as it tries to bring the dissenters into line. Many people simply disregard the pronouncements of church officials. For instance, there is increasing disregard of church authority in the case of the hierarchical opposition to the use of medically safe and effective means of birth control.

Other Christian traditions sometimes attempt to use similar impositions of church discipline. Mormons must be certified as living correctly in order to receive permission to enter the temple for the ritual benefits they dearly wish to have. Various groups, such as the Amish or the Hutterites, have clear behavioral standards that are obligatory. One of the fascinating aspects of life in some of these groups is a practice of letting young members of the group experiment with life outside the community before committing themselves fully to the behavioral requirements of the group. Some young people do not return, but those who do have accepted the group customs knowing what is involved.

In other Christian groups the tension between individuality and group expectation is seen when church bodies expect leaders—which generally means ordained clergy—to abide by certain special behavioral standards. Long before not smoking became a matter of medical wisdom, many Protestant denominations frowned upon the use of tobacco by their ministers. The same is true with respect to drinking alcoholic beverages, and, until quite recently, divorce for any reason was a barrier to clergy's good standing. The problem with resolving the tension between individual and group behavior by passing off the special communal obligation to the clergy is that it sets up a double standard and turns into a form of coercion for one set of members.

## Dealing with Difference in the Christian Community

If, then, the imposition of moral requirements, either by edict or by expecting only leaders to follow them is a questionable way of implementing the communal nature of moral obligation, then what ways are there to do so in more constructive ways?

One possible way, not without attendant tensions, is for churches to nurture and sustain free and open discourse about moral and social issues in which all their members encounter each other face-to-face and deal with disagreements. This is no easy thing to do, and it goes against a widespread assumption that the church is one of the rare places in society where hassles are out of bounds. The tendency to look at the church in this way is often strong and even comes from within the churches themselves. People hope that churches will be havens of harmless tranquility distinctly different from the other communities in which people have to deal with disturbing hostilities.

The difference between the world and the church, between the places in our culture that are torn apart by conflicts and the community of faith, should not be conceived as one between a community in which conflict abounds and a community in which there is no conflict; rather, it should be understood as a difference between crass and destructive partisanship and one in which conflict is transformed into an instrument of mutual growth and the experience of reconciliation. It is a function of the church to be a supportive community that differs from many other institutions primarily because it refuses to abandon the tension between authority and freedom, between making standards so inflexible that only submission is possible and lacking standards altogether. The church is neither a moral boot camp nor a circus free-for-all. It is a place in which people can seek to understand what belief means and how righteousness can be achieved only through ongoing pilgrimage. It is a place where conflict is transformed, not eliminated.

It would be utterly naive to suppose that the church is a place where conflict is continually and easily transformed into clear moral agreement; but it is a vision of what *can be* and ideally *should be*. When it is most loyal to its Lord, and most mature in its life, the church is a community of sinners seeking to do better rather than a club of conformists proud of their virtue. Its members experience grace as both the acceptance of their inadequacy and differing views of others advanced in good faith. To experience life in such a community is to be transformed by a renewal of the mind, a change in the heart, and the discovery of new dimensions of selfhood.



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## Community outside the Church

Some of the most difficult and vexing problems for Christians come not in their efforts to deal with differences in their own community of faith but in dealing with the so-called world—the community that surrounds them but does not share their commitments. Christians have never dealt with this problem in the same way. H. Richard Niebuhr, in a book that has profoundly shaped thinking about this problem for well over half a century, identified five possible stances that Christians have adopted for relating to the culture around them. Some have acted on the assumption that Christians must repudiate the customs and practices of the world; others have accommodated to that world; others have felt that it is the task of Christians to stand above the culture, seeking to achieve a working synthesis between the requirements of the gospel and the realities of the world; a fourth model finds Christians involving themselves in the culture but always aware that there is a tension between their values and those of the world—a tension that never goes away even if Christians play a prominent, even a dominant, role in shaping the culture in which they live; and a fifth pattern finds Christians active in their world and somewhat more hopeful about the extent to which Christians can change things, though never assumes they can completely change the culture even if they exercise an enormous influence within it.

None of Niebuhr's patterns—Christ against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, or Christ the Transformer of Culture—has ever become the one and only way in which Christians relate to the world. Neither do any of these patterns disappear because they are repudiated when one becomes dominant in a particular time or set of circumstances. Each of them is a partial way of maintaining Christian identity while living in a non-Christian community.

Since Niebuhr's classic study, Christians have continued to wonder about how to relate to the world and have developed different ways of thinking about their role in relationship to society at large. Some seek what might be described as proprietorship: they feel called to control the world about them. Others, who recognize the dangers in claiming to be proprietors, look at themselves as, in a phrase suggested by Professor Stanley Hauerwas, "resident aliens": they utilize the patterns of rejection and paradox identified by Niebuhr to emphasize the persistent difference between the gospel and the world, seeking to be faithful to the first without being hostile to the second. They witness to the inevitable tensions between what the gospel commends and what the world will accept. A third approach is for Christians to consider themselves agents of change—not by dominating the power centers of the world, which often results in corrupting their very undertaking, but by working gently, sacrificially, humbly, and with undiminished trust in the power of love and reconciliation as redemptive strategies. This approach does not try to dominate or give up on the conviction that Christian behavior is important even if never fully achieved. It tugs persistently at all the problems that beset the world that in its present condition is not what God intends it to be, and it hopes for the eventual transformation of the world. Transformative agents are motivated by faith and do not let go even if they do not succeed. The world that God seeks to redeem is their present home even if living in it is not easy.

## Christian Concern for Society

For many months, perhaps even for years, it has been alleged that conservative churches are growing and liberal churches are shrinking because of the moral stands on social issues frequently made by mainline churches. When this idea was first suggested there was a tendency for Christians to assume that if they wished to thrive they ought to avoid dealing with matters of public controversy, sticking strictly to matters of personal behavior. But more recently Christians on both the so-called left and the so-called right have taken stands they believe are important for the well-being of society. This has brought the "culture wars" into the life of the churches with much resulting discord and discomfort.

At first it was assumed that there is a social outlook that might enjoy widespread acceptance among conservatives, but it is becoming increasingly clear that there are

differences among people on the right, just as there are differences among people on the left or between people on the left and people on the right. For instance, many so-called evangelicals are divided about the importance of such matters as global warming and the mandate to be ecologically responsible. In time this will mean that no matter where people locate themselves on the theologically defined spectrum, they will not be able to escape the task of dealing with moral differences within their own group as well as the differences between their group and others. This can create a major dilemma for those who define themselves by moral litmus tests that make moral agreement the measure of fidelity.

The problem with the idea that churches grow or shrink in response to public demands is that it both tacitly assumes and actually engenders the assumption that religion is a consumer commodity. According to that view, people pick and choose their religion like they pick and choose what they buy at the mall. This view has little, if any, place for community. It misunderstands the meaning of belonging to the church. Belonging to the church should be understood as similar to accepting membership in a service organization—something that involves dedication, an examination of one's habits, and even a willingness to make sacrifices in response to the needs of a community.

This brings us to the highly charged and often controversial issue as to whether or not the community of faith should engage in social witness—in thinking through social and political issues in the framework of a diverse grouping that shares fundamental assumptions about ultimate issues but may differ in its judgments about how to deal with specific problems. There are important reasons why this is a communal process—which means

that many points of view must be seated at the table, but does not mean that every one of them can persist indefinitely in the advocacy of their position. Studying social issues within the community of faith can be a learning process—one in which all sides grow, benefiting from each other. This is often a slow process. A problem arises when such transformative interaction is experienced in a small task force or study group that carefully works through an issue and then is bought before deliberative bodies that do not have the time for much communal interaction and therefore vote on the basis of polarizing attitudes which they bring to the process. Welcome to moral decision making by the ballot.

Does all this add up to futility—to the impossibility of ever achieving communal moral understanding? It may, but it does not need to do so. People of good faith whose minds have been freed of the need to stubbornly entrench certain views can do better. Such openness does not come quickly or easily. The Holy Spirit does not work only through instant changes of mind or total consensus. God's purposes in history are not dependent on counting noses. Thoughtfulness is a more profound approach to issues than stubborn advocacy. The elimination of all differences of opinion in the church may be postponed until the end of history, but meanwhile the work of grace in the transformation of conflict can go on, and can result in changes that are pleasing to God and helpful to everything that comes under God's care.

## About the Writer

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