

D. Stephen Long

# CHRISTIAN ETHICS

A Very Short Introduction

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should be affirmed. But Christian theologians claim that the relation between God and creatures is such that humans and God can both be the cause of a 'virtue' without divine and human agency being in competition. Thus these gifts are also divine *gifts*. As Aquinas puts it: 'Wisdom is called an intellectual virtue, so far as it proceeds from the judgement of reason: but it is called a gift, according as its work proceeds from the Divine prompting.'

The beatitudes and fruits of the Spirit are likewise distinguished from the theological virtues and gifts largely because they name different means of movement towards the end of happiness.

The fruits of the Spirit are listed in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. They are similar to the beatitudes, and all beatitudes are fruits, but not all fruits are beatitudes. The difference is that fruits are 'virtuous deeds' which bring 'delight', but beatitudes are 'perfect works'. They are the fulfilment, perfection, or completion of the law.

#### Christian Ethics

## Chapter 2 The history of Christian ethics

Christian ethics emerges out of the shared Jewish and Christian mission to make God's name holy throughout creation by 'building' a 'city' or 'house'. This requires a twofold approach to ethics, which can best be characterized by the call to Abraham: 'do not be like the other nations . . . for the sake of the nations.' This section traces the historical development of Christian ethics as it addresses both concerns.

The first section, 'do not be like the other nations', develops the patterns or forms of living those who voluntarily enter into this mission are called to embody. Ethics here is 'habitation' and 'infusion'. Habitation assumes that there are things we can do in order to 'put on' the life of Christ. Yet habitation alone is insufficient; Christian ethics also requires 'infusion'. It affirms that no matter how much we do or act rightly, the Christian life is never an achievement of our own apart from grace, which is a communication of the Holy Spirit. This requires attention to worship, and especially the development of 'penance', which is the historical source that gave rise to Christian ethics. Penance holds together both habitation and infusion; it requires that we do some things and turn away from others in order to receive what is already given to us in baptism.

The second section, ... for the sake of the nations', negotiates the diverse relations between those who voluntarily enter into the mission and those who do not. It asks the question of the relation between the Church and the 'nations'. This too is crucial to Christian ethics; it is a source of some of its greatest contributions as well as its significant failures.

## The first section: 'do not be like the other nations...'

The basic pattern to Sunday worship discloses the shape of Christian ethics. This basic pattern has an ancient lineage. Robert Wilken argues that with 'little alteration' the liturgy found in the work of Justin Martyr (AD 100-65) has been present throughout Christian churches until the Reformation. That liturgy had five key elements:

- 1st: Biblical readings interspersed with prayers and psalms;
- 2nd: Exposition of the text as a 'sermon' or 'homily';
- 3rd: Common prayers;
- 4th: Greeting with a kiss of peace;
- 5th: Bread, wine, and water are then brought forward and thanksgiving offered.

These five elements exist within a fourfold movement acknowledged by the World Council of Churches as the basic form of Christian worship. The first movement is the gathering. People leave their homes and enter into the church, gathered as a new community. Baptism initiates people into this new community. Every baptism is a mini-exodus where sin and slavery are left behind and the believer takes on the life of Christ, participating in his death and resurrection symbolized by the water of baptism. The gathered community receives the name of God in order to be reminded why they gather; this is why the first act of gathering normally invokes the Trine Name: 'In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.'

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The second movement is the reading and proclaiming of Holy Scripture. The readings give shape to the community as it is reminded that all these words are necessary for its ongoing mission and identity. They are followed with proclamation to encourage and exhort those gathered. The Word read and proclaimed demands response, so the third movement is various responses to the Word, which come in the form of confession, prayers, altar calls, and the Holy Eucharist, or Lord's Supper. The fourth and final act of worship is the sending forth. Those who have been gathered are now sent into the world to live as people marked by the Spirit. They are called from 'the nations' only to be equipped to be sent back to them.

## The purpose of the liturgy: the Church's four marks

The purpose of the liturgy is to make people holy so that they in turn make God's Name holy; this is why every gathering for worship invokes the prayer - 'hallowed be thy Name'. To make God's Name holy is the work of the Holy Spirit, who helps the Church become what it is called to be, which is characterized by four marks: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. Unity should characterize the Church's common life. Holiness is a feature of its nearness to God's goodness. Catholicity states that it is 'universal'; no particular time or place alone defines it. As G. K. Chesterton said, 'Christianity is a democracy of the dead'. Apostolicity is a 'task' by which the Church always seeks to keep faith, with its origin in the 'apostolic witness', primarily attested in Scripture. The Holy Spirit breathes life into the Church in order for it to embody these four marks.

The Spirit, writes Yves Congar, 'is the extreme communication of God himself, God as grace, God *in us* and, in this sense, God outside himself'. This word 'communication' is significant. The Spirit *communicates* God's presence by uniting communicator and communicated. It is therefore the 'principle of communion'. I briefly mentioned this in discussing the giving of the Divine Name in Exodus 3. Just as the Spirit communicated with Moses by

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taking the form of, but not consuming, the burning bush, so the Spirit communicates with that which is not God – creation – by bringing it into unity with God without losing the distinction between God and creatures. The symbol for the Spirit is often a flame.

The four marks of the Church are not mere sociological claims for the Church's ethical superiority, but theological descriptions of grace received and tasks set for the Church. Even the physical structure of churches participates in these four marks. Congar writes:

The Church, which is the house of the living God, is the sacrament of salvation for mankind. It is not simply liturgy offered to God, but also a sign of God's love for men and of his kingdom. Even the structures that are also known as 'churches' have this part to play in our towns and villages.

#### Christian Ethics

Architecture matters. Think of the community in which you live; what gives it its 'orientation'? The philosopher Albert Borgmann reminds us that the term 'orientation' arose from the way cathedrals once shaped daily life in the West. They were built pointing towards the east, bearing witness to where Christian hope was directed – towards the homeland of Christ who would one day return. When Christians would stand to worship, they would have a similar orientation. The centrality of these buildings also gave shape to everyday life in villages and cities. Although the shopping centre with its easy access, or the fast-food restaurant with its quick availability, may 'orient' daily life in many of our cities and villages today, the presence of churches often still points to a different orientation that continues to make up the architecture of everyday life, gathering people daily and weekly for celebration of God's presence.

Of course, for most Christian churches, this witness does not take place without the human creature's willing participation. The building alone is insufficient; people must consent to the Spirit's

work, which is why they stand and make confession, pray and go forward to receive the Eucharist. Nevertheless, any observant person would readily recognize that those so formed do not always embody the marks of the Church in their common life. This puzzled many in the early Church. If the Spirit is the actor in these events and people consent to the Spirit's work, why do they continue to do evil? The possibility that a person could repent for sins after baptism was controversial.

#### Penance or repentance

The Church was depicted as a 'ship' sailing through virulent waters of chaotic evil. Baptism gave you entrance into the ship; to sin was to jump out of that ship back into the waters, which for some would forfeit the redemption baptism brought about. In some places in the early Christianity apostasy, fornication or adultery and murder excluded one from the possibility of repentance after baptism. Eventually, repentance for even these sins could be achieved, although they were still taken to be gravely serious. So the understanding of the Christian moral life developed. Early on it assumed that after baptism Christians would not commit such grave sins and therefore could not be readmitted into the community. Later even such grave sins could be forgiven before and after baptism. The specific discipline of Christian ethics arises from pastors and theologians trying to figure out how to make sense of the sins that arise after baptism and whether they should or should not exclude someone from the Eucharist.

Baptism is an unrepeatable event whereby a person becomes a member of Christ's body, the Church. This gives him or her access to the Eucharist, which is a repeatable feast. As baptism symbolizes the once and for all exodus from slavery, so the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, symbolizes the manna from heaven, which nourishes the 'wayfarers' moving towards God's 'New Jerusalem'. After baptism and before Eucharist is the necessary practice of 'repentance', or 'penance'. It is to be regularly repeated. Penance requires discerning what constitutes the good, or the holy, that baptism

brings, which is why we first discussed the sources of Christian ethics in the gifts, beatitudes, the natural or acquired and the infused virtues. Once these are acknowledged, which, as we mentioned above, are found primarily in the righteousness of Christ, then those sins or vices that detract from them can also be acknowledged. St Augustine demonstrated this in his *Confessions* when he wrote, 'for love of your love I will retrace my wicked ways'. In other words, sin and vice are the lack of something that is much greater than them. Vice does not stand on its own; it is parasitic on virtue, its lack.

### Deadly vices

We easily become fascinated with the vices and forget that the mere avoidance of them is not the purpose of Christian ethics. Perhaps this is why we have so many powerful movies and literary forms about the seven deadly vices (the film *Seven* comes to mind), but fewer art forms that show the same fascination with the beatitudes or the theological virtues (although the film *Joyeux Noël* would certainly be such a form). Vice seems to fascinate us more than virtue. The seven deadly vices were regularly present in manuals which priests used to help people identify sin. They are pride, covetousness, lust, gluttony, sloth, anger, and envy. Pride is 'the inordinate appetite for one's excellence'. Pride despises the good that comes to one's neighbours, friends, and enemies because the prideful person fears that the good given to them will detract from his or her own excellence. Covetousness is 'the inordinate love of temporal things'. Like the prideful person, the covetous person fears loss, not loss of status but loss of temporal goods. He is so led by this fear that he lives a life of deceit, doing all in his power to insure his own security against that of his neighbours. Lust is 'the inordinate appetite for sexual pleasure'. It should not be equated with sexual desire itself. Lust is a vice that leads one to dominate, consume, and destroy the other for one's own gratification. Gluttony (and drunkenness) is 'the inordinate indulgence in food or drink'. It is the desire to consume all the time and never know satisfaction. Sloth is the lack of sufficient desire to fulfil one's

obligations. If lust and gluttony are an overabundance of disordered desires, sloth is the lack of appropriate desire. Anger is 'the inordinate inclination to take revenge'. Envy is the '[w]illful sadness on account of the good of another, whether temporal or spiritual, regarded as diminishing one's own good'.

These vices, like the virtues, might appear to be merely an ethic for individuals, but that would be to misunderstand them. The Anglican priest John Wesley (1703–91), who started the Methodist movement, recognized this in his commentary on the beatitudes. He wrote: 'I shall endeavor to show that Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.' He gives an example of what he means in the beatitude of 'meekness', of which he writes, 'as it implies mildness, gentleness and long-suffering, it cannot possibly have a being . . . without an intercourse with other men . . . So that to attempt turning this into a solitary virtue is to destroy it from the face of the earth.' The beatitudes require living in proximity with others. They cannot but involve questions of sex, war, economics, family, and so on – all of which are crucial social matters. Meekness, like the hunger for justice, requires a social context for its intelligibility. That context is found both in the Church and in the intersection between the Church and the world.

### From penitentials to canon law, manuals, and the Protestant revolt

Historically, penance gave rise to Christian ethics. Irish monks confessed to each other in private, and then carried this practice with them on their missionary journeys throughout Europe. To assist this process, books known as *penitentials* were written which listed known sins and what should be done to remedy them. These books are an early, albeit strange, expression of Christian ethics. They mix local customs with theological and biblical convictions. Take, for example, the 7th-century Anglo-Saxon *Penitential of Theodore*. Some of its rules are odd, some seem overly rigorous, and others quite lenient. The odd rules are found in the dietary



penances. Anyone who 'eats unclean flesh or a carcass that has been torn by beasts shall do penance for forty days'. Here we still find the 'torn limb' law of the Noachic covenant. Dietary penitentials can also be found with respect to eating or drinking where a dog, cat, mouse, or bird accidentally contaminated the food or liquid. Discovering a dog 'contaminated' one's food would seem to be penance enough without tacking on something more! In this penitential, masturbation required penance for three years, while murder only seven to ten. Penance would usually involve certain kinds of fasting as well as abstaining from the Eucharist.

Because of their arbitrary nature and lack of systematization, the penitentials created problems within the Church. Eventually, they were subject to the Carolingian reforms (8th and 9th centuries, initiated by Charlemagne), and then later an effort was made to regularize penitential practice in Gratian's decretum, which was the first attempt to systematize the arbitrary and conflicting canons concerning the moral life. It led to the development of canon law, which assisted the process of discerning good from evil and became one of the bases for 'rights' in Western society.

The Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, marked the end of medieval penance and the beginning of modern penance. It made possible a 'tariff system' of penance whereby penance became an end in itself. Individual auricular confession and the priest's absolution represented a growing cost-benefit analysis of sin and reward, whereby the Christian moral life is reduced to an accountant's ledger with sins on one side and penances as payment for those sins on the other. Manuals of confession were produced which focused on those acts alone that violated certain laws and how confessors were to lead their confessee into a thorough examination of conscience. Many Catholics and most Protestants found this system wanting. Catholics reform the manualist tradition at Vatican II, which for them is the twenty-first ecumenical council held from 1962 to 1965.

### Luther and the Lutherans' protest

Martin Luther, rightly or wrongly, thought that much of Christian ethics of the later Middle Ages resulted in a 'gallows sorrow' that was based on fear rather than the love of God. He protested against a corrupt form of penance that resulted in a minimalist and juridical conception of the moral life. When he was reconsidering the sacraments, Luther seemed ambiguous on whether penance should be a sacrament. In 1519, he wrote: 'The sacrament of penance renews and points out again the sacrament of baptism.' However, Luther rejected the long-standing tradition via Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine, and Aquinas that spoke of penance as a 'second plank', which he thought diminished the efficacy of baptism. He feared the practice of penance would prevent fully trusting in 'the first plank, or the ship', which was baptism. He feared any account of 'habitation' would lead Christians to trust in themselves rather than in grace alone. To think that acts of penance restored baptismal grace could too easily make grace dependent upon human works.

Luther could so emphasize the promise present in baptism that law became something overwhelmingly negative. This led to a 'forensic justification' whereby persons are forgiven by having God's righteousness imputed to, but not inherent in, them. So Luther stated that God 'pledges himself not to impute to you the sins which remain in your nature after baptism, neither to take them into account nor to condemn you because of them'. Instead, God 'winks at our sins' and regards us 'as if' we were sinless. Sin is so 'overruled by our baptism that it does not condemn us and is not harmful to us'. This will give a different conception of ethics than one finds in the Catholic tradition. Some, if not most, Lutherans emphasize a law-gospel dialectic where we try to live the law but cannot. Then we flee to where we are justified not by any cooperation on our own part but solely by God's declaration that we are forgiven. This could call 'ethics' into question altogether.

In an attempt to explain what a 'Lutheran ethics' might be, the 'radical Lutheran' Gerhard Forde stated, 'Put audaciously, perhaps even irresponsibly, one might announce that the problem is that Luther does not have any ethics.' For Forde, this is not a problem as much as an opportunity, for too much 'ethics' leads away from grace. What Forde means by this must be carefully nuanced if it is to be properly understood. Luther opposed the ethics of Aristotle, which he thought had become a way of salvation, especially through the basic scholastic dictum that grace did not destroy but perfect nature. For Luther, the scholastics were insufficiently radical in that they were preoccupied with an 'exodus from vice to virtue' when what was needed was one from 'virtue to grace'. For this reason, Luther spoke hyperbolically against ethics to preserve the fundamental reality that apart from grace, human creatures could do no good. But this did not mean he had no place for doing good. Forde writes, 'Ethics is not the way of salvation. It is not, to use Luther's favorite image, the tree. It is the fruit of the tree.'

### Catholic and Lutheran convergence

Lutherans themselves are divided on whether Luther's position is best represented by a strong law-gospel dialectic, or by Eastern Christianity's understanding of 'theosis' or 'deification', which will be discussed below. Deification calls into question the distinction between an imputed or inherent righteousness. Because this is similar to the Roman Catholic Church's position, it provided the means by which the Roman Catholic Church and some Lutherans acknowledge their positions are not far apart in a document called 'The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification' (1999). Catholics and Protestants had been divided over the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone since the 16th century. Catholics formulated their position against the Protestants at the Council of Trent (1545-63). The following two canons from Trent show the traditional Catholic teaching. The first canon (or teaching) suggests that the Catholics do not teach what some Protestants thought they did - justification by works.

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If anyone says that man can be justified before God by his own works, whether done by his own natural powers or through the teaching of the law, without divine grace through Jesus Christ let him be anathema [condemned].

(Canon 1)

This second canon seemed to drive an ineradicable wedge between Catholics and Lutherans by suggesting that the Protestants did not have an adequate understanding of the merit of human work.

If anyone says that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified; or that the one justified by the good works that he performs by the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living members he is, does not truly merit an increase of grace, eternal life, and in case he dies in grace, the attainment of eternal life itself, and also an increase of glory, let him be anathema.

(Canon 32)

However, the 'Joint Declaration' affirmed on 31 October 1999 claims that the Protestant and Catholic positions can be reconciled:

Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.

(para. 15)

The Joint Declaration acknowledges and clarifies the perceived differences. For instance, a Catholic understanding of our cooperation in justification was clarified.

When Catholics say that persons 'cooperate' in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God's justifying action, they

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see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities.

(para. 21)

Likewise, Lutherans affirmed a proper place for human works.

We confess together that good works – a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love – follow justification and are its fruits.

(para. 37)

This Joint Declaration was historically significant, and should bear on how Christian ethics is understood in both Catholic and Protestant circles. Neither would be 'Pelagian', but nor are human works inconsequential. Ethics matters.

### Catholic ethics

Catholics do not have a single, uncontested tradition about ethics. Luther's concerns about the minimal and juridical character of some Catholic ethics were not confined to Protestants alone. Servais Pinckaers, a contemporary Roman Catholic ethicist, viewed 'moral theology' undergoing a 'profound break' at the end of the Middle Ages when it produced the tradition of the 'manuals'. He credits a theology called 'nominalism' for producing the change. It so emphasized God's will that it made ethics dependent primarily upon commands. The new manuals still had an important place for the Ten Commandments and the human, divine, and natural laws, but they neglected the beatitudes and the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit. Moral theology became decisively separate from mystical theology.

One of the results of the minimalist and juridical account of the moral life was a moral theology known as 'probabilism'. This controversial account of morality asks whether a given act is licit or illicit under the law. It does not ask whether it is virtuous; nor does it ask, as Thomas Aquinas would have, whether the act directs us

towards God and the good. Instead, it seeks only to know if something is licit based on the previous precedence of at least five established authorities (at least in one version of probabilism; it has different versions). If sufficient authorities in the life of the Church affirm a certain action as licit, then that opinion can be followed.

This kind of moral theology came under attack by the Catholic Blaise Pascal (1623–62) and others, who told the story of Louis XIV who would put his mistress away on Thursday, confess to his Jesuit confessor on Friday, go to Mass on Sunday, and call her back on Monday. In his *Provincial Letters*, Pascal satirized the problems with probabilism through a conversation with a fictitious Jesuit. Pascal wrote:

Reverend father, said I, how happy the world is in having such men as you for its masters! And what blessings are these probabilities! I never knew the reason why you took such pains to establish that a single doctor [approved teacher of the church], if a grave one, might render an opinion probable, and that the contrary might be so too, and that one may choose any side one pleases, even though he does not believe it to be the right side, and all with such a safe conscience, that the confessor who should refuse him absolution . . . would be in a state of damnation . . . Indeed father! cried I, why on this principle the Church would approve of all the abuses which she tolerates and all the errors in all the books which she does not censure!

Probabilism 'probably' deserved such ire. It can easily produce a minimalist ethic primarily concerned with evading rules without attending to why those rules may or may not matter in the first place. Whether Pascal accurately described Jesuit practice is questionable. His own position could become so rigorous that it too lost why rules and laws might matter. Catholic ethicists can also be found who emphasize virtues, the natural law, or canon law.



### Anglican ethics

The Anglican Christian ethicist Kenneth Kirk (1886–1954, Bishop of Oxford as well as Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology) suggested Christian ethics best proceeds by avoiding both formalism and rigorism. Formalism seeks to bring all of life under codification, the setting out of codes and laws that proscribe what is not to be done in advance, but actually demands very little; for all it asks is that we avoid violating some formal code. It seeks to 'discipline' through the lowest common denominator. Rigorism reacts against this formalism and demands a higher standard. But both miss something significant, suggests Kirk, and that is the 'vision of God' as the true purpose in life to which the codes or laws should be directed. For this reason, he titled his Christian ethics *The Vision of God*, and began it with a quote from the church father Irenaeus, who wrote, 'The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man is the vision of God'. Because the 'vision of God' is the 'end of life', Kirk suggested, 'the high prerogative of the Christian, in this life as well as hereafter, is the activity of *worship*'; and that nowhere except in this activity will he find the key to his ethical problems'. The 'way of worship' is set against a 'formalism' or 'moralism' that becomes so preoccupied with one's own virtue or morality that it turns into a self-preoccupation; a 'vision of self' supplants the 'vision of God'. Worship re-directs us from self to God.

### Orthodox ethics

The centrality of worship for ethics in Kirk's understanding of the Anglican tradition resonates well with Orthodox ethics. The Orthodox Churches of the East and the Catholic Church of the West, along with its Protestant offshoots, are sometimes distinguished by their conceptions of salvation, leading to different ethical emphases. The East supposedly focuses on salvation from death and the West from sin and guilt. The East's ethics then focus on the Incarnation and its effects on humanity, leading us into a

participation in the life of God, which is called 'theosis' or 'deification' (becoming like God). The West supposedly focuses on the crucifixion and juridical accounts of atonement whereby Christ's sacrifice on the cross redeems humanity of sin and guilt. But many contemporary theologians call into question any too easy distinction between them. In fact, both churches draw upon the same church fathers for their understanding of salvation, and both draw upon the sacraments, virtues, gifts, and beatitudes as central to the Christian life. This is not to deny different emphases in the two traditions.

Panayiotis Nellias, an Orthodox theologian, explains how Orthodox theology differs from the Western churches in its understandings of the human person. For the Orthodox, a 'tendency' or 'inclination' remains in the human creature after the Fall that gives a 'specific direction' towards God. This inclination is insufficient to attain God, but not is the person so totally depraved that she or he is left with nothing by which to respond to God. Yet for Nellias, like the Catholics and the Reformed, grace alone can properly guide this inclination. He writes: 'Human nature could not have been completed simply by its tendency, it had to attain union with the Archetype.' The 'Archetype' here is Jesus, and we are originally created in his image. Therefore we have a longing or desire for union with him. After the Fall of Adam and Eve, this image is distorted. We are then given 'garments of skin' (Genesis 3:21). These 'garments' are interpreted as a 'later human nature' given to Adam and Eve, but they are not to be identified with the body. They are mortality and the conspicuous desires it brings. Although this is a judgement, it is also remedy; for they give human nature its inclination towards the Christian ethical life. God himself will be found in these same 'garments' in the Incarnation. Salvation, then, is called 'Christification' which is obtained via 'faith, keeping the commandments, asceticism, the sacraments, the whole ecclesiastical and spiritual life'. The Christian life as 'deification' or 'theosis' is an important theme in much of early Christian tradition. A. N. Williams explains ethics in terms of it:

It asserts the *imago Dei* and the Incarnation as the basis of deification and construes theosis overwhelmingly in terms of knowledge, virtue, light and glory, participation and union. In some authors, the sacraments are important tradents of divinization; more often, human faculties such as the intellect and the ability to love are significant.

This then assumes some 'degree of human striving toward virtuous assimilation to God', but love of, and union with, God always comes as a 'divine gift, a gift of grace'. Williams finds this theme present in the Western, Catholic tradition as well as the Eastern, Orthodox one.

### Reformed ethics

Deification is seldom found in the Reformed tradition; its emphasis on total depravity mitigates against it. For Calvin, 'concupiscence' (the garments themselves in the Orthodox tradition) is already a sin whether one acts upon it or not. He wrote:

... between Augustine and us we can see that there is this difference of opinion; while he concedes that believers as long as they dwell in mortal bodies are so bound by inordinate desires that they are unable not to desire inordinately, yet he does not call this disease 'sin.' Content to designate it with the term 'weakness' he teaches that it becomes sin only when either act or consent follows the conceiving or apprehension of it, that is, when the will yields to the first strong inclination. We, on the other hand, deem it sin when man is tickled by any desire at all against the law of God. Indeed, we label 'sin' that very depravity which begets in us desires of this sort.

All are already depraved by concupiscence and the only way to overcome it is by God's election. Only as God 'elects' to redeem us by God's grace can we possibly have desires restored such that we might keep God's law. This provides a very different account of ethics than is found in the Orthodox Church. Reformed ethics tend

to focus on commands God gives, which we are to obey, but can only do so if God elects us so to do.

### Evangelical ethics

This remains a key influence in much of 'Evangelical' theology and its understanding of ethics, which are often based upon a 'divine command' theory, whereby God wills an action to be done and in the willing of that action also provides the grace to accomplish it. The Evangelical theologian Roger Olson states that Christian ethics for Evangelicals rests solely on revelation rather than nature. He writes:

Evangelical ethical reflection and guidance rests on divine commands; almost all evangelical ethical thinkers appeal to commands of God found in Scripture as ultimate norms, even if they also seek to demonstrate their rationality and ethical flexibility and fruitfulness for normal human living.

Even those good works accomplished outside the Church are acts of grace, often referred to as 'common grace'.

### Anabaptist ethics

In the 16th century, Protestants and Catholics could not agree on much. One thing they did agree on was their opposition, often violent, to the 'Anabaptists'. Since this Christian community did not believe Christians should use violence, violent opposition to them was easy. Their enemies called them 'Anabaptists', which means 're-baptizers'. They are also known as the 'radical wing' of the Reformation. They did not arise from a single reformer or place, but from several of both. They became known for their own specific take on the marks of the church: adult baptism, the ban, the common Supper, and 'mutual aid'. Eventually, they also became known for a 'common purse', whereby they shared goods in common; non-violence; and the practice of binding and loosing.<sup>2</sup> The practice of the 'ban' to resolve disputes comes from Matthew 18:15-20 and seeks restoration by first going to an offender and

confronting him or her. If this is to no avail, then you take someone else along to help effect restoration. If this remains ineffectual, then the offended tells the matter to the Church and the offender is placed under the 'ban' whereby they are considered outside the community, in need of restoration.

The Anabaptist practice of binding and loosing is one way the Church disciplines its members. It differs from Catholic forms where the bishops, and above all the Bishop of Rome, are given the 'keys to the kingdom' in order to determine what is permitted and what is prohibited. The biblical warrant for this tradition is Matthew 16:18-19, in which Jesus gives the keys to the kingdom to Peter, who first confesses he is the Messiah. Jesus says:

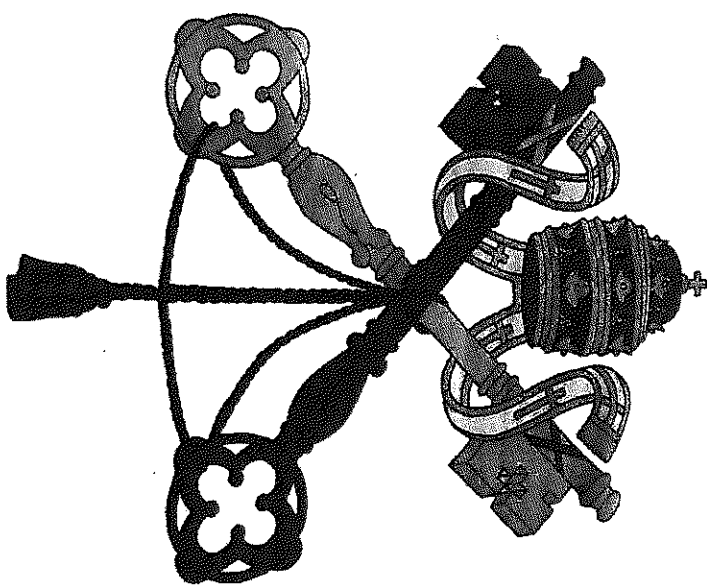
You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

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This is why the symbol of the papacy is two keys (Illustration 7).

#### Summary

This brief history of the origin and execution of Christian ethics within the Church shows that it is both for and against 'ethics'. It is for ethics in that what humans do matters. Most Christian traditions agree that all humans are capable of ethical action. In fact, Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), a Christian philosopher, stated that a society of atheists could be ethical. A similar argument was debated among the Spanish scholastics of the 16th and 17th centuries with the 'discovery' of the Native Americans. While some, such as Sepúlveda, argued that they were natural slaves and could not be trusted to form good societies, the majority opinion was the opposite. God had so created the world that good could be found among its various nations, even those who did not know God. But Christian ethics



The history of Christian ethics

7. The two keys represent the two keys Jesus gives to Peter. Roman Catholics understand this as giving the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, the power to exercise authority in the Church

is also against ethics because something more than our own nature is necessary. For the good to be truly attained, nature is presupposed and perfected but may also need to be disrupted and corrected.

The second section: '... for the sake of the nations'

To this point, we examined Christian ethics internal to the Church and its calling 'not to be like the other nations'. The first context for Christian ethics is the community of faith as it seeks to embody the

life to which God calls. But it is also called to do this for the sake of the nations. How it has fulfilled and failed to fulfil that task is also a crucial element in the history of Christian ethics. The failure to fulfil this mission was a central cause in Christ's crucifixion.

### We have no king but Caesar

In his trial, Jesus is brought before the Roman prefect Pilate, who asks the Jewish elders, 'Shall I crucify your King?' To which the chief priests answer, 'We have no king but Caesar' (John 19:15). Anyone who has followed the biblical narrative to this point would let out an audible gasp; the Gospel here is intentionally provocative. The chief priests betrayed the call of Abraham 'not to be like the other nations'. Yaweh alone was to be king. In order to deliver Jesus to death, the chief priests betray him and their own history by calling on the security of Rome. The New Testament scholar Raymond Brown suggests that this may give us authentic historical insight as to the reason Jesus was crucified – worry about what they would say in Rome.

### Christian Ethics

This is a constant temptation not only for Israel but also for the Church. The temptation takes diverse forms. At times, the king or governing authority gets treated as divine or as head of the Church. This is called 'Caesaropapism'. At other times, bishops or leaders of the Church act more like kings than Christ's ministers. Still another version of this temptation is to turn the Church into a 'chaplain' to the state, whereby it seeks only to do its bidding. We will discuss below various historical failures – crusade, conquests, inquisitions – that arose from these failures. They are often temptations for the Church to resemble the power of the state.

Walter Miller's novel *Contide for Leibowitz* explains the temptation to Caesaropapism. After a number of unfortunate incidents, newly formed states engage in battle with nuclear weapons, threatening the earth itself. A character in the narrative, the abbot of a monastery, surveys the damage and comments on how such devastation arose:

Always culminates in the colossus of the State, somehow, drawing about itself the mantle of godhood, being struck down by wrath of Heaven. Why? We shouted it loudly enough – God's to be obeyed by nations as by men. Caesar's to be God's policeman, not His plenipotentiary successor, nor His heir. To all ages, all people – 'Whoever exalts a race or a State or a particular form of State or the depositories of power... whoever raises these notions above their standard value and divinizes them to an idolatrous level, distorts and perverts an order of the world planned and created by God...' Where had that come from? Eleventh Pius, he thought. But when Caesar got the means to destroy the world, wasn't he already divinized? Only by the consent of the people – same rabble that shouted: '*Non habemus regem nisi caesarem*' [we have no king but Caesar] when confronted by Him – God Incarnate, mocked and spat upon. Caesar's divinity is showing itself again.

From popes to Protestants, traditionalists to Reformers to revisionists, a perennial temptation is to dissolve the form of God's people into 'the nations'. The temptation is to say, 'we have no king but Caesar'.

This is not to argue that the nations, the 'state', or social institutions other than the Church are somehow intrinsically evil, from which Christian ethics demands withdrawal. Quite the contrary! All their goodness has a place in God's kingdom (Revelation 21:26). The purpose of Christian ethics is to fashion the people of God in order to serve the 'nations'. This has been accomplished through a variety of means in Christian tradition. We will examine some of the most important of them.

### Relating to the nations

One of the first articulations as to how Christians should relate to other peoples or nations is found in the Epistle to Diogenetus, perhaps a late 2nd-century document. It tells us that Christians are not distinguished from others 'by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe'. In other words, the Christian

vocation is not to create its own country, language, or custom apart from others. The epistle continues:

But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, [Christians] display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven.

#### Christian Ethics

The epistle to Diognetus sets forth a tension always present in Christian ethics. On the one hand, Christians find 'every foreign land' amenable as a place in which they can live and 'share in all things with others', including their understanding and pursuit of the good. On the other, every land, even their native one, is to be to them a 'land of strangers' where they 'endure all things as if foreigners'. Can such a tension provide a workable ethic?

This tension produced varying results in how Christians live among the nations. For instance, both Origen and Tertullian denied that Christians should serve in public office or in the military of those nations in which they found themselves. Such positions did not serve the 'good' to be preserved, but this did not mean they denied cooperation and solidarity in other matters. For instance, Tertullian wrote:

But we are called to account as harm-doers on another ground, and are accused of being useless in the affairs of life. How in all the world can that be the case with people who are living among you, eating

the same food, wearing the same attire, having the same habits, under the same necessities of existence? We are not Indian Brahmins or Gymnosopists, who dwell in woods and exile themselves from ordinary human life. We do not forget the debt of gratitude we owe to God, our Lord and Creator; we reject no creature of His hands, though certainly we exercise restraint upon ourselves, lest of any gift of His we make an immoderate or sinful use. So we sojourn with you in the world, abjuring neither forum, nor shambles, nor bath, nor booth, nor workshop, nor inn, nor weekly market, nor any other places of commerce. We sail with you, and fight with you, and till the ground with you; and in like manner we unite with you in your traffickings – even in the various arts we make public property of our works for your benefit. How it is we seen useless in our ordinary business, living with you and by you as we do, I am not able to understand.

Exactly what Tertullian meant here by we 'fight with you' is unclear, for in other statements he made clear that Christians could not participate in warfare, for when Christ took away the sword from Peter on the night of his arrest, he took it away from all Christians.

By the time we get to St Augustine (354–430), things have shifted somewhat. He too preserves the tension we find in the Epistle to Diognetus, and argues that Christ is the only source of virtue for a truly just society because he rescues us from the deep problem in every political society, which is the fact that 'the lie' primarily constitutes our social relations. The Church makes possible social bonds, unlike the Roman Empire, that do not depend upon deceit. But even for Augustine, this does not mean Christians abandon Rome. They cooperate as much as they can, pursuing a common peace, with proper worship discriminating what is and is not possible. Augustine writes:

The heavenly city, while it sojourns on earth . . . not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly



peace is secured and maintained, but recognizing that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthly peace. . . . [Is] so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities, that it even preserves and adopts them so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced.

Even the heavenly city, therefore, while in its state of pilgrimage, avails itself of the peace of earth, and . . . desires and maintains a common agreement among men regarding the acquisition of the necessities of life so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness.

For Augustine, worship and holiness qualifies the relation between the two cities.

#### Christian Ethics

The tension certainly collapses when emperors adopt Christianity and begin to act like bishops, thinking their task is to create and enforce Christian doctrine and ethics. When this happens, the task of the Church is to remind the ruling authority of his limited role. An ancient saying of the Church captured this – ‘if you want a Theodosius, you need an Ambrose’. Theodosius was emperor from 378 to 392. Ambrose was bishop of Milan. After a Christian uprising that resulted in monks and the local bishop burning down a Jewish synagogue in Thessalonika, Theodosius responded by requiring the bishop to rebuild the synagogue. Then one year later, the people of Thessalonika rebelled against Theodosius’s army officer. Theodosius responded violently; his army slaughtered seven thousand people. Ambrose responded by telling Theodosius he could not come to the Eucharist because he had blood on his hands. The result was that Theodosius agreed and did penance. As David Bentley Hart argues, this was a mixed incident. On the one hand, it desacralized the state. It could never again claim divinity without challenge. On the other, it produced the ‘unhappy marriage of church and state’ that has haunted Western politics since. Antonis van Dyck made a famous painting of this incident, dramatizing it by making Ambrose confront Theodosius at the



8. Saint Ambrose confronting the emperor Theodosius. This story became the basis for one understanding of the relation

door of the church (Illustration 8). The event was not that dramatic, no confrontation occurred at the door of the church, but Ambrose did send a letter to Theodosius, confronting his violence and telling him that he could not say Mass in his presence.

Despite its legendary accretions, and ambiguous morality, this incident between Theodosius and Ambrose nonetheless sets forth an important theme in Christian tradition as to how it serves the nations. Christianity has a long tradition of reminding the ruling authorities of their limits, even when the Church's leaders begin to resemble those ruling authorities. There was Tertullian, who told the emperor 'look behind you, you are but a man'; Maximus the Confessor (580-662), whose tongue was cut out and hand cut off for reminding the emperor that he was no priest; St Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), who challenged the Church's complicity with the wealthy and powerful; Catherine of Siena (1347-80), who sought the peace of the Church when it was divided against itself; Peter Chelcicky (1390-1460), who told pope and emperor that their union of power was inconsistent with following Christ; Thomas More (1478-1535), who refused to recognize Henry VIII's act of supremacy by which he claimed authority over the Church; Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566), who challenged the Spanish conquerors of the Americas; Martin Luther (1483-1546), who called into question the papacy's temporal authority over a military crusade; Dorothy Day (1897-1980), who said the US president Truman was no 'true man' for violating the Church's teaching on war by the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima; Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), who refused participation with Hitler's usurpation of the Church and paid for it with his life; Martin Luther King (1929-68), who reminded the governing authorities that an 'unjust law was no law at all' in the context of laws demanding segregation of whites from blacks; Oscar Romero (1917-80), who commanded El Salvadoran soldiers to put down their weapons during the repression against the poor. These are, of course, only a few Christian witnesses who reminded emperors, popes, mayors, presidents, and others of the way of Christ. They are not all unambiguous saints, but, like Ambrose, they served the nations by reminding them of their role in God's economy. In so doing, they help us understand Jesus's opaque words, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's' (Matthew 22:21).

### Serving the nations

Christian ethics serves the nations by reminding government of its limits, but it also makes important positive contributions. It should affirm what is good in every culture, working in cooperation with it. Christian ethics follows local customs, cultivates common habits, and avails itself of earthly peace (to cite again the Epistle to Diognetus, Tertullian, and Augustine). For instance, Christian ethics affirms, preserves, and turns into international law, the Roman Cicero's teaching on the just war (about which more will be said below). At the same time, it questions war's appropriateness for a creation made good by God, and constantly asks whether Christians are called to pacifism. Likewise, it affirms our possessions are to be held in service to a common good, even while it has a longstanding affirmation of private property within proper limits. It also has a tradition of holding goods in common, a form of Christian socialism.

Christian ethics makes common cause with similar ethics wherever they can be found. The goodness of God's creation, and the confession that all things are made through Christ, means that Christians are not surprised when they find his way of life vindicated in creation apart from those who explicitly confess him. Some call this 'natural law', others 'common grace'. The Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder suggested it revealed the deep Christological structure to God's good created order. He wrote: 'People who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe.' For Yoder, Christian discipleship, including the refusal to use violence, can be found in and outside the Church because God who creates all things is the same God who discloses himself in Christ, redeeming the world. Christ's life remains normative, even when it finds expression in creation outside the Church. Even those Christian ethicists who affirm a natural law based on self-preservation that requires, or at least permits, the use of violence

within certain limits would have to agree that Christ's life remains normative.

Notice, for instance, the following report on Benedict XVI's praise for the non-violent work of youth in the Italian Civil Service. Benedict stated:

the authentic conversion of hearts represents the right way, the only way that can lead each one of us and all humanity to the peace that we hope for. It is the way indicated by Jesus: He - the King of the universe - did not come to bring peace to the world with an army, but through refusing violence [which is the way] followed not only by the disciples of Christ, but by many men and women of good will, courageous witnesses of non-violence. [We] cannot fail to praise those who renounce the use of violence in the vindication of their rights and who resort to methods of defense which are otherwise available to weaker parties too, provided this can be done without injury to the rights and duties of others or of the community itself.

#### Christian Ethics

Benedict XVI, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, and John Howard Yoder, the influential Anabaptist theologian, do not agree completely. But they both recognize that Jesus refused violence, that his life is normative and should be affirmed when others embody it, and that such an embodiment can be found in and outside the Church. The task of Christian ethics is to affirm the mission to embody the life of Jesus in the world, and to affirm it wherever it is found. What both Yoder and Benedict share is the conviction that it is the dogmatic certainty that Jesus is who the Church professes him to be that is the basis for cultivating, discovering, and affirming the good in creation. This seems counter-intuitive, and, as we shall see, modern ethics finds it difficult to affirm, but Christian ethics suggests that it is the truth of its particular, dogmatic commitments that makes it open and welcoming to others.

Now we must return to the question of the relation between Christianity and ethics, for once again this question acutely arises. Is such a 'call' and 'mission' to the world ethical? If Christian ethics depends upon its dogmatic claims as well as the social form of the Church as the ongoing mission to fulfil the call of Abraham not to be like the other nations for the sake of the nations, does this inevitably result in failures of imperialism and colonialism? It is the missionary character of this body that worries some, especially postcolonialist thinkers who help us recognize and avoid the lingering sources of colonialism. For instance, Walter Mignolo finds that religions of the 'Book' like Christianity inevitably foster colonialism. Once you have a notion of a 'Sacred Book' that contains truth, then you get 'religions of conversion', and, citing Jack Goody, he states, 'you can spread them like jam'. Mignolo continues: 'What is important here is not the "content" of the Book but rather the very existence of the object in which a set of regulations and metaphors was inscribed, giving to it the special status of Truth and Wisdom.' If you have a Book filled with 'Truth' and 'Wisdom', which is considered to be the Word of God, then you will have a universal standard by which you evaluate and tacitly subordinate all other cultures. Is the mission itself immoral? Should there not be an appreciation of all religions, cultures, and peoples without any hierarchical evaluation of one as truer or wiser than another, an eschewal of all dogmatic certainty? Should we seek to find a common basis for ethics that would not exclude anyone? This was the hope of modern ethics, and remains, in some form, the hope of a postcolonial ethic as well.