

## 4

## Moral Structure in the World

*The Form and Function of Moral Norms*

*"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."*

Matthew 5:17

In this chapter we will look even more closely at the way Scripture informs our ethics. We will propose that Christians (and, in fact, all people) organize and communicate their moral convictions — technically known as **moral norms** — at four different levels: the particular judgments/actions level, the rules level, the principles level, and the **basic-convictions** level. Finding congruence between these levels is vital so that ethics is neither too vague and abstract nor too legalistic and superficial. Scripture offers numerous examples of each level of moral norms.

Our task in this chapter is fourfold. First, we will present this model as a way of organizing thinking about the nature of Christian moral norms. Second, we will explore each level of moral norms more deeply, consider approaches to Christian ethics that see one level or another as the heart of Christian ethics, and argue that the four levels belong together in an ethic that is incarnational, Hebraic, realistic, embodied narrative. Third, in a new way of describing these complex matters for the second edition, we will present the modes of reasoning in which these moral norms function. Finally, we will discuss how this model works out in action. Throughout, we will seek to ground these reflections on the witness of Jesus.

How Christian moral norms are understood is significant in at least two ways. First is the basic problem of communication: when discussing the biblical witness in ethics, or a particular moral issue, people often talk past each other and confuse or anger each other because they are talking on different levels. Four friends can talk about **abortion**, for example, but not really communi-

cate — because Omar speaks at the rules level, Sam addresses principles, Issa does theological basic-conviction reflection, and Daphne is at the judgments/actions level. This kind of communication breakdown happens every day.

Second, at a more technical level, Christian ethicists differ over what kinds of moral norms are most frequently found in Scripture, were most central for Jesus, or are most significant for the Christian life. This is no mere technical squabble but a disagreement with practical consequences for Christian ethics and behavioral norms. We need clarity about the nature of moral norms if we are to understand Christian ethics and communicate its insights clearly.

## Four Levels of Moral Norms in Christian Ethics

Our approach to this issue is influenced heavily by philosophical efforts to clarify what people mean when they talk about **morality**. Decades ago the philosophical ethicist Henry David Aiken defined four levels of moral norms (*Reason and Conduct*). His proposal was adopted by Christian ethicist James Gustafson in a highly influential essay ("Context vs. Principle"). We believe Aiken and Gustafson's proposal helps correct some harmful errors in Christian ethics — especially concerning what we mean by *rules*. We offer further adaptations of their original models here.

*The Level of Particular Judgments/Actions*

Sometimes when we express a moral evaluation, we do not give any reasons. We just say, "That's wrong," or, "What a good thing to do!" or, "Tamela is a really good person!" And sometimes we just act in situations without either considering or offering reasons. These are examples of particular and immediate moral judgments and actions. They are part and parcel of everyday life. For example, Jesus once called Herod "that fox" (Lk 13:32). Jesus, like the prophets before him, often criticized the powerful for ignoring biblical mandates of justice, faithfulness, and mercy and covering it up with religious rationalizing.

But in *this particular passage*, Jesus criticized one particular ruler, Herod, and not all rulers who do injustice. He did not give any reasons for his criticism. That is a moral judgment *on a particular and immediate level* rather than a general or universal level. It is also a kind of prophetic action (the kind that gets you in trouble). If someone had asked Jesus why he said that, he could certainly have given reasons. But in this one passage, Jesus only made a *moral declaration about one particular case* — *without stating any reasons that would apply to other cases*.

Sometimes when we make a judgment or take an action and do not give any reasons, we could give dozens of reasons if asked. Other times we say, "I can't give you a reason. I just know it's right/wrong. If anything is right/wrong,

that is it! I did what I had to do!" This is moral judgment and action about a particular case in which no reason is given and no reason apparently can be given. The person just knows, just feels, perhaps by **moral intuition**, that this particular course of action is required.

Norms expressed at the immediate judgment/action level are useful in two different ways. First, when such judgments/actions are examined, one can sometimes discover the rule, principle, or basic-conviction wellsprings from which they come. By asking why Jesus judged Herod to be a "fox" and took the action of publicly declaring him as such, we can learn something about the deeper structure of his moral norms with regard to justice, power, government, and so on.

Second, we can sometimes extend the logic of particular and immediate judgments/actions by way of **moral analogy**. Thus the immediate judgment that Jesus expressed concerning Herod may find in our context a suitable analogy. One might say, "Herod was to Jesus's context as *x* is to ours." The capacity of Scripture to function in this way is a critical part of its power for the church. For example, the parables of Jesus tell us particular, immediate stories and imply or sometimes directly articulate moral judgments, norms, and **action-guides**. We then reason by analogy from the particular moral judgment expressed/implied in a parable to our own situation. Thus, if I am to be to this needy child at my door as the good Samaritan was to the wounded man by the side of the road, what should I do?

Using **moral imagination**, we enter the particular story, place ourselves in one or another role, and then find ourselves drawn or driven to particular courses of action. The prophet Nathan offered this style of reasoning when he confronted David about Bathsheba and Uriah; a rich man who steals a poor man's one lamb is analogous to a king who steals a man's wife and takes his life (2 Sm 12). David realized that the analogy was accurate and repented. To make correct analogies, we need to study the way the particular moral judgment/action functioned in the particular biblical context and then consider what moral judgment/action would function similarly in our context. No one can prove the adequacy of such a moral analogy, but we attempt moral analogies all the time.

In summary, two things characterize the particular judgments/actions level:

1. No reasons are given for the moral judgment/action.
2. The moral judgment/action applies or responds to one particular case or situation.

### The Rules Level

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught a moral rule about instances when Roman soldiers compelled Jews to carry their packs a mile (Mt 5:41). In Ro-

man law, soldiers had the limited right to require one mile of this beast-of-burden duty. It was resented deeply, especially by rebels or freedom fighters, who urged people to resist the foreign occupation, even with violence. Jesus opposed this strategy. Instead, he gave a different rule to those who would be his followers: when a Roman soldier compels you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two miles. (Of course, not everyone reads Jesus's teaching here as a rule, which is itself an interesting issue.)

Jesus also quoted another rule, indeed a **moral law**, in fact a **moral command**, from the Decalogue: "Thou shalt not kill." He affirmed this rule, while adding several additional rules that undergird, support, and help enact it: if you are unreconciled with someone, interrupt your worship of God to go make peace with that person; make friends with your accuser while on your way to court; and so on (Mt 5:21-26).

These rules that Jesus taught do not apply only to one particular situation. Roman soldiers often compelled Jews to carry packs. Jesus said that when that happened, his hearers should carry their packs a second mile. "Thou shalt not kill" applies to countless cases, as does the command to go and make peace. So these are not simply judgments about particular cases; they *apply to all similar cases*.

These rules *tell us directly and concretely what to do or not to do*. "Go the second mile" means "Don't carry the pack only one mile but also a second mile." "Do not kill" tells us directly and concretely what not to do. This is different from a general principle like "love your enemy," which does not tell us directly how we are to express our love for our enemy. In fact, this specific rule — carry his pack a second mile — is one concrete expression of the general principle "love your enemy."

Two things characterize the rules level:

1. A rule applies not just to one immediate case but to all similar cases.
2. A rule tells us directly what to do or not to do.

### The Principles Level

Jesus also taught moral principles. "Love your enemies" is one. Another is "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Mt 7:12). Another is "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:39). Another is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Mt 22:37). *Principles are more general than rules; they are one level deeper than rules. They do not tell us directly and concretely what to do*. They support rules — or criticize them. They provide the basis for rules — or show why certain rules need to be changed. The principle "love your enemies" supports the rule "go a second mile." The principle supports the rule, and the rule spells out a direct application of the general principle.

Two things characterize the principles level:

1. Principles support rules — or criticize them.
2. A principle is more general than a rule; it does not tell us directly and concretely what to do.

Now we can understand the relation between the particular judgments level, the rules level, and the principles level. Rules give reasons for particular judgments/actions; principles give reasons for rules. Rules can also criticize particular judgments/actions; principles can criticize rules. Rules serve principles, not the other way around.

This distinction helps us find our way through a sticky issue in Christian ethics: whether rules should be understood as “absolute” or we should admit there might be **exceptions** to rules. We join many Christians and Christian ethicists in reacting against the permissiveness and **moral relativism** of our society and reaffirming the need today for clear, firm, and sturdy moral rules. We do so primarily because we believe Jesus taught concrete moral rules that he intended his followers to obey. But we also do so for a very contemporary and practical reason: we have to live by rules, or we get ourselves and others in trouble. Politicians, business leaders, pastors, and so many others who do not have firm rules harm societies and the church.

Some want to go a bit further, though. They say rules are absolute. They are quite suspicious of anyone who would “open the door” to exceptions to moral rules.

There is good reason for such a perspective. When you teach children not to touch a pot on the stove, you do not immediately list a half dozen exceptions or say, “Do what seems right in the moment.” You state a rule very firmly: “Don’t ever touch pots on the stove.”

The principles and reasons underlying this rule are clear: love for your children, desire to protect them from harm, awareness that boiling pots burn those who touch them without proper protection, and so on. The rule is based on reasons and would be nonsensical apart from them. Stoves and pots are not intrinsically bad or wrong to touch.

The problem is that *if rules are there for reasons, the reasons for which the rules exist sometimes can and must override the rules themselves*. Thus the rule “don’t touch pots on the stove” does not apply if the pot is not hot and the stove is not turned on. Likewise, the rule does not apply in the same way when a child reaches an age in which he or she can begin to cook and work with hot pots on stoves. The principles on which a rule is based need to be understood clearly so we can know why the rule exists and thus when to make an exception to the rule.

- Understanding that rules are based on principles enables us to affirm the strong need for rules without turning us into legalists — which can be defined in our model as *people who operate solely at the level of rules and thus detach them from the underlying principles that are their reason for existence*. We reject that approach to Christian ethics and thus any position that says moral rules, severed from their roots in principles and the character of God, are absolute and exceptionless.

### The Level of Basic Convictions

There is one more level of moral reasoning. Suppose someone asks you on what you base your commitment to the principle of covenant truth-telling. You might say that you base it on God’s command in Jesus Christ to let your “yes” be “yes” (Mt 5:37), or on God’s covenant with us in the Ten Commandments: “You shall not bear false witness” (Ex 20:16), or on the fact that all people are made in God’s image (Gn 1:26–28), so you owe truth to all people. But then suppose the next question asks on what you base your commitment to Jesus Christ. You answer, “That is my rock-bottom life commitment. I don’t base it on anything else. I base it on God.” Now you have reached the basic-convictions level.

For Christians these are our most basic convictions about the character, activity, and will of God and about our nature as participants in that will. These convictions are the ultimate ground of Christian ethics. At every other level of moral discourse, one can always dig deeper and find an underlying stratum of moral norms. Underneath particular judgments/actions are rules; under rules are principles; under principles are basic convictions. But under core theological convictions, there is nothing, because these are rooted in the very way we see ultimate reality.

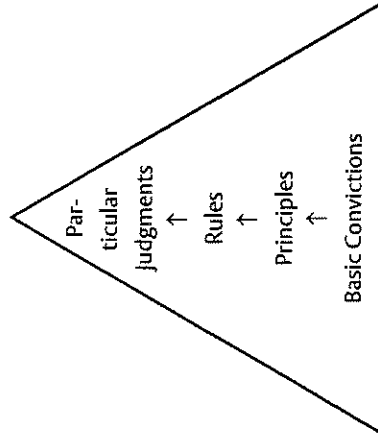
When Jesus taught that we are to love our enemies, he gave a reason: “so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45). He taught similarly in 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly grounded his teaching on God: God’s mercifulness (Mt 5:7, 45; 6:14), knowledge of our needs (6:4, 6, 8, 18, 32; 7:11), providential care (6:30), judgment (5:22; 7:23, 27), sovereign ownership of all (5:34–35), and on our obligation to give glory to our Father who is in heaven (5:16). For Christians, *God’s character, actions, and will constitute the heart of the basic-convictions level*.

Two things characterize basic convictions:

1. Basic convictions are the basis for our principles, rules, and overall ethical reasoning.
2. You can’t go deeper than basic convictions.

Now we have four levels of moral reasoning. Particular judgments/actions depend on rules. Rules depend on principles. Principles depend on basic-conviction theological beliefs, which serve as the rock-bottom, look-no-further basis for Christian ethics because they describe ultimate reality as we understand it.

Figure 4-1. Levels of moral norms



### Which Level Is Most Important?

Different approaches to Christian ethics tend to emphasize one level of moral norms and present it as the most important. These approaches typically are not placed in proper context — as varying responses to the nature and levels of Christian moral norms. Instead they are often presented as separate and competing stand-alone moral theories. Our way of briefly presenting these competing theories will be to situate them in terms of our four-level moral norm model.

#### Focus on the Particular Case: Situation Ethics

Some Christian ethicists believe that every situation in life is so unique that making rules for living is wrong. Rules blind us to special circumstances, unique individuals, and personal dimensions of morally significant situations. Thus we should not make rules for “similar” cases but figure out what to do in each unique situation.

**Situation ethics** reasons on the particular judgments/actions level. Joseph Fletcher, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, made situation ethics famous, or infamous, in the United States. He taught one principle: always do the loving thing. Rudolf Bultmann taught situation ethics based on “radical obedience” in Germany. Much German Christian ethics during the mid-twentieth-century era was tinged with **situationism**, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.

The only rules Fletcher recognized were “rules of thumb” or summary rules.

A summary rule, like “honesty pays,” teaches only that in most cases in the past honesty has turned out to be the best policy. “Honesty pays” carries no moral obligation, just as “punt on fourth down” in football is not a binding rule. It just tells what usually works best. You should figure out in each case what will be the best, which may include dishonesty.

A cousin of situation ethics is **moral subjectivism** — the belief that moral judgments are private and personal opinions or emotions, and are not subject to discussion and critique. This denies the existence of rules “out there” that apply to similar cases and says we are each so unique that we cannot reason about what is right and wrong in others’ behavior.

Rules can seem uncaring or lacking in compassion for the special needs of a person. Good ethics involves thorough knowledge of all relevant details in a situation. Our four-level model takes account of situations without succumbing to situationism. We can consider individual situations in all their richness and uniqueness yet apply relevant rules to them, rules grounded in broader principles and ultimately in the character and will of God. Situationism rose partly as a reaction against the prohibition-heavy **legalism** pervasive in American religion and culture; situationists resist legalism by abandoning rules. We suggest that rules can be important without being legalistic.

In situationism:

1. What is ethical is decided by the particular situation.
2. Cases are unique; they can’t be categorized by rules.
3. Obligatory rules are a bad influence; they cause us to miss the uniqueness of the case and the person.

Problem: What if we need rules because without them people do wrong — because they are sinful or just don’t know enough?

#### Rules Alone: Legalism

To reject situationism, ethicist John Jefferson Davis moves far in the opposite direction. “There are many moral absolutes, not just one absolute of ‘love,’ as in situation ethics. Examples of moral absolutes are provided by the Decalogue: idolatry, murder, blasphemy, adultery, stealing, and so forth are *always* morally wrong. . . . Contextual absolutism holds that in each and every ethical situation, no matter how extreme, there is a course of action that is morally right and free of sin” (*Evangelical Ethics*, 7, italics in original).

Notice that in his brief list Davis omits the Decalogue’s command against false witness. Perhaps he simply wants to save space. But given his model, he could hardly include it since he approves of Rahab’s lying to protect the Jewish spies (Jo 2:4–6). He also omits the **Sabbath** command. One wonders if he

would approve of stealing an enemy's battle plan during wartime, and so would need to drop stealing from his list.

By "contextual," Davis means that in some contexts *prima facie* duties (duties at first appearance, all other things being equal) are not actual duties. There can be a conflict between one's *prima facie* duty — do not steal — and one's *actual duty* in a particular situation — steal a loaf of bread to keep a starving Jewish family alive during the Holocaust. This long-established distinction in ethical thought stems from vexatious circumstances in a sinful and broken world and from conflicts between rules and principles.

Thus *legalism*, with perhaps some contextual modification, bases ethics on rules that apply to all similar cases and that tell us directly what to do or not to do, cut off from situational specifics or grounding principles. It reads the Bible looking for rules. It sees God primarily as the rule-giver.

Brazilian sociologist Paul Freston critiques the limits of legalism. He observes legalistic Third World evangelicals gaining political office but rapidly sliding into abuses of power. "The legalist who depends on rules, when he enters a sphere for which his church has not elaborated rules, becomes literally unruly. That is one reason why many evangelical politicians become corrupt: they are legalists and therefore people without principles" ("Evangelicals and Politics in the Third World," 125–26).

Understanding the forces, including fear, that drive a position is important. Legalists fear that exceptions to rules open the door to disastrous moral relativism and moral subjectivism.

Our four-level model responds to these fears by embracing moral rules within a larger context. The rules that Jesus taught are needed, binding, and to be obeyed. Exceptions are considered as a last, not first, resort. An exception is legitimate only if it is grounded in a principle or another rule that Jesus taught or that is found in Scripture. And all actions and moral judgments must pass the basic-conviction test related to the character and will of God as revealed supremely in Jesus Christ.

In legalism:

1. What is ethical is defined and determined by rules.
2. Rules are absolute and universal — for all cases.
3. If there are exceptions, the rule must be redefined so it does not apply to such cases.

Problem: What if two rules conflict? What if the only way I can keep a murderer from killing someone is by telling a lie about where the potential victim is?

### *The Centrality of Principles: Principism*

Henlee Barnett was dissatisfied with the extremes of situationism and le-

galism in the 1950s–1970s and developed **principism** (*Introducing Christian Ethics*, ch. 1). Principism is also advocated by other ethicists using other terms, such as **middle axioms**. Barnett argues that love is not an unstructured feeling or belief (contrary to situationism); it is expressed in specific principles (not rules — contrary to legalism) that give guidance on complex issues.

For example, Barnett writes that what treatment to give and what to withhold for a terminally ill person whose cancer has spread should be based on the *principles* of justice, **human dignity**, **double effect**, well-being, and truth.

- *Justice* requires that treatment be based on the patient's basic right to **consent**. Justice also considers the ability of the family and the medical and insurance system to pay for prolonging the life of someone dying of incurable cancer.
- *Human dignity* means the dying person should have the company of family members and friends when possible and measures should not be taken to prolong the last stages of dying from cancer.
- *Double effect* means the person should be given pain medicine when the intended effect is to relieve pain, even if a side effect is to shorten the person's life.
- *Well-being* means the person should not be forced to prolong an intolerable life.
- *Truth*, which Barnett always emphasizes, means that the person must receive accurate medical information.

Barnett gives much more guidance for ethical decisions than Fletcher does. He does not leave us to decide what is best based on intuitive response to a situation. He also does not advocate for a single absolute rule or set of rules. Principles support rules but also limit them; rules are not absolute and universal but can be overridden by principles. Principism sets the parameters of moral decision while leaving a range of actions to be determined in each particular case.

Principism has two shortcomings, though. One, Jesus taught some particular rules. We may be tempted to disobey the direct commands of Christ by hiding behind broad principles. We may neglect the rich and demanding substance of Christ's moral teaching and thin our ethics into a few vague generalities that do not require much of us in any particular moment. Two, principism severs principles from the basic convictions about God's character, will, and reign in which they ought to be situated.

Contemporary philosophical ethics, which hugely impacts how ethics are integrated into business, medicine, and other professions, rejects rooting principles in any theological basic conviction. Thus principles exist but, in our view,



without a satisfactory support system to nourish them. Why human dignity? Why justice? Why truthfulness? Lacking any convictional basis, it becomes extremely difficult to fill out the content and meaning of principles. Why do these really matter, why are they binding upon us, apart from a theological narrative that gives such moral norms their meaning?

In principlism:

1. What is ethical is defined and determined by principles.
2. Principles support rules but also limit them.
3. Rules are not absolute and universal; they can be overridden by principles, but only when the principles demand it.
4. If two rules conflict, you decide by going deeper, to the principles level.

Problem: What if two principles conflict?

### *The Theological Ground: Contextualism and Narrative Ethics*

*Contextualists*, including H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Lehmann, and James Gustafson, focus Christian ethics at the theological basic-convictions level. Another group with this focus is *narrative ethicists*, including James McClendon, Stanley Hauerwas, Darrell Fasching, and Katie Cannon. Although these groups differ in significant ways, here we shall summarize what they hold in common related to Christian moral norms. Both remind us that rules and principles get their meaning from the various contexts in which they are understood.

Humans are not isolated, individual decision makers but members of groups, communities, and societies in which they are embedded and to which they tend to be quite loyal. The frame of reference provided by these contexts shapes our perceptions and responses. That is a factual claim, but here is a normative one: Christian ethics must be done in the context of our faith communities, and our faith communities must do Christian ethics in the context of the theological narrative found in Scripture—in particular, the reign of God inaugurated in Jesus Christ. We need acute insight and honesty to name the personal *faith context*, the *church context*, and the *community/societal context* and to correct them where needed on the basis of our foundational theological narrative.

Many Christians recognize that ethics is grounded in theology yet still propose quite different ethics. Different ways of approaching theology, both in methodology and in substance, lead to radically different ethical outcomes. And because Jesus taught that “you will know them by their fruits” (Mt 7:20), we consider the ethical import of theological claims as part of the overall assessment of their value and truthfulness.

Let us illustrate with brief examples.

*Dualism* identifies God with spirit, church, and gospel in sharp contrast to body, world, and law and seeks to rescue the former from the latter. The implication for ethics is lack of emphasis on obeying the concrete teachings of Jesus due to presuming the impossibility of obedience or believing that they do not apply in physical, this-worldly life.

*Dispensational* theology makes a similar error by dividing salvation history into distinct “dispensations” or epochs. The moral teachings of Jesus Christ (some of them, at least) do not apply during the present dispensation of the church but apply during the era after Christ returns. This dissuades Christians from practicing the teachings of Jesus, which is exactly contrary to what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 7:21–27)!

*Doctrinalism* emphasizes the careful crafting of rigid doctrinal formulas as the heart of the Christian enterprise. Right doctrine (**orthodoxy**) is stressed while right living (**orthopraxy**) is neglected. Doctrinalism robs the church of ethical seriousness through sheer inattention, imagining that calling Jesus “Lord, Lord,” in just the right language will somehow lead to entrance into the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt 7:21).

*Deism* claims that God set the world in motion but lets it run its course without supernatural involvement. It views Jesus as a marvelous moral teacher but not God incarnate, son of a virgin, miracle worker, exorcist, kingdom inaugurator, or resurrected Lord. While an emphasis on the moral teachings of Jesus is welcome, those teachings must be placed into a full-blooded biblical/theological framework. Jesus did not just say “Repent” but “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17). Extracting Jesus’s moral teaching from its theological narrative drains the life out of both Christian theology and ethics. Accommodationist approaches seeking to bring the gospel into conformity with prevailing cultural and intellectual winds (Eph 4:14–15) also travel this path.

We emphasize our version of the Christian theological narrative throughout this book to illuminate the significance of theological basic convictions for Christian ethics. We affirm that Jesus came to inaugurate the reign of God. All areas of life belong under the will of the Sovereign Lord. Resistance continues but will ultimately be subdued. The church is called to be that body of people who have joined with Jesus to redeem the rebellious creation. This Spirit-led community testifies to the in-breaking of the kingdom throughout creation, visibly bearing witness to God’s reign (when we get it right!). This is a sketch of the basic-conviction theological narrative so foundational for our Christian ethics.

Those who raised us told us biblical, personal, and ethnic stories that shaped us and our family traditions in deep ways, and those stories usually had a concrete “moral,” a lesson for living. For example, the story told by parents of

the Depression era that “we had it hard and survived by the grace of God and hard work” leads to the concrete moral that “you need to work hard to overcome obstacles instead of complaining about your hard luck.” Narratives teach morality.

The Bible is full of narratives. But the narratives generate rules and principles, often quite concrete and specific. The story of the exodus is central in the Hebrew Scriptures, and central to the story of the exodus is the covenant — the Ten Commandments and related laws. Jesus taught parables, but Jesus also taught the Sermon on the Mount. The cross is a narrative about Jesus’s death, but it is also something we are to take up for concretely following Jesus.

Our four-level model tells us that the particular norms generated by theological-narrative contexts need to be spelled out. Rules and principles make clear the implications of the gospel story and our life stories for **concrete ethics**. Christian rules and principles should be clearly *embodied* in narratives, church practices (such as liturgy), and faith-community understandings. And narrative ethics should be concretely expressed — *embodied* — in principles, rules, and particular judgments. This reciprocal relationship is why we can also call our method **incarnational discipleship**.

Situationists, legalists, and principlists tend to ignore the historically embodied narrative way of life of the people of God in both Testaments while contextualists and narrativists tend to rebel against rules and principles. We say rules and principles are part of the narrative of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ; the levels of moral norms thus integrate and interconnect. Mainline pastors tend to preach sermons that are strong on the basic-convictions level but lack concrete guidance on principles, rules, and particular judgments where most people operate. Evangelical pastors with a legalistic bent tend to preach without clear enough relation to embodied biblical narratives. We want to help heal those disconnections and foster churches that teach discipleship in every aspect of life.

In **contextualism/narrative ethics**, as we interpret it:

1. What is ethical is ultimately defined and determined by basic theological convictions and narrative contexts.
2. Moral decision making is not just individual but is also helped by consultation and mutual admonition from the faith community.
3. Rules and principles find their place within the context of core theological beliefs.

Problem: What if Christians cannot agree on the content of these foundational beliefs?

### Three Modes of Moral Reasoning in Christian Ethics

Ethical reasoning should consider the ways in which moral norms function in addition to their form. **Deontological** and **teleological** reasoning, as helpfully clarified by William Frankena (*Ethics*), are two such modes; the third we call the characterological mode, already discussed in chapter 2. Each mode functions in important ways for Christian ethics.

#### Teleological Mode

“Teleological” comes from the Greek word for end or goal (*telos*). Actions are right or wrong depending upon whether or not they advance a worthy *telos*. Another name for this is **consequentialism**. Actions are evaluated not in and of themselves but on the basis of their anticipated or actual consequences. The ends, or consequences, justify the means.

Different teleological ethics advocate different good ends for advancing. **Utilitarianism** seeks the greatest happiness or welfare of the greatest number of people. **Perfectionism** or character building seeks to improve people’s virtues and perfect their character. Nationalism seeks whatever is best for the national interest. Egoism seeks whatever is best for our own self-interest.

The utilitarian version of teleology lacks any principle of just distribution that guards the rights of the minority. Teleological ethics can justify manipulating the truth, killing enemies, and stifling minority religions or minority races if that is the most efficient way to advance the good consequences one seeks. An interesting example is John 11:50–53, where Caiaphas argues that “it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (RSV).

#### Deontological Mode

“Deontological” comes from the Greek word *deon*, which means “obligatory” or “binding.” We are obligated to refrain from using wrong means to our ends. The deontological mode is bound to justice and fairness in how we act. Actions are inherently right or wrong.

There are several types of deontological reasoning: human rights, divine command, Kantian, Rawlsian, and **natural law**. We will explain these when dealing with particular issues in the following chapters.

Most deontologists are also concerned about achieving good ends. Fairness says it is wrong to discriminate against a minority race for good schooling. That is an obligatory principle of justice, based not on a teleological goal but on what is right. Once that *principle* is respected, then we should also pay attention to the *goal* of offering a good education. It would be **immoral**, while avoiding discrimination, to cut off funding from all schools so that everyone had poor

schools. A deontologist cares about achieving good ends as long as just rules or principles are obeyed.

### **Characterological Mode**

Our term “characterological” is shorthand for virtue ethics as discussed in chapter 2. Character ethics needs rules and principles. We have now filled in that argument. But the question remains: How do *practices*, *virtues*, and *narratives* relate to the levels of moral norms?

James McClendon, influenced by John Howard Yoder and Alasdair MacIntyre, helps clarify this relation. He points out that “rules are not arbitrary additions we might very well discard. . . . It is exactly the rules that constitute” the practice (McClendon, *Ethics*, 163). Contrary to Fletcher, summary rules like “punt on fourth down” are not the only kinds of rules. *Obligatory* rules *constitute* the game: “To disregard the *constitutive* rules . . . (say by trying to win by crossing the goal line over and over again before the game begins) is not a way to win at football; . . . it simply shows failure to understand what the rules are” (*Ethics*, 163–64). “Do this in remembrance of me” and “wait for one another” so that all are fed are constitutive rules indicating directly what we are to practice (1 Cor 11:24, 33). Practices are more concrete than principles; they support particular actions. This puts practices — *characteristic* behaviors — at the level of rules.

McClendon then relates practices to virtues. “Many virtues have their home in connection with particular practices whose pursuit evokes exactly those virtues” (*Ethics*, 169). Virtues are more general than rules. Being humble and yielded to God, being merciful and hungering for justice, and seeking to do God’s will do not tell us directly what to do as rules do. So virtues — worthy *characteristics* — operate at the level of principles.

Finally, McClendon grounds practices and virtues. “The lives of those who do engage in these practices must have at least enough continuity and coherence to permit the *formation* of those virtues and *sustaining* of those intentions — in a word, their lives must take a narrative form,” particularly an embodied narrative like a drama (*Ethics*, 171). For example, the embodied drama of Jesus’s last supper with the disciples, his giving his body as a sacrifice for others and his blood as a covenant of grace, is what gives deep theological meaning to the practice of the Lord’s Supper and to the community’s feeding the hungry. This deeply symbolic practice embodies all the Christian virtues, certainly including the virtue of hungering for justice, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians. Churches should practice the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist in varieties of ways to portray different dimensions of its powerful meaning. And sermons should explicate the dimensions of the embodied drama that give the practice coherence.

We speak of “embodied drama” and not simply of “narrative.” Jesus did not just tell a story about someone giving his life for others but incarnated it in his

own body and blood — and not as a private act but as a community drama in which Christian disciples, the Jewish power structure, and the Roman power structure participated. We all sinned. It is embodied *now* as the church enacts and incarnates it in worship and feeding the hungry. And it will be embodied in the *future* kingdom, which Jesus often portrays as a banquet to which many are invited who had not been thought includable (Mt 22:9; Lk 14:23). This embodied drama — the narrative of God’s *character* taking shape — gives continuity and coherence to virtues and practices, fitting the level of basic convictions.

The characterological mode of moral reasoning is grounded in the embodied drama (narrative) of God’s character, which leads to the characteristics (virtues) of God’s people, which lead to the characteristic behaviors (practices) of God’s people. This flow of character is then brought to bear upon each particular situation in which we act.

To summarize, Christian ethical reasoning functions in three modes. The characterological mode emphasizes who we are; the teleological mode emphasizes what we seek to do; and the deontological mode emphasizes (the rules and principles that govern) how we do it. We can also distill them this way: the deontological mode is about what we *should* do; the teleological is about what we *could* do; and the characterological is about what we *would* do.

### **Which Mode Is Most Important?**

Emphases on the three different modes of moral reasoning do not necessarily clash like competing emphases on the four levels of moral norms. Deontologists base the rule against murder on the principles of human rights and the sacredness of life or God’s prohibition in the Ten Commandments. Teleologists of the utilitarian type also support the rule against murder because allowing murders would set back the welfare of a very large number of people. Characterologists uphold the rule against murder because murder does not fit the practices or virtues of God’s reign. The difference between deontologists, teleologists, and characterologists is not whether they emphasize particular judgments, rules, principles, or basic convictions or even what moral norms they value; the difference pertains to what they base their moral norms on, or, as we are saying here, the *mode* in which they reason: obligation to do right, pursuit of a good end, or embodying God’s character.

We believe a Jesus-centered ethic takes divine commands seriously and is vigorously deontological. But it understands the mandates and teachings of Jesus to be gracious and authoritative *invitations to become people (characterological) who do the will of God (deontological) and participate in the coming of the kingdom of God (teleological)*. Christians are to “go . . . be reconciled to your



brother or sister" (Mt 5:24) because we are obligated to obey Jesus's command (deontological), because this breaks the cycle of relational brokenness and brings about peace (teleological), and because this fits the nature of the Christ who heads the church (characterological). We obey Christ's teachings not only because he is our Lord but also because we trust that he above all knows what advances the kingdom of God and because we want to grow in his likeness. We do not look for exceptions to challenging rules but instead look for ways to be people who do the gloriously liberating things Christ teaches.

The fact that a Jesus- and kingdom-centered ethic includes concerns about consequences may trouble those who are determined to oppose teleological ethics. Yet "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" (Mt 6:33 KJV) clearly posits a good end. Jesus presents a goal — verily, *the* goal — for which all Christians are to strive, and he sets us to work pursuing that goal. Actions that advance the kingdom of God are obligatory; actions that hinder it are forbidden. Rightly understood, this kind of goal-oriented concern meshes with a healthy Christian deontology and characterology. After all, Jesus commanded complete

Figure 4.2. Unified ethical modes

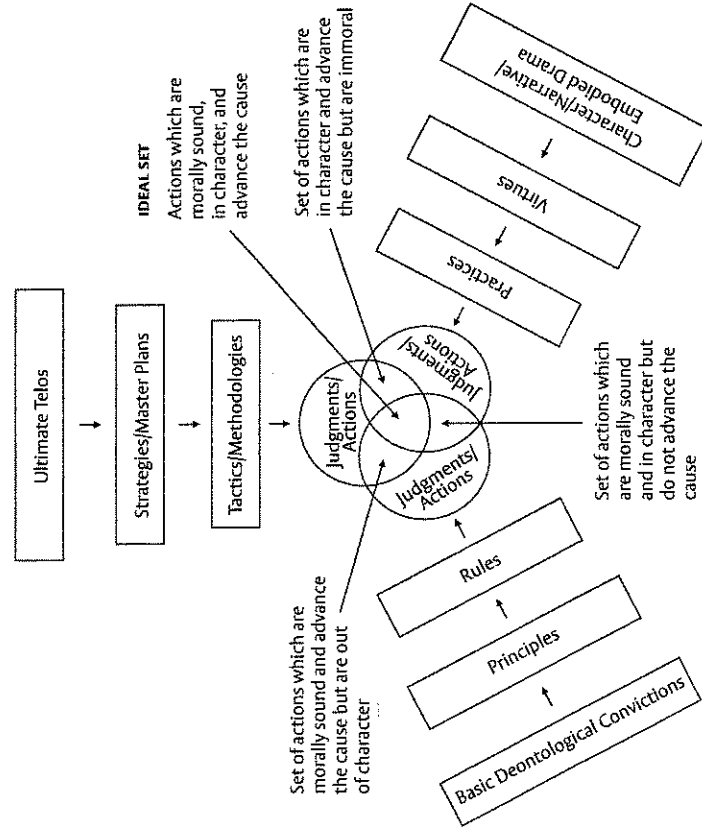


Diagram by Aaron Hedges

obedience to the Law and the Prophets and offered a dire warning to any who would set these aside (Mt 5:17–20).

Christian ethics must avoid reducing the moral life to a mere **decisionism** or *legalism* of abstract deontological absolutes. It must integrate the Scriptures' kingdom-seeking goals and character virtues. The best overall term for the substantive content of Christian ethics is the broadest available — *Christian ethics is about the entire "way of life" of the people of faith* (Eph 2:10; cf. Dt 30:19–20). No aspect of moral existence is left out — decisions, practices, convictions, principles, goals, and virtues are all included in the effort to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel" (Phil 1:27; cf. Rom 16:2; Eph 4:1; Col 1:10) as we obey, seek, and embody the kingdom of God.

The familiar language of "moral norms" thus comes to feel too passive, static, and theoretical. The church's moral task is not merely to develop right beliefs about issues and then make sure that every member holds them. Nor is it to uphold the right set of virtues and hope that every member will be virtuous. Instead, our central task is to be useful servants of the reign of God, and thus with all our heart we seek to discern and put into practice a total way of life in tune with God's kingdom.

Jesus's moral teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is focused precisely in this way. He does not instruct his listeners merely in *right beliefs* about moral issues but trains them in those behaviors, those *practices*, that characterize the reign of God and offers concrete *transforming initiatives* that advance it.

## Ethical Reasoning in Action

We now demonstrate our four-level, three-mode model in action, beginning with a basic ethical question: Why is murder wrong? We will assume that all respondents are Christians.

### Deontological Mode

1. *Situationist* — In this situation murder is a disobedient act in violation of God's will for me.
2. *Rule-oriented* — The Bible contains a rule against murder in Exodus and Deuteronomy.
3. *Principlist* — Murder violates the biblical principle of the sacredness of human life.
4. *Basic convictions* — Murder offends God, who made human beings sacred.

### Teleological Mode

1. *Situationist* — In this situation murder does not serve a good purpose.

2. *Rule-oriented* — Murder is not a method that advances people's well-being.
3. *Principlist* — Murder is not part of an effective strategy for advancing people's well-being.
4. *Basic convictions* — Murder hinders God's ultimate goal for humans to have peace, justice, and security.

### **Characterological Mode**

1. *Situationist* — In this situation, murder does not fit my narrative; it is out of character.
2. *Rule-oriented* — Murder is not a practice (characteristic behavior) of God's reign.
3. *Principlist* — Murder is incongruous with the virtues (characteristics) of the embodied drama of God's reign.
4. *Basic convictions* — Murder is contrary to the loving and just character of God.

This simple test shows that the same ethical stance can be taken for a variety of reasons. At any level and in any mode, a Christian is likely to reason against murder. But what if the matter is not so simple? What if the people considering an issue are not all Christians? What if there are not any fully good options? These very real difficulties will surface in more detail in the topics in the second half of the book, but we offer some general guidance here.

### **Challenges: Diversity, Complexity, and Ambiguity**

Our focus in this book is Christian ethics, specifically the ethics of Jesus's inauguration of the kingdom of God. But not all people and groups share this identity. In our diverse American public, much less the global community, people perceive their lives according to a wide variety of narratives or embodied dramas. This challenges the characterological mode of ethics. Even kingdom-oriented Christians who live in different places, cultures, and times will have differing senses of the nature of God's drama in their particular contexts. Ethical thinking and acting must acknowledge and take into account the character(s), narrative(s), or embodied drama(s) grounding the involved moral agents.

To say that our world is complex is the height of understatement. The natural world, from the quantum level to the cosmic, overflows with interconnected intricacy. Humans share this magnificent complexity — innumerable elements shape our bodies, personalities, spiritualities, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and behaviors. We increase the complexity by interacting as families, communities, congregations, organizations, businesses, and governments. This challenges the teleological mode of ethics. Complexity can push understanding of how to effectively pursue good goals, or even recognition of what goals are worth pur-

suing, beyond comprehension. Ethics must engage the complexities involved in a subject to the extent possible and acknowledge when they are beyond current understanding.

Some situations involve **ethical ambiguity**. This challenges the deontological mode of ethics. At times we will encounter options that simply are not well described as inherently right or wrong. A trivial example is choosing the color of a vehicle; few of us are likely to have a sense of obligation or divine command on that matter. A more significant example is deciding which congregation to join. Even if one eliminates some choices as "wrong," many contexts will offer numerous remaining "right" choices. Ethical thinking and acting must recognize ambiguity without creating it; we must hold clear deontological convictions but also acknowledge their limits.

### **Problems: Sin and Brokenness**

The above difficulties are challenges, not necessarily problems. Diversity can reflect the grandeur of the Creator. Complexity can give us a sense of wonder and beckon us to adventure beyond what is known and expand understanding. Ambiguity can give opportunities to live by faith and expand our freedom to act as moral agents. Not all difficulties we face, though, are mere challenges. Our ethical thinking and acting inevitably confront genuine problems due to sin. This comes in two forms of brokenness.

A painful fact of our current reality is that well-reasoned ethical choices sometimes are not available. That is, actions that are at once right (deontologically sound), effective (teleologically sound), and in character (characterologically sound) are not possible in the given situation. Bonhoeffer's dilemma in the midst of Nazism is a classic example. Inaction was ineffective in advancing justice for Jews — teleologically unsound — but effective action, such as assassinating Hitler, violated Christian character and commands about murder. Sometimes, through no fault of our own, we are forced into a choice involving sinful brokenness.

In such cases, one must not abandon ethics but must examine the actions that are possible and weigh their relative merits according to the parts of ethical reasoning that they do fit. Ethics does not flow only from theology to action, doctrine to praxis, but is necessarily a two-way street. This is a value of our multilayer, multimode model. We do not have to go off the ethical map entirely when confronted with difficulties.

In the best-case situation, we can consult sources of authority in our contexts; formulate basic convictions, ultimate goals, and embodied dramas from them; and move through the levels of moral norms into actions that fit all three modes. Practically, we often have to start with the available actions, evaluate if they fit any of the modes, in fitting mode(s) move through the levels of moral

Figure 4.3. Ethical map for a total way of life

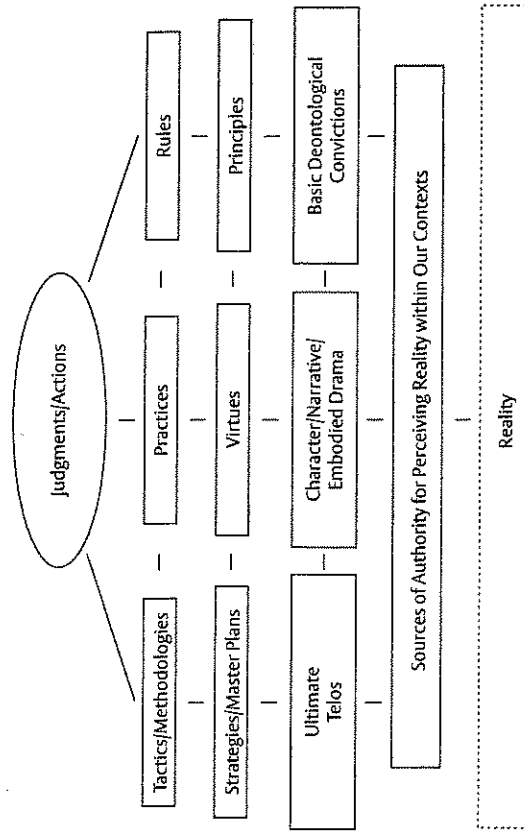


Diagram by Aaron Hedges

norms, and find grounding in a source of authority. The best-case approach alone fails to spur action when no unambiguously right/good options are available. The “practical” approach alone fails to generate creative, transformative options beyond those typically thought to be possible or feasible. We suggest that wise Christian ethical living demands continuous moving in both directions across all relevant segments to make the most of every opportunity (Eph 5:15–16) in our time.

The other aspect of sinful brokenness is knowing that a moral norm is fully good yet being unable or unwilling to adhere to it. Because of sin in the form of cowardice, laziness, or selfishness, we sometimes choose what is convenient or self-serving rather than a challenging good. No model can temper this persistent problem, and we must resist temptations to excuse or justify ourselves. We should acknowledge our failures as such, confess our participation in brokenness, and trust only in God for justification.

### Accountability, Testing, and Continuous Repentance

To be accountable for the *particular* actions we take and advocate, we should let our faith and ethics be tested and corrected by how they work out in real life. This is helped by making our ethics transparent, explicitly spelling out rules, principles, and basic theological grounding as well as the modes in which they

function. Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), we all need to keep making corrections in our ethical theory and practice. H. Richard Niebuhr calls this *metanoia* (continuous repentance) or *semper reformandum* (the church is always to be reforming). It was a major theme in his work (see “Reformation: Continuing Imperative”).

The Holy Spirit does not simply affirm what we already believe but dynamically engages us in continuous learning, confession, and correction. Christians should keep particular judgments, rules, principles, and basic convictions, along with deontology, teleology, and characterology, in continuous conversation, reformulation, and repentance. We must remain accountable above all to God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Meanwhile, we gratefully trust in God’s mercy to forgive us our many failings in moral discernment and action.

### KEY METHOD ELEMENTS FOR KINGDOM ETHICS

#### KME 5. Four Levels and Three Modes of Moral Norms

Ask of any ethical posture or stance, including your own, whether it seems to be primarily functioning at the particular judgments/actions, rules, principles, or basic-convictions level and in the deontological, teleological, or characterological mode. Learn to listen for the implicit or explicit ethical systems that reflect a focus on each level or mode, such as situationism, legalism, principlism, utilitarianism, or narrative ethics.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which level of moral norms typically guides you?
2. What problems could arise from using that level without considering the others?
3. Which mode of moral reasoning typically guides you?
4. What problems could arise from using that mode without considering the others?
5. Do you agree with our version of the Christian theological narrative? How would you change it?
6. What role do Christian moral norms have in a diverse society?
7. How do you respond to ethical difficulties?