

Ethics as Worship

Introduction

I teach Christian Ethics at a major evangelical seminary. Most students who show up for class the first week usually have a rather vague idea of what ethics is. For the most part they knowingly or unknowingly equate ethics with the far more mundane cultural idea of “moralism”. That is, they expect that the class will be some kind of glorified rehashing of the same boring Sunday school lessons they heard all their life. “Don’t drink or chew or go with girls who do” for graduate school credit. Typically, the novice ethics student has been preconditioned by our evangelical subculture’s tendency to package morality into overly simplistic bumper sticker formats like “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”

The problem with this thinking is not related to the authority of God’s word. The issue, rather, is the tendency to relegate the discipline of ethics to systematic legalism. As C.J. Mahaney says in his helpful little book *The Cross Centered Life* “legalism is seeking to achieve forgiveness from God and acceptance from God through obedience to God. In other words, a legalist is anyone who behaves as if they can earn God’s approval and forgiveness through personal performance.”¹ The unfortunate reality is that the initial perceptions of my beginner students, and I believe the perception of most Christians, is that ethics is primarily about rule keeping, moral laws, and rigid systems of accountability.

Even more tragic, in my opinion, is the fact that this preconception belies a deeper theological separation between right practice and the doctrine of worship. In my mind, it is a sin to allow such a predisposition regarding the field of ethics to continue because when ethics is properly grounded on a creation order foundation that places God in the center of all we think and do, then every moment of life - from the most mundane, repetitive action to the highest pinnacle of contemplation – rightly becomes an opportunity to glorify God. Any vision of ethics that is less than this will ultimately prove impotent for personal life-change and incapable of providing a compelling vision for ecclesiological and cultural transformation.

It is, then, my purpose in this paper to set forth a rudimentary meta-ethical outline for how one should begin to understand ethics form within the larger biblical and theological category of worship. By way of fulfilling this task I begin with a brief discussion seeking to

¹ C.J. Mahaney and Kevin Meath, *The Cross Centered Life* (Sisters, Or.: Multnomah, 2002), 25.

establish the idea that ethics must begin with a focus on God and that God made the entirety of creation for His own glory. Second, I will argue that the primary purpose of human existence is not only to glorify God, but that ethics serves as the means by which humans worship rightly. Third, I will contend that the tragedy of the fall is best understood in terms of the disordering of worship that results not only in robbing God of the glory He is due, but also fundamentally disorders humans from their right and proper end. This makes it impossible, in turn, for those apart from Christ to be truly ethical in the most full and biblical sense of the word.

I. The Context of Worship

A. It is All About God

The Christian life will only be properly applied after it is properly grounded. This is the point Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued in his lectures on Christology. Bonhoeffer rightly put forth the idea that theology must give priority to the question of *Who* over *how*, and that the best and most proper way to understand *how* must be determined in light of *Who*.² A.W. Tozer made a similar point in his classic work *The Knowledge of the Holy* when he wrote that

A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse. I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.³

The first leg, therefore, on the journey to understanding ethics as worship must begin where all good theology does, and that is with an inquiry about God and his purposes for the world. Unfortunately, it seems most ethical investigation done by evangelicals these days places a high premium on stating the normative aspects of behavior without first understanding the ground upon which our norms must be built. For whatever reason there is a proclivity among non-believers and believers alike to conceptualize ethics primarily in terms of behavior modification through the establishment of norms without much attention to the grounding and ultimate *telos* of the norms established.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, ET (London: Collins: New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

³ A.W. Tozer – *Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper Collins, 1961), 2.

Ethics, however, is not primarily about action, character, results accomplished or responses to situations – it is about God. Our actions, character, results and responses only take on proper context when first we understand that God, not man and his behavior, is the central question that ethics is meant to pursue. Lest we miss this point it is wise to remember that the first four words of the Bible set the entire course for how we should understand its text: “In the beginning God....” The story of creation that follows is amazing, and the creation of, and endowments given to, man are wondrous. But more stunning still is the One Who stands behind the scenes, does the creating, and most importantly imbues the creation with purpose: “We must begin with God not merely because all other beginnings, continuations and endings must be explained in light of his triune Self but because [worship] must above all be informed by and understood in light of his person and work.”⁴

B. All Creation was Created for the Purpose of Worship

Scripture teaches plainly that the whole earth is full of God’s glory (Isaiah 6:3). While humans may have a special role in giving God the honor He is due, the worship of humans by no means provides the sum total of worship in the universe. Indeed, “God’s decision to create the universe is the effective cause of worship. He creates and that which springs into being through his Word and Spirit as a result of his creative will, worships.”⁵ Thus, every element of creation, simply because it *is* His creation, is meant to reflect back to God the glory He is due. As Jonathan Edwards rightly affirms in his classic work *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, the glory of God is the chief end of *everything*.⁶ Charles Hodge simply affirms this idea when he states “the final cause of all God’s purposes is his own glory.”⁷

The idea that the universe was created to glorify God is true for both the inanimate and animate aspects of creation alike. For example, Scripture indicates “the entire creation is intended to show God’s glory. Even the inanimate creation, the stars and sun and moon and sky testify to God’s greatness.”⁸ This takes place because even the non-sentient elements of creation

⁴ Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 21.

⁵ Noel Due, *Created For Worship* (Mentor of Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House, Fern, Ross-shire, Scotland, 2005) 35.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*. See sections 2.3.142; 2.4.221; 5.10. 238-9; 7.264-285.

⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Hendrickson, 2003), 535.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan, 1994), 271.

follow God's will and thus, as Psalm 19:1 indicates "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands." Jesus himself indicates that if human beings did not praise God as they ought, even the stones would cry out in worship (Luke 19:40). Now, one may not want to go so far as to interpret Jesus' words about stones in this light, but the larger point remains: human worship of God is not the full extent of worship that takes place in the universe.

This point is even more strongly affirmed when one realizes that Scripture indicates that in heaven the seraphim, cherubim, living creatures and elders all render to God the praise He is due (Is. 6:2, Ps. 99:1, Rev. 4:6-9, Rev. 4:4). Thus, before the creation of humankind, the very fabric of creation and all the beings it contained were created for the glory of God. Therefore we are rightly reminded that worship does not begin with humans "as though they alone worship, or as if they are the initiators of worship. Worship begins with God. By virtue of his very being as God and by virtue of his act of creation, God is the initiator of worship. It begins with God, and it was evident in the celestial and terrestrial creation before human beings were brought into existence."⁹

This is an important fact to consider when contemplating the foundations of ethics. For only from this perspective that can one begin to rightly understand the purpose of humanity in the grand scheme of the universe. As Due puts it, "this means that when God created our first parents, they came into a worship-filled creation. By implication their existence was also to be taken up in worship."¹⁰ Any discussion of ethics, then, must be pursued from the framework and context of the greater purpose for which all creation exists. With this in mind we then turn to an exploration of humankind's purpose in the created order.

II. Humans Were Created to "Worship and Obey"

A. Created as Continuous Worshippers

The opening chapter of the Bible provides the context by which we can discover God's overall purpose of creation and humankind's place in it. Genesis 1:27-28 reads:

⁹ Noel Due, *Created For Worship*, 37.

¹⁰ Ibid.

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it’

As the pinnacle of His creation, God made human beings and set them apart in two significant ways. First, He gave them a special nature distinct from all other parts of the creation: He made them image bearers. In giving them this special status, God ensured that all human beings regardless of race, gender or ability would have a unique dignity that stood out from the rest of creation. Not to be mistaken with a value they either earn, or by which they can actually make themselves autonomous from God, this dignity finds its grounding in the God who put it there and imparted it to each one as an element of Divine general grace.

In his recent book *Unceasing Worship* Harold M. Best argues that in order for us to properly understand the life- application import of being an image bearer, one must first realize a crucial element about God Himself. In Best’s words: “He cannot but give of himself, reveal himself, pour himself out. Even before he chooses to create, and before he chooses to reveal himself beyond himself, he eternally pours himself out to his triune Self in unending fellowship, ceaseless conversation and immeasurable love unto an infinity of the same.”¹¹ Thus, creation should be understood as a “gift of the Trinity to itself even as it is a gift to the stuff that he creates.”¹² According to Best, in order to recognize the nature of what it means to be an image bearer, we must first understand that the image we reflect is of One who is continuously outpouring grace and love. Indeed, God is the “Continuous Outpourer.”

In relation to the purpose of creation and, in particular, human beings Best goes on to point out that “because God is the Continuous Outpourer, we bear his image as continuous outpourers. Being made in the image of God means that we were created to act the way God acts, having been given a nature within which such behavior is natural.”¹³ According to Best, then, it is simply our intended created nature to pour forth worship. He writes:

I dare not imply that we were created *to* worship. This would suggest that God is an incomplete person whose need for something outside himself (worship) completes his

¹¹ Harold M. Best, 21.

¹² Ibid, 22.

¹³ Ibid, 23. We must be more careful than Best has been to distinguish between the communicable and incommunicable attributes of God, but having recognized this, the thrust of his point is extremely pertinent and valuable to our greater direction.

sense of himself. It might not even be safe to say that we were created *for* worship, because the inference can be drawn that worship is a capacity that can be separated out and eventually regulated to one of several categories of being. I believe it is strategically important, therefore, to say that we were created continuously outpouring – we were created in that condition, at that instant, *imago Dei*.¹⁴

As image bearers, then, human beings by their nature are not only worshippers but were also created worshipping and indeed never stop worshipping. As Noel Due says it, “from the perspective of our relationship to God as our Creator-Father, in whose image we have been made, worship is natural to us... We have been made by the Triune God to reflect his internal self-giving love, and to participate in the action of honouring him above all things.”¹⁵ We must understand, then, that life boils down not to the question of *if* one is worshipping, but rather, whether one’s outpouring of worship is directed to the right end. By way of preliminary conclusion, then, we can see already that if this perspective on the *imago Dei* is correct, then it is a simple step to understanding that the purpose of ethics is to guide the image bearer not only *to* worship, but to worship *well*. The discipline of ethics is that which facilitates the image bearer to appropriately and increasingly reflect back to God His own beauty for His own glory in and through every aspect of our lives.¹⁶

B. Created to Worship and Obey: The Link Between Ethics and Worship.

The second way God set Adam and Eve apart from the rest of creation was by blessing them and giving them a task. Genesis 1:26-28 indicates that the task had two elements: they were to be *fruitful and multiply* in order to fill creation, and they were to *subdue and rule* over creation as benevolent stewards as they filled the earth. The clear implication from the passage is that it would be in the fulfilling of God’s agenda for them that they would experience the promised blessing and presumably its accompanying joys.

In Genesis 2 the scene moves from a panoramic view of all creation to a close up shot of the creation of Adam and Eve. Genesis 2: 15, 18 and 19-20 read as follows:

¹⁴ Ibid, 24.

¹⁵ Due, 39.

¹⁶ I recognize that the discussion of what it means to be an image bearer is far more extensive than what I have included here. I believe, however, that the point I am focused on here is sufficient for the argument being carried forward in this paper.

Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.

And out of the ground the LORD GOD formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. And the man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.

For our purposes there are several vital points that must be made regarding these passages. First, note that Genesis 2:15 indicates that God specifically places Adam in the garden of Eden to “cultivate and keep it.” Why is this significant? In working with the Hebrew text, Cassuto makes the case that English translations of Genesis 2:15 rendering God’s intent for putting Adam in the Garden to “cultivate and keep it” miss an important nuance. While the English phrase “cultivate and keep” is technically accurate, the original language and context strongly suggest the idea of *worship* and *obedience*.¹⁷

Respected Old Testament scholar John Sailhamer agrees. He points out that this important element is often lost in translation from ancient Hebrew to modern English. Many English translations, he argues, overlook the “specific purpose for God’s putting man in the garden. In most [English versions] man is ‘put’ in the garden ‘to work it and take care of it.’” Sailhamer objects, however, and argues “a more suitable translation of the Hebrew... would be ‘to worship and obey.’” That is, when reading Genesis 2:15 from the perspective of the language and the given context, the passage indicates that “Man is put in the garden to worship God and to obey him. Man’s life in the garden was to be characterized by worship and obedience.”¹⁸

Due reaches a similar conclusion when he comments that in the first several chapters of Genesis

we should see humanity as being brought into, and existing in, a matrix of worship. The primal couple did not exist for themselves, or by themselves, but they existed for God, at the head of creation yet to be brought into its full glory. We see that the primal couple

¹⁷ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978) 122.

¹⁸ Sailhamer, John H. “Genesis” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* vol. 2, *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, ed. by Walter C. Kaiser & Bruce K. Waltke (Grand Rapids: Regency, 1990), 45.

was given a mandate, to ‘fill’ the earth, and ‘subdue’ it and ‘rule over’ it (Gen. 1:26f), and a task to ‘cultivate and keep’ the Garden (Gen. 2:15). To engage in such tasks and to fulfill the mandate was to be their expression of worship. Their communion with God, the joy of his nearer presence, the offering of praise and adoration to him, were not to be set in some compartmentalized fashion away from their daily activity, but the daily activity was their service to God.¹⁹

One can understand why Jamieson, Fausset and Brown discuss this passage of Scripture from the point of view that the Garden functioned as a sort of “whole life temple.” They comment that Eden “was in fact a temple in which [Adam] worshipped God, and was daily employed in offering the sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise.”²⁰ Due argues the same point, making strong connections between Eden and Adam’s role as the King-Priest who was designed and created to rule and shepherd all of creation. He comments that “the whole of Eden was built for worship. Adam was created to be the great leader of the creation in its glorification of God, with Eden as the garden-sanctuary of his communion with the Creator.”²¹

In consideration of Genesis 2:15, then, it is right and proper to conclude that in the safety of the flawless environment which He provided, God then created Adam and placed him there to worship the Creator and demonstrate that worship through obedience. “Cultivating and keeping” were simply the proper expression of the overriding purpose and orientation of Adam’s life. Adam was simply built to worship and obey in a manner that transcended duty and which would lead to experiencing life’s highest joys and God’s fullest blessings.²²

C. A Helper in Worship

The next passage, Genesis 2:18, clues us into another important element for our discussion. The verse indicates that Adam was *alone* in the garden and God declared that this condition was “not good.” So in His wisdom and grace God created a “helper suitable” for Adam. Of particular interest is the fact that it is God, not Adam, that notices and identifies Adam’s aloneness. It is important not to interpret this passage by mistakenly understanding

¹⁹ Due, 40.

²⁰ Jamieson, Robert; Fausset, A.R.; and Brown, David, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1998.

²¹ Noel Due, 41-2.

²² John Murray captures this point nicely when he states “The biblical ethic, as it would have been exemplified in a sinless world and as it is exemplified in redeemed humanity, knows no antithesis between duty performed in obedience to commandment and love as the fulfillment of the law.” For his full discussion of worship and ethics in the pre-Fall context see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*. (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1957), 37- 39.

Adam's being "alone" primarily in the emotional sense of what we in our modern understanding of might construe to be an emotive "loneliness." Nowhere does the passage explicitly, nor perhaps even implicitly, indicate that such an emotional need was what drove God to conclude that Adam's aloneness was "not good."

Consider this thought: who was Adam's best friend up to this point? God! Wouldn't it seem strange, then, to suggest that even though Adam enjoyed the friendship of the most perfect Being in the universe, the One in whose presence he was built to find meaning for eternity, that Adam was somehow lonely? Having perfect fellowship with the God of the universe hardly lends itself to the idea that Adam was having an emotional crisis in verse 18 that prompted God to create "a helper suitable" to him. This argument takes on even more weight when we consider Jesus' teaching that in heaven there will be neither giving nor taking of wives (Matthew 22:30). Apparently, the presence of God is enough.

As if to reiterate the previous point, in verses 19 and 20 we learn that God, perhaps with the intention of raising Adam's awareness, had all the animals parade in front of Adam so that Adam could name them. Amazingly, it is only *after* God creates the beasts and the birds and after Adam names them, that he becomes aware that there is no "helper suitable" for him. Scripture clearly indicates that only after God had Adam name the animals did Adam become aware that each animal was created with a corresponding one like in kind, but not exactly the same, as itself. It is only *then* that Adam realized he did not have a "helper suitable."

Why is this important? Because it helps to evaporate the common idea that Adam was "lonely" and that God's primary reason for creating Eve was to fill the void he had in his life. Instead, the implication is that God's concern is not so much with meeting Adam's emotional needs as much as it is with seeing His own agenda for creation fulfilled. In other words, the thrust of the story is not meant to place Adam and his need at the center of creation, but to see that even Adam and his soon to be created "helper" had a purpose for existence that was higher than their own fulfillment.

So then we must ask the question "for what purpose did Adam need a 'suitable helper'?" Piecing our ideas together from Genesis 1 & 2 we can find the answer. First, recalling Genesis 1:27-28 we know that a central element of God's purposes in creating Eve was to help Adam "be fruitful and multiply." It would certainly be difficult for him to fulfill this task alone! He needed a companion—a "suitable helper"—for that! So God, knowing that His own desire was to see the

world filled with his image bearers, created Eve (at least in part) with this in mind.²³ Sailhamer's comments about this passage are once again helpful. He writes, "in what sense was the woman created to be a 'helper'?" It is in "light of the importance of the blessing ('Be fruitful and increase') in the creation of the man and woman in 1:28, it appears most likely that the 'help' envisioned is tied to the bearing of children."²⁴ Clearly, then, God remedied Adam's aloneness not so much because he was "lonely" but because remaining "alone" would make it impossible to complete the task God meant for both Adam and Eve to accomplish: The filling and subduing the earth.²⁵

D. The Outward Thrust of Ethics as Worship

Why is filling and subduing the earth so important? Consider the following line of reasoning: 1) if God created Adam and Eve and placed them in a garden of perfect safety and peace in order to worship and obey, and 2) if that worshipful obedience transcended the realm of duty but was instead the highest form of fulfillment and thus joy, and 3) if God created Eve as Adam's perfectly complementary helper so that together they could do what they were made to do - be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it - then one has to wonder what the world would have been like if Adam and Eve never gave in to Satan's temptations in Genesis 3. To put it in question form: "What would have happened if they had remained pure, obeyed God, and fulfilled the task to be fruitful and multiply and to rule the world and subdue it? What kind of people would have filled creation? What would Adam and Eve's fruitful oneness have accomplished?"

The answer is, their life together would have resulted in a world filled with God-honoring, sinless worshippers united under one purpose: to subdue and rule the world for the glory of God!

²³ This should not be taken to mean that Eve's only or even chief purpose is to be a "baby factory." Such a conclusion from this context misses the point of discussion here. The central point is that like Adam she is an image bearer of equal worth and dignity. Together they have a higher purpose than their own "happiness" or "fulfillment." Indeed, they would only find and experience those things as they together pursued the highest end of their existence — the worship of God.

²⁴ Sailhamer, 46.

²⁵ This is not to say that the companionship of Eve and the vital role of marital union was not a crucial factor in the motive of God to create man and woman together. Surely Genesis 2:24 indicates that oneness is vitally important to marriage and that human companionship is central to the creation of male and female. I have given a fuller discussion of the implication of this passage for marriage in other writings.

Consider the implications. From the very beginning of creation, God built into the human race His own image, He specified the purpose of living life before Him as a joyous journey of worship and commissioned them to fill the earth with like worshippers! The very reason for our existence and journey through endless life in a perfect Garden was to bring glory to God and spread that glory to the uttermost parts of creation. Indeed, for the whole human race life together was not meant to focus around the glory of humankind as the pinnacle of creation or the fulfillment of emotionally “felt needs.” The purpose of life together was meant to be a corporate journey in the experience, and extension of, the worship of God throughout all of creation. Certainly it is not difficult to anticipate from this point the connection of this “Genesis Great Commission” with that which is found in Matthew 28:18-20.

III. The Tragic Effect of the Fall: Disordered Worship.

As our earlier discussion about the *imago Dei* suggested, the crucial question that each person faces in life is not *if* one is worshipping, but *whether one's outpouring is directed to the right end*. Discovering that the purpose of the universe and that each element therein was meant to worship God together in total harmony, does not mean that this is what they actually do. As Genesis 3 so tragically indicates, Adam and Eve's sin plunged the entire human race into a fundamental disordering. Therefore, the real tragedy of this disordering is that God is no longer given the worship He is due.

Secondarily, human beings now find themselves alienated from God and his purposes. As a result, those who were once naturally, inherently and perfectly aligned with God's will are no longer tuned to God's universal purposes. This leads to both an internal sense of discord and an external reality of separation from God. All moral activity, then, is likewise disrupted and cast into disharmony with the music of eternity. Apart from God, humans may strike an occasionally beautiful note, but they are playing the wrong song.

This begs the question, then, as to whether a person could be *ethical* without being properly oriented to God. The answer depends on how one understands and uses the word “ethical”. If by this word one simply means behaving in a manner that flows from an internally coherent and consistent justificatory system, then the answer would be “Yes”. Throughout the ages humans have developed many ethical systems by which one could motivate and justify patterns of behavior beneficial to the human race. Therefore, if one were to evaluate these

ethical systems only in terms of the “horizontal” or “human to human” level of morality then even in spite of the Fall one would have to judge these forms of “ethics” in a positive light. Oliver O’Donovan captures this idea in his *Resurrection and Moral Order* when he writes, “we are not so visited with the fruit of our moral disorder, that we find ourselves converted, like Odysseus’ sailors, into swine. In this sense it is true to say that the image of God is ‘defaced’ but not ‘lost’” and thus some semblance of morality can be had by those apart from saving knowledge in Christ.”²⁶

If, however, one were to replace such an anemic understanding of the word *ethics* with the more biblically founded notion of *ethics as worship* we have begun to explore, then the answer would be “No” a person apart from God could not be ethical in the fullest and right sense of the word. The reason for this is that ethics is not merely about action or behavior, it is primarily about rendering to God what he is due: worship. Thus, it is only when someone is first properly related to God (and, therefore, the fundamental orientation of the universe) that any discussion of proper action can be rightly described as “ethical”.

O’Donovan picks this point up when he comments, “Knowledge of the moral order is a grasp of the total shape in which, if anything is lacking, everything is lacking.... This is the sense, then, in which it is true to say that the image of God in man was not merely ‘defaced’ but ‘lost’. We are not to think of revelation as conferring upon man a knowledge of created order which he never possessed before... for knowledge is, and always has been, man’s mode of participation in the universe. Rather, revelation catches man out in the guilty possession of a knowledge which he has always had, but from which he has never won a true understanding.”²⁷

In light of this real disharmony between fallen image bearers and the God they were meant to worship and serve, any form of moral knowledge that remains in us is fundamentally wrong-headed. Moral action, then, can only be conducted in a fashion that is fragmented and partial. “If the Creator is not known, then the creation is not known *as creation*; for the relation of the creation to its Creator is the ground of intelligibility as a created universe. If one term of that relation is obscured, the universe cannot be understood.”²⁸ Thus, even if one were to be able

²⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1989, 1994), 88.

²⁷ Ibid, 89.

²⁸ Ibid, 88.

to make a “right moral choice” when viewed in itself, in the greater scheme of things, such a choice is “wrong” in a much deeper and more profound sense.

The reason such a moral choice is wrong in this deeper sense is that the knowledge of God “is something from which we can turn away, refusing to glorify God as God. And in that case the universe confronts us as something which might have been understood but has in fact been misunderstood, giving rise to various kinds of idolatry in which the creature is regarded as absolute.”²⁹ As John Calvin describes this situation, when we are fundamentally disordered from our proper end and purpose our hearts become nothing more than “idol factories”.³⁰ This is the point Augustine made in the *City of God* when he argued that the apparent virtues modeled by the Romans and their empire were actually not virtues at all because “there is no reference to God in the matter.”³¹ Therefore, because any moral activity or character quality that is not properly ordered to its final end would be nothing more than “a splendid vice”, it is right to conclude that for the unbeliever, it is impossible to be truly virtuous or “ethical” in the fullest sense of what I am describing here with the notion of *ethics as worship*. As Isaiah 64:6 tells us, apart from God even our best deeds are nothing more than dirty rags.³²

IV. Conclusion

What we finally come to at the end of this paper is the realization that A.W. Tozer was right: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” Therefore, “the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at any given time may say or do, but what he in his

²⁹ Ibid, This discussion reflects John Calvin’s depiction of the human heart as an “idol factory”.

³⁰ *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.11.8

³¹ Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.25. Trans. by Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 707. Calvin also touches on this point in the *Institutes of Christian Religion* 1.1.2. For a further rich discussion of this see *Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition*, Ed. with Introductions by Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1955), 108-109.

³² At this point one might question why the believer strives to engage culture on points of ethical debate. Once again it is vital to be clear on the distinction I am making. The fullest and most proper understanding of the word ethics is that which properly worships God. The value of moral debate, then, has several points of overlap with general culture. First and foremost, morality debate in the culture should function in a manner consistent with Luther’s description of the first use of the Law: to show us our need for Christ through its condemning action. Second, moral debate in culture should also function like the second use of the Law: to restrain the culture from being as bad as it otherwise would be. Here I emphasize that the development of virtue has positive effect on humanity, but such virtues are really only “splendid vices” when viewed in light of the non-believers position *corum Deo*.

deep heart conceives God to be like.”³³ In terms of the way we understand ethics, our lives cannot possibly find proper ordering until we apprehend in the core of who we are that only one Being has the immensity and grandeur to send forth a universe from His glory as well as the gravity of self to pull it all back unto His praise. Therefore, every action, thought, motive, deed, or omission is not primarily about us. It never has been. It never will be. As I Corinthians 10:31 so clearly reminds us, whatever we do, whether we eat or drink, we are to do all to the glory of God.

It is only when we come to grips with this foundational starting point for ethics that we begin to see the truly amazing nature of the entire discipline. Far more than a system of legalistic moralism, ethics is the good and right expression of image bearers created to worship and obey. It shapes the manner of life for those who need to be, and those who are, redeemed and yet struggle in a fallen world to have their worship re-aligned with the One who alone deserves it. It has an ever outward reaching momentum to fill the earth with God’s glory. When we finally get it, when we see that God stands at the center of all things, worship and ethics forever find their harmonizing point. It is in the One who composed the music of eternity.

Recalling Bonhoeffer’s admonition and applying it to our conception of ethics, then, we conclude that Christian Ethics must begin with an inquiry into Who God is before we can properly begin to pursue the questions of how one is to live. When seen for Who He is, the beauty of God has revolutionary power. As Jonathan Edwards instructs us, “when the inclination of the soul is deliberate in its attempt toward God, it becomes affection or ‘affectionate love.’ This is the dynamic and fervent love which Christ describes as the sum of all religion when He speaks of loving God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds and our neighbor as ourselves.”³⁴

Grasping this point is the key to seeing our impotent and distasteful preconceptions of ethics as moralism transformed into the glorious opportunity to worship the King of the universe. Thomas Chalmers eloquently captures this idea in his timeless work, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*:

“There are two ways in which a practical moralist may attempt to displace from the human heart its love of the world – either by a demonstration of the world’s vanity, so

³³ A.W. Tozer, 1.

³⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*. Abridged Edition, (Portland, Or.: Multnomah, 1984), 15.

that the heart shall be prevailed upon simply to withdraw its regards from an object that is not worthy of it; or, by setting forth another object, even God, as more worthy of its attachment, so that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new one.”³⁵

Life transformation and ethical worship finds its potency not merely in rules indicating what we should avoid, but in a desire to replace sinful longings with a total life pursuit of the One whose beauty should stir and draw all our affections: God himself.

In conclusion, then, we note with the prophet Isaiah that God created humans for his own glory (Isaiah 43:7). It is for this reason that when properly conceived *ethics as worship* follows the time honored theological formulation of *exitus et reditus* made most famous by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. That is, all things begin with God and go forth from Him coupled with the reality that all things find their fullness in Him and must rightly return all glory to Him. As Genesis 1:1, Ephesians 1:10, and I Corinthians 10:31 make clear, *ethics as worship* rests on the notion that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” to pour forth His glory. In the end there will be “the summing up of fall things in Christ, things in the heavens, and thing upon the earth.” In the meantime, “whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” The highest good (*summum bonum*) of life is to worship God, the fullest and most flourishing life possible is the one dedicated to a comprehensive worship of God (*eudaimonia*), and the final end of life, as I Corinthians 13:12 tells us, is to see God face to face (*beatific vision*) so that we might worship him in an ever increasingly joyful forever.

³⁵ Thonas Chalmers, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection” in *The Works of Thomas Chalmers* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1830), Vol. II also found in *The Protestant Pulpit*, ed. By Andrew Watterson Blackwood, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1947), 50.