

Lecture 10: Alternate Ethical Systems; Ethics and the State

Questions concerning ethics fall into two major categories: What is the right or wrong thing to do in a given situation? What is our responsibility to see that other people also be required to do the right thing?

The first question involves the relating of the moral law to situations we often encounter in life, especially when it seems that different laws would contradict each other. The second question leads to the application of ethics, especially in society and in the church. Rather than dealing with each ethical issue individually, in this chapter we will examine several Scriptural principles which can cover various issues.

Alternative ethical systems

Once the laws of God have been determined, the next question is to apply them to situations not particularly mentioned in the legislation. Are the laws equal? Do some have priority over others? Do they ever contradict each other? These and related questions must be answered before a particular course of action in a certain situation can be confidently undertaken. Six competing schemes of ethics have been advanced. In this section we will follow the outline and terminology of Norman L. Geisler (*Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, 1971).

Antinomianism

(Existentialists: Kierkegaard [to some extent], Nietzsche, Sartre, A. J. Ayer)

- “There are no norms.”
- No absolute values; “ought,” “should” merely emotive words, have no objective meaning; each person makes his own standards.

Generalism

(Utilitarians: Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, C. G. E. Moore, John Austin)

- “There are no universal norms.”
- No universal laws of ethics, only general laws which can properly be broken; ultimate measure of law’s purpose is its usefulness, usually its usefulness to give pleasure or “happiness” to people.

Situationism

(Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, 1966; Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr)

- “There is one universal norm.”
- Only “love” is universally binding; all other “laws” may be broken if it is the “loving thing to do”; examples of “altruistic adultery,” “patriotic prostitution,” “sacrificial suicide,” “acceptable abortion,” “merciful murder.”

Non-conflicting absolutism

(Plato, Kant, many traditional Jewish and Christian theologians, Charles Hodge)

- “There are many non-conflicting universal norms.”
- Several moral or ethical laws exist, none of which should ever be broken, and which will never contradict each other in practice; apparent contradictions arise from misunderstanding or misapplying these laws; Plato and Kant base these laws on their reason; Hodge identifies them with the Ten Commandments.
 - Cf. interesting article by Michael McKenzie, “Christian Norms in the Ethical Square: An Impossible Dream?” *JETS* 38/3 (Sept. 1995) 413-427; he points out that ethics must be based on the Bible; they cannot successfully use other foundations; he surveys attempts to do so, especially in modern medical ethics.

Ideal absolutism

(E. J. Carnell)

- “There are many conflicting universal norms”
- There are several absolute ethical laws; they may contradict each other in practice, in which case the person will sin regardless of what he does; this situation is the result of sin—his own and others’; he will sin, but will be forgiven by grace; sometimes concept of sin separated from concept of blame.

Hierarchicalism

(Plotinus, Norman Geisler)

- “There are hierarchically ordered universal norms.”

- There are several universal norms; but if they conflict, the higher norms cancel out any conflicting lower norms; example of Abraham sacrificing Isaac; there are regular principles for determining higher versus lower norms (Geisler, pp. 115-121):

- (1) Persons are more valuable than things.
- (2) Infinite person is more valuable than finite person(s).
- (3) A complete person is more valuable than an incomplete person.
- (4) An actual person is of more value than a potential person.
- (5) Potential persons are more valuable than actual things.
- (6) Many persons are more valuable than few persons.
- (7) Personal acts which promote personhood are better than those which do not.

Comparing the systems

While a Scriptural case can be made for several of these ethical systems, the best one seems to be the one favored by our standards—that is, non-conflicting absolutism. Properly understood, the Ten Commandments, summarized in the two great commandments, should never contradict each other. The Bible itself gives many principles and examples showing the situations in which they apply and do not apply, which should impact our understanding of the meaning of those commandments in the first place. Jesus was tempted in all points as we are, yet he never sinned; this shows to us that there are no situations that require us to sin; we only sin because we are sinful.

Ethics and the State

God has ordained the power of the state to maintain social order and to enforce the external observance of his law as it applies to man's social relations.

- “God, the Supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people, for his own glory and the public good: and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers.” (WCF 23:1)
- Magistrates are to “maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth.” (WCF 23:2)

Since in this dispensation the gospel operates through the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, there is no place for the state to enforce belief in God, or the observance of the first table of the law, except insofar as is necessary to protect the equal rights of believers. It is the second table of the law which is the particular realm of the state. These laws were enforced in ancient Israel in the theocracy, and in many ways the method of enforcement then can be a guide for us today.

- “To them also [Israel], as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require.” (WCF 19:4)

Note the clause “further than the general equity thereof may require.” Some of the OT civil law was based on the general Ten Commandments as such; that part has abiding and universal force. Much of the OT civil law was based on the peculiar status of Israel as a redeemed captive people, slaves of God, and on the particular status of their land as צְרָמָה *cherem*, devoted to God. These laws are unique to that place and time, and should not be made normative for all nations.

There is a difference between the biblical theocracy, with God ruling directly and visibly, and even the most advanced Christian commonwealth today. The church has no mandate from God to rule the earth without God’s visible and direct presence. This is a major flaw of the modern Reconstructionist movement (see an evaluation of this movement in Rodney Clapp, “Democracy as Heresy,” *Christianity Today*, Feb. 20, 1987, pp. 17-23; countered by Gary North, “Honest Reporting as Heresy”). The OT and the NT uniformly look to the coming of the Messiah in person before the blessed kingdom promises are fulfilled. These promises include not only the personal presence of Christ, but also the post-resurrection participation of the saints, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the NT apostles. Jesus pointed out to the Sadducees that the Abrahamic covenant, as reiterated to Moses, requires the resurrection (Matt 22:31-32).

This understanding of Scripture does not mean that the Christian must wait helplessly for Christ’s second coming before doing anything in society or government. We are commanded to be active in promoting God’s ethics in all areas of life. In many cases God has used the efforts of Christians in society and government to accomplish great reforms and produce outstanding results. Living in a nation with representative government, we share the responsibility that falls on government to be God’s minister of justice.

Recently in Reformed circles a controversy has emerged, the “Two-Kingdom” controversy. In the past, a term often used by two-kingdom advocates was “the spirituality of the church.” Historically the Reformers and Reformed theologians have distinguished two kingdoms of Christ: Christ’s universal kingdom, over which he rules as the Son of God, including all the nations of the earth and their rulers, and Christ’s mediatorial kingdom, over which he rules as the Messiah, including the church and all its members and officers. Two-kingdom theologians think that the Bible is given specifically to rule the church and natural law is given for the state, while others think that the Bible is rule both church and state.

- David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (2009), and *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (2010)
- Opposing view, John Frame, *The Escondido Theology: A Reformed Response to Two Kingdom Theology* (2011)

Since the exact extent to which the OT civil laws are “generally equitable” is not stated in Scripture, there should be careful study of each area of law. This question is referred to as “theonomy.” In 1990 the Bible Presbyterian synod appointed a committee to investigate this issue and report at the next synod; as a result the 1991 synod adopted the following report:

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Report of the Committee on Theonomy

This committee was charged by Synod with “examining our Confessional position in relationship to the Law (moral and case) in respect to mankind today, and with examining the various positions commonly called theonomy.” The committee has studied many of the works written by several leading proponents and opponents of theonomy. The committee, in keeping with its charge, did not investigate the often related issues of eschatology or apologetics, but rather limited itself to the single issue of theonomy as it concerns the relationship of the Old Testament law to mankind today. After having studied and deliberated this issue, the committee recommends the adoption of the following statement by the Synod.

THEONOMY

While the word *theonomy* in itself means “the law of God,” at the present time it has come to be used for a particular belief about the law of God. We understand theonomy as it is presented by its leading and seminal advocates, such as R. J. Rushdoony and G. L. Bahnsen. Bahnsen (in *By This Standard*) has enumerated the main teachings of theonomy as follows:

1. Since the Fall, it has always been unlawful to use the law of God in hopes of establishing one’s own personal merit and justification, in contrast or complement to salvation by way of promise and faith; commitment to obedience is but the lifestyle of faith, a token of gratitude for God’s redeeming grace.
2. The word of the Lord is the sole, supreme, and unchallengeable standard for the actions and attitudes of all men in all areas of life; this word naturally includes God’s moral directives (law).
3. Our obligation to keep the law of God cannot be judged by any extrascriptural standard, such as whether its specific requirements (when properly interpreted) are congenial to past traditions or modern feelings and practices.
4. We should presume that the Old Testament standing laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament, unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation.
5. In regard to the Old Testament law, the New Covenant surpasses the Old Covenant in glory, power, and finality (thus reinforcing former duties). The New Covenant also supersedes the Old Covenant shadows, thereby changing the application of sacrificial, purity, and “separation” principles, redefining the people of God, and altering the significance of the Promised Land.
6. God’s revealed standing laws are a reflection of His immutable moral character and, as such, are absolute in the sense of being nonarbitrary, objective, universal, and established in advance of particular circumstances (thus applicable to general types of moral situations).

7. Christian involvement in politics calls for recognition of God’s transcendent, absolute, revealed law as a standard by which to judge all social codes.
8. Civil magistrates in all ages and places are obligated to conduct their offices as ministers of God, avenging divine wrath against criminals and giving an account on the Final Day of their service before the King of kings, their Creator and Judge.
9. The general continuity which we presume with respect to the moral standards of the Old Testament applies just as legitimately to matters of socio-political ethics as it does to personal, family, or ecclesiastical ethics.
10. The civil precepts of the Old Testament (standing “judicial” laws) are a model of perfect social justice for all cultures, even in the punishment of criminals.

Many theonomists also believe in other doctrines, such as postmillennialism and presuppositional apologetics; but these beliefs are not essential to the definition of theonomy nor to one being considered a theonomist.

The Westminster Confession defines the law of God as of three types: the moral law, summarized in the ten commandments, which “doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others”; ceremonial laws, which “are now abrogated under the New Testament”; and “sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people [Israel], not obligating any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require” (WCF 9:3-4).

The question posed by theonomy is, “To what extent does the general equity of the Old Testament civil laws require their use today?” Theonomists conclude that these laws are all generally equitable, being God’s own applications of the Ten Commandments to life. Theonomists are not completely unanimous in their application of every principle, and they admit of varying degrees of application among those who hold to this position. Non-theonomists believe that at least some of these laws are tied so closely either to the Old Testament dispensation, to the peculiar position of the Jewish people and land, or to the theocratic government of Israel that they cannot be of universal application. Our Confession, while indicating that as a general principle the judicial laws have expired, does allow for the continuance of at least some of them.

This question should be discussed on the nature of the various laws and punishments involved, including careful exegesis of the Old Testament passages, and reference to the New Testament and the analogy of faith. Since there are many judicial laws which our Confession does not specify as having or not having expired, positions taken in this debate should not be considered as heretical or unorthodox, as long as final appeal is made to the Scriptures and the system of doctrine of our church standards is maintained. Since this debate sometimes has been marked by immoderate and intemperate language and even by schism in the church, the Synod urges its members to discuss this matter in love, to present their views modestly, and to endeavor to maintain the unity of the church and the mutual love and confidence of the brethren.

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