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and abilities of all three within themselves, i.e., people who are at one and the same time theologically perceptive, seriously engaged in the care of others, and alert to the psychological and sociological dimensions of their work and its actual effects upon its recipients. Here again, Paul provides the model. He was not a systematic dogmatist but an active pastoral thinker, one who was neither unaware of the broader social currents of his time nor isolated from the personal ministry of others involved in similar work to his own. Surely, for all the cultural differences between his time and ours, this is partly why he continues to speak so relevantly to us. There is a theological sharpness, realistic edge and experiential flavour to his injunctions that has the ring of authenticity about it.

Only if Christian reflection upon social work is governed by these considerations will its desired practical application be discovered, with all its challenge and complexity. Since this is the only way we will find the answers to our questions in this area, the *most essential and practical* thing that can be done at the present is the setting up of groups to work in just such a way as I have here suggested and, along with that, the questioning by some people as to whether they are being called to the kind of theological vocation of which I have spoken. Any attempt to short-circuit this way of approach will be doomed to superficiality.

So then, the early Christian communities did have a distinctive approach to care in their own time and, for all the influence that has had in twenty centuries since, their contribution today is by no means exhausted. For this to be released, however, a redirection of theological [p. 327](#) endeavour as well as a reorientation of patterns of care are required. Only so will social work itself feel the full impact of that revolutionary new life that Christ, through the early communities, introduced into the world at large.

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Biblical Ethics in a Fallen World

John Ting

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This article raises important questions concerning the responsibility of the local church whose members lose their jobs because they act on biblical absolutes in situations which demand ethical choices.

(Editor)

I was chatting with William about a series on Christian Work Ethics which I had been giving. In the course of our conversation he made a remark which provoked considerable reflection on my part. 'You do know, don't you John, that you are regarded as a 'purist' in this area of ethics? ...' I gathered people meant by this that I was an 'armchair' idealist, correct in theory but impractical in practice. For example a group of typists/receptionists told me that lying is part and parcel of their job—they claimed loyalty to their boss required this. I found it hard to accept this though I trust I had every sympathy for their

situation and some appreciation of the pressure which confronts every Christian in a fallen world. I found it hard to accept that there was no real alternative but to follow these norms of society. It went against all that I believed and taught (and attempted to practise) regarding Biblical ethics and standards as normative, relevant and practicable for present day society—fallen thought it is.¹

So in this article I want to address myself to this question of whether Biblical ethics are too idealistic and impracticable for our (fallen) society. Would I be forced to modify my stand if I were to move out of my ‘ivory tower’ classroom and academic seminars into the real world?²

HOW GRAY IS GRAY?

I have noticed we find it easy to use the phrase ‘gray areas’ whenever we talk about the application of Biblical ethics to the real world situation. But how gray gray is, is partly conditioned by the perspective from which we view the area concerned. To people inside a darkened theatre whose eyes have adjusted to the lack of light the theatre may appear relatively light but to someone who has just come in from the light of day outside the theatre may appear pitch black. I am not **P. 329** denying that there are gray areas where it would be presumptuous to prescribe a cut and dried solution and I am aware that the problem may be heightened when the Bible has no specific word to say leaving us with the difficult responsibility of determining the relevant principles that bear upon that situation. But I am saying that if we were more thoroughly grounded on Scriptures and less conditioned by the world views around us we would see some ‘gray’ areas for what they really are—not gray but black.

One of the important factors which contributed to the expansion of the church in the early centuries was the seriousness and consistency with which the early Christians sought to apply the Biblical ethic in a thoroughly pragmatic society. Christians took their religion seriously. They were prepared to die for their faith—a rather unique phenomenon at a time when most men used religion to serve their own ends. The Christians were prepared to live out their faith at all costs. Theirs was a seriousness which spread to every facet of life. Their society was not different from ours. If anything, it was harder to be a consistent Christian then than now.

SAME PRINCIPLES—DIFFERENT APPLICATIONS

We need to make due allowances for the differences between cultures. For one thing the same word may connote different meanings and practices in different societies. Take the example of bribery. When I first returned to Singapore and taught ethics I took a ‘black and white’ stand on bribery. I had very little sympathy for a Christian who took to bribes to expedite matters. For the Bible clearly and specifically condemns the giving of gifts to judges to subvert their judgement. The basic principle would seem to apply to all other areas too. So I concluded that bribes of any kind were absolutely out! Later, on reflection and in conversation, I realised my stand may have been conditioned as much by my cultural experience as by Scripture. Australia and Singapore where I lived, were relatively free from corruption. But what about those surrounding countries where ‘bribery’ is

¹ See my article, Social Concern, *Asian Challenge*, June 75.

² I did have five years of teaching in a government secondary school. However, some may regard teaching as a rather ‘protected’ occupation.

almost part of the fabric of society, where the 'bribe' resembles a 'commission' or a 'tip' i.e. almost like a service charge? In such cases we are not really subverting judgement in our favour for the 'bribe' is imposed on everyone, much like the 10% service charge that is automatically added to our hotel bill.³ The governments concerned are well aware of the practice and appear to condone it. The amount P. 330 needed is common knowledge and I understand in some areas a receipt may even be issued for the 'bribe'. I find I am now more sympathetic to Christians who feel they need to go along with such a system though I am still personally inclined to an absolutist view. But the point is, bribery is one thing in Singapore and apparently another thing in Indonesia or India.

Furthermore, we may fail to make sufficient allowance for the different social conditions and political climate which exist between countries.

For example, those of us brought up in a western democracy would consider the practice of detention without trial a grave immoral practice and we may even wonder why our Christian counterparts in the 'guilty' countries don't raise their voice in protest. Let me answer with extracts from two students' assignments:-

1. An increasingly important issue in most Asian countries is the detention of political dissidents or 'social menace' without trial. In Malaysia some political detainees have been (and still are) in prisons from as far back as the early 60's. I do not intend to formulate the ethics of such actions but rather to raise certain issues which might help a western Christian friend rethink his position before outrightly condemning the whole system. (a) Freedom of speech is not necessarily good for all societies. In Asia where a large percentage of the population is uneducated the minority that is educated and has the experience of rationalising certain ideology for society must do so with the utmost responsibility. Masses that are not trained to think for themselves but who would emotionally follow their leaders can be used for evil gains through their manipulation by a wicked few. Hence total freedom of speech can be a hindrance to society rather than a help. The bloodiest racial war in Malaysia was a result of such phenomena. (b) Potentially violent men or men who have vowed to carry out bloody revolution must be confined and controlled. Often due to lack of facilities, technology, communication and funds, a delay in confining such people through the normal judicial system would by itself secure their release—hence detention for a limited period without trial is necessary.

As a Christian I can understand the spirit of such a rationale but I have (strict) reservations as the method is open to more abuse than help. However, I have no better alternatives besides the preventive measure ...

2. There is a difference of heaven and earth between the West and my country. In no way can we compare them on equal lines.

Within the period of thirty two years, the country has hardly p. 331 breathed under established civil government. Several times, there have been shifts from civil to martial law. There are several factors: (1) Education—This is one of the major reasons. People are illiterate; they do not have understanding to discern the right people or policies. Therefore they often go by slogans. So sometimes the wrong type of people try to play with people's opinion and create trouble for the government. (2) Social and economic factors—As is often said, poverty is a curse. Under such circumstances, people want to follow happy slogans. (3) Religion—This is another most effective tool used by the political leader. The majority is extremely religious-minded therefore leaders can use their religious zeal and emotion and create trouble. Take for example, the present issue, the burning down of the US Embassy and the killing of seven people. The wrong people

³ In the Bible, the greater condemnation seems to be levelled against those who exploit their power to demand bribes than those who give under pressure.

have played with the emotions of the people. On such an occasion what should the government do? Are open trials for such people useful for the country? Will it be helpful to the community?

Should we think about only a few people or about the majority and the country at large?

My personal opinion is that if the Government for some time keeps them in prison even without trial, I will sympathise with the government. Why? Because it will deter further exploitation of the situation till things become normal. Because this open trial means inviting further trouble, people will again come out in the streets and there may be more damage.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS NEED A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

On one occasion while lecturing along the lines outlined in the first section above, I was perturbed by the 'resistance' to what I was presenting. People felt the position I presented was too idealistic an approach for our fallen world—an ethic for heaven perhaps but not a practical enough ethic for earth! I wondered why there should be such 'resistance' among Bible-believing Christians. I believe it has to do with out inadequate world-views. A Biblical ethic is only consonant with a Biblical world view. A feeling of dissonance results when we impose a Biblical ethic against the background of a non-Biblical world view.⁴

Let me clarify what I mean by the importance of a Biblical world view for our ethics:

1. A Biblical world view consists of more than just a knowledge of p. 332 Biblical morality, that is, rights and wrongs, commandments and prohibitions, the principles which underlie the oughts and ought nots etc.

2. A Biblical world view relevant to Biblical morality should include the following:

a. God is a loving Father. He is not a tyrant nor a 'hanging judge', out to punish us the moment we transgress. We may recall the older traditional attitude of the Asian father. If a child did everything right the father gave no smile nor word of praise or commendation but if the child transgressed in any way the heavy hand would descend. God is not like this. He is a loving Father vitally concerned with the welfare of His children.

When we talk about the absoluteness of Biblical morality we are not talking about a cold-blooded stern set of rules in isolation or in vacuo. We are talking about the way of life—the instructions and the commandments—of a loving, caring Father.

b. God is the Sovereign, Living God who intervenes on behalf of His children. Christians have often been accused of being too idealistic and unrealistic. They have been accused of not taking into sufficient account all the relevant factors within a situation. But the reverse is the case for we are being unrealistic if we leave the Living God out of our reckoning. Whether we leave this factor out or not may vitally influence our approach to ethical decision making. It is not that Christians are too heavenly minded but that non-Christians do not have before them the total picture.

I wonder if Christians have been unduly, albeit unconsciously, influenced by the view of God held by our non-Christian society—the Hindu Non-personal deity, the Buddhist Nirvana, the fatalism bred by the Islamic concept of God, the capricious demons and spirits of the popular animism which underlies a considerable section of

⁴ For example, if the whole orchestra is playing in a minor key and someone strikes up a note in a major key dissonance will result.

Asian society or Hinduism or the Deism of the western society. The non-Christian deities by and large do not take the initiative to intervene on behalf of their followers.

Given this kind of background and influence, it is not surprising that even Christians leave God out of the **real** reckoning.

Perhaps we have been so conditioned by these prevailing perspectives in our society that we do not take into account the Personal Living Sovereign Caring God of the Bible. When we are talking about an absolute Biblical morality we are not talking about it in vacuo, but in the context of the living God of the Bible.

- c. A Biblical world view also includes a proper understanding of Eschatology. Whether this world and this life are all there is or whether there is an after-life of eternal significance has an important bearing upon our ethics. The Bible speaks of this life as important but nevertheless as of transitory character. We are aliens and pilgrims. If our real home is in heaven then we should be able to sit somewhat 'loosely' to this world with 'our affections set above where Christ is ...'

Think of a diplomat sent to another country for a term of office. His loyalty is to his home country and it is this loyalty which basically determines his [p. 333](#) lifestyle though naturally he will seek to adjust as much as he is able to in the country of residence. He will not let his roots sink too deeply knowing it is a temporary residence. It has been said that some Christians make themselves so much at home in this world that when they get to heaven they will feel homesick!

- d. A Biblical world view further involves a proper understanding of God as Creator. As our Creator/Maker He is in the best position to know how we will best function. I understand the Bible to contain the Maker's instructions.

BIBLICAL ETHICS ARE COMMUNITY ETHICS

It may not be easy to conform to Biblical standards in our fallen world and if a member of the community suffers in doing so, the community needs to support him. The Christian community is responsible to bear the consequences of its teaching. It should not just make pronouncements which lay standards upon the individual without also providing a supportive ministry for that individual. This was the failure of the Pharisees and it received its due censure from our Lord.

The importance of this need to see the church as a Body concerned for the welfare and needs of its members has struck me with renewed impact in recent months. At a series I gave on work ethics I was exhorting people to be honest, act with integrity and speak truthfully in their work situation. A group of receptionists came to me advocating the necessity of 'white' lies as part and parcel of their job ... it was impracticable to adopt a 'purist' stand—their job might be at stake ...! Now one cannot deny the possibility of suffering following adherence to Biblical standards in our fallen world, the receptionist **may** lose her job for refusing to lie; the junior executive **may** have his promotion delayed because he doesn't engage in politicking; sales may slacken because the salesman speaks with integrity. So one's income **may** remain static and one may face hardship along with one's family. What is to be done?

Firstly we need to have a proper perspective of values. I recall one young man who turned down a job opportunity which promised substantial increases in material benefits because the job also entailed a great deal of 'entertainment' of a less than edifying kind. It may have been a loss materially but it was a gain in real terms.

The second is to recognise that Biblical ethics are community ethics. This was impressed upon me when I gave some lectures on Biblical ethics in Malaysia. I had been speaking about the absoluteness of Biblical morality and in particular the need for

honesty and integrity in our business dealings. A Christian leader there encouraged me to continue along these lines in my lectures. However, he also reminded me that [p. 334](#) my lectures were not a mere academic exercise for they were having their effect upon the lives of some. He then told me about one of the Christians, a girl who had just been baptised the previous Sunday. She was employed as a sales assistant in a local cosmetics store. She now found herself in a dilemma. She knew that her customers were not getting the full value of the product. The products had either been diluted or partly emptied out elsewhere. Her boss had made it plain that she was not to let the customers know this or she would lose her job! She was not well educated and would have had difficulty in finding an alternative job. She brought this problem to the Christian leader who left the decision with her but told her that if she decided to be honest and suffered as a result then the Church would bear the consequences with and for her!

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