

# William Barclay on Situation Ethics

## 1. **Who** was William Barclay and what are his key ideas on situation ethics?

William Barclay (1907-1978) was a British academic, popular author, and priest in the Church of Scotland. He was most famous for writing *The Daily Study Bible*, a set of bestselling commentaries on the New Testament based on his translation of the Greek text. William Barclay was born in Wick, one of the northernmost towns in Scotland and the United Kingdom, but grew up in Motherwell. He read classics at the University of Glasgow, graduating with a first in 1929 before training for the priesthood. In 1932, he received a bachelor of divinity degree with distinction, was ordained in the Church of Scotland, and then appointed minister of Renfrew Trinity Church in 1933, a post he held for 13 years. In 1947, he returned to the University of Glasgow as a lecturer on the New Testament and then as Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism from 1963 until his retirement. In 1971, William Barclay was invited to deliver the Baird Lecture, which became the paperback book, *Ethics in a Permissive Society*; in it, he outlined his key ideas on situation ethics (including the ones listed below). He died in 1978 at the age of 70.

**Situation ethics is anarchic:** situation ethics promotes social disorder and lawlessness because situation ethicists suffer from a phobia of law. This is problematic because law is essential to a functioning society; ironically, without law, people would be unable to enjoy the freedom that situation ethics seeks to promote.

**Situation ethics is unnecessary:** there is no need to replace law-based Christian ethics with situation ethics because there are no real problems with law-based Christian ethics. Situation ethicists misrepresent law-based Christian ethics when they portray them as inadequate and outdated.

**Situation ethics is unsuccessful:** even if the apparent problems with law-based Christian ethics that situation ethicists identify are accepted, situation ethics is unable to solve them. The tension between law and freedom that situation ethics seeks to address cannot be resolved successfully by weakening law.

## 2. **How** do William Barclay's key ideas on situation ethics work?



William Barclay

William Barclay's key ideas on situation ethics form a major but only moderately successful challenge to the new morality. Although situation ethics is not the only subject William Barclay dealt with in *Ethics in a Permissive Society*, it is the only normative ethical theory he focussed on for an entire chapter. Taken together, his key ideas form a direct response to the writings of Joseph Fletcher and John Robinson, which warns Christians against embracing situation ethics as a solution to apparent problems with law-based ethics.

**Situation ethics is anarchic:** William Barclay argued that situation ethics is anarchic, so seeks to strip society of several essential elements. Specifically, he thought that a functioning society requires the collation of wisdom and experience from each generation, the provision of a framework for how each member should live, the definition of right and wrong behaviour, the provision of a deterrent from evil-doing, the protection of weak and vulnerable members, and the ability to adapt to a changing world. According to William Barclay, law provides all these essential elements; by seeking to undermine law, situation ethics threatens the foundations of functioning societies worldwide.

**Situation ethics is unnecessary:** in *Ethics in a Permissive Society*, William Barclay provided three reasons why there is no need to replace law-based Christian ethics with situation ethics. First, situation ethicists overstate extreme and exceptional cases to support their claim that law-based Christian ethics cannot address many moral dilemmas. As William Barclay wrote, "I am not very likely to be confronted with an Arab blood feud or a war situation in Eastern Germany", referencing the very unusual scenarios that Joseph Fletcher used to justify law-breaking under certain circumstances. Second, situation ethicists assume that people want freedom in ethical decision-making, but William Barclay claimed this assumption is wrong: most people want to be told how to behave appropriately. Third, situation ethicists overestimate the power of situations. According to plenty of Christians, some actions are just plain wrong, whatever the circumstances (a view that was supported by Pope Pius XII (1876-1958)).

**Situation ethics is unsuccessful:** William Barclay argued that even if situation ethics is necessary (because exceptional circumstances are commonplace, people want freedom, and situations do make actions right or wrong), it would still be unsuccessful at solving any problems with law-based Christian ethics or promoting freedom. William Barclay acknowledged that law undermines free choice because it constrains how people behave; however, without it, he claimed people could not act freely because disorder would create a chaotic climate of fear and panic. Likewise, William Barclay accepted that law sometimes harms the individual because of concern for the community; however, a community is composed of individuals. Ethics should balance the interests of individual and community instead of prioritising one over the other. In both cases, William Barclay argued that law-abiding behaviour maintains balance: between anarchy and totalitarianism on the one hand and individual and community on the other.

3. **Why** are William Barclay's key ideas on situation ethics important?

William Barclay's key ideas on situation ethics are important for several reasons. First, they are varied. In *Ethics in a Permissive Society*, William Barclay presented several different arguments against the adoption of situation ethics; cumulatively, they serve to sow several seeds of doubt about both the desirability and workability of situation ethics. Second, they are virulent. The television of William Barclay's Baird Lecture and publication of its expanded text in an affordable paperback format meant that his ideas spread far and wide; indeed, far further and far wider than those of any previous Baird Lecture. Consequently, William Barclay's criticisms of situation ethics became popular counterarguments among conservative Christians to the rapidly spreading new morality. Third, they are vulnerable. Several of William Barclay's complaints are open to obvious rebuttals. For example, his description of situation ethicists as law-phobic promoters of anarchy is a complete and deliberate mischaracterisation of Joseph Fletcher's position (and others). In fact, it is possible to completely disregard William Barclay's first key idea on this basis alone: he was criticising a figment of his imagination.



**An exception:** situation ethics addresses exceptional circumstances not normal ones.

### George Thinks

Chapter four of *Ethics in a Permissive Society* is well worth reading, especially the second half, which systematically covers William Barclay's numerous problems with situation ethics. Whilst there's plenty I disagree with (like the charge of anarchy promotion and law-phobia), William Barclay did make a few salient points. For example, a thoughtful poll could reveal that most people do want to be told how to behave; that they don't want the responsibility of making ethical decisions for themselves. If this proved accurate, and I suspect it would, this criticism would become a significant obstacle to situation ethics. Likewise, William Barclay believed that strictly observing law maintained a balance between both freedom and law and individual and community. It's entirely possible that this delicate balance would be seriously upset by a normative ethical theory that permitted lawbreaking in some situations. Nevertheless, there remain a lot of issues with his ideas, so they have to be considered critically; in particular, the suggestion that situation ethics is irredeemably anarchic is pure hogwash.

