

# Neil Messer on Situation Ethics

Messer, N., 2006. Introduction: Deciding How to Decide. In: Messer, N. Christian Ethics. London, UK: SCM Press.

## 1. What Is Christian Ethics?

Christian ethics should be conceived of as a landscape or territory; introductions to the subject should be thought of as maps for it. Although maps are valuable aids for understanding a landscape, they are no substitute for a visit to the territory. In everyday speech, people rarely distinguish between ethics and morality; however, in academic writing, "morality" often refers to the rules and principles that people follow, whilst "ethics" refers to the process of critically analysing them. Christian ethics is the academic study of the rules and principles that people follow in the context of Christian faith, practice and theology; it covers part of a larger landscape called "Christian theology".

## 2. What to Decide

Contrary to widespread opinion, Christian ethics is not exclusively concerned with sex. It is concerned with ethical decision-making in response to any moral dilemma. It is concerned with how people should behave in certain situations, what they should advise others to do, and what they should collectively permit or prohibit as a society. Christian ethics is concerned with sex and relationships, the disciplining and education of children, the punishment and rehabilitation of criminals, beginning and end of life issues (e.g. abortion and euthanasia), international development and global economics, and war. These are issues of an applied or practical nature.

## 3. How to Decide

When someone encounters a moral dilemma, how he or she comes to a decision is just as important as what the decision is. Christian ethics has four sources of moral insight that help guide ethical decision-making. First: scripture, which is the contents of the Bible. Christians disagree about the influence that scripture should have over ethical decision-making, particularly given the moral dilemmas people encounter today.

Second: tradition, which is a collection of time-honoured beliefs, teachings and practices. It is a collection of shared ideas about what Christianity is, why it exists and, by extension, how Christians should behave. Tradition is important because it provides each generation with a blueprint for Christian living that saves them from reinventing the wheel. In some types of Christianity (e.g. Catholicism), tradition is codified into official teaching.

Third: reason, which is the human ability to think, understand and argue. Some Christians believe God created human beings with the ability to perceive the moral structure of the world; consequently, people can reason their way to ethical decisions. During the Enlightenment, some people attempted to create normative ethical theories (i.e. theories about how to behave) based on the influence of reason alone, excluding scripture and tradition.

Fourth: experience, which refers either to the role of conscience or personal experience in ethical decision-making. However, unlike the other sources of moral insight, experience is considered relatively unimportant. All types of Christianity claim scripture is of central importance, and some claim it is the only sound source of moral insight; Catholics claim tradition is also essential, and Anglicans claim reason is as well.

## 4. The Person Who Decides, and What a Good Life Looks Like

Some Christians argue that focusing on what to decide and how to decide neglects the question of who decides. These critics claim that Christian ethics should focus on what people should be like (i.e. character and virtue) instead of what they should do or how they should make ethical decisions; they argue that people of good character will behave well. Among Christians, concern with what people should be like elevates the importance of the priesthood to the wider community because it serves as a model for good behaviour. In Christian ethics, the distinction between practical and theoretical ethics is often sharply drawn; however, this is a false dichotomy. The theoretical considerations about how people should address moral dilemmas are intimately related to what they actually do.

## 5. What Makes It Christian Ethics?

Christian ethics are Christian for two reasons. First, they are distinctive, which means Christians have distinct reasons for holding the same views as non-Christians (e.g. most Christians and some non-Christians condemn euthanasia, but Christians condemn it because of the sanctity of life). Second, Christian ethics are specific, which means some Christians have ethical views that separate them from most non-Christians (e.g. condemnation of homosexuality).

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Christian ethics is a diverse subject: different Christian individuals and communities have widely divergent ideas about moral thinking and living. One reason for this is that moral understanding is heavily influenced by upbringing (among other things). Similarly, it is impossible to form a totally impartial or neutral view of Christian ethics; consequently, all introductions are inevitably influenced by their author's experiences.

### George Thinks

This chapter of Christian Ethics is an introduction to an introduction on the subject, and it doesn't mention situation ethics once. So, why bother reading it? Well, even though C. S. Lewis, John Robinson and Joseph Fletcher are never referenced, they're conspicuous by their absence; in fact, the central section on "how to decide" highlights the hotly debated role of experience in Christian ethical decision-making. In short, situation ethics, with its relative irreverence for scripture and tradition, no longer holds much sway with most Christian ethicists, at least as far as Neil Messer is concerned. For this reason, Christian Ethics is a helpful introductory text because it situates situation ethics within the contemporary Christian landscape and argues (with its silence) for the relative irrelevance of this theory. By comparison, mainstream Catholicism and Anglicanism are held aloft as branches of Christianity that prioritise scripture and tradition above experience.

This said, Neil Messer's dismissive treatment of situation ethics is influenced by his background. Quite plainly, and with full marks for honesty, he confesses to an evangelical upbringing; in other words, an upbringing within a community that typically prioritises scripture over other sources of authority in ethical decision-making. By comparison, situation ethics emphasises the role of experience when it conflicts with scripture or tradition, which is not an activity endorsed by most evangelicals. So, in Christian Ethics, there is a predisposition to downplay the influence and intellectual integrity of situation ethics, which may be more fanciful than factual. As Neil Messer concedes in passing much later on, "Despite its problems, situationism's basic assumptions have come to seem attractive to many Christians." Why? Well, as far as situation ethicists are concerned, because there seems to be a complete mismatch between much Christian tradition and the actions and teachings of Jesus.

