

BAHRAIN REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH
CCCG 11: Hierarchy Ethics (Hierarchicalism)

May 17, 2024

Preliminary

Ethical Problem: How to decide the right course of action when moral standards conflict?

Case 1: A soldier who lies to his captors to save the lives of his comrades

➤ Telling truth vs. saving lives

Case 2: A doctor who decides between the life of the child in the womb or its mother

➤ Life vs. another life

Case 3: A businessman who misrepresents in advertisement to attract more customers

➤ Truth vs. profit

Case 4: Choosing the party to support in the election – Republican vs. Democratic

Ideal Absolutism: Every moral standard is absolute, and whenever violated constitutes a moral evil.

Common Approach: In case of conflict, the rule becomes “Do the lesser evil”

Problem: It is entangled in inner contradiction, for it is never “right” to do evil

Creation Mandates of God’s Authority: God allows man choice in the enjoyment of His good gifts, but not in violating His command...

Proposed Biblical Approach: *Choose the higher good.*

Note: Moral values are structured in a gradation of good

➤ Situation do occur where a moral value conflicts with another

Point: In such a conflict. The choice should (must) be the higher good

Biblical Evidence

1. There are degrees of evil and sinfulness

Note: This is not similar to the Roman Catholic concept of venial/mortal sins – all sins are mortal... Rom. 6:23

(a) Degrees measured by knowledge

i. Unintentional (ignorant) sin... Lev 5: 17; Num 15:27-31; Ps 19:12, 13

Point: It is still sin that renders the sinners guilty and demands atonement for its cleansing ... i.e., *Ignorantia juris non excusat*

ii. Presumptuous Sin

Note: It is sinning against full light of knowledge and conscience

Point: It carries a compounded element of guilt and penalty

Mt 10:15 = Those who had contact with gospel-preaching more culpable than those who have none

Lk 12:47, 48 = More stripes for those with knowledge, less stripes with those who are ignorant

Rom 1:32 = Greater sin of those who know God's judgment against sin.

➤ cf. Heb 10:26; 2 Pt 2:20f - the great sin of apostasy

(b) Degrees measured by action

Mk 7:20-23 = The corrupting influence of sin is from the inside to outside

(c) Degrees measured by harm

➤ To harm oneself wrongfully is sin... Eph 5:29

➤ To cause harm on another wrongfully is worse... Mt 18:6, 7; 23:14

➤ Taking another's life wrongfully is irreparable damage... Gen 9:6ff

Warning: To cause the deception and damnation of a soul is the worst harm...

Texts: Mt 23:13, 15; Rm 1:32; cf. Mt 18:6, 7

2. There are degrees of virtues and goodness

(a) Mk 12:28-31 = Priority of God and neighborliness to man are key measures of virtue... (“first”) = first of all; foremost

Point: There is nothing greater than Love to God ‘first,’ and love to neighbor as second...cf. 1 Cor 13:1ff

(b) Mt 23:23 = “Justice and mercy and faith” = weightier matters of the Law

➤ Mere religious rites cannot supersede the demand of justice, mercy, and faith... cf. Pro 21:2

(c) 1 Cor 7:36-38 = Between issues of good, there are “better” choices based on other Considerations... Context: Marriage during a time of “present distress” (v.32)

Choice: v. 36 = ... *if his passions are strong ... let them marry – it is no sin.*

Reminder: [1689 BCF, XXV.3] – “...it is the duty of Christians to *marry in the Lord*” – 1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14; Heb. 13:4

Point: In case of conflict of values, the higher good transcends, but does not violate, the lower good...

Special Cases:

Exodus 1:15-22 = God-fearing midwives

➤ Offences = Disobedience of authority; misrepresentation of facts (lies?)

➤ Virtue = Preservation of lives

Joshua 2:1-7; 6:25 = Rahab’s hiding of the spies

➤ Offences = Treason against her own nation

➤ Virtue = Preservation of lives – An act of faith in identifying with the people of God... cf. James 2:25

1 Samuel 21:12-15 = David feigned madness

➤ Offences = misrepresentation of facts

➤ Virtue = self-preservation – vindication of faith in God...cf. Title of Psalm 34

Matthew 12:1-8 = Jesus correction of Pharisaic legalism

➤ Offences = Sabbath breaking? (not keeping to the external form of law)

➤ Virtue = helping/healing the people – acknowledging Christ...cf. Lk 13:10-17

Conclusion: In a hierarchy of moral standard, it is not doing a lesser evil – but doing the higher good (it must be biblically-based and conscience clear)

Proposed Guidelines:

1. God is higher than any creature claims... Mt 6:24; 10:37; Ac 4:19f; 5:29

2. Person are of more value than things... Mt 10:31; 12:12

3. Truth is more important than image/impression... Lk 16:15; 2 Cor 13:7, 8

4. Soul is more precious than body... Mt 10:28; Mk 8:36, 37; Lk 12:13ff

5. The eternal is infinitely greater than temporal... Jn 6:27; 2 Cor 4:16-18

6. The church is pre-eminent over human institutions...1 Cor 3:16; Eph 1:22, 23