**Foundations of Christian Ethics**

The fundamental thing that distinguishes the Christian ethics from secular Humanists ethics revolves around the foundation of ethics or the absolute nature of morality. Christian ethics is grounded in the character of God. For secular Humanists ethics believe in a “limited number of basic values and principles that has no foundation for these principles by saying that they are naturalistic and empirical phenomena.” For humanists, there is no m absolute morality; only that moralities are sets of social conventions devised by humans to satisfy their needs. Furthermore, “Humanists believe that man’s conduct should be based on humanity, insight and reason. He must face his problems with his own moral and intellectual resources without looking for supernatural aid**.”** Carl F. Henry vehemently rejects the Humanists position by asserting that, “Any ethical view point which discounts this supernatural source cannot represent itself as being genuinely Christian in character and composition. For Christian ethics derives its content and sanction and dynamic and goal from God—not from some inference of anthropology or sociology.”

For instance, a Christian asked a Humanist that, If man is going to decide what he “ought” to do, and what he “ought” not to do; then he must refer to a moral code or foundation, who dictates the ought? The Humanist said, I can find no basis for moral ought. The Christian countered the Humanist statements in these words, If there is no ultimate basis for “ought” then there is no basis for determining what is right and wrong, which means the Hitlers, Stalins, Maos, or bad leaders in the world are innocent of their wrongdoings.

The point is: What you believe determines how you behave or conduct yourself. Christian Ethics is inseparable from Christian theology. Theology is the hybrid of two Greek words namely, *theo*s means God; *logos* means Word/discourse.  Both words combined together gives you “a discourse of or about God. Christian theology that derives its resources from the Scripture is critical to the development of Christian ethics. Any theology or doctrine that does not have Scripture as its principium, one would have a very disjointed and misdirected ethical system. What are the foundations of Christian ethics?

1. Revelation and Character of God

Revelation is the epistemological grounding of Christian ethics, in that by it God disclose himself to the creation as affirmation that He exists. Thus the self-disclosure of God to creation is classified under the general and special revelation.

1. General revelation – simply means God revealed himself through nature, history, and conscience. Nature declares the glory of (Psalm 1-3); it is a manifestation of God to all peoples by endowing humanity with a “sense of a deity” (Rom 1:19-20); Human agents are moral agents and have moral capacities to judge between right and wrong. In Acts 14: 15-17 through nature and history God left to all peoples a witness to Himself.. People can never escape His divine witness through general revelation. Finally, through general revelation, Anthenian philosophers came to know the existence of God by their inscription “to the unknown God.” (Acts 17:22-31).
2. Special revelation means that God personally revealed His Will for creation. “God with us.” Jesus is the final self-disclosure of God (Heb 1:1-3; John 1:1-4, 14-18). Jesus Christ is the model for Christian ethics. Without Jesus Christ in the realm of Christian ethics, the ethical paradigm will not be possible. This means that 1. our life and morality ought to follow His example (1Thess 1:6).2. Following the steps of Jesus Christ by demonstrating through our life and conduct the same qualities that Jesus Christ demonstrated in his earthly life and ministry. Thus, by Jesus Christ’s redemptive work and our faith union with Him has given each believer the power to live a good moral life in this life. This power is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit enables Christians to live a moral life (Rom 7:15). Thus, the Holy Spirit is “the dynamic principle of power for Christian ethics, the personal agency whereby God powerfully enters human life and delivers man from enslavement to Satan, sin, death and law. He is a main character whose role is crucial for the life of holiness in all its phases.”

1. The Character of the Triune God-Christians call God triune because this way of speaking accords with the biblical witness (Gen 1:26, God said, Let us make man in our image and likeness...” Gen 11:7, God said, “Let us go down…”) and with the experience of the Church rooted in this witness (Matt 28: 18-20, Jesus said,… baptizing them in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, 2 Cor 13:13)..

The foundation of Christian ethics is the Christian worldview that is “ultimately rooted in the nature and actions of the Triune God” The Triune God affirms that God is one not several Gods (Deut 6:4). Biblical Christianity teaches the unity of God not three Gods (tritheism) as some people misconstrued Christian teaching about God. It is impossible to reduce the Christian God in his oneness to one single Person. It is only in three distinct Persons that he is the one God. Only in these three Persons is the inexhaustible, incomprehensible, and the unfathomable mystery of the one God to human mind is fully expressed. The life of the Triune God—that is God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is a mutual exchange and they work in the world in different ways in order to bestow on this world the one life in differentiation, that is, life in the plural.” Failure to affirm the nature of the Triune God in ethics will mean that morality will be misguided and misdirected. The triune God is the foundation of ethics and morality. This means that “Christian ethics is not rooted in principles such as love or justice nor in virtues embodied in the narratives of the communities, nor in the existence of social structures deemed to be part of the created order. All of these may be important elements in Christian ethics, but they do not form the foundation of moral thought, character, and actions.”

One of the distinctions of the Judeo-Christian God is that the living God is one and is the God of nature as well as of religion, of the secular as well as of the sacred; and “that not all things are the same to him. That at first they sound rather trivial, but in reality it is one of the most profound things one can say about the Judeo-Christian God. He exists; He has a character; and not all things are the same to Him. Some things (we do and say) conform to His character, and some are opposed (antithetical) to His character.” The task of Christian ethics is not only for determining what conforms to God’s character and what does not, but also ensure that people should reflect or mirror God’s character in and through their lives in this life. God’s character is the norm of Christian ethics (Lev 20:26; Matt 5:48; 1Pet 1:14).

1. Scripture (Bible) is the Guide and Principium for Christian Ethics.

The Scripture plays an integral part in developing Christian ethics. It not only provides guidelines on drawing ethical principles of moral absolutes that should be obeyed but also judges all ethical standards of morality that are developed by secular humanists that are aberration to the commands of God and His Word.

The Scripture reveals the moral absolutes to man that requires moral decisions on what he professed, what we ought to do, and how we should live our life on specific values and guidelines in order to have a sense of what is right and what is wrong in al situations as contained in the Bible.

The most obvious absolutes are the Ten Commandments—the Decalogue. In reading the Decalogue, it is very evident that the Lord God is the foundation and source of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2). To emphasize the essence of the Ten Commandments without appreciating God who established these moral absolutes for moral order in the society will miss the entire subject that might open the way to a spineless ethic. The Decalogue acts as the basic law for humanity. But it is not the only law revealed in the Bible; it also introduces us to the God incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ whose life, ministry and ethical teaching are encapsulated in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) coupled with ethical pronouncements of the Old Testament created specific ethical order.

It is satiating to know that in the basic law, the “ought” should always follow the “is.” In the same way, “many of the New Testament epistles follow a similar pattern of the imperative flowing from the indicative.” For instance, these passages affirmed the above claim: 1John 4:7’11’19; 2Cor 8:7-9; Eph 4:32. The transcendence and immanence of God should undergird our understanding and practice of ethics.

Thus, ethics in the Bible is not blind obedience to laws, principles, or virtues but rather a response to the living, all-powerful God of the universe, who is himself the foundation of those moral guidelines. The content of our moral responses are certainly known and shaped by the biblical norms in the various forms, but ultimately they are reflections of God’s character, purposes, and actions in the world.

Man is inexcusable for doing wrong always, because Christian ethics has been truthfully addressed in our Christian faith, religion, traditions and our perfect role model, Jesus Christ that W.E.H. Lecky , who never claimed to be a Christian, admitted, ”The character of  Jesus has not only been the highest pattern of virtue, but the strongest incentive to its practice.” Scripture plays a normative role in the formation and development of moral order in all facets of life for Christians to uphold for God’s glory.

1. Man in God’s Image and Inevitable Sin

God created man in his own image and likeness, affirms a necessary statement for Christian ethics. “All of creation is the handiwork of God and man is creation *par excellence,”* Being created in God’s image does not only means that man is unique in creation, but also that man is a relational, rational and moral being who knows what is right and wrong or good and bad. For, out of God’s creation, man is given a culture mandate and content of knowledge for ethical responsibility. Originally, man was created good without sin, man disobeyed God and brought Sin into existence by the fall. Thus, Sin works destructive effects in our minds, moral motives, and in darkening our natures from understanding God, creation and ourselves.

Abraham Kuyper enumerated seven fatal effects of sin that always incapacitate man’s mind, motivation and decision to do what is right in this life:

It makes us asserts falsehoods, it makes us subject to unintentional mistakes; It leaves us exposed to self-delusions and self-deception; it distorts our powers of imagination; it makes us ready victims to the evil communication with other minds[ it exposes the soul to spiritual maladies which arise from corresponding physical maladies. It works destructively in marring our relationships with other peoples, and it fractures the inner harmony of self, etc

Man and everything about him needs redemption. This redemption of man becomes the necessary component of Christian ethics as Kunhiyop further asserts that,

Moral philosophy cannot cannot forgive failure; it cannot save the lost. Moral philosophy, apart from the gospel, cannot offer grace , cannot instil in people the ability to live with this failure. This is not because moral philosophy—and correctly philosophers—necessarily lacks kindness or compassion, but because they lack a foundation for grace in their theories, apart from acknowledgment of God’s self-revelation as one who comes not to condemn the world but to save it.

Thus, the man as a moral offender is only restored, regenerated (Gk: *palingenesis*) and endowed with new nature by faith union (Sola Fide) with Jesus Christ to become the “congregation of the righteous”, Communion of Saints,” “God’s people,” and for God. The redemption of man through Christ has clear links to Christian ethics in that a regenerated man would not gratify the desires of the flesh and the power of sin bows to our new nature in Christ because of the power of the Holy Spirit enables and preserves us as new being in Christ results in new morality (Eph 2:8-9; 2Cor 5:17; and Gal 2:20).

**THEORIES OF ETHICAL RIGHT**

**Preamble:** People are in search for the ultimate definition of the concept of right in Ethics.     Thus, many have postulated theories as quest to answer the question of “what is     right.” Below are theories of right that most Christians use to justify their decision and     actions.

1. **Might is Right:**

According to Thrasymachus, “Right is in the one who has the greater power or authority” He reiterates that “Justice is in the interest of the stronger party.” Iranian proverb,” one that has the sharpest sword

* Leaders like Nero, Hitler,Mao, Idi Amin, Robert Mugabe and Abacha etc used their military or political power to justify their evil decisions and actions. Rape, Robbery, Murder, Deception, Fraud, Immorality, etc.
* It is true that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely
* This is an autocratic or authoritarian kind of leadership that is suppressive, oppressive , vindictive and draconian.

**Problem: -**     (a) It fails to differentiate between power and goodness

        (b) It is possible to be in power and not be good or right

        (c)  It is possible to be good and not be powerful

1. **Right Morals & values are with the more:-**

* What is right is what the community, or group (tribal, political religions etc) says is right.
* What the community or group accept as right is what I must do eg: African philosophy says, “I am because we are” or “we are because I am” (John Mbiti) .
* African Ethics is always a “we” ethics” in that the community sanctions morality, determines and interprets ethics of right and wrong decisions/actions.

**Problem**

* Two different communities can have two different ethical standards. eg What is evil might not be evil to the other community.
* If the definition of right and wrong are left to communities then right becomes relative eg Other social ills are justified on the basis of communal ethical motivations.

1. **Man is the measure of Right**

* This means each man’s opinion is the (ethical norm) standard for what is right
* Pythagoras said “Man is the measure of all things”

**Problem**

1. What is right for one man may be wrong for another.
2. If anyone does what he believes right then there will be serious chaos.
3. It paves way for lawlessness disorganize, oppressive, and anarchy (Judges: everyone did what was right in their own eyes,”) eg Everyone is a king
4. **Right is what the Human Race Approves:**

* Emphasises that “the whole determined right values for the part not otherwise.
* It upholds the absolutes of the human race.

**Problem**

1. Undermines the problem of total depravity
2. Maintains inconsistent values because human race has been inconsistent
3. It creates an avenue for prejudices and spirit superiority over against the neglected minority.
4. **Right is Moderation:-**

* Emphasizes the virtuous life by stating that the individual character strives for the “Golden Mean”
* It is located or the just- right point between excess (too much) and defect (too little). So, the popular saying “too much of everything is bad”
* Acts produce habit and habits produce character.

**Problem**

1. Cannot measure virtues like love, kindness mercy etc,
2. Moderation is not an ethics but an action.
3. Tolerates Luke warmness in Christian life.
4. **Right is what brings the Greatest Good for the greater number:**

* It focuses on the benefit of the majority not few, even if the supper or die on the process. The majority as they say, carries the vote.”
* It is also known as utilitarianism or consequential theory of right that stress that the morally right thing to so is that which provides the greatest happiness (benefits) to the greatest to the greatest number of people.

**Problem**

1. Good/Right is defined in terms of quantity.
2. It is the path way for inaccurate/false predictions quality determines the right.
3. **Right is what brings pleasure**:-

* What is right is what brings pleasure, and what brings pain is wrong (Hedonist philosophy).

**Problem**

1. Not all pleasure are good and not all pains are bad
2. Pleasure can be relative
3. **Right is Indefinable:-**

* Right or good cannot be defined
* Right is simply right. Any attempt to define “good” in terms of something else make that something “The Intrinsic “Good”

**Problem**

1. Right is life undefined
2. Merit: Traces goodness to the ultimate Reality- God
3. Goodness is one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit
4. **Right is what God wills:-**

* Right is based on what is the will of God. He wills an action to be right and done in the right way that is Right.
* Right is the binding will of God for humanity to know by obeying His instructions   (Mal 3:6; Jos 1:17)
* The Will of God is the source of good
* This Divine Will is central to the life, that is, it stresses what we ought to do and be.
* The right hinges on God’s reign, Jesus Christ & Jesus’ teachings and practices.

1. **Right is with the wisdom of the crowd (collective wisdom)**

This theory explores the idea that power is with the large group of people (power to the people) who are smarter than a few brilliant elite,

* large groups of people are better at solving problems,
* large groups of people foster innovation,
* large groups make wise decisions and even the people of Israel did by rejecting God for asking for a king just like every nation was doing.

How to avoid being swayed by the crowd wisdom:

1. Be steadfast, make up your mind- do not compromise (Daniel 1:8; Joshua 24:14-15)
2. Ask yourself “does the collective wisdom tally with God’s word and divine wisdom?
3. Always pray and let the Holy Spirit guide you.

* It predicts the future based on the collective wisdom of the people (James sorrowing versus The wisdom of the crowd).

The proponents of this theory, argue that Prov. 11:14 clearly shows that there are benefits in seeking counsel or advice from people. It supports consultations, dialogue and debates and encourages us to follow ungodly, popular wisdom, “……… in the multitude of counsellors there is safety” This theory of collective wisdom has many slogans, for instance, “vox popli, vox deux” – meaning” the voice of the people is the voice of God.” Another one is” it is fashionable because everybody is doing it.”

* **Problems:**
* Popular opinions are not always right, and the fact that everybody is doing it does not mean it is right.
* It can lead many astray or rather than relying on the wisdom of the crowd, we should search for God’s wisdom that is superior and powerful than all wisdoms the world offers. (Job 3:13-18).
* It is not always right to follow the crowd in order to avoid being manipulated or enslave to doing wrong things.