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Christian views on ethics

by David Stone

There is a distinctive and coherent Christian approach to medical ethics based on what God has made known to us in the Bible.

Discovering God's will

When Christians make decisions about what is right and wrong their underlying rule is that what God wants and says is best. This does not necessarily lead to their conclusions being wildly different from those who leave God out of the equation. The Christian explanation is that God can make his will known, perhaps through our consciences, or in ways that are more up-front.

In any case, western culture's ideas on morality stem very largely from principles that can be traced back to their roots in the Jewish and Christian religions. This means that plenty of people hold views that are more or less Christian without necessarily being aware of where they come from.

For Christians, the most up-front way God has ever made his will known has been through his Son, a man called Jesus Christ. He lived in Palestine about two thousand years ago. Ever since then, Jesus has been worshipped and honoured as Lord of everyone and everything. All over the world today, many millions remain

convinced that his example and teaching provide a reliable blueprint about how to live.

This is why Christians take the Bible so seriously. First, because it gives us the fullest record we have of what Jesus was like and what he taught. And secondly, because Jesus himself is recorded as having immense respect for the value of these Scriptures.

He clearly regarded the scriptures that were around in his day as the 'word of God'. We now call this set of writings the Old Testament. Christians believe that the term 'the word of God' can also apply to the New Testament, those parts of the Bible written since Jesus was born. They say that it records what God

chose to make known through Jesus and his first followers. Christians believe that understanding Jesus is the key to discovering God's will.

Knowing God personally

Although God wants us to do what is right and avoid doing what is wrong, it's even more important to him that we should come to know him personally. Apart from anything else, this is where a life that truly pleases him begins.

Christians look mainly to the Bible in order to discover principles that will help them to determine right and wrong.

For Christians, the Bible is a vital guide that helps them to establish and nurture their relationship with God.

The Bible is a source of principles that will help Christians determine right and

is the basis of his ethics. Once our lives become centred on God we can develop a growing capacity to love other people and a growing understanding of how best to do so.

Christians believe that God's guidelines for human life are worth

cookery book. It doesn't give precise instructions for what to do in every situation. Apart from anything else, many of the dilemmas we face now were entirely unknown at the historical times of the people who wrote the Bible. And many of the issues that did concern them seem to be entirely irrelevant to us today.

You need to look at each part of the Bible and see what style it has been written in. Some of it seems reasonably straightforward, but some looks like historical narrative and other parts are poetry.

Some Christians try to isolate neat and clear instructions from the rest of what the Bible says. This has the possibility of giving a simplistic view of life. Other people go to the opposite extreme. They concentrate on the differences between the culture of the Bible and the way the world is now. Consequently, it becomes virtually impossible to pin anything down that is relevant to us today.

The first group makes the mistake of ignoring the fact that the Bible, though inspired by God, is still a very human book rooted in cultures very different from our own. The Bible tells a story that progressively reveals God and his standards. As a result, individual passages need to be seen in the light of the whole. The second group concentrates so much on the Bible as a human book that they discount its ability to convey the word of God at all.

The right path lies in between these two extremes. We need to take the Bible seriously. It is the timeless word of God. It is also the word of God expressed through the particular cultures of the ancient Near East.

For Christians, using the Bible properly means seeking to step into the shoes of those who first heard and read it. This allows them to understand what basic principles God was teaching.

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wrong. They try to follow these principles themselves and encourage others to adopt them. But it's worth bearing in mind that this is only one aspect of what the Bible is for.

Christians believe that the Bible's principal aim is to reveal what God is really like. Once people get to know him they can respond to him with love, trust and allegiance.

One of the foundations of Christian belief is the Ten Commandments. Jesus was once asked to say which he thought was the most important. His reply clearly puts God first: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments¹.

For Jesus, right relationships with other people are based on a right relationship with God. This

trying to follow even if you don't believe in him. But they work even better when you do.

Using the Bible

It's all very well suggesting that the Bible can help guide us in determining right and wrong, but how are we to use it? After all the most recent parts were written almost two thousand years ago. So how can it be of any real help to us today? In some places it's not always exactly clear what some words mean. And even when we think we know, how can we be sure that we're right?

Still another hurdle is the question of what to do when one part of the Bible seems to contradict what another part says. Which part are we to choose? We need to bear in mind that you can't use the Bible like a

Their task then is to apply these principles to current situations.

CMF Files seek to do just that as, paper by paper, we examine a wide range of current issues in medical ethics.

A biblical framework

As we have already noted, biblical ethics are fundamentally God-centred. He is at the centre of the universe he created. He continues to take an active interest in his creation. This means that if he has given us any indication of how things ought to be, then the wisest course of action is to do what he says.

The best way to find out how to use a piece of equipment is to consult the maker's instruction manual. This explains why, again and again, the rules set out in the Bible relate back to God. For example, the first of the Ten Commandments is 'You shall have no other gods before me'².

Such a commandment doesn't stand in isolation. Instead it is based on the truth stated in the previous

Biblical ethics are fundamentally God-centred

sentence. This explains who God is in terms of what he has done for people: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery'³.

Guidelines for action in the Bible are based on the character and activity of God: 'Because I am like this and have done such-and-such, you are to do the following...'

Related to this is the important principle that people are called to reflect God's character. In the New Testament there is an instruction that Christians should 'be imitators of God, as dearly loved children'⁴. This echoes the Old Testament instruction to 'be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy'⁵.

The general idea is to observe how God acts and then follow, walking 'in all his ways'⁶. God's character is one that loves the people he has made. Our task is to learn to reflect that love. This is why love has a central place in biblical ethics. We are encouraged to show the same love towards our fellow human beings that God shows to them and to us.

Being human is special to God

It is the fact that God thinks human beings are special that makes human life 'sacred'. We may not see anything very remarkable in another individual, especially if they have some disability. But God's estimate of human worth and value does not stem from the qualities we display. Instead it comes from his decision to love us, come what may.

For Christians, the best example of God's love is seen in the life and death of his Son, Jesus Christ. The coming of God into the world as a human being, Jesus, demonstrates the supreme status that we have at the summit of God's creation.

This is further underlined by the Bible's claim that men and women are made 'in the image of God'⁷. Out of every living creature, they have a unique ability to relate to him and to one another.

However, we do not have the authority to take innocent life⁸ and we must care for the poor, the weak

and the ill⁹. The length of our life on earth is God's decision, not ours. He has not chosen to give control of when it will end to anyone else.

People are called to reflect God's character

On the other hand, the significance of life this side of the grave must not be overstated. The Bible stresses that this life is not all there is. God desires to give us a level of reality known as 'eternal life'. In comparison, our time on earth is only a brief apprenticeship¹⁰.

There is another aspect to what it means to be made 'in the image of God'. Each one of us carries the dignity of responsibility for what we

Made in the image of God

do. We are not simply puppets on strings. God has made us and placed us in charge of the world around us. It is ours to enjoy, look after, manage and care for.

Despite the risks, he gives us genuine freedom to choose whether to follow his guidelines or reject them. Such freedom must not be lightly denied to other people or used against their best interests.

Not just what, but how

Near the beginning of the Bible are some instructions¹¹. They are sometimes called the ‘creation ordinances’ or the ‘Maker’s instructions’. These affirm:

- the importance of us having one day in seven free to rest from our work — Sabbath rest,
- the dignity of work,
- the need for human companionship — supremely in marriage and family life,
- the vital need for each person to have a relationship with God.

Being out of step with our creator leads to many other things going wrong

But the Bible also recognises that our ability to decide right and wrong has been spoilt because we tend to reject God’s right as Creator to govern our lives. This also inhibits our abilities to put such decisions into practice. Such an attitude of rebellion means that things are not necessarily the way they should be.

Being out of step with our Creator leads to many other things going wrong. This is one of the principal

reasons why he has given us rules in the first place.

God’s law is seen in the Bible as his provision for the fact that we need guidance about what is right and wrong. In the Old Testament, God offers his people a series of binding relationships, known as ‘covenants’. He promises to bless them if they keep his commandments and punish them if they do not.

Much of the Old Testament is concerned with urging people to return to their obligations under the covenants to obey God. Human beings are not programmed like robots. They do not automatically do what God says. Instead they are invited to choose to obey him.

The New Testament offers a fresh perspective, based on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, where we’re not merely told what to do but helped to do it. Christian faith offers not only forgiveness for the mistakes of the past. It also offers a new power to respond to God’s love. This leads beyond what we would otherwise be capable of which allows us to live as he intends us to.

In the Christian understanding of things, this power comes to us as it came to Jesus: that is, through a relationship with God made real by the Holy Spirit.

Helping one another

Although most Christians believe in the supreme value of the Bible as a guide to belief and behaviour, they also believe that guidance can be found elsewhere.

Looking back to see how Christians in the past have faced similar situations is one very useful starting point. Advances in technology mean that some right-or-wrong situations

are completely new. However, most of the fundamental issues that underlie these dilemmas have been faced before in one form or another.

Then there is the role of the Christian community today. Christians depend very much on each other to stimulate and challenge their thinking on moral issues. This helps them find out together the will of God and the direction they should take.

Conclusion

Christian views on ethics stem from the idea that God has a say in how we decide what’s right and wrong. We can discover this by careful study and application of principles found in the Bible.

Passages quoted from the Bible

¹ *Matthew 22:38-40*

² *Exodus 20:3*

³ *Exodus 20:2*

⁴ *Ephesians 5:1*

⁵ *Leviticus 19:2*

⁶ *Deuteronomy 10:12*

⁷ *Genesis 1:27*

⁸ *Genesis 9:5*

⁹ *eg Deuteronomy 15:7*

¹⁰ *Romans 8:18*

¹¹ *Genesis 1:28; 2:2, 18, 23-24*

All quotes taken from the New International Version.

Further reading

Atkinson D. Pastoral Ethics: A Guide to the Key Issues of Daily Living. Lynx. 1994.

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