

Kingdom Ethics

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When I first studied ethics as part of my theological training this centred on the Decalogue. While some special attention was paid to issues in social ethics as well as the challenge of the New Morality popularised by Bishop Robinson and Joseph Fletcher, the approach was in the main *deontological*. It was based on the “oughts” or necessity (Gk. *deon*) of God’s law. Probably this approach was representative of what was taught at other conservative seminaries. A widely used textbook at that time, *Principles of Conduct* by John Murray, was based on creation ordinances and the Ten Commandments.

The Deontological Approach

The deontological approach had reigned supreme in Protestant theology since the time of the Reformation. In Luther’s theology the Law was regarded both as a guide to human society and a schoolmaster who led men to Christ (*Smalcald Articles*, Pt. III, Art. II). As a guide to society the Law had a central function in the Kingdom of the Left, that of the State. As a schoolmaster who led one to Christ it functioned mainly in the Kingdom of the Right, that of the Church (*Augsburg Confession* Art. XXVII, *Apology* Art. XVI). The law also functioned to define righteousness and sin (*Smalcald Articles*, Pt. III, Art. I), and it is Christ’s obedience to the law, together with his sacrifice for man’s sin, that leads to the justification of God’s people (*Augsburg Confession* Art. IV; *Solid Declaration*, Art. III). The law was so crucial to Luther’s understanding of salvation that both the Small and Large Catechism give an exposition of the Ten Commandments before proceeding to the doctrine of salvation.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin deals with the law after the doctrine of salvation. This order followed from his recognition of a third use of the Law: to serve as a rule of gratitude for those who have received forgiveness in Christ (*Institutes*, Bk. II, Ch. vii, 12). For Calvin this is the “principal use” of the law, and his exposition of the Decalogue serves as a guide to Christian living. The five chapters he devotes to law and sin are sometimes identified as the first Protestant treatise on ethics

(Bk. II, Chap. vi-x).¹ In this section Calvin recognised three hermeneutical rules for interpreting the Decalogue that continue to be observed today:

- a. Every negative command (prohibition) comes with a positive demand (exhortation)
- b. Every trespass is connected to other trespasses
- c. Together with the external sin all internal contemplation of such activity is forbidden.

In the traditional Reformed approach, ethics was closely linked to theology. In Basle, von Polansdorf distinguished between the *credenda* and *facienda* of theology, the “things believed” and “things done” (*Syntagma theologiae Christianae*). The *facienda* covered the area of ethics. Earlier another Swiss theologian, Lambert Daneau, had written the first Protestant publication to deal solely with ethics (*Ethices christianae libri tres*, 1577). His approach, was based purely on the laws revealed to Moses and other inspired authors, and renounced all pagan philosophical influences. Subsequent works by British Puritan authors like William Perkins and William Ames followed a similar law-centred approach. According to some critics, this Puritan concentration on law was tantamount to casuistry.²

The exclusion of the insights of pagan ethicists did not last. As Philipp Melancthon developed the Lutheran concept of the first use of the law he did so with frequent references to the ancient Greek philosophers. He argued that, since civil law could also be known from nature, we should not ignore what pagan philosophers could contribute. A more nuanced use of pagan philosophical studies was made by the seventeenth century Dutch ethicist Gisbertus Voetius, a pupil of the Puritan, William Ames. Voetius took the Bible as the normative standard for ethical conduct, but with that he adopted what we would now call a “common grace” approach to the scholarship of non-Christians. Voetius was careful to test all pagan contributions by the Bible, and insisted that Christian Ethics was ultimately a theological discipline. Most of his successors, however, abandoned that position, and followed the German, Bartholomew Keckermann, who placed ethics with the philosophical disciplines (*Opera Omnia*, 1614).³ Thus, from

¹ Albert Schweizer referred to this section of Calvin’s *Institutes* as the first draft of a Christian ethics, *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* (1850).

² See e.g. Edward Vallance, “Oaths, Casuistry, and Equivocation, Anglican Responses to the Engagement Controversy” *The Historical Journal* (2001), 44: 59-77 Cambridge University Press, 25 June 2001.

³ See W. Geesink, *Gereformeerde Ethiek* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1931), vol. 2 p. 467.

the seventeenth century onwards, most universities once more made ethics the domain of philosophers.

According to W. Geesink, the Reformed approach to ethics reached its peak under Voetius.⁴ The subsequent move of ethics from theology to philosophy coincided with a turn to Deism and rationalism, and few works representing a distinctive biblical ethics were published in the years that followed. However, the deontological approach itself continued to flourish. Deistic rationalism was based on the presupposition that the world was governed by divine laws, including moral laws. Emanuel Kant typifies this rational approach, and he sought to base both ethics and religion on the recognition of laws which he identified as “categorical imperatives” (*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*). In Deism moral laws were regarded as correlative to physical laws. They were believed to have a divine origin, but their enforcement was only by natural means, in the sense that good and bad conduct led to their own reward or penalty.

The Teleological Approach

Towards the end of the eighteenth century there was one notable departure from deontological ethics. The utilitarianism advanced by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill represented a teleological or consequentialist approach where the moral worth of actions were measured by their outcome rather than by laws. Bentham began from the premise that “nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure”. From here he went on to argue that good is what brings the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of people.⁵ Mill, who followed Bentham, helped popularise his utilitarian approach, though he judged Bentham’s definition of pain and pleasure too physical. He argued for the pursuit of higher pleasures, found in man’s cultural achievements and philanthropy.

The utilitarian approach was commonly adopted by many governments and similar bodies to justify policies deemed beneficial to society, but at cost to individuals. In the 1960’s a more personal teleological system of ethics made its appearance under the name *Situation Ethics*, or *the New Morality*.

⁴ W. Geesink, *Gereformeerde Ethiek* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1931), vol. 2, p. 480.

⁵ *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) Ch I, p 1.

This approach was advanced by Bishop Robinson and Joseph Fletcher,⁶ who rejected any ethics based on laws and argued that ethical decisions could only be made on the spot, guided by love. Coming at a time of general disillusionment among the young with the values of the older generation, the “new morality” proved popular with those who adopted alternative lifestyles. But the approach was poorly defined, and the love that was emphasised soon degenerated into self-love. In time this led to the egotistic morality so prevalent today.

Here we should note that a form of the teleological or consequentialist approach had long existed as a kind of fall-back position in instances where the deontological approach gave rise to ethical dilemmas. The Principle of Double Effect (PDE) recognises that in obeying one command it may be necessary to ignore another. Thomas Aquinas, in the main a deontologist, pointed out that some actions may have both a good and an evil effect at the same time. To use some modern examples, prescribing penicillin, which heals most people, may occasionally cause a reaction leading to death, or injecting pain relievers, like morphine, may shorten the patient’s life expectancy. The PDE holds that such acts are justified as long as:

- The nature of the act itself is good
- The intention is to do good
- The good outweighs the evil that may result

The first criterion presupposed the deontological approach, and the PDE was never advanced as a replacement for deontological ethics.

Another teleological approach advanced more recently also leaves room for deontological ethics. This is the Kingdom Ethics advanced by Stephen Layman, which is based on the premise: “An act is right if and only if it promotes the Kingdom of God.”⁷ This approach stresses harmony in relationships, as expressed in Christ’s summary of the Law and the Prophets. However, it does not suggest that the end justifies the means, as one criterion for its application is that the means must be Kingdom means. While these means are not defined, it is hard to see how they could be completely removed from the laws of the Kingdom, which are clearly based on Christ’s interpretation of the Decalogue (Mt. 5:17ff.).

⁶ John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1963); Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966)

⁷ Stephen Layman, “The Kingdom of God” in *Readings in Christian Ethics, Volume 1: Theory and Method*, edited by David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), pp. 32-40.

The Virtue Ethics Approach

Another approach to ethics, based on human virtues, has a much longer history, and typified the ethics of Greek philosophers. While it has been pointed out that some Greeks did include a teleological emphasis, in the promotion of happiness and wellbeing, this only reinforces the Greek preference for Virtue Ethics.⁸ Thus Epicurus emphasised virtues as a means to promote individual happiness, while Aristotle prized well-being (*eudaimonia*) as the characteristic of a virtuous man. Virtues were seen as qualities achieved through human effort, the result of a thorough education and constant training.

The Greek Virtue Ethics approach made considerable impact on the early church. Here it was taught in its platonic form and modified to fit in with biblical themes. The utilization of Greek ethical categories can already be discerned with Hellenistic Jews, like Philo, who upheld the four virtues taught by Plato: prudence, courage, self-control and justice. Like many Christians who followed him, Philo contrasts these virtues to vices, identified with sins against God's commandments. The whole approach depended on a good dose of allegory. Thus Philo argued that the four rivers in paradise stood for the four natural virtues, which had their source in the Tree of Life. The opposing vices he identified with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.⁹

The early church continued to teach virtues in contrast to vices, but with the emphasis on defining the latter this eventually led to a more deontological approach. From early on, especially under the influence of Tertullian, virtue and vice were linked to the attainment and loss of merit. In this manner virtue was not so much tied to the character of the agent as it was seen as an attribute of his deeds. Or to put it another way, virtue described acts and deeds rather than character and disposition. One outcome was that the monastic lifestyle, with its denial of earthly pleasures, became the model of a virtuous life. This was in marked contrast to the Greek ideal of a virtuous life, which encouraged the enjoyment of all things in moderation.

⁸ See John Frame, *Living under God's Law*, www.reformedperspectives.org/newfiles/joh_frame/

⁹ See Havairosh-Samuelson, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge and Well-Being* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003)

Around 400 A.D. a Roman Christian poet named Aurelius Prudentius Clemens popularised an ethic which placed seven virtues over against seven vices.¹⁰ The pairs were: chastity and lust, abstinence and gluttony, liberality and greed, diligence and sloth, patience and wrath, kindness and envy, and humility and pride. The vices became known as the Seven Deadly Sins, which could only be taken care of through confession and penance. But the virtues were eventually redefined, largely through the work of Thomas Aquinas.¹¹ He took the four *cardinal virtues* taught by Plato: justice, fortitude, prudence and temperance, and added to these the three *supernatural virtues*: faith, hope and love. The first four he placed in the realm of nature, where they were available to all people. But the last three, received through baptism, he placed in the realm of grace. Only Christians could properly practice these supernatural virtues, and thereby attain merit to ensure their salvation.

The Protestant dismissal of Thomistic dualism and Rome's salvation by works theology are probable reasons why the virtue approach did not feature in the Reformers' approach to ethics. In the Prefatory Address of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin rejects any "works meritorious to eternal salvation" based on virtues achieved by the light of nature, and warns that we must "acknowledge ourselves divested of all virtue that we may be clothed by God."¹² When he deals with the doctrine of justification he points out that, while virtues like justice, continence, friendship, temperance, fortitude and prudence serve as "instruments of God to preserve human societies", man's corruption entails that "they have no better title to be classed among virtues than vices, which impose upon us by their affinity or resemblance to virtue."¹³

Stephen Plant suggests that Luther's doctrine of total depravity and Calvin's development of the third use of the law were further reasons for the rejection of this approach:

¹⁰ Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, *Psychomachia*.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II (I), 61.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Prefatory Address to the King of France. He also condemns the exaggerated value attached to the "virtues" of fasting and celibacy (IV, 12: 19, 27). The only places where Calvin uses the word "virtue" with a positive meaning is where he uses it for the perfections of God.

¹³ *Ibid*, IV, 14: 3. In the preceding paragraph Calvin argues that whatever virtue is found in the natural man follows from his creation in the image of God.

The Reformation thus set two theological cats into the pigeon loft of virtue ethics. Luther called into question human ability to be good without divine grace. Calvin pressed the question of if and how God commands the believer to act according to his law. But if what matters is obedience to God's commandments, then is the significance of one's personal virtue and character not relativised?¹⁴

Though there are those who disagree that Luther abandoned virtue ethics,¹⁵ most would agree with Plant, and also his conclusion that:

In Modern times Protestant theologians have tended to follow Luther and Calvin in their rejection of ethics based on virtue and character”¹⁶

Of course this is not to say that Luther, Calvin and their followers did not encourage their people to lead virtuous lives. But such lives were always seen as the result of the working of God's Spirit within them, applying the teachings of the Law. There was no room for the development of virtues by mere human effort. Even where goodness is recognised as the work of the Spirit in sanctification, Calvin, in particular, is reluctant to use the word “virtue”.¹⁷ He cites Augustine: “When we speak of the perfect virtue of the saints, part of this perfection consists in the recognition of our imperfection both in truth and in humility’ (August. ad Bonif. lib. 3, c. 7).”¹⁸

Virtue Ethics in recent times

There is some debate about when and how virtue ethics made a comeback into Protestant theology. Plant holds that Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to develop his ethics along these lines towards the end of his life.¹⁹ However,

¹⁴ Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004, p. 62.

¹⁵ For the position that Luther was not opposed to virtue ethics see Knut Alfsvag, “Virtue, reason and tradition: A discussion of Alasdair MacIntyre's and Martin Luther's views on the foundation of ethics”, *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 2005, vol. 47, #3, pp. 288-305.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.* p. 62.

¹⁷ In book II, 8, Calvin identifies virtues as taught by the law of God. But in the following chapter, where he gives an exposition of the law, the word “virtue” is again used with the negative connotations of pride and imperfection.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 17: 15.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 61ff.

Bonhoeffer himself did not identify his approach as virtue ethics, nor did he claim common ground with the ethics of the Greek philosophers.²⁰ Stassen and Gushee agree that Bonhoeffer brought Virtue Ethics into Protestantism, though they see it as more evident in his earlier writings.²¹ Because of the questionable connotations associated with the word “virtue” they prefer to speak of *Character Ethics*. Like Virtue Ethics it places the emphasis on the character of the moral agent. In our own approach below we will follow their terminology.

For the Greek philosophers virtue was very much seen as something achieved through human effort. A similar understanding was found in much of the Virtue Ethics that was reintroduced to the West in the 1950’s.²² The connotation of human effort has not even escaped some Protestant authors. We find an ambivalence with one of the Protestant pioneers of Virtue Ethics, Stanley Hauerwas. While he endorses Augustine’s and Luther’s objections to the human centeredness of virtue, he nevertheless continues to define virtue in terms of “being human”.²³ The connotations of merit and worth appear to be so unavoidably attached to the word *virtue* that an ethics based on this concept is fraught with the danger of introducing a Pelagian note to the doctrine of salvation.

It may be asked why, if the concept of virtue has such theologically unsound connotations, an ethics based on virtue should even be considered. The reason is that this approach does draw attention to an important theological truth, that God is concerned about what we are, and not just in what we do. A description of the person loved by God repeatedly used in the Psalms is the “upright in heart” (*yisrēy-lēb*, Ps 7:10; 11:2; 36:10; 94:15; 111:1; 125:4), who, in the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, are also described

²⁰ Like Calvin Bonhoeffer also identifies human virtues as ungodly in God’s sight. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Canterbury: SCM Canterbury Press, 2001), p. 99, cf. p. 107.

²¹ Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics, Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), p. 57.

²² There are different opinions about what stimulated the new interest in Virtue Ethics. Some trace it to an article by G.E.M. Anscombe entitled “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958); others to a series of essays by Philippa Foot collected in *Virtues and Vices* (1978); others again credit it to Alasdair McIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1985).

²³ Stanley Hauerwas & Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues, Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 27; Stanley Hauerwas, “Virtue”, in Clark and Rakestraw, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

as the “righteous” (*tsaddiyq* Ps. 32:11; 64:10; 97:11). King David is described in these words (1 Ki. 2:44; 3:6), and his devotion (*shalem*, 1 Ki. 11:4; 15:3) and “integrity of heart” (*tom-lēbāb*, 1 Ki 8:66; 9:4) became the yardstick by which his successors were measured (1 Ki. 9:4; 11:4; 14:8; 15:3).

The biblical assessment of David must come as a surprise to the pure deontologist, because by their standards it would not be amiss to identify David as a deceiver, brigand, adulterer and murderer (1 Sam. 21:13; 25; 1 Ki. 11). The Bible makes no pretence these things did not happen, yet it characterises David as a man after God’s heart (1 Sam. 13:14; cf. 1 Ki. 15:3-5). Such an assessment fits in with the approach of Virtue Ethics, or as we have agreed to call it, *Character Ethics*. The Character Ethics approach also helps explain the prophets’ condemnation of those who would keep the ceremonial and outward aspects of the law without concern for the poor and needy.

Both Psalmists and Prophets recognise that legalistic adherence to God’s ceremonial laws without a proper attitude of heart is particularly heinous to God (Is. 1:13-23; 10:1-2; 58:3-7; Am.8:5-6; Zech. 7:5-10). Micah paints a stark picture contrasting ritual obedience to righteousness:

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic. 6:6-8)

It is not that right action is of no value, but an action is only right when it comes out of a righteous heart. One cannot act justly without loving mercy. Without the right attitude, that of a godly character, the deeds fail to bring pleasure to God. By the same token God is willing to forgive a wrong action where the heart is set right again, so that David, after his sin with Bathsheba, could praise God with the knowledge:

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Ps. 51:16-17)

The ethics of the Wisdom literature also places more emphasis on the kind of people God's community should be than on what they should do. This literature reminds the readers that God made the world a place where people may take joy in what God so graciously supplies, provided they keep God's directions and purpose in mind (e.g. Song of Songs). Job deals with the riddle of evil in a world created by a benevolent God, and similarly the preacher seeks to understand why God's world is not living up to man's expectations.

The Book of Proverbs, in particular, deals with the question of what kind of people God wants us to be. Many of the proverbs characterise people in terms of virtues, like wisdom, prudence, discretion, understanding and righteousness (e.g. Prov. 1:1-5, 20; 2:1-6; 8:12; 26:7) or vices like foolishness, laziness, mockery, and maliciousness (e.g. Prov. 26:11, 15, 24-26; 24:9). Direct contrasts between these are common: wisdom versus foolishness, diligence versus laziness, peacefulness versus strife, and so on (Prov. 10:8; 13:4; 17:1). Numerous situations are pictured where the practice of virtues and vices have their own consequences (e.g. Prov. 6:24-35). Both the characterisations and the consequentialism of the proverbs challenge people to holy living.

It is important to note that where we find the Character Ethics approach in the OT this is never presented in contrast to the deontological approach. Obedience to Law and commandments is itself a cardinal virtue (Prov. 28:4-9; 29:18; Job 23:12; Ecc. 12:13). While in some cases the call to obedience may refer to the laws of a king (Ecc. 8:2-5) or commandments of a father (Prov. 2:1), God rules supreme, so that even kings are subject to God's law (Prov. 31:4-5). A second thing to note is that virtues are shown to have their source in God. This is especially evident in the case of wisdom (Job 12:13; Ecc. 2:26; Prov. 2:2). Hence, while virtues carry their own reward, there no hint that those who lead a virtuous life can take pride in their virtue, as we find it among the Greek philosophers.

Kingdom Ethics

The Kingdom Ethics of Jesus reflects the approach of the Law, the Prophets and the Wisdom Literature of the OT. Building on the moral Law given to Moses, Christ both teaches and demonstrates the kind of character and actions he demands of his followers. Despite a frequent misperception that Jesus replaced the OT Law with a commandment to love God and

neighbour, the Gospels make it clear that Jesus both upheld and practiced the whole Law of God (Mt. 5:17-19; 19:17; Jn. 8:46; Acts 3:14). There is not a hint of antinomianism in the words of Jesus.

However, Jesus did take serious exception to the ways in which the society in which he lived put the Law into practice. Hence his repeated admonition in the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard it said ... but I tell you ...” (Mt. 5:21f., 27f., 33f., 38f., 43f.). In correcting the moral perceptions of the Jews, Jesus unfolds the ethics of the Kingdom. Beginning with the Beatitudes, where he lists the virtues of those called to the Kingdom, he goes on to spell out how such Kingdom people ought to live.

If the Sermon on the Mount can be said to embody Christ’s ethics for the Kingdom, it raises the question why it does not feature more centrally in Protestant ethics.²⁴ Stassen and Gushee give a plausible explanation for this situation. They suggest that it is largely the result of dualism, where the Law was either placed in the Realm of Nature (Thomism), or the Kingdom of the Left (Lutheranism), while the high ideals of the Sermon on the Mount were placed in the Realm of Grace and the Kingdom of the Right respectively. In Pietism the same division distinguishes private spirituality from participation in the world.

While Calvinism promoted a more holistic and unified worldview, the Sermon on the Mount never became the basis for Christian ethics. Stassen and Gushee maintain that John Calvin and his followers used the Sermon on the Mount more as a commentary on the Law than a fresh guide to living as Kingdom citizens. Moreover, since the standards Christ set for the Kingdom were often perceived as impossibly high, Christ’s words were taken as representing lofty principles rather than practical behaviour to be put into practice²⁵

Stassen and Gushee point to Christ’s crucial words at the climax of his sermon: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Mt 7:24). This, they argue, shows that Christ was not just giving a commentary on the OT, but issuing a whole new Kingdom manifesto. Where these words

²⁴ John Murray, in his *Principles of Conduct*, only discusses the Sermon on the Mount where it touches on issues raised by the Ten Commandments. John Jefferson Davis, in his *Evangelical Ethics*, besides some passing references to this Sermon, only discusses Jesus’ teaching on divorce.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 128-32.

are interpreted as teaching faith in Christ and the Gospel message this misses the point.²⁶ In the context, recognizing Jesus as Lord is not enough (7:21-23), as such recognition must come with obedience and with deeds. Trees that do not produce the fruit expected will be cut down (Mt. 7:15-23). Only those who put Christ's words into practice are like a house built on the rock.²⁷

Stassen and Gushee go on to show that, far from preaching unreachable ideals, Christ gives some very practical commands. But to grasp what is actually commanded requires a careful study of the text. The key is to recognise that in his teaching Christ is not following a two-fold (dyadic) pattern, but a three-fold (triadic) one. Thus the pattern is not what people say (*you have heard it said ...*) contrasted to what Jesus says (*but I tell you ...*) followed by an example (so in the case of ...), rather what is usually taken as the example IS the command.

Using Stassen and Gushee's tables²⁸, the pattern is not:

Traditional Righteousness	Jesus' Teaching
Matthew 5:21-22 You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' (translations by Stassen and Gushee in these tables to follow the Greek verb forms more closely)	Matthew 5:22 But I say to you that every one being angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council and whoever says 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. (Illustrations: So if you are offering your gift at the altar ... make friends quickly with your accuser.)

Rather the pattern is:

Traditional Righteousness	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiative
Matthew 5:21-22: You	Matthew 5:22: But I	Matthew 5:23-26: So if

²⁶ E.g. John Calvin paraphrases the text as: "That faith ... is true, which has its roots deep in the heart, and rests on an earnest and stead affection as its foundation that it may not give way to temptations." In *Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1956), translated by W. Pringle, vol. 1, p. 370

²⁷ Stassen and Gushee, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-33.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 134-35. The tables are paraphrased in places to avoid confusion.

<p>have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' (In the Greek "shall not" and "shall be" are not imperatives, but futures; as translations of the Hebrew in the Ten Commandments, they do of course imply a command.)</p>	<p>say to you that every one being angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council and whoever says 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. (No imperatives in the Greek)</p>	<p>you are offering your gift at the altar, and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there ... and go; first <i>be reconciled</i> to your brother, and then coming, <i>offer</i> your gift. <i>Make friends</i> quickly with your accuser. (Italics mark the Greek imperatives)</p>
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Stassen and Gushee recognise 14 triads of this nature in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount. The reader is referred to their book for further information. For our purpose the point is that the "transforming initiatives" are given to help Kingdom citizens develop a Christian character. Their intent is not to give information, but to bring change. Kingdom citizens seek reconciliation, remove temptation, let their *yes* be *yes* and their *no* be *no*, turn the other cheek, give their tunic and cloak to those in need, go the extra mile, and so on. These examples remind us of the Wisdom literature, where we are shown how to act, in specific situations, on the basis of a godly character and attitude.

Stassen and Gushee would argue that it is not so much the OT Wisdom literature, as the prophet Isaiah who provides the background for Jesus' teachings on the mount. While we cannot go into all their arguments here, one is based on a comparison of the Beatitudes to Is. 61:1-11. The poor in spirit, the humble, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and the persecuted can all be found in Isaiah, where very similar promises of reward are also given. For our purpose we note that in the Beatitudes, like Isaiah, we again have a case for Character Ethics.

There are no imperatives in the Beatitudes to command Kingdom citizens how to behave (unless verse 12 are included, where we are told to "rejoice and be glad"; we will return to this). Rather the Beatitudes are indicative of the character of Christ's people. Kingdom citizens exhibit virtues like humility, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, and a readiness to suffer persecution and joy. Stassen and Gushee point out that these same virtues are often listed by Paul (Rom. 14:17; 15:4-5; 2 Cor.

6:4-10; Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 4:2-3, 32; Phil. 2:2-3; Col. 3:12-17; 1 Tim. 4:12; 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22; 3:10) and by Peter (1 Pet. 3:8; 2 Pet. 1:5-7).²⁹

It is interesting that the last of these passages uses the Greek word *virtue* (*aretē*). But here it is not used as a generic term to embody the qualities listed, rather it features as one quality among many. For this reason the NIV translation of the word as “goodness” is not out of place. Paul also uses the word *virtue* in Phil. 4:8, but in parallel to the word *praise* (*epainos*). These uses indicate that the word as used in the Bible lacks the connotations of human achievement and pride associated with the virtues exalted by Greek philosophers. In fact, Paul does not regard these qualities as human achievements, but calls them “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22).

The fruits of the Spirit are an aspect of Christian sanctification, and as such are not devoid of requiring human effort. Christians are commanded to display these fruits (e.g. Mt 5:12; 2 Pet. 1:5). But this does raise another matter, and that is that from our western perspective a number of these imperatives may seem a bit unreasonable. Many of the virtues concern emotions, and by our western way of thinking emotions are something that happens to you, not something you do. Thus we speak of people “falling in love”, or “being overcome with joy”.

Commenting on Christ’s command to love our enemy, many have observed that it would be unreasonable to command someone to *feel* a certain way.³⁰ It has therefore been suggested that the command does not apply to our emotions, but to our actions,³¹ our intelligence³² or our will³³. Yet the Bible not only commands us to love, but to rejoice and to be zealous (Rom. 12:9-15), and to exercise a whole range of fruits of the Spirit as emotions which that cannot be reduced to actions, or the mind, or the will. Does this mean that we are able to steer our emotions?

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 48, 50.

³⁰ E. Kant wrote that “Love as an inclination cannot be commanded ...” Cited at <http://www.wfu.edu/~hhardgra/kanteth.html>, no source given.

³¹ David Hill defines *agapē* in Mt. 5:44 as to “do good to” ones enemies; in *The Gospel of Matthew, The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

³² R.C.H. Lenski suggests the *agapē* in Mt. 5:44 refers to “the love of intelligence, comprehension and corresponding purpose.” In *The Interpretation of Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg House, 1943), p. 247.

³³ William Barclay writes “Agape has supremely to do with the will.” In *New Testament Words* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2000), p. 21.

This question lies at the heart of a recent book by Robert Roberts dealing with the psychology of Christian virtues.³⁴ Roberts defines emotions as “a way of ‘seeing’ things, when this ‘seeing’ is grounded in a concern”.³⁵ Having the right concerns will bring the emotions the Bible calls for. Thus concern about the Gospel reaching the lost will bring joy and gratitude at news of a conversion, and concerns for justice leads to a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Peter and the Apostles could feel joy at being arrested and flogged because it met their concern about being “counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41).

Roberts points out that in similar situations Stoics would have resisted any show of emotions by refusing to be concerned. In contrast to them, it is part of the Christian character to embrace concerns and this, in turn, cultivates emotions. When emotions are commanded it means that Christians are told to examine what is going on in relation to Christian concerns.³⁶ Using the example of Peter and the apostles who rejoiced in their persecution, it was their concern for their Lord, and their opportunity to follow his example, that led to their joy. A less mature Christian may have despaired at the pain and the opposition shown to the Gospel. But more mature Christians view such events in terms of God’s purpose, agreeing with Paul that we may “rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3-4).

C.S. Lewis agreed that emotions like love can be commanded. For him it was a matter of working at it. He wrote:

Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbour, act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of love's great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.³⁷

Emotions then, like other virtues, are a matter of sanctification. They are both commanded and seen as the work of the Holy Spirit. The human agent is required to view events from the perspective of Christian concerns.

³⁴ Robert Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions, A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 22ff.

³⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (London: Collins, 1952), p. 114.

Where this is done the Holy Spirit stirs the emotions through his work in the hearts of believers. A good picture of this process is found in Romans 5:1-5:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

The Christian concern about right standing before God brings peace, while concern about God's glory brings joy and hope. It is the Spirit who passes on divine emotions so that Christians may display them in turn. The same passage also shows the close connection between character and virtue. Virtues (like perseverance) produce character, and character in turn produces virtues (like hope).

Much more than a purely deontological approach this emphasis on character formation demonstrates the importance of a right standing before God in the process of sanctification. It echoes the ethical approach of Paul in Romans, where he shows that no human can please God by way of the law. Only Christ could please God in this way. But where Christians are saved by grace God's Spirit brings a new birth, where renewal manifests itself not just in deeds, but in attitude. Moral living, then, is not just a grateful response to salvation, but a complete renewal of character, with new values, insights and emotions, the development of Christian virtues.

Why Character Ethics?

It remains that we ask what benefit there is to be gained from using the Character Ethics approach. In answering this I want to make it clear from the outset that I am not advocating Character Ethics as a replacement for Deontological Ethics. Rather, I believe the cause of Christian ethics will be better served where both these approaches are used in harmony, where each contributes from their own unique strengths.

It may be argued that such an addition is unnecessary as the deontological approach has stood the Church in good stead since the time of the Reformation. With this may come the further observation that it has always been part of the Reformation insight that believers should develop a Christian character and lead virtuous lives. So what would change if Character Ethics were to be adopted as a complementary approach?

The first thing to note is that the Deontological approach has not been able to provide a satisfactory solution in every moral situation. It leads to ethical dilemmas where different commandments make conflicting requirements, which cannot all be met. Corry Ten Boom's well known story about hiding Jews from the Nazis³⁸ provides a good example of a dilemma faced by many true believers during times of war. Two sisters face the question whether they can tell a lie if this were to save the lives of Jews in hiding.

Some deontologists believe the dilemma is a false one, since in every situation only one law applies. Thus Robert Rakestraw suggests that where an honest answer is demanded saving lives is not the issue, though it may be an issue for the one who asks the question.³⁹ Yet Rakestraw's approach (*non-conflicting absolutism*) leads him to come to some conclusions that many Christians would find questionable. For example, he has no problem in deceiving the would-be executioners with a misleading answer. In other words, we can deceive as long as we don't tell a lie. Or even more dubious, he would be prepared to shoot a gun toting maniac in self defence rather than mislead him with a lie that would remove the danger. Should our morality rely on our ability to tell misleading half-truths? Or is shooting someone in self defence a possible way out of telling a lie?

A second approach (*Hierarchical Absolutism*), defended among others by Norman Geisler, argues that the solution lies in the fact that some laws are higher than others.⁴⁰ Since life is more important than truth, one may lie to save a life. But how do we know which commandment is more important? And can we really say that life is always more important than truth? Are there not situations where people have rightly died to protect secrets? Moreover, how does this help solve ethical dilemmas where it concerns the same commandment, as in aborting a life to save that of the mother?

³⁸ Corry Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (London: Random House, 1982).

³⁹ Robert V. Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices, A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism", in Cark and Rakestraw, eds., *Readings in Christian Ethics, Volume 1: Theory and Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 1994), pp. 118-24.

⁴⁰ Norman L. Geisler, "Graded Absolutism", in Cark and Rakestraw, pp. 131-37.

A third approach, (*ideal absolutism*) holds that laws must be followed in normal situations, but may be set aside under abnormal circumstances. Thus Helmut Thielicke writes that, in order to overthrow Nazism in Germany, Christians should have been prepared to resist, rebel, and otherwise set aside the moral law to rectify the situation.⁴¹ While breaking laws in such a situation would still require forgiveness, he holds that it would nevertheless have been the right thing to do. Our objection to this approach is that it hardly follows the example of Christ, who came to correct the most serious of abnormal situations known in history: man's rebellion against God.

In these situations Character Ethics would come with different solutions. In the Bible we see that God rewarded the midwives who lied to Pharaoh, and Rahab the harlot, who placed their faith in God and lied to save God's people (Ex. 1:19-21; Josh. 2). Similarly Elisha, a "man of God", had no qualms about deceiving the soldiers of the King of Syria about his identity, and even received help from God who kept the soldiers from recognising Elisha (2 Ki. 6:18ff.). Deception was also practised in war, as in the second battle at Ai (Jos. 8:3ff.).

There are other biblical accounts of virtuous people who appear to have kept the spirit rather than the letter of the law. From a western position, based on deontology, Lot's willingness to offer up his daughters' virginity to protect his heavenly visitors may seem despicable, but Peter identifies Lot as "a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men" (2 Pet. 2:7). Most commentators appear to have difficulties with this description. Some ignore it all together,⁴² others admit it to be "puzzling".⁴³ But J.N.D. Kelly points out:

In a very different tradition, however, both Jewish and early Christian (e.g. Wis. x.6; Pirke R. Eliezer, xxv; I Clem. xi.1), he was saluted as a model of virtue, a striking proof that when castigating evil God will always save the minority who trust in Him.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Helmut Thielicke, "The Borderline Situation of Extreme Conflict", in Cark and Rakestraw, pp. 125-30.

⁴² E.g. John Calvin, *in. loc.*

⁴³ Frank E. Gaebelien, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol.12, Hebrews – Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 279.

⁴⁴ J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969), pp. 333-4.

The story about David and Nabal also makes more sense from a Character Ethics approach. Nabal's answer to David seems reasonable from a western deontological perspective (1 Sam. 25:11). There was no contractual obligation on Nabal's part, and David was an enemy of the king. But it is clear that his contemporaries disapproved, and regarded him as "wicked" as well as "foolish (v. 17, 25). Other questionable acts of David, from a deontological perspective, include his lies to the priest at Nob and his use of consecrated bread to still his hunger (1 Sam. 21:2ff.).

Jesus uses the example of David's willingness to use the consecrated bread in defence to an accusation by the Pharisees (Mt. 12:1ff.). The Pharisees charge Jesus with allowing his disciples to work on the Sabbath when they pick some ears of corn to still their hunger. Jesus replies by pointing them to the prophets' condemnation of those who adhere to laws without justice and righteousness and concern for the poor and needy, and tells them: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent" (v.7; Hos. 6:6). A concern for mercy and compassion was enshrouded in many of the ceremonial laws, e.g. not reaping the edges of fields for the benefit of hungry travellers (Lev. 19:9). Even as laws of ownership were superseded to care for the needy, so the law of the Sabbath, meant to preserve man's wellbeing, was not to stand in the way of meeting this purpose.

The Character Ethics approach not only helps us better to understand some Biblical accounts, it can also help us appreciate the actions of Christians in different cultures. On the mission field missionaries and local Christians sometimes take different sides on moral issues. I worked for many years in a society where the word used for *treasurer* translated as "the chief of the bag" (compare Jn. 13:29, KJV). Traditionally only virtuous people were appointed to this role, since all money collected was under his control, to be used as he thought best. It also entailed that if someone needed help on a serious matter for which the money had not been collected, help could not be refused. Western missionaries had great difficulty with this practice, because their deontological approach identified undesignated use of such money with "stealing".

What we observe in the biblical and cultural examples given above is that the Character Ethics approach does not contradict the requirements of the law, but helps safeguard the purpose of the law. Here we note that the Ten Commandments are not introduced as laws or commandments in the OT, but as ten "Words" (*debarim*, not *mishpatim*). The word *dabar* has a whole

range of meanings, including *counsel*, *cause* and *reason*.⁴⁵ It may therefore not be pushing the connotative envelope too far to think of the *Ten Words* as *Ten Principles* for godly living. This certainly fits in with John Calvin's understanding that the Decalogue not only forbids harmful actions, but demands actions that have the opposite effect. Thus command forbidding murder we are commanded to protect life, in the forbidding of false witness we are commanded to protect the truth, and so on.

Seeing the purpose of the Decalogue, where it deals with man, as protecting the sanctity of human well being, relationships, life, marriage, property and truth helps explain why a lie may be told to protect life (Gen. 9:5), or a lie may be told to protect the truth from those who would misuse it (Ex. 1:19; cf. Prov. 26:5), or works of mercy may be done on the Sabbath (Lk. 6:9). This purpose is immediately obvious to the people of godly character, who desire to please their maker by making God's (revealed) concerns their own. Their first interest is in meeting the purpose of God's commands as revealed in his Word.

One further reason why a combined deontological and character approach is preferable is that where the moral worth of actions is measured solely by rules or laws it can give the appearance that some immoral practices have moral value. A biblical example is the pharisaic use of the law of *corban*, which allowed people to avoid the responsibility of caring for their needy parents (Mk. 7:8-13). It is not difficult to find examples in our own society where people stick to the rules or even legislate new laws to escape moral responsibility.

Conclusion

We conclude that Kingdom ethics cannot be defined solely in terms of laws, even Kingdom laws (Jas. 2:8). Christ, especially in his Sermon on the Mount, shows us that observing God's laws must go hand in hand with an ethics of virtue, or character. Such virtues are not virtues of human achievement, but the workings of the Holy Spirit. Hence it is only those who have entered the Kingdom through the Spirit's work of regeneration who can practice Kingdom Ethics, and live righteously before their Lord.

⁴⁵ Harris, Archer and Waltke (eds.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), vol. 1, p. 399.