

The Bible, Ethics, and Health Care
Theological Foundations for A Christian Perspective on Health Care
by
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In her hospital room a woman lies dying. Different forms of chemotherapy and radiation treatment have been tried, but they have only temporarily stalled the spreading cancer. Now she is deteriorating more rapidly—frequently in pain, looking more and more disfigured, and having difficulty breathing. Her physician wants her to be put on a respirator, but she, terrified, refuses. In fact, she pleads with the physician to give her a drug that will end her life.

A baby is denied a heart transplant because his parents are unmarried and judged to be poor parents. The decision is publicized, there is a public outcry, custody of the baby is transferred to grandparents, and the hospital agrees to operate. Emotional appeals through the media are made for a donor heart, a heart is donated, and the baby's life is saved. Meanwhile, two other parents quietly look on—grieving that their decision not to subject their family to the public spotlight has left their baby without a desperately needed heart transplant.

Both cases are real, both symbolize countless numbers of similar situations, and both raise many difficult ethical questions. What is the meaning of suffering? How important is life? Why is there death? How should a person be valued? These are the kinds of questions about life and death that drive people to search their faith, including its authoritative writings, to gain insight and direction. Many Christians turn to the Bible.

However, many current dilemmas did not even exist when the Bible was being written. At least in their present form, these dilemmas are the product of modern technology. The particular issues addressed by the biblical authors often seem far removed from the critical questions of today.

How can it be, then, that “all Scripture” is useful for training in right living (among other things) so that people may be “thoroughly equipped for every good work” (II Tim. 3:16–17)? It turns out that the Bible offers something much more important, more enduring, than answers to particular problems. One may find there a way of thinking ethically—a way to approach moral challenges.

Even attempting to demonstrate that there is a “biblical” way of thinking is a project far beyond the scope of the present discussion. There are many different biblical authors, all having their own approaches and styles. Yet, if there truly is an Author beyond all of the authors, then one would expect a common perspective at some deep level to unite the various writings.

PAUL'S ETHICS AS A USEFUL PARADIGM OF BIBCAL ETHICS

While there is only space here to develop this perspective in the writings of one biblical author, the harmony of this perspective with other biblical materials will also be sketched. The letters of Paul have been selected as the initial source of the perspective to be developed here because Paul takes a step beyond the gospels toward today's world by attempting to bring new life in Jesus Christ to bear on a diverse, not predominantly Jewish, culture. Moreover, his letters represent the most comprehensive attempt in the Bible to do so. An examination of these letters reveals a consistent outlook reflected throughout—an outlook that may be characterized as God-centered, reality-bounded, and love-impelled.

A GOD-CENTERED ETHICS

Paul's Distrust of a Merely Human Ethics. In contrast to attempts to root ethical decisions in human assessments—e.g., of possible consequences—Paul's ethics may first of all be called God-centered. Paul opens Romans 3:5–8 with the historical observation that, in the past, human unrighteousness has provided the occasion for God to demonstrate divine righteousness all the more clearly. The apostle then notes what would be a typical consequence-oriented rejoinder: If this so-called unrighteousness produced good results on the whole, then it was not really unrighteousness after all, for that very reason, and God's wrath against it is unjust. The problem with this reasoning, says Paul, is that it is a mere "human argument."

While he does not elaborate, one implication is that this view is limited to the human sphere and fails to take God's actions into conation. As Paul notes five chapters later (8:28), God's actions are too important to neglect; God brings good out of the worst (otherwise) situations. At the same time, God's actions provide an entirely different basis for ethics. Paul only hints at this fact here with his reference to God's moral judgship over the universe as a given to which human ethical systems must accommodate. However, his vehement opposition to human-centered consequentialists is fairly explicit ("their condemnation is deserved"). The consequence-oriented reasoning so characteristic of many contemporary approaches to life-ending and resource-allocation decisions is fundamentally brought into question by this outlook.

Paul's distrust of human-centered ethics stems from his understanding of the human condition. With Adam all fell—human fallenness meaning, among other things, that people cannot always know and do what is right (Rom. 3:10–11; 5:17–19). By nature people are slaves to sin (Rom. 6:17–20). Part of the problem is that the mind has become distorted. It is blinded by the "god of this age" (II Cor. 4:4) and warped by one's own sinful nature (Rom. 8:5–8). The mind is said to be depraved and actually prone to approve "what ought not to be done" (Rom. 1:28). It needs not merely a one-time regeneration but a continual renewing transition (Rom. 12:2).

Looking to God. Accordingly, it is vital that people look to God rather than relying on their own moral discernment. God dwells in the believer in the person of the Holy Spirit to provide moral leadership (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18). The external standards of the written religious law have been replaced by the no less objective Spirit of God (Rom. 7:6; II Cor. 3:6). Just as the Spirit by which believers live is a Holy Spirit, so believers are called to live a holy life (I Thess. 4:7–8). The holy life is a set-apart life in that it involves rejecting values common in the world and re-orienting one's life around God's will (Rom. 12:1–2; I Thess. 4:3–4).

At the same time, this God-centered ethics is more specifically a Christ-centered ethics. Christ is the wisdom and the power of God, which stands opposed to the "wisdom" of the world (i.e., human reasoning divorced from God—I Cor. 1:20–24). The salvation from sin which Christ has accomplished makes possible the renewed mind and will which can recognize and obey God's will.

Paul is particularly concerned that Christians not be duped by Satan (see II Corinthians 11). Just as the serpent deceived Eve by encouraging her to act upon what looked "good" to her rather than what she knew to be right (v. 3), so Satan and the servants of Satan continue to masquerade as agents of light—appealing to people's propensity to make decisions based upon what looks or sounds appealing and good (vv. 14–15). To this Paul juxtaposes the person, spirit, and gospel of Jesus Christ (v. 4). People are to act on the basis of what they know in Christ to be right, not on the basis of some merely human assessment of the (apparent) good to be produced. End-of-life decisions made purely on the basis of eliminating unhappiness and resource allocation priorities based solely on maximizing social value are radically flawed from this perspective.

A REALITY-BOUNDED ETHICS

Not only is Paul's ethics centered on God, but it is also bounded by certain aspects of the moral-spiritual reality that God has created. This dimension of ethics is what lies behind Paul's concepts of good, evil, and truth. Good and evil are notions with specific content that is not dependent, for example, on calculations of consequences or implications of character. For Paul, there is such a thing as intrinsic good and intrinsic evil (e.g., Rom. 2:7–10; 12:9,21). Similarly, truth refers to what really is, and to act wrongly is fundamentally to act contrary to the truth (Rom. 1:28; 2:8). So it is not surprising to find Paul using the words right and true virtually interchangeably (Rom. 3:4).

Past and Future Realities. Paul's letters are filled with explicit appeals to specific past, future, and present realities as the bases of moral exhortation. A key past reality, for instance, is the fact of Christ's death and the baptism of the believer into that death at conversion. In light of this reality, observes Paul, the Christian must not allow the presence and activity of sin within to continue unopposed (Rom. 6:3, 11ff.).

The future reality of the world's end also has great ethical significance for Paul. While the end of the world for Paul is inescapable (I Thess. 4:13–18), he sometimes portrays it as distinctly in the future, sometimes as imminent. When he conceives of it as distinctly in the future, the end of the world is a time of reward and punishment for actions of moral and religious significance (I Cor. 6:1–10; Phil. 3:12–21). At other times, however, he conceives of the end of the world as very close at hand (Rom. 13:8–14). From this perspective the first-fruits of God's ultimate victory in the world have been realized in Christ's resurrection from the dead and the coming of the Holy Spirit in a permanent way (I Cor. 15:20,57–58; Rom. 8:23ff.). At any moment the Lord may come "like a thief in the night" (I Thess. 5:1–7), so people need to take moral living seriously and not be so distracted by the lures of a world which "in its present form is passing away" (I Cor. 7:29–31).

Present Realities. More often, though, Paul grounds his ethics in the present reality—of God, the created world, and people in particular. The reality of God is foundational and has already been addressed here. Even the worst immorality is not surprising among those who have exchanged the truth of God for a false reality (Rom. 1:25ff.).

Who Christians are as people constitutes a further reality that has many implications for moral conduct. As members of the body of Christ, they must work together, all individually utilizing and developing their strengths to the fullest (I Cor. 12:12ff.; Rom. 12:5ff.). Yet they are always to be sensitive to the ways their abundance can contribute to the needs of others (II Cor. 8:14). Their status as holy ones (saints) of the Lord means both that they are to be treated with special care (II Cor. 8:4; 9:1) and that they are to treat others with special care or wisdom, as the case may warrant (Rom. 16:2; I Cor. 6:1–2).

Paul, then, exhorts believers to be who they are. The reality of who they are in Christ necessarily dictates how they are to live. Just as it is grammatically preposterous to suggest that people are other than they are, so it is morally preposterous if such is the case. Who they are to be (the imperative) is intimately linked to who they are (the indicative). Accordingly, it is to be expected that ethical end-of-life and allocation-of-life decisions will somehow depend on who God has created people to be.

In this reality-bounded perspective, the apparent ambivalence in Paul's ethical instruction is more understandable. Paul, for example, makes it clear in his letter to Philemon that Philemon's response to the apostle's letter should be "spontaneous and not forced" (v. 14). Yet, at the end of his appeal to Philemon Paul adds that he is confident of Philemon's "obedience" (v. 21). In other words, Philemon is free to act as he deems best—his action will not be mandated by Paul or the community. But there remains a particular action that is definitely right because of the realities involved, including the fact that Onesimus is now a brother in Christ (v. 16). If Philemon is not obedient to this reality, he will be wrong. Paul gives him the freedom to be wrong, but such freedom will not make a reality-contradicting action ethically justifiable. This perspective helps to explain, for example, how people can at the same time have the freedom to choose life or death in any situation and yet not necessarily be equally justified whichever way they choose.

A LOVE-IMPELLED ETHICS

Paul's ethics, then, is reality-bounded in a variety of ways. Most of life, though, is lived well within the bounds. In such cases, a third aspect of Paul's ethics, its love-impelled dimension, comes to the fore. Once it has been established that no God-given realities are being violated, then the right action is that which is the most loving under the circumstances. Love, for Paul, is edification in a very real sense (Rom. 14:9). People are to strive to enable others to experience as much "good" as possible, that they might be built up (I Cor. 8:1; Gal. 6:10). In a sense, love can be seen as the essence of the entire Christian life (cf. I Cor. 16:14). "Follow the way of love" (I Cor. 14:1), says Paul, for that is "the most excellent way" (I Cor. 12:31).

Neighbor Love. Whereas the special priority of loving God is acknowledged by Paul, he only occasionally speaks of this reshaping in terms of love. Generally he uses the term faith. For the most part, he reserves the term love for God's commitment to people and their commitment to one another. Portraying Paul's ethics as first of all God-centered is an attempt to acknowledge the primacy of this God-ward dimension in a way that clearly distinguishes it—as does Paul—from love of the neighbor. Love of the neighbor is secondary to faith in (or love of) God in that the former is dependent upon the latter, though neither can truly exist apart from the other. Neighbor love is the expression of a faith relationship with God—a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:6,22; I Thess. 4:9).

This God-centered focus means, among other things, that neighbor love respects God's intentions for the world. Love will not violate the bounds of the realities discussed earlier. Trusting in God's supreme love for people, neighbor love believes that acting in harmony with those realities is for the ultimate good of all persons, even though such may not appear to be the case at the time. Accordingly, the moral obligations contained in God's law are not abrogated in Christ. Rather, they are maintained as expressions of love (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14).

In a very real sense, then, love as Paul understands it will always give priority to the God-centered and, in turn, the reality-bounded dimensions of ethics. Often, though, people encounter situations where God's will is unknown and there are no God-given realities which require a particular action or prohibit all alternatives except one. In such cases, Paul's love-impelled ethics comes to the fore in its more narrow sense. People are to do that which will produce the greatest possible good for those involved.

The Need for Discernment. Implicit here is an important element of situational judgment in Paul's ethics. His ethics is not merely a simple application of realities, for even when they apply, their application takes the discernment of the renewed mind, as discussed earlier. When they do not, judgment is even more important, in that what is truly in the best interests of the other must be discerned (cf. Phil. 1:9–10). The importance of discernment is particularly great in the myriad of circumstances under which decisions to end treatment—or life itself more directly—arise today.

In Paul's day, different issues, such as circumcision, were more pressing. How he deals with them illustrates how the love-impelled dimension of ethics operates once the reality-bounded dimension is found to provide no definitive guidance. For example, Paul considers what is involved in circumcision and discerns that in itself "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing" (I Cor. 7:19; cf. Gal. 5:6). Therefore, decisions about who should or should not be circumcised should be made out of love and service to others. No "realities" are at stake. Accordingly, when the circumcision of Titus threatens to jeopardize the blessings of the gospel for countless people because of the submission to the bondage of the law it would entail, Paul opposes it. However, when the circumcision of Timothy promises to open the door to more effective ministry among Jews who would be needed otherwise, Paul apparently approves it (Gal. 2:3; Acts 16:3).

EXPANDING THE PICTURE OF BIBLICAL ETHICS

The approach to ethics described to this point is consistently God-centered, reality-bounded, and love-impelled. What do these characteristics mean, more concretely? It would be illuminating to explore in detail the way that these three dimensions play a pivotal role throughout the Bible. For instance, passages central to Jesus' teaching, such as those addressing Sabbath observance (Matt. 12:1–14), material possessions (Matt. 6:19–34), and love (Matt. 5:43–48; 22:34–40), display this outlook particularly clearly. (In Matthew 22, in fact, Jesus is even more explicit than Paul regarding the priority of love for God—i.e., the God-centered and reality-bounded dimensions—over love for neighbor—i.e., the love-impelled dimension in its limited sense—though the two are not intended to conflict.) However, in the present context, a briefer sweep of the Bible must suffice in order to suggest some of the broader implications of this threefold perspective.

THE IMAGE OF GOD AND A GOD-CENTERED ETHICS

An important aspect of the God-centered dimension of ethics, for instance, is human creation "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:26–27; cf. 5:1). That people are images suggests that God is the original after whom people are patterned. It says more about who people are than it does about who are people. There is an unfortunate tendency to try to dissect the concept of the image of God into a set of defining characteristics of people, in order to have a basis for deciding which beings are "truly human" or are "persons" deserving the special respect (e.g., health care) reserved for persons. Such an attempt is just one of many efforts to tear apart that which God has put together.

Creation in the image of God serves in the Bible precisely as a basis for not treating the fringes of humanity as less than human. A person may be tempted to curse and even kill those deemed unworthy and inhuman, but their creation in the image of God is intended to serve as a check against such behavior (Jas. 3:9; Gen. 9:6).

More positively put, creation in the image of God explains who people are by explaining whose they are. God is the one who has made people. Moreover, they are made in a way that reflects who God is. So as people learn more about who God is they learn more about who they are intended to be.

They see that the crucial importance of Jesus for them lies not only in his crucifixion on their behalf but also in his presence as the perfect image of God (Heb. 1:3). They see in Jesus what a forgiven person and a redeemed life are to look like—how both are intended to image their Creator by the power of God’s Spirit.

Then as Colossians 3:10-11 elaborates, being created and renewed in the image of God entails a negative and a positive. It involves not only a healthy skepticism of efforts to exclude the unworthy or unlovely (whether Greek, uncircumcised, barbarian, or slave) from the human community, but also the importance of living a holy, God-centered life that reflects favorably on God. Unfortunately, people repeatedly find themselves in the position of the man who asked Jesus, “Who should and who should not be considered my neighbor?” (Lk. 10:29). Jesus turns the tables on him by explaining that the real issue is not, “Who is my neighbor?” (and worthy of my love) but rather, “Am I a neighbor?” (and loving as a neighbor should love—v. 36).

So, an awareness of creation in the image of God should point people to who they are to be, individually and corporately, rather than cause them to ponder who they can safely neglect. This perspective has significant implications, e.g., for discerning when it is appropriate to advise a patient to forgo treatment or life itself.

GUIDES TO A REALITY-BOUNDED ETHICS FOR HEALTH CARE

Because God has created people and the universe in ways that have ethical implications—and because of the reliable charter of God—there are certain ethical guides people can know in advance. Nevertheless, it is important not to let these guides idolatrously replace God as the basis of moral authority or pretend to exhaust God’s will for humanity. While certain actions may be ruled out as manifestly opposed to God in this view, God’s will in a particular situation is often not manifest until God illumines the understanding through prayer and the experience of other believers. Ethical guides must remain as limited reflectors of God’s will and never be allowed the status of independent authorities discernible by reason alone. Otherwise, the narrative and experiential nature of ethics is violated as it so often is by an ethics of principles.

Because the term “principles” commonly refers precisely to such rationalistic mandates, it is best avoided in order to prevent missing. The term “guides” helps to signal that there is a personal dimension here—a Guide from whom all ethical guides derive their authority and who must lead people toward the proper interpretation of those guides in particular situations. Guides are not comprehensive in the guidance they provide, but they are one of the initial means that God can use to point people in the right direction. Four such guides are particularly instructive in the present context: life, freedom, justice, and truth.

Life. The first guide to be examined is life, not because it is necessarily more important than the others but because it is foundational to the entire enterprise of medicine. Since people that can be seen, touched, etc., are in view here, “life” will always refer to post-birth human life, although much could also be said about the significance of fetal and non-human forms of life. Furthermore, unless indicated otherwise “life” will refer to life in its biological form. Yet, the biblical texts will not allow a neat severing of this dimension of life from its larger context. Biological life is but one creative manifestation of the life that is intrinsic to God.

Life is special in the best sense and worthy of special care because of numerous realities. First of all, life is created by God (Gen. 1–2). Human life is particularly special because people are created in the image of God, as discussed earlier. That God should personally take the form of a human being suggests that life (in all of its human dimensions) is uniquely special. Moreover, the life of Jesus bore consistent testimony to a commitment to life through preventing killing (Matt. 26:52; John 8:10) and healing the sick (Mark 6:56; Acts 10:38).

The importance of life is reinforced by the care taken in the Bible to make certain that life is not jeopardized. Not only is murder prohibited, but so is a detailed list of life-threatening injuries (Exod. 21:12-36). No individual life is beyond the scope of the life to which God is so committed, no matter how unlovely or unworthy by human standards. Jesus healed all ten lepers even though only one seemed concerned about anything more than biological life (Luke 17:11–19). This special respect for life undergirds certain resource allocation criteria and is at odds with others. It also constitutes an important frame of reference for considering various life-ending options.

Then how should people speak about the special significance of life according to the described approach? Some refer to the “value” of life, but this way of speaking improperly places life on a scale of value. It erroneously suggests that life can be compared and traded off with anything else of value. Because life draws its significance from the realities of God and God’s creation, however, it is not so negotiable. It is sacred, and a sense of awe or reverence is appropriate. Even the notion of “infinite value” misses the mark, for the issue is not how much value life has but the fact that its significance is not dependent on how valuable or useful life is to anyone.

However, using terms like sanctity, sacred, and reverence in relation to life’s significance can be dangerous. Life can take the place of God and become an idol. Only God has absolute moral authority. Life, though extremely important, reflects only part of the reality created and intended by God. There are other reality-based ethical concerns which may supersede even life on occasion.

Freedom. A second ethical guide, freedom, has two rather different meanings in the described approach. Because their practical implications are so different, they must be carefully distinguished and the relation between the two identified. One meaning—the more familiar of the two—understands freedom in terms of what one is freed from. The other understands it in terms of what one is freed for. God is indeed concerned about freeing people from a host of physical and social impediments (slavery, forced marriage, political, and financial burdens, etc.—see Deut. 21:14; I Sam. 17:25; I Cor. 7:21; Philem. 16). Freedom from other sources of bondage such as Satan, sin, self-deception, custom, and death is also important (Mark 3:27; Rom. 6:18; John 8:31–36; Rom. 6:21–23).

However, freedom is not merely an end in itself; rather, it is a means to a greater end as well. People are freed for something and not merely from something. Freedom is a state of doing as much as it is a state of being (cf. Gal. 5:1–2; Jas. 1:25). People are freed precisely in order to be able to live the God-centered, reality-bounded, love-impelled life discussed earlier. It is the life with such direction that is truly fulfilling—not the life of mere absence of restriction (cf. I Pt. 2:16).

So freedom has a dual dimension of a particular kind. It involves freedom from restrictions, but not from all restrictions. It is not autonomy (literally, “self law”), and the two concepts need to be clearly distinguished. Since freedom is for a new life—a true life—the nature of that life itself forms the one abiding restriction upon the believer. As my by definition knows no law but the self, whereas God intends that even this law be replaced—and fulfilled—by love of God and neighbor.

The restriction is less a restraint than it is an opportunity, for it is the very life in which people were created to flourish. People are community, just as they are individuals. It is also not a restraint in that people are not forced by God to live this God-directed life. They are wrong not to do so, but God gives them the freedom to be wrong. After all, the relationship that God desires to have with people requires an obedience freely chosen out of love, not a forced submission. This perspective on freedom has much to say concerning the wishes of patients regarding treatment and how such wishes should be viewed.

Justice. Another guide which has an important place in the various biblical writings is justice. When the psalmists reflect on God they recognize that God “loves justice” (Ps. 99:4) and that justice chares Gods own actions in the world (Ps. 103:6; cf. 146:7–9). Rooted in the character of God, the importance of justice does not wane with time. Not only does knowing God in the time of Jeremiah necessarily entail knowing the importance God attaches to doing justice, but Jesus similarly insists that those who overlook the doing of justice have tragically misunderstood God (Jer. 22:15–16; Matt. 7:21–23; 25:34–45). While justice has several meanings in the Bible, there is a distributive sense of the term which most directly governs the access people have to vital resources of all sorts, including medical resources.

The notion of equality lies at the heart of distributive justice. The ultimate basis for the egalitarian treatment of people is that each is precious in the eyes of God (cf. earlier discussion of “life” as an ethical guide). This egalitarian concern surfaces concretely in the Old Testament in the context of insuring that the original egalitarian distribution of land be preserved. In light of this background, it is not surprising that Paul should find a situation intolerable in which some people are without the basic necessities of life while others have more than enough. In II Cor. 8:13–14, Paul explicitly invokes the notion of equality to argue that the Corinthians should share their resources with others. After all, God is not partial to some and satisfied that others should lack what they need to live (cf. Deut. 1:17; Matt. 5:45). Moreover, true community is hampered when the lives of some in effect are valued more than the lives of others since some have access to life-sustaining resources while others do not.

Implicit in this discussion of equality is another basic conation of distributive justice: need. When vital resources—and therefore people’s lives—are at stake, it is a person’s need for these resources, not one’s desire for them or one’s own goodness, that warrants access to them. There is no indication in the Bible that one who lacks vital resources is necessarily a better person or deserves those resources more than does someone else. Rather, the existence per se of a serious need constitutes a moral problem in light of the tremendous value that God ascribes to the life of every person.

This understanding of justice is particularly helpful and appropriate in the arena of health care. Life itself is often at stake, so the equal value to be placed upon each life is a natural starting point. Yet, without an accompanying standard of need, egalitarian justice would sanction no medical treatment for anyone as much as it would justify comprehensive treatment for all. Justice in the biblical texts is unmistakably committed to the restoration of health. Nowhere is this more evident than in the life of Jesus. Jesus' ministry is "good news to the poor" because all dimensions of their need, including medical, are addressed by it (Luke 4:18). In fact, at one point, Jesus' healing ministry is even referred to as a justice ministry (Matt. 12:15–18). Such a characterization is not surprising, for health is indeed a basic need of all alike.

Truth. A fourth guide that warrants special note is truth. The very nature of Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God is said to be truth (John 14:6,17). Accordingly, the words of God are true, and people created in God's image are also to tell the truth (II Sam. 7:28; Lev. 19:11; John 8:33). Since truth was the subject of last spring's CACE workshop at Wheaton (see the CACE booklet, *On Being Truthful*, by Lewis Smedes), it will not be further examined here.

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN LOVE

As indicated previously, love is defined in part by its God-centered and reality-bounded nature. For example, God provides the standard for what love entails. As God is actively involved in sustaining those in need, so God's people should be actively involved as well (Is. 25:4; 58:6–7). In the New Testament, the pattern becomes specifically Christ-centered: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn. 13:34; 15:12). Jesus shows what love looks like in the face of sickness and other needs and calls upon those who would follow him to live the same way (Matt. 4:23–24; Luke 16:19–31). If people's lives do not emulate Jesus' self-sacrifice in tangible day-to-day ways, then it is not God's love that is in them (I Jn. 3:16–17). The example of Jesus provides a particularly powerful model for those caring for the sick and dying.

The reality-bounded aspect of ethics also provides significant direction regarding what love entails. As explained earlier, love includes seeking the well-being of others, but always in a way that observes first the ethical guides rooted in the realities of who God is and how God has made the world to be. More, though, must be said regarding the nature of love.

Most importantly, that ethics is love-impelled entails that it is communal and not just individualistic. While there is a concern for the individual, it has been evident from the beginning that "it is not good to be alone" (cf. Gen. 2:18). Unique individuals find their fulfillment in community as their strengths enable them to be needed, even as they need the strengths of others. The widely-quoted love chapter in I Corinthians 13 flows naturally from and provides the basis for the discussion of one body with many parts in I Corinthians 12.

Love, then, seeks mutuality in community. People are to love their neighbors as themselves. What this means in practice is self-sacrifice, because people are constantly prone to think of themselves more highly than is warranted (Mark 7:21–22; cf. Rom. 12:3,16).

But the goal is interdependent community. Accordingly, Paul commends Jesus' self-sacrifice (Phil. 2:6–8), yet interprets its message to believers as: "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (vv. 4–5). The needs of all are to be met in a community where "your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need; then there will be equality" (II Cor. 8:14). Moreover, community is to be understood inclusively embracing those usually considered to be "different and involving love expressed concretely even toward one's enemies (Col. 3:11; Luke 6:35).

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF BIBLICAL ETHICS

How distinctive is the approach to ethics being described here? A brief comparison with other popular ways of ethical thinking is instructive in this regard. The approach described here provides a wholistic perspective, in comparison with which many common contemporary approaches to ethics appear rather narrow. Three alternatives—the ethics of consequences, the ethics of principles, and the ethics of virtue—warrant particular attention.

The Ethics of Consequences. First of all, the ethics of consequences, particularly in the common form of utilitarian ethics, is both like and unlike the described approach. A utilitarian approach, as classically understood, identifies the right decision as that which will produce the greatest utility (i.e., good) for the greatest number of people under the circumstances. Widely influential today, it is quite similar to the love-impelled dimension of the described approach.

There are two other important dimensions to the described approach, however, both of which have priority over simply seeking the well-being of other people. Most importantly, there is the God-centered dimension. No assessment of the consequences of an action is complete without consideration of its impact upon God's glory and evaluation of all consequences from an eternal perspective. By focusing on God, people do not abandon good results as their primary goal. However, they are assured of far better results (eventually, and in some form) than could even be imagined apart from God (cf. the account of Abraham in Rom. 4, esp. vv. 18–21).

The second dimension of the described approach, its reality-bounded aspect, also contrasts sharply with a utilitarian approach. Whereas utilitarianism insists that nothing except maxing human well-being is intrinsically right, the described approach holds that many actions are intrinsically right or wrong by virtue of their harmony or disharmony with the realities of the world as God has made it and intends it. These realities limit the realm within which the pursuit of good consequences can operate, in that actions which violate a God-given reality are wrong irrespective of the consequences.

The Ethics of Principles. Just as the ethics of consequences captures part, but only part, of the ethical picture, the ethics of principles, or deontological ethics, also represents a partial understanding from the described perspective. Deontological ethics contends that a variety of moral considerations—often referred to as principles, imperatives, or duties—are intrinsically binding on people. Justice, truth, freedom, and respect for life are examples of considerations that might be commended as intrinsically worthy. These are all considerations that the described approach affirms to the extent that they are entailed by such realities as creation and Christ's death and resurrection.

However, the basis of such considerations is precisely the point where the described approach and many deontologists part company. The described approach reflects Paul's concerns about "human arguments" (Rom. 3:5) and "the wisdom of the world" (I Cor. 1:20), which tend to be grounded in nothing more substantial than people's intuition. The very notion of moral givens seems odd without a moral Giver. According to the described perspective, without God to provide an ultimate moral authority, communal ethics is arguably just misguided or wishful thinking. If human life is really only the product of molecules randomly joining, with no divine intention guiding that or another creative process, wherein lies the special significance of human life?

A deontological orientation, moreover, tends to overlook the critical importance of several other aspects of ethics, the first being the place of human character and virtues. Principles and duties are fine but are of little significance if people are not the kinds of persons who will live in accordance with them. Attending to a person's unique experience also tends to get lost in the preoccupation with abstract principles. Moreover, many deontological approaches neglect the key role that assessing consequences can play when more than one course of action is acceptable according to the basic principles in view. Compared with the described God-centered, reality-bounded, and love-impelled ethics, then, deontological ethics may be seen as embodying a very partial truth.

The Ethics of Virtue. The ethics of virtue similarly represents only part of the complete ethical picture according to the described perspective. Virtue ethics focuses on the persons who make ethical decisions more than on the decisions themselves. Its major concern is moral character, along with the virtues (benevolence, justice, etc.) that make up that character and the motivations that flow from it. In this emphasis, it agrees with important aspects of the reality-bounded and love-impelled dimensions of the described approach.

What is good character, though, and where does it come from? The described ethics differs significantly from many versions of virtue ethics at this point. The character to which people are to aspire is not an ideal established by people. It is determined by God's own character and who God has made people to be. Both the God-centered and the reality-bounded dimensions of ethics are critical here. Who people truly are (i.e., were made to be) directs who they are (i.e., ought) to be. According to the described approach, moreover, to be all that they should be, people need God's Spirit alive in them. By themselves, people are inherently self-centered. Even when they know what is right, they sometimes do not do it. However, new life in Christ makes possible the full flowering of virtues. In fact, virtues may be understood as fruit of the indwelling Spirit of God. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers and shapes the holy life.

There is another way in which focusing on virtue paints only part of the complete ethical picture. A virtuous person may have the best of motivations, but can still be stymied as to which of several alternative actions to choose in a particular situation. Some way to identify the right alternative is needed, so that the person can recognize it and act accordingly. Utilitarian and deontological ethics both provide such ways; but these answers are inadequate for reasons explained earlier. On the other hand, a God-centered focus and God-given realities provide much of the needed direction, with the commitment to human well-being (neighbor love) providing the rest. The approach is wholistic, joining being and doing, motive and action, faith and works.

COMMUNICATING A CHRISTIAN ETHICS OF HEALTH CARE IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

While this approach does lead to positions on some issues that are at odds with positions that follow from other approaches, Christians can make common cause at times with people who adopt such approaches. For example, one Christian justification for a patient paring in treatment decisions is the importance of the caregiver remaining faithful to the covenantal nature of the caregiver-patient relationship. Since virtue ethicists generally support a similar faithfulness—albeit one perhaps without Christian moorings—Christians can join virtue ethicists in encouraging caregivers to enable patients to participate responsibly in decision-making.

Similarly, Christians and deontologists may join forces to oppose mercy-killing by physicians on the ground that it violates the guide or principle of respect for life so central to the profession. Christians and utilitarian, meanwhile, may together advocate the discontinuing of certain medical technologies when no reality-bounded guides are at stake and both groups recognize the torture being inflicted on the dying patient.

The way of thinking described here, then, enables Christians to develop ways of being, thinking, and acting that are identifiably true to God. Yet, Christians can also communicate those commitments to non-Christians in meaningful terms by, for example, taking advantage of the ethical ground they have in common.

Question about Euthanasia:

“Dr. Kilner, if the people at Corinth had written to Paul and asked about physician-assisted suicide along with asking if they could eat meat sacrificed to idols and whether or not they should get married, what do you think the apostle would have said?”

Answer:

“This is something I have wrestled with for some time, both theologically and experientially. First, I want to affirm that in any of these issues there really is a great need for the wisdom of the Christian community. Let me share with you some thoughts.

What I see happening in Scripture is that a lot of attention is focused on death and life. There is a fundamental contrast between the two. A God-centered, reality-bounded, and love-impelled perspective is oriented toward life. Death, from the beginning, is induced in Scripture as something that is counter to God’s intentions for creation. Paul characterizes death as the enemy, the last enemy that will be overcome (1 Cor. 15:25,26). You can trace that idea all the way back into Genesis and see that human death was something introduced by the fall.

I realize that in the Bible, life sometimes has a biological reference and sometimes has a non-biological reference. More often than not, which kind of life is being referred to is not clear because the Bible takes a very holistic view of life and ingrates those dimensions together. In any case, a radical choice is presented in Scripture, a choice as to whether one is oriented toward life—all of life—or whether one embraces death—something that is a part of the fall.

Paul would, I believe, see any action taken or omitted that intends the patient's death as representing a fundamental shift from a life orientation to a death orientation. He would be the first to admit that suffering needs to be addressed, but would insist that there are better ways to address suffering than by eliminating the sufferer.

At the same time, we must recognize that there comes a point when there is nothing we can really do in behalf of life. All too often we fail to recognize this, and we torture people in their dying. We devise means that are supposed to be for people's good, and we keep them hanging on the verge of death. That use of technology must be resisted. Treatment is refused or withdrawn not because death is intended (as in physician-assisted suicide) but because death cannot be avoided.

In summary, I would say that there is a fundamental difference between an orientation toward life and an orientation toward death. An orientation toward life is rooted in the way God has created the world to be. I think Paul would say there is something critical at stake for the health care profession and society as a whole if we reorient toward death by accepting physician-assisted suicide or so-called "active euthanasia."

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For a more detailed analysis, including footnotes to secondary literature and an extended discussion of terminating treatment, actively causing a patient's death, and resource allocation decisions, see John F. Kilner, *Life on the Line*, Eerdmans, June 1992. The author is grateful to Eerdmans for permission to draw upon this material here.

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For further study on allocation of health resources, see the author's, *Who Lives? Who Dies? Ethical Criteria in Patient Selection*, (Yale, 1990).