

# *Symposium on Ethics*

## *Foundations of a Christian Character Ethics*

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*A symposium on Ethics was sponsored by the Dharma Realm Buddhist University during the summer of 1989. Guest speakers who are experts in the fields of science, education, public policy, and the family were invited to discuss how ethics relates to their areas of specialty.*

*Dr. Thomas MacMillan, a well-established friend of the university, provided a Christian perspective on ethics during one of the four weekened seminars. Dr. MacMillan currently teaches Critical Thought, World Religions, and writing courses at nearby Mendocino College and is an advisor to Dharma Realm Buddhist University.*

### INTRODUCTION:

The study of Ethics and Moral Development has enjoyed a significant resurgence in the recent academic history of the United States. In fact, the whole enterprise of moral philosophy has come under scrutiny due in large measure to a call for redefinition or even abolition of the project as traditionally defined. The field of moral philosophy, once commonly understood as involving a search for normative principles to guide specific choices and actions is now being challenged by what Stanley Clarke and Evan Simpson have recently characterized as "new forms of moral conservatism that regard local practices as primary in moral reasoning" or "a movement from abstract principle to common practice."

In the Christian academic community, one very influential "anti-theorist," in the sense defined above, is Alasdair MacIntyre, whose book, After Virtue, vividly presents the contemporary frustration over application of precepts in a normative Ethic whose historical and cultural context has changed, been lost, or been reconstructed. In such conditions, MacIntyre argues, one may find two parties to an argument who believe themselves to be in agreement about basic precepts, but who, in fact, hold "conceptually incommensurable" positions and thus inevitably reach contrary conclusions with no possibility of reconciliation. On a practical scale, such a circumstance was represented politically by the presidential candidacy of Rev. Jesse Jackson and Evangelist Pat Robertson -- each claimed by supporters to represent an authentically "Christian" position.

Today I wish to accomplish two things. First, I wish to propose that Christian Ethics might best be understood in terms of a virtue-based vocabulary and justification, as MacIntyre and others seem to imply by the nature of their work. Second, I wish to present a visual model of the foundational elements of such an Ethic for purposes of discussion. Following Agnes Heller's lead in a recent article from Philosophy and Social Criticism. I will begin by suggesting the most important question of moral philosophy may not be: "What are the precepts which alone can lead us to moral behavior?" Rather, it may be: "Righteous persons exist; how are they possible?" And, more specifically: "Righteous Christian persons exist; how are they possible?"

### FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS:

The elements presented here are so few as to be merely suggestive of what may be considered for further dialogue. Five (5) concepts have been chosen from the KOINE Greek of the New Testament to give us a working vocabulary from which to proceed. They are:

KOINONIA - communion; fellowship; community

CHARACTER - express image; exact representation; authentic article

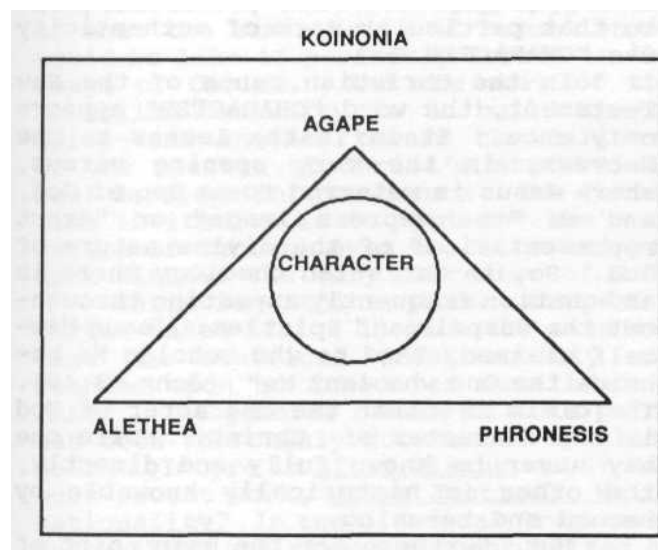
AGAPE - "love" as moral and behavioral imperative; the capacity to regard the other as of ultimate value to God, and to act toward the other based on this conviction.

ALETHEA - "truth" as morally and spiritually relevant to the life and faith of the community of believers.

PHRONEO - "prudent wisdom;" the mind's capacity to apply morally relevant truth to immediate circumstances.

The interaction among these concepts is suggested in Figure I, which will provide a visual outline for the rest of this discussion.

**Figure I**



#### KOINONIA - COMMUNITY

The distinctiveness of a Christian Ethic, as with any religiously-based Ethic, is bound by the sense of membership in a common community of faith drawn from Torah and what in the Christian vocabulary is called KERYGMA, the defining set of beliefs concerning Jesus Christ, which distinguishes the Christian faith from all others. Briefly, the boundary of community is circumscribed by affirmation of what is contained in two Biblical passages:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord your God is our God,  
The Lord is one!  
And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and

with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:3,4)

And:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures.

(I Corinthians 15:3,4)

The first of these passages is the SHEMA, the confession of faith which has always marked the foundation of Jewish belief in a monotheistic, communicative, loving and covenant-making deity. The second is from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthian church and represents the "Christology" of the faith in succinct terms, which point to an atoning action historically performed by a redeemer commissioned by God, who, after completion of the act of redemption, demonstrated power over death by resurrection from the grave. Taken together, these suggest a minimal definition of what stands in historically orthodox terms to be the foundations of Christian community. It is these beliefs, as lived out in community, which constitute the faith which I speak of as "Christian."

James Fowler, who has written on the stages of faith as a developmental sequence toward maturity and congruity of belief and action, defines "faith" as an "active 'mode-of-being-in-relation' to another or others in which we must invest commitment, belief, love, risk and hope." Fowler goes on to say:

...without the kind of commitment and regard that are involved in faithful relationships, human beings cannot become and maintain themselves as 'selves.'

Fowler's claim is somewhat stark, but not without a tradition in Western thought. Please consider that the claim is not unique to a Christian world view; further, I will suggest that it is not exclusive of other views of "self" which may be held concurrently. It is a meaning of "self" that pertains to moral and religious agency in a manner precisely relevant to the points suggested in this paper. It views the self as interactively defined and suggests that the relational phenomenon of faith -- in self, in others, and in shared causes or values that bind the community together -- is the foundation upon which "self" is built. Absence of a community -- a KOINONIA — strongly suggests the possibility of an incompletely defined or dysfunctionally askew notion of "self."

For the first century Christian community, one might imagine, and for the continuing tradition of Christian orthodoxy, the focal point of KOINONIA was the person and work of Jesus Christ -- viewed as Word Incarnate; God become flesh; at once fully human and fully divine.

The importance of the belief in "Incarnation" is emphasized by Stanley Hauerwas as he discusses the relationship between this particular doctrinal point and the sense of Christian community. Hauerwas says:

...the incarnation is not the affirmation of God's approval of the human...but God's breaking through the borders of man's definition of what is human to give a new and formative definition of the human in Jesus.

So, to arrive at point number one, represented by the outer boundary of the diagram in Figure I: we are invited to imagine a community of belief centered around the faith and hope that there is both a good and a purpose for humanity; that such a goodness and purpose has been personified and actualized in ONE human/divine person who is therefore worthy of worship and discipleship in both person and

precept. Further, the Christian notion must be understood as implying that only in such a community of KOINONIA can the highest human purpose and potential be attained.

The curriculum, so to speak, for such a community would include both the teachings and the personal remembrances of its spiritual leader and those who follow him. As Alasdair MacIntyre describes such an imagined community, the ethical or moral enterprise would include two requisite types of precepts: one "enjoining the virtues, those dispositions without the exercise of which the good cannot be achieved;" and the second "a set of precepts prohibiting those actions destructive of those human relationships which are necessary to a community in which and for which the good is to be achieved, and in which and for which the virtues are to be practiced."

## CHARACTER - AUTHENTIC IMAGE

Focus now on the inner boundary of the central portion of Figure I, designated "Character."

In the etymology of the term "CHARACTER," one finds an interesting story. The English word is a cognate of the KOINE Greek of the New Testament, so we have adopted its meaning directly from the first century. It seems that throughout the Roman Empire there were a number of coin-making centers as, for example, at Ephesus where silver was in plentiful supply. The problem for the Empire was, of course, counterfeiting. So, to control the temptation to produce counterfeit coinage, the coin-maker would complete a perfect mold, strike an exemplary coin for approval and then randomly inscribe a mark with an engraving tool to induce a deliberate and distinctive mark upon the mold that would be present on every genuine coin. The name given to that particular mark of authenticity was "CHARACTER."

In the Christian canon of the New Testament, the word "CHARACTER" appears only once. It is in the letter to the Hebrews, in the very opening verses, where Jesus is referred to as Son of God, and as "the express image" or "exact representation" of the divine nature of God. So, in Christian theology there is an equation frequently appearing throughout the Gospels and Epistles. Jesus himself claimed, "And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me" (John 13:45). The claim is this: the character of God is the character of Christ. While one may never be known fully and directly, the other is historically knowable by record and teaching.

But, further, for the main point of this section of the presentation, the Christian community is enjoined to "Let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5); "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." (Romans 12:2). The claim, hope, faith and experience of the Christian community is that in some way one might receive and experientially KNOW that actuality of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:29).

Christian Ethics, viewed in this light, must cause us to consider the possibility that Jesus was not merely either advocate of precepts or example and pattern of a universally valid moral or religious code, but the incarnation of a way of being in the world -- and more specifically, a way of expressing God to humanity so that, in turn, "Humanity" could be turned to God.

Christian writings of the New Testament contain a number of indications of what virtues of character distinguish Jesus Christ. One indication is presented in Galatians 5:23, where Paul contrasts the "works of the flesh" with the "fruit of the spirit" as follows:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.  
(Galatians 5:23)

It has frequently been noted that although there are nine virtues enumerated, there is but a single "fruit." The list is by no means exhaustive but strongly suggestive of the moral dimension of the "Character" of Christ. It is, therefore, also strongly suggestive of what the human being of "excellence" would be like if perfectly formed in the image of Christ. And one work of the Christian community is to build up -- to edify -- one another toward the fullness of the measure of Christ's stature, as Paul develops in Ephesians 4. The Christian invitation is to "put on" the very nature of Christ, even as Jesus had put upon Himself the very Character of God.

Christian Ethics, then, must be a virtue-based Ethics in much the same way that the classical Greek society was founded upon an Ethics of excellence -- ARETE. The general nature of this point has been thoroughly documented by Alasdair MacIntyre in After Virtue and in his more recent work, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? In the classical Greek culture, ARETE was always conceptualized as in relation to the attainment of a function or purpose (TELOB). Thus, the excellence of a knife was related to its ability to cut; the excellence of an athlete to his performance; and the excellence of the warrior-citizen by his Temperance, Fortitude and Prudence. To this list later Christian writers would add Justice and the three "Theological" virtues of Faith, Hope and Love.

For the Greeks and later for Aquinas as well, it was proposed that such virtues would best be induced by HABITETHOS. It is by habit that we "acquire a 'second nature'," as Hauerwas puts it, and "insofar as those habits are virtuous, they furnish us with a nature befitting our moral stature." Such an Ethic of Virtue, as Hauerwas contends in his further development of the point, places BEING before DOING.

AGAPE, ALETHEA and PHRONESIS: LOVE, TRUTH AND REASON:

Within the limited scope of this presentation, let it be noted merely that the sum of what has been presented thus far is the core of the relevant TRUTH—ALETHEA -- informing the life of a Christian community. When Jesus proclaimed, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," he was not speaking epistemology but theology. The truth of community and character and the claims which mark the boundaries of both are the substance of the "TRUTH" as taken for purposes of this paper.

Secondly, there is a role of reason -- practical, moral reasoning capability, leading one to formulate righteous decisions and perform righteous actions -- in Christian Ethics. This notion is captured by the terms PHRONEO (Verb), PHRONESIS (Noun) and PHRONIMOS (Adjective), which collectively appear forty-six times in the New Testament. The "MIND" of "Let that mind be in you..." is one of the forms of the root of this concept word.

Finally I come to the central imperative of Christian Ethics contained in the term AGAPE -- Love. When Jesus was asked to characterize the life of righteousness and the imperatives leading to it, he presented only two. The first was SHEMA; the second was "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." In the Gospel of John, Jesus pronounced that the love among the community of faithful would be the distinguishing mark of his followers throughout time: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples; that you love one another," he said. And in the same Gospel record, Jesus commands: "This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

In fact, to "Love," in the meaning of viewing the object of our concern as of ultimate value to God and then acting toward that object of concern in a manner consistent with such ultimate valuing concern, is the only Christian Ethical imperative. As Joseph Fletcher has shown in Situation Ethics, it is possible to make of the imperative, "Love one another," a categorical and universal precept divorced from the theological underpinnings of KOINONIA or KERYGMA. But as his critics have noted, it is not

possible therefore to make any predictions at all about what behaviors might be entailed from such a universal.

In the New Testament, AGAPE is always in context of Christ's presentation of the new humanity, transcending and preserving Law. At least twelve times it is associated with a Greek verb (SPLANGCHNIZOMAI) which means "to be moved with compassion." The root of the word refers to the entrails of the human body -- the gut, if you will. Over and over, Jesus is represented as "moved with compassion" for the sick, the hungry, the blind, the children, the disciples. Over and over, the compassion was translated into action.

The hope of a Christian Ethic based on such compassion translated into loving action is presented in a little book called Compassion, from which the following comes as a representation of what it would be like to live in and through such a community:

Compassion is no longer a virtue that we must exercise in special circumstances or an attitude that we must call upon when other ways of responding have been exhausted, but it is the natural way of being in the world.

Concerning such a hope and expectation, the Apostle Paul wrote:

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet: but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ. (Philippians 3:13, 14)

Perhaps that is, in the last analysis, the best hope of a Christian Ethic.

#### CONCLUSION:

What has been presented is a case for consideration that Christian Ethics can best be understood as Virtue-based rather than Precept-based. It is further suggested that the focal point of a foundational study of Christian Ethics, from this point of view, would begin with a re-examination of what it means to be in Christian community; of what indeed is that understanding and experience of the community concerning the person and work of Christ; of what such an understanding might imply for Christian moral action.

There are many contending voices of "Christian ethicists" enjoining us to action on the major issues of our time. It is clear that progress on such issues as abortion, distributive justice, AIDS, or the world food crisis is not being made on the basis of more intense or more shrill moral injunctions based on precept. What seems to be called for is another approach, and it is hoped that the ideas here presented may lead to a further dialogue, not only within the Christian community, but beyond the boundaries of that particular community to others in parallel search for the path of moral action in present world conditions.