

# Summons to Faith and Renewal

*Christian Renewal in a Post-Christian World*

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**"An Agenda for Christian Ethics"**

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*A Pastoral Renewal Book*

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## An Agenda for Christian Ethics

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**CHRISTIAN ETHICS** ought to be centered on our Lord Jesus. To be Christocentric means that Christian ethics should guide followers of Jesus toward more perfect personal union with him. This union primarily is a sharing by the grace of the Spirit in Jesus' divine life. But it also is a human communion in bodily life and in cooperative work. Ethics bears directly upon the last.

Christians are called to do what Jesus did and add to it, to bear real and abundant fruit, not by themselves but in him. Without Jesus we can do nothing; in him we can and ought to do great things. Thus, Christian ethics should be an ethics of communal cooperation with Jesus; each Christian should seek and accept his or her personal role and responsibilities in the body of Christ.

The work of Jesus bears on human salvation, begun in this world but completed only in heavenly fulfillment. Hence, Christian ethics primarily should be an other-worldly humanism. It should direct Christian life here and now as a real sharing in the kingdom (which is not of this world) and preparation for everlasting life (still to come).

A truly Christocentric ethics must be a Trinitarian ethics. Human persons are made in God's image, and their fulfillment can only be in renewal according to the loving plan God proposed from the beginning. The focus of Christian ethics on the kingdom must not mean a religious fanaticism or even an exclusive focus on the good of religion. All human goods are affected by sin, redeemed by God in Jesus, and ought to be revered and served by Christians.

Nor can a genuinely Christocentric ethics be individualistic;

God calls us to heavenly fellowship, not simply to saving my soul and your soul. The ethics of Jesus is that of the New Covenant. Turning from sin, Christians make a fundamental option or decision for Jesus, accept with faith the terms of the covenant sealed with his blood, rely with confident hope on God's faithfulness to his promises, and fulfill their communal responsibilities by the love which is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, just as Jesus' divinity was no substitute for his living his human life, and his human life accomplished nothing without the power of the Spirit, so grace is no substitute for Christians' fulfilling their human responsibilities, yet human works are fruitless except through the power of the Spirit. A truly Christian ethics does not use God's grace as an excuse for sloth.

*Christian ethics ought to be rooted in the word of God.*

For Christian ethics to be rooted in God's word, that word must be heard and accepted in faith from those who hand it on. A genuinely Christian ethics will be faithful to God's revealed word as it is received in the community of faith and will resist every attempt to substitute supposed inner movements of the Spirit for faithful obedience to the truth of the gospel.

One can think out the problems of Christian ethics only if one is a believer striving to live a Christian life. Theological work requires scholarship, but a Christian scholar must not allow the world to define what is scholarly (what agrees with the academic establishment's methods and opinions) and what is not (what is faithful to the word of God which the nonbelieving academic world rejects). Authentic Christian scholarship is marked by absolute obedience to God's word, even when one does not understand it and finds oneself at a loss for plausible answers to the challenges of nonbelievers.

The fundamental mysteries of faith—Trinity; Incarnation, and second birth of men and women by the gift of the Spirit—must be seen as practical truths which should shape human life. The Bible also includes specific, revealed moral truths whose

validity is absolute and unalterable. These include the Ten Commandments.

However, Christian ethics cannot be limited to the norms explicitly stated in the Bible. The principles explicitly contained in scripture—especially those exemplified by Jesus' living of his own human life—are endlessly rich in consequences for every question of life in every time and place.

The Bible must be interpreted as a living word. Christians of diverse denominations obviously differ about how to do this. This difference is not insignificant, but all agree on the primacy of the word and the need to understand it within the community of faith. Christian ethics should be ecumenical; it should work toward cooperation among those who accept Jesus as Lord in faithfully unfolding the meaning of God's word for today.

The relationship between law and grace must not be misunderstood. Love fulfills the law and renders it unnecessary as law—that is, as something imposed upon a sinful and resistant, fallen humankind. But love does not nullify or displace the truth about human good and evil. The grace of the Holy Spirit, won for us by Christ, instead renews human hearts and enables men and women, living in Christ, to walk in the full light of the moral truth which God has made clear to humankind in Jesus.

*Christian ethics ought to make use of a  
rationally defensible ethical theory.*

Reliance on the word of God does not mean that Christian ethics can be an intuitionism which neglects or bypasses careful study of facts and reasoned application of principles to problems. The word of God comes in human words, and the Spirit normally speaks to us through careful study, critical reflection, and charitable dialogue with one another.

Christians often have been suspicious of philosophy, and rightly so if it tries to usurp the role of faith. But philosophy need not be dogmatic; it need not try to produce an autonomous rational worldview. It can limit itself modestly to a responsible

use of reason articulating and defending that part of the truth of the Christian faith which is accessible to reason, clarifying the meaning of linguistic and other symbols in which (and against which) faith must be articulated and applied, and pointing to human realities, present in our awareness, which faith illuminates and renews.

A Christian philosophy of this sort is needed for four reasons. First, the Christian must be ready to give an account, and cannot do this without such a reasoned view. Second, the Christian must understand the reality of the world and be able to criticize the inadequate theories nonbelievers offer to make sense of and guide life. Third, the believer must be able to draw out new implications of the word of God to meet new challenges and cannot do this without a systematic theory of morality. Fourth, one cannot interpret scripture without a unified worldview—that is, a philosophy. Failure to develop a consciously Christian philosophy leads to the unconscious use of some non-Christian philosophy.

There are several urgent challenges today for the theoretical part of Christian ethics. A sound account of conscience is needed to counter the subjectivist notion that individuals may follow their autonomous opinions against moral truth, even that which is clearly included in God's word. The subjective and objective aspects of morality must be carefully distinguished, and the objective truth of moral norms clarified. The right way of reaching moral judgments must be explained and the error shown in reducing morality to efficiency in attaining specific objectives.

### *Christian ethics ought to be truly pastoral.*

Christian ethics must be realistic about sin and the truth of the human condition. The first principle of pastoral practice is honesty about the fallen human condition. The first pastoral act is the call for repentance. God's mercy demands conversion and enables fallen men and women to rise to a new life.

Christian ethics should effectively guide preaching, teaching,

and counseling. To do this, it must take into account the actual challenges and temptations people face today. But with this realism, it should articulate the way of the Lord Jesus as really livable, not merely by an elite but by all. A truly pastoral approach not only asks and answers the question, "What must I do?" but the further questions, "How am I to do it? What can I do right now?"

To ask and answer these questions, the Christian ethicist must be confident in the power of the Spirit. This confidence does not exclude but rather requires full use of human means, including sound psychological insights and techniques, for building up a Christian character. Realism also demands the building up of Christian community. Christian ethics should not be individualistic; it must always stress mutual help, the bearing of one another's burdens.

Mature life in Christ requires not only initial conversion but continuing conversion. Each Christian must learn how to put Jesus in the center of his or her life and subject everything else in life to his lordship. This means setting priorities for one's whole life, determining the use of one's lifetime, finding one's personal vocation.

In its pastoral function, a Christian ethics must clarify the role and right use of discernment. This is necessary to determine one's personal vocation and to exclude from one's life those concerns which, though not morally objectionable in themselves, have no place in God's plan. In Christian discernment, advice and guidance of the community is necessary, because God's will for each Christian is expressed through the institutional forms of the ecclesial body.

A truly pastoral theology is not legalistic; it does not regard the requirements of Christian life as a set of arbitrary rules which can be bent and stretched to lighten the burden of following Jesus. Thus, Christian ethics should firmly reject dissent from the word of God. A truly pastoral Christian ethics will help leaders of the community know how to deal effectively with such dissent by making clear that false teaching lacks authority while authentic teaching shares in the authority of

God's word, which it guards as sacred and faithfully proposes.

Confidence in the Spirit also means firm rejection of any "theory of compromise"—that is, that in our fallen world sin is sometimes required. Similarly, the theory that a good end can justify one in destroying, damaging, or impeding human life or other goods intrinsic to human persons must be rejected both as rationally incoherent and as a betrayal of faith's teaching that certain kinds of acts, such as idolatry, adultery, and killing the innocent, are always grave evils.