

## Mapless Travelers and Christian Cartographers

More than once in my life I have wandered around unnecessarily for long periods of time on foot or in my car because I was utterly confused and lost. Why? Because I have a personality defect that makes me think I can somehow sense where to go or perhaps remember my way from a previous visit. But this is pure self-delusion: I have no such sense of direction, and my memory for directions is conclusively unreliable.

There are only two possible solutions to my problem. The first is to be sure I always have someone with me who knows where we are and how to get where we need to go. The second is to get a good map or clear directions for my travel. Fortunately, my wife has a great sense of direction and a good memory for such things. As long as I keep my instincts and comments to myself (alas, not always possible) and follow her advice and intuition, we get where we need to go. Unfortunately, she is not always available, and I am either too cheap to buy a map or too hasty to get directions. So I waste time going in circles.

Once in a great while my mapless, unguided travel results in an unexpected discovery. Much more often it wastes my time and gasoline (and contributes unnecessarily to air pollution and traffic congestion). Sometimes I have been late and missed the beginning of a great performance. (Once I had to watch the first half of an expensive opera on a television monitor in the lobby. "Sorry, no latecomer seating!") Sometimes my mapless travel follies make other people wait for me. (This is

great for their disposition and general happiness and for our relationship, as you can imagine.) I've never harmed anyone, but you can imagine that speeding drivers who are lost or running late might seriously injure someone in their haste.

This saga of maps and travel provides a helpful metaphor for ethics and life. Ethical guidelines are just as essential for finding your way in life as good maps and directions are for finding your way geographically. The Bible is full of the language of pilgrimage and migration toward the promised land. Walking in the way and the truth is a common metaphor. Map and travel imagery has the additional virtue of emphasizing the dynamic, open, developmental character of the Christian life—in contrast to the static, abstract and dispassionate character of most ethics (and theology) literature.

But are maps really so important? Isn't this just a matter of taste and preference (anal-retentive map followers vs. free-spirited mapless troubadours)? Perhaps if we lived in small towns with one street and five or ten houses, we wouldn't need maps. But our ethical world today is vastly more complex, crowded and dangerous. Traveling without a moral map can result in crashes and injuries; in getting lost in dangerous and lonely places; in aimless, meaningless, profitless wandering around; and in too much gratuitous pollution. We need

better ethical guidance because there is far too much cruelty, sadness, dishonesty, violence, suffering and injustice in our world—not just in some distant places, but in the cities and neighborhoods where we live. Ethics is about avoiding harm and overcoming evil with good. This is why we need to find an ethics map.

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**Ethical guidelines are just as essential for finding your way in life as good maps and directions are for finding your way geographically.**

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Our problem is not solved, however, if we grab a defective map. Have you ever had this experience? I have sometimes been frustrated by maps that fail to show the existence of some street, or that show two roads crossing but don't warn you that you may not turn from one onto the other, or that show an old name for a road that has long since been renamed, or that fail to indicate that a road surface is gravel and mud.

So it is with today's ethical maps. There are lots of faulty or inade-

quate ones to lead us astray. Hollywood puts out maps that show the road of irresponsible self-indulgence as the way to happiness. (There are a lot of wrecks when people use this map.) Many governments now put out maps urging citizens to take the lottery road to arrive at wealth and happiness (a bald-faced lie financed with tax money). Businesses put lots of money into maps directing us onto the consumer superhighway to arrive at satisfaction. The National Rifle Association promotes a map urging gun-ownership as the main road to political freedom and personal safety and security. We need better maps than these.

Another school of thought urges each of us to draw a personal ethical map as we wish. Apart from the personal dangers of living in such a fabricated dream world, there are just too many people on the road for each of us to insist on making and following our own personal maps. If personal autonomy (self-determination) is allowed to trump all other values, we become nearly powerless when seeking any common resolution of the big issues we must face together. We need to find an ethical map that respects, protects and values the individual while providing us with good guidance in matters of common concern.

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**WITHOUT A GOOD, RELIABLE MAP**

- you can get lost in very dangerous places
  - you can waste a great deal of time and resources
  - you may never reach the destination you want
  - others can be endangered or hurt by your haste and mistakes
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### **A Moral Map Is a Network of Guidelines**

Saying that we need a better map to guide life's ethical movements means that we need a better network of guidelines for our actions. Ethical guidelines are *action guides*, indicating not so much what we *are* as what we should *do*, how we should *act* and what is the *right* thing to *do*.<sup>1</sup> These ethical action guides are *ought* statements: *imperatives*

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<sup>1</sup>What makes something *morally* right or wrong has been hotly debated by philosophers, of course, but one fundamental characteristic is that *wrong* harms and hurts lives, while *right* protects and nurtures lives. There are right ways to pronounce French vowels, grill salmon, change the oil filter on your car and set the table; but these are not matters of ethical or moral correctness because the threat of harm is inconsequential (although some experts would say that my French accent is in fact a moral issue because it threatens actual harm to the ears and sensibilities of my hearers).

concerning what we *must* do, which are *prescriptive* rather than descriptive in tone. Terms like *commandment*, *duty* and *obligation* underscore this emphasis.

What gives ethical guidelines their oughtness? Why are the Ten Commandments not just the Ten Suggestions? Why isn't Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative" just the "categorical option"? The short answer is some more map talk: "If you want to get to destination X, you must turn right on road Y and proceed 3.4 miles," and so on. Thus, if you want to know and please God, you ought to obey his commandments; or, if you want to be consistently rational, you ought to do what Kant says. Ethical principles are linked with, and dependent on, purposes.

There are many terms for such moral action guides (e.g., rules, precepts, axioms, counsels), each of which carries various nuances or shades of meaning. These guidelines are often organized into *codes* of some sort; such codes are, in turn, components in larger moralities, moral philosophies or ethics.<sup>2</sup> Such ethics and moralities are, in their turn, components in philosophies or theologies of life. We will mainly confine ourselves to four terms as we try to map out the guidelines for a Christian ethic: *principle*, *rule*, *law* and *commandment*.

*Principle* comes from the Latin *principium*, meaning "beginning." A principle is thus a fundamental starting point truth on which others are based. It is a guideline or rule of conduct at a very fundamental level.

*Rule* comes from the Latin *regula*, meaning a straight piece of wood, such as a ruler. A rule is thus a guideline established to *regulate* action, a criterion or standard by which the rightness (or straightness) of an action can be measured. Rules can be very broad and general or very narrow and specific.

*Law* comes from the Latin *lex*, meaning a rule (or system of rules) of conduct laid down and established by an authority, political or otherwise. It is not unusual to encounter the phrase "moral law," which sometimes implies a law above the law. *Law* has also been a common

<sup>2</sup>There are no basic (or justified) differences in the meanings of these two families of words. *Ethics* terms come from Greek roots; *morality* terms are of Latin origin. Historically, they referred to the same subject matter; and in the literature, both ancient and modern, there are no certain or consistent differences. I will use ethics and morality terminology interchangeably.

English translation of the Hebrew *torah*, referring sometimes to the Decalogue, sometimes to all 613 laws in the Pentateuch, sometimes to the Pentateuch as a whole and sometimes to the whole Old Testament. *Torah*, however, must be understood not just as a collection of regulations, but in the broader sense as teaching, instruction and guidance.

*Command* (or *commandment*) comes from the Latin *commendatus*, meaning "to commit to one's charge." A commandment is thus an order or mandate from an authority. This notion of a commander entrusting or charging someone to do something is a central feature of Christian ethics.<sup>3</sup>

### Cover Principles and Area Principles

We should make an important distinction between action guides that are broad, inclusive and general in their field of application, and others that are narrow, specific and limited. The first type is like the Golden Rule ("Do to others as you would have them do to you," Mt 7:12 par. Lk 6:31) or the principle of utility ("Do what results in the greatest good for the greatest number"). Examples of the second would be "Do not murder," "Do not give a patient a deadly drug even if they ask for it" (from the Hippocratic oath), and "Be kind to children and the elderly." Such rules pertain to certain situations or sectors of life.

Some ethicists call the general statements *principles* and the more specific ones *rules*. However, there are no compelling etymological reasons to require this distinction, nor is there anything like a consistent customary usage (e.g., *Golden Rule*). I think it is better to use *principle* and *rule* interchangeably (unless a specific nuance is made clear in context) and to distinguish instead between *cover principles* (or rules) and *area principles* (or rules). The Golden Rule, the principle of utility, the categorical imperative and the love command (see chapter two) are four examples of what I will call *cover principles*. They cover everything, every situation. They are general. In the travel metaphor, these cover principles could be called "rules of the road": they apply to every itinerary at all times. Cover principles help us to have a coherent, integrated, unified moral perspective. Cover

<sup>3</sup>The primary Old Testament term for the Ten Commandments, however, is not *commandment* but *word* (Hebrew *dabar*), i.e., the "Ten Words" from God.

principles remind us of the overarching purpose and intent of our area principles.

*Area principles* include prohibitions such as those against murder, theft and lying, or those enjoining kindness, generosity and truth telling. *Area principles help to make the demands of our general, cover principles more concrete, practical and specific.* In the travel metaphor, I think of these area principles as "itineraries," guidance for how best to explore a certain region. If you want to see Paris, Michelin's green tourist guide will give you twenty-five walking itineraries, pretty much covering the whole city. *I will argue in this book that the Decalogue provides ten such moral itineraries for exploring human life.*

If we press to a level of still greater detail and particularity, some rules can be so specific that even designating them as area guides is too

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*Cover principles are broad, general, inclusive action guides that apply to all situations: for example, "Do to others as you would have them do to you," or "Do what results in the greatest happiness for the greatest number."*

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*Area principles are narrower in focus: for example, "Do not murder" (which applies to human life), "Do not steal" (which applies to property), or "Speak the truth in love" (which applies to speech).*

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broad (e.g., "do not use a photocopy of a copyrighted song unless the composer has been compensated"). We might call this the level of *situation rules*. All of our action guides together form a kind of hierarchy, a pyramid, with the most general cover principles at the top, the area principles in the middle and the specific situation rules on the bottom. The love commandment is a cover principle at the top of the Christian ethics hierarchy,

the Ten Commandments are a set of area principles in the middle, and the hundreds of specific, contextual moral injunctions of Scripture are at the bottom of the hierarchy.

### Improvisation, Spontaneity and Principles

Let's leave the map and travel metaphor for a moment and think about sports. Principles function in the moral life like plays function for competitors in an athletic contest (such as football). Players could, of course, compete in games *only* by improvisation; they could make up plays in the huddle or in the middle of the action. If they played in this

unplanned way, they would probably have a real adventure and their personal self-determination would be fully respected. However, they would almost certainly be soundly defeated by the opposition! Learning ethical principles and rules is like learning life's playbook.

Allow me another metaphor: the jazz ensemble. Improvisation is a basic element in the beauty and joy of jazz. But jazz musicians improvise on a standard or on a theme. It is not total chaos. Playing only the notes on a musical score might be wooden and lifeless, but having no musical score at all would be meaningless noise.

So in sports and music, *and in the moral life*, it is important to preserve those elements of instinct, intuition, feeling and improvisation. To reduce every action to nothing more than interpretation and compliance with a principle or rule would diminish life in a terrible way. On the other hand, if our imagination is not creatively related to some sound rules and principles, our life risks becoming chaotic, meaningless and perhaps even destructive.

### Principles Don't Stand Alone

Sound principles, as crucial as they are, do not stand alone. Let's briefly note a few key relationships.

*Principles and purposes.* Maps derive their value and persuasiveness from the destination or goal of the traveler (arriving at place *X* or exploring neighborhood *Y*). In a similar way, ethical principles and rules guide us toward the achievement of our life goals and purposes. Without a clear, convincing and inspiring "end," moral principles will remain unclear, and irrelevant. People are motivated to behave ethically only when they value the end that such ethical guidance serves.<sup>4</sup> We will never convince others to be more ethical without *first* convincing them that a changed life could serve to bring their lives richer meaning, purpose and direction. This is an absolutely crucial point. We cannot, for example, resolve specific ethical issues among rivals (whether children, spouses, churches, ethnic groups or nations) unless the contending parties embrace a common purpose or goal. A great deal of our ethics (e.g., in business, health care and politics) fails at

<sup>4</sup>This is as true for Kant and other deontologists as it is for frankly teleological theorists. If one does not value rationality, logic and detached universality as ends, Kant's categorical imperative is totally unconvincing.

precisely this point. Later in this chapter we will consider the purpose and goal of Christian ethics.

**Principles and character.** Ethical principles are also linked to personal character. Ethics of character or virtue ("becoming a good person") is like physical conditioning for athletes. Without adequate physical conditioning, the best-designed football plays will fail to lead to victory. Travel, even with good maps, will not be successful without acquiring the capacities to read (maps and signs), to drive cars (of various types), to speak foreign languages (if foreign travel is intended) and so on. A map by itself doesn't get you where you want to go.

Without character, principles and rules are impotent. Many of us profess allegiance to moral principles, and yet these principles do not guide our behavior when the going gets tough. We do what we know is wrong, and we fail to do what we know is right. We lack the strength of character to recall, interpret and apply our own principles when a challenge comes our way. Character traits, virtues, vices and habits define our capacity, inclination and potential to do the right thing.<sup>5</sup>

**Principles and community.** Individual moral agents also need communities if they are to succeed in following their principles. Ethics and morality is a *team* sport, not an individualistic enterprise like singles tennis or marathon running.<sup>6</sup> It is as impossible to be victorious in the moral life (i.e., to achieve our highest good, our mission and purpose) as an ethical Lone Ranger as it is to defeat an opposing football team all by yourself.<sup>7</sup> Travel is possible for individuals, of course. But having one or more people with you to help with the driving or the directions and to encourage you not to give up when you feel hopelessly lost is a much better way to travel.

Community relates to ethical principles in at least two ways. First, our communities (family, friends, influential others) help us *learn* and *discern* our principles and rules. This is their educative function. Sec-

<sup>5</sup>In *Becoming Good* I develop a fuller account of character shaped by the Pauline virtues of faith, hope and love and by Jesus' eight Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. As I said in the preface, I actually began writing *Doing Right* several years before I wrote *Becoming Good*, but I then became convinced that it made no sense to write about principles and action if I didn't first address the character issue.

<sup>6</sup>Of course, the singles tennis player and distance runner need practice and workout partners, coaches, trainers and fans, so these metaphors are not strictly accurate.

<sup>7</sup>Oops! Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. Nobody does it all alone.

ond, our communities provide us with *care* and *support* when the going gets tough in our pursuit of a principled existence. A lack of community can paralyze our ability to carry through a good decision in today's complex and challenging times. (We will return to the role of the church as a critical factor in Christian ethics below.)

**Principles and practices.** Principles require practices; principles need to be applied to life. If a given principle goes unpracticed, we are left to ask whether we really are committed to it. Moral value is achieved in situations where a principle is applied, not just proclaimed; here progress is made along the road toward life's purpose and goal. Maps are to use, not just to mount on the wall. As our principles are practiced, we understand them more fully, and they become more fully embedded in our moral perspective and identity. If they aren't practiced, our principles become mere abstractions. It is one thing to affirm a principle at a theoretical level and quite another to practice it in daily life.

Worse than such abstraction is hypocrisy: when high principles are espoused but one lives in contradiction to them. We don't practice what we preach. We might be moralistically high-minded on matters that cost us little. It's easy to proclaim and practice principles guarding our own personal liberties; it's not so easy to proclaim and practice principles of equality or of compassion for the poor. It is easy for many Christians to proclaim and practice rigorous principles prohibiting homosexual activity; not so easy (it appears) to practice similar rigor concerning divorce and remarriage.

Practicing our ethical principles means allowing them to range proactively across our life like searchlights. Thus, if one of our principles is "Do not kill," why defer its guidance and practice until a tough case of violence rises up? Why not allow this principle to question our whole life? Is there anything in my lifestyle, my activities or my attitudes that contributes to violence and killing in the world? Is there anything in my business (or my political party or my church) that contributes in this negative way? Am I doing anything in a positive way to head off the causes of killing and violence, or am I blind and apathetic in this violent world, excusing myself from moral self-scrutiny just because I don't shoot people?

**Principles and cases.** Inevitably, of course, ethical crises and di-

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STEPS IN FACING ETHICAL CASES, DILEMMAS  
AND QUANDARIES

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1. **Recognize.** (Ask yourself, *Is this an important ethical problem or not?*)
  2. **Analyze.** (If it is an important ethical problem, it deserves your careful consideration.)
  3. **Resolve.** (Do the best, most responsible thing you can.)
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to others, like sharing a reliable map with some lost travelers. Second, we must have an effective method for resolving ethical crises and quandaries. No method can guarantee a perfect process or outcome; but with care, we can minimize damages and maximize good outcomes, both in the short- and long-term. My proposed method outlines three processes in facing the ethical dilemmas of our lives: recognition, analysis and resolution.

We begin by determining whether the matter that concerns us is truly an important ethical problem. Sometimes this is not at all clear. The best way to recognize a legitimate ethical crisis is to ask some questions:<sup>8</sup>

- Would Jesus do this? Would Jesus question it?
- Does it violate clear biblical teaching about right and wrong?
- Does it go against basic Christian teaching and tradition?
- Does it violate your (or another's) conscience?
- Would you like this done to you or your loved ones (per the Golden Rule)?
- Could someone be seriously harmed?
- Would this practice continue if it were publicized? (Most unethical acts flourish in secrecy: "People [love] darkness rather than light because their deeds [are] evil," Jn 3:19.)
- Is it illegal? (Ethics is always more than mere compliance with laws,

<sup>8</sup>This set of questions is tailored to *Christian* ethics. In a general business setting, the questions would be phrased a little differently.

and laws themselves have on occasion been unethical, but breaking the law is often a tip-off that something is wrong.)

If you answer yes to some or all of the preceding eight questions—that is, the situation has tested positive for an “ethics infection”—we must go on to stage two and carry out the best analysis we can under the circumstances. There are three aspects needing careful analysis: First, clarify the ethical principles and values at stake. What is crucially and clearly important to God here? We must weigh these competing values and later justify our proposal by appealing to these principles. Second, clarify the relevant facts of the case. Many apparent ethical dilemmas are resolved by this step alone. Third, clarify the options we have for action and the possible outcomes of each. This step is not easy, especially predicting consequences, but we must not barge ahead without considering the possible benefits and harms of our actions.

In all of this analysis, we are required to investigate carefully and prayerfully, to do good research, to think critically and to humbly depend on God to guide us. What the crisis also begs for is some real creativity and imagination, especially in the face of hard ethical challenges. Can we find or invent a win-win solution that will honor the ethical principle, minimize damage and harm, and maximize positive outcomes? So often when bad, unethical things are done, the way we handle them bungles things even worse. Finally, we should, as much as possible, get advice from others. Share the burden, the thinking and the responsibility. There is safety and wisdom in community-derived ethical discernment. Don't try to be an individualistic hero if you have the slightest chance to work with others when confronting an ethical crisis.

Some ethical crises will blow over and disappear, but others will not; we must bite the bullet and act to resolve them as faithfully and courageously as possible. The time comes when we must bring to a close our analytical, imaginative and consultative process and choose the best, most responsible option we can come up with. We must act, even though we know we are not perfect. In the short-term, we hope the crisis can be resolved by appealing directly to the principal offender. If this doesn't work, we bring another person or two into the process, trying to resolve it without going public. And if that doesn't work, public whistleblowing may be necessary (i.e., going over or around the offending individual or organization to authorities inside or outside the con-

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ETHICAL PRINCIPLES DO NOT STAND ALONE.  
THEY ALSO REQUIRE

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- a compelling mission and purpose to serve
  - strength of personal character
  - a community for discernment and support
  - proactive, practical application in daily life
  - a faithful, effective method to resolve crisis cases
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it is possible to follow through with the ethical offenders themselves—to help them see what went wrong and avoid making the same mistake again—so much the better for all concerned.

### Picking Our Principles: Christian Cartography

We all operate, even if thoughtlessly or inconsistently, by some *de facto* principles. A careful observer could figure out what ethical principles and rules are implicit in our choices and actions. We inherit some basic values and principles from our family, church and friends, and we absorb others from the influence of the surrounding culture. Sometimes our ethical commitments are a fairly trivial, casual, thoughtless affair, based mostly on uninformed feelings and preferences. But this can hardly be a very satisfactory way to live, especially for Christians who are called to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5).

Thus, we must consider what makes an ethical principle “Christian.” Cartography is the art and science of mapmaking. How should we approach the task of Christian moral cartography, mapping out an authentically Christian ethics? Many erroneous and counterfeit moralities have been attributed to Christianity over the past two millennia.

text and forcing the issue until the offense is stopped and the harm is addressed).<sup>9</sup>

But an ethics challenge is not fully addressed until we follow through on those immediate actions with ongoing, deeper reforms of the structures, procedures and circumstances that caused or allowed that ethical problem to occur in the first place. To fail to do this thorough work is to invite further crises. If

Though it is sad and shameful to have to review the parade of allegedly Christian crusaders, inquisitors, racists, sexists, imperialists, holy warriors and quietist dropouts, we should not be completely surprised by such a motley crew.<sup>10</sup> All good causes in history—including all religions, political movements and social reform efforts—have been exploited, betrayed, diverted and co-opted at various times. Fellow travelers, hucksters and opportunists lurk around the edges of every good movement and organization waiting for their chance. Too often they manage to get into the driver’s seat.

Still, the proper response to our spotty Christian moral history is neither to make excuses nor to assign blame, but to try again. I want to argue that the construction of an authentic Christian ethic—the design of a Christian ethical map—proceeds from four sources.<sup>11</sup> From highest to lowest priority (or from the center to the periphery), these are Jesus Christ, the Bible, the church and the world. We have to leave room for a range of opinion and judgment here, but we cannot accept everything that appropriates the label of “Christian” ethics.

### An Ethics Centered on Jesus Christ

The primary, foundational, central authority in Christian ethics is the person of Jesus Christ, whom Christians affirm as Savior, Lord and God. Jesus Christ is our ethical mapmaker and guide; he is the Lord, Master and Captain of our moral life. If we want to know the right thing to do—or what justice is, or what love requires, or what is good—we look to Jesus Christ as our central authority. When other guidance is unclear, Jesus is our clarifying center.

Tragically, even among Christians, Jesus Christ has often *not* been

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<sup>9</sup>Remember Jesus’ instruction on how to deal with an erring brother. First go to him privately; then go with one or two others if the first visit wasn’t productive. Only if you fail at this second stage should you publicize it to the whole church (Mt 18:15–20).

<sup>10</sup>A very helpful study of this painful past is Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986). The bad stuff should not blind us to the awesome good done by Christians throughout the centuries. Most of the time, I am convinced, Christian faith has brought real improvements to individuals and to communities and nations.

<sup>11</sup>Metaethics (Greek for “after ethics”) is the branch of moral philosophy that studies questions of justification (the grounding of moral norms and values), the definition of moral terminology and the logic of moral arguments. This chapter is my metaethics, although I am more concerned about justifying (and clearly defining) my approach to the people who will be using it than comparing it to some standard set up in the philosophers’ guild.

the Lord and center of ethics. Some excuse this rejection by saying that we cannot know the real, true, historical Jesus and, thus, we cannot base our ethics on what is illusive. Others have argued that Jesus' mission was purely spiritual and inward, that he never intended to teach anybody ethics. Still others think that Jesus taught some ethics, but not for us; that is, his ethics apply only to first-century Palestine, or to a future millennium, or just to monks and saints, not to ordinary people like you and me.

But Jesus *must* be at center of Christian ethics. Christians are followers and disciples of Jesus Christ. We are not Paulians, Mosesians, Lutherans or Darbyites, but Christians.<sup>12</sup> We believe in the incarnation; we believe that God himself assumed human form in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus knows God and Jesus knows humanity. Jesus is the "one who in every respect has been tested as we are" and yet never yielded to sin. He alone can be the understanding captain of our ethical ship (Heb 2:8-18; 4:14-16).

Jesus is the Word of God, the message and representative of God, revealed in our human flesh and history. Jesus is the Messiah, the focal point of the whole Bible, the "exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3), the one in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:19) on our earth. God has revealed himself at many times, in many places, in many different ways. But *only* in Jesus is God's self-revelation *exact*; elsewhere it is true but *inexact*. *Only* in Jesus did *all the fullness* of God dwell; elsewhere it is *partial* (Jn 1:1-18; Lk 24:27, 44).

Jesus Christ gets the first and last words on what is right and wrong. He completely fulfilled the law and was always guided by Holy Spirit. With him the kingdom of God truly arrived and the will of the Father was truly done, on earth as it is in heaven. The church is called the body of Christ—a powerful image that implies our serious effort to know and to carry on what Jesus was and did in his own bodily history.

The agenda for Christian ethics is set primarily and fundamentally by God. Of course, people should freely bring their problems and questions to God. But we also should bring a pen and blank sheets of paper to make notes on what God thinks is ethically important. The empha-

<sup>12</sup>This is to say nothing of potential nonbiblical centers such as Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Adam Smith, Adolf Hitler or Uncle Sam. For authentic *Christian* ethics there can be only one center: Jesus the *Christ*.

sis on a God-centered ethics would be hard to accept, except that God has come alongside us, in our human history, in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who anchors and reveals an ethics from above. Jesus Christ is still very much alive and seeks a *living* relationship with people. The ethical traveler relates not just to a map but to the Mapmaker. In a Christian ethic, our participating in evil is more fundamentally a breaking of God's heart and a breach of faith with our Ruler than a breaking of the rules (though it is that as well). Christian ethics proceeds in prayer, worship and a daily life in relationship with God.

### Guided by Scripture

We do not know about Jesus Christ and the transcendent God he incarnates, however, except through a book, the Bible, the map for Christian ethics. Actually, to refer to the Bible as a map is too weak. The Bible is not just a map, it is an atlas! The Bible includes *many* different maps, many different views of life's terrain and abundant ethical directions to help us navigate our way toward the goal. While it is a huge atlas with many contributors over several centuries, Christians believe there is but one overall editor-in-chief and one clear thematic center to our atlas.

Some people think that Scripture cannot suffice as our ethical guide (or that major parts of it must be rejected). Sometimes this is because it seems irrelevant: the differences between the cultural and political world of the Bible and our own seem too great.<sup>13</sup> Some biblical scholars have been reticent to do any more with the biblical text than probe (though sometimes rather speculatively, on meager evi-

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The person of Jesus Christ is always the central guide in Christian ethics.

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<sup>13</sup>Rupert Davies says boldly, "We can abolish at a stroke the myriad regulations laid down in the Pentateuch, and in subsequent rabbinical and Christian rule-books. Life continually bursts the bounds of ethical manuals, and it is absolutely useless to go through the Old and New Testaments in order to find a rule which we can apply in a modern situation." *Making Sense of the Commandments* (London: Epworth, 1990), p. 25. It boggles the mind to read this kind of stuff. Davies, with one wave of the hand (he provides no convincing reasons), dismisses the Golden Rule and everything else.

dence) for its historical development. For some, the purpose of the Bible seems to be religious rather than ethical. For others, biblical ethics seems contradictory—egalitarian but then hierarchical, peaceful but then warlike. Some reject biblical ethics because it seems negative and legalistic, too full of “you shall not” statements. Worst of all, to some, much of the Bible seems self-evidently immoral; they are disturbed by tribal and religious wars of extermination, polygamy, the oppression of women, the toleration of slavery, the shrill condemnation of homosexuals, arbitrarily restrictive dietary laws and the counsel to passivity before tyranny, violence and injustice. Furthermore, many of the Bible’s loudest defenders throughout history seem self-serving, angry, judgmental, hypocritical, ignorant, unethical and downright dangerous! So there are lots of reasons and excuses not to look for a biblical ethics.

I agree that many of these are serious and important issues, but I argue that Scripture must remain the second great source and authority in Christian ethics for several reasons. The main reason is that **source number one (Jesus) urges and requires us to take Scripture seriously.** (And, by the way, he was never guilty of teaching or practicing the problems mentioned in the previous paragraph. If we keep Jesus as the center of our ethics, the foregoing list of problems rapidly diminishes.) Jesus constantly quoted Scripture, explained it and treated it as a source of authoritative guidance (Lk 24:27). He saw the Old Testament as an illuminating explanation and prophecy of his own life. He promised the Spirit’s guidance for the future leaders of the church, who would write the New Testament (Jn 14:25-26; 16:12-15).

One of the latest texts in the New Testament expresses the early church’s attitude: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). While there have been differences of opinion over the centuries, the Christian church has accepted and set apart this book as the written Word of God. Luther, for example, was passionate about the importance of studying Scripture: “Time and paper would fail me if I were to recount all the blessings that flow from God’s Word. . . . Shall we frivolously despise this might, blessing, power, and fruit . . . ? If so, we deserve not only to be refused food but

also to be chased out by dogs and pelted with dung.”<sup>14</sup> John Coleman Bennett, one of the outstanding liberal Protestant leaders of the twentieth century, also called for a renewed Christian ethic that would be based on “the Bible with Jesus as the center.”<sup>15</sup>

What does Scripture do for our ethics?<sup>16</sup> How does it contribute to our mapmaking? When received as the Word of God, it nurtures and sustains our relationship to Jesus Christ (our primary ethical authority) and also places us in relationship to Israel and the church, “people of the book” formed and shaped by the authority of the Bible. Reading the Bible reinforces our family tradition, our story and our identity, and it shapes our personal character and values.

The Bible provides many specific ethical laws, commandments, counsels, criteria, principles and norms, which in turn help us draw a moral map and then interpret and apply it. Of course, the ethic of Scripture is conveyed not just by its explicit principles and rules but by its stories, poems, proverbs and parables, by apocalyptic and prophetic visions, by Gospel and letter writing, even by genealogical lists and census reports. There is more to a good atlas than austere lines, street names and numbers.

Scripture is not always clear to its readers or self-interpreting. To avoid getting lost or misunderstanding, we must remember the first principle for the interpretation of biblical ethics: Jesus is the center, the apex, the clearest revelation of what is right and good. When other parts of the Bible are unclear or hazy (e.g., on war, children, women, slavery, money), we look to Jesus to find clarity. Second, we must be careful to distinguish major points from minor ones, and what is clearly and frequently taught from what is rarely and obscurely taught in the Bible. We should concentrate on the classic texts, the ethical summaries and master themes, not the rare and obscure texts. We must also understand the historical context and flow of the biblical teaching—that God participated in specific historical-cultural con-

<sup>14</sup>Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, trans. Robert H. Fischer (1529; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup>John Coleman Bennett, *The Radical Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), pp. 29ff.

<sup>16</sup>On Scripture and ethics, see Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976).

texts, sometimes as a "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12 KJV). The Bible is not an account of abstract, detached moral perfection; it provides guidance for people in contexts that are often messy and fall far below God's intention (e.g., polygamy, war). Third, as we will discuss in the next section, our understanding of Scripture should always be informed by what Israel and the church have believed it to mean.

**The Bible, with Jesus at the center, is the atlas of Christian ethics.**



### Informed by the Church

The third source of Christian ethical guidance is the community of faith: other people who share a relationship with God as we know him in Jesus and Scripture. This is the primary

Christian response to the point that principles need community, which I made earlier. This means, of course, the church, the *koinōnia* (Greek for "community"), but community also comes in the form of families, households, small groups and friendships. Individualism may be valued in some philosophical traditions and in American cultural myths, but it is blatantly out of place in the ethics of Jesus and Scripture. Ethical pilgrims not only need a Bible to navigate their way through the world, they need also some partners—not only the atlas but a Society of Atlas Readers. All authentic Christian ethics is *koinōnia* ethics. Why is this so important?

Humanity was created as *cohumanity* in the image and likeness of the triune God ("Let us make man in *our* image. . . . In the image of God he created *them*," Gen 1:26-27, italics added). The only time God declares that something is not good in creation is when he says, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). The Ten Commandments are given to a *people* liberated from Egypt, not just to Moses or to an individual pilgrim escapee. The Sermon on the Mount, and all other major biblical ethical instruction, is given to groups, not isolated individuals. We are given no reason to think that individuals will ever be able to understand and carry out this guidance without help from others.

Jesus sent his disciples out two by two, not one by one (Mk 6:7). He promised his presence "where two or three are gathered in my name" (Mt 18:20). Paul asks (in 1 Cor 12:21), how can members of the church say they have no need of other members? "[Do] not think of yourself

more highly than you ought to think," Paul says at the beginning of his major ethical passage (Rom 12:3-8). Remember that you are only one member of the body of Christ and you need the others (1 Cor 12:12-26).

The Bible itself did not just drop out of the sky; nor does it copy, translate or reprint itself. It does not interpret and apply itself without human participation. The Bible is found in the church, the people of God, the dwelling place of God's living, holy Spirit. The church is (in one of its major functions) the Society of Atlas Readers, gathering to study and preserve this central text. God is present not just in Jesus Christ and in the pages of Scripture, but in the church, its members and activities. Certainly, God calls us to responsibility and helps us as unique individuals known by him. Being isolated is never a sufficient or valid excuse for failing to do God's will. But community and partnership are the normal ethical context.

How does the church help us? It directs its members to God and to Jesus Christ, the center and source of our ethics. By its teaching and storytelling, by its affirmation or criticism, community shapes our identity and character and builds up our knowledge of God's moral guidance. Community acts as a pilot project and testing ground for our understanding of what is right (e.g., our views of decision making, racial reconciliation or the care of the poor). Our community is a model and witness, for better or worse, to the world. Remember that Jesus prayed that his followers would be united in love so that the world would believe (Jn 17:20-21; cf. Jn 13:34-35). Our relationships together bear witness to a world in need of salt and light.

Community in its various forms is absolutely essential for *discerning* the right thing to do. "In an abundance of counselors there is safety" (Prov 11:14). The complexity and scope of today's ethical challenges can overwhelm isolated individuals. Being part of a prayerful, thoughtful community will vastly improve our likelihood of accurately interpreting both our situation and the appropriate guidance from Scripture. This is more than just a matter of common sense. Jesus granted authority to his church to bind and to loose, a metaphor for moral decision making (Mt 16:19).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>See John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 26-28.

Community is essential also to *support* us during the application of what we have discerned as ethically right. Figuring out what to do is extremely difficult, but carrying it out can be even harder. We need each other. This is such a core point in Christian ethics that we could say that it is wrong to advise a difficult course of action and then fail to be there to support those burdened with applying our counsel.

**The church—past and present, near and far, with the Bible as its atlas and Jesus as its center—helps teach and interpret Christian ethics.**



Our agenda, then, is to create (or discover) and sustain meaningful community—from friendship and household to church.

We will benefit greatly by taking some steps to enrich and expand our community input, deepening our knowledge of our own historical tradition and broadening our knowledge of people in other geographical and cultural settings. We need community in both large and small groups, among both experts and nonexperts, with both old and young.<sup>18</sup>

### Practiced in the World

God's world contributes to our Christian ethical mapmaking in two basic ways. First, the world of nature and society *around us* can bear witness to what is true, right and good. Second, our own nature and conscience *within us* can bear witness to that ethical truth. In both cases we must be careful, for we can easily misinterpret and misapply these witnesses. But remember, this is the *fourth* source of mapmaking guidance, subordinate to the three sources above it. Paul argues that "his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom 1:20). By carefully looking at humanity, society and nature as a whole, we can learn some ethical basics. Paul also says that the law of God is "written on [the human] heart." Thus, our interior conscience bears witness to God's moral guid-

<sup>18</sup>On the role of community in Christian ethics, see James M. Gustafson, *Christian Ethics and the Community* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1971).

ance in some way (Rom 2:15). Paul concludes, of course, that these two sources have been unable to produce righteousness and goodness in our lives. But the thrust of his argument is that *by themselves* they are inadequate, not that we have no use for them at all. They can teach us something true, even if it is not sufficient.

Calvin argued that the Ten Commandments teach what is known or knowable "by that internal law, which . . . is in a manner written and stamped on every heart. For conscience . . . acts as an inward witness and monitor, reminds of what we owe to God, points out the distinction between good and evil." The written law, Calvin says, is necessary because of our "dullness and contumacy" and our "lethargy."<sup>19</sup>

We cannot forget that God created the whole world, not just the Garden of Eden, and that he made it "very good." Adam and Eve were banned from Eden, but they were not banned from the rest of the world, which God also created and called "good." Though the world is fallen and our sight is dim and susceptible to deception, still "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps 19:1). Adam and Eve sinned and erred by seizing the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the "ethics tree"). In so doing they gave up a direct knowledge of goodness through an unhindered, uncorrupted relation with the God who pronounces that his creation is good; but remember that God also created that ethics tree from which they ate. What they received, even if second best, was still a certain kind of divinely created "knowledge of good and evil."

And God is still at work in human life and culture. For example, God adopts human language. The Ten Commandments begin, "God spoke all these words" (Ex 20:1). God's revelation is contextualized in human language and culture. God did not speak and write in a special otherworldly language; he communicated in the language of a particular, fallen, human culture. And Jesus took on flesh just like yours and mine, not some special kryptonite superflesh.

While retaining a critical and mature judgment, we should be open and receptive to what God might be saying to us through the world around us. The world may be messed up, but it is still *God's world*, and therefore it is far from worthless. We may personally be very messed

<sup>19</sup>Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.8.1.

up human beings, but we are still made in *God's image* and likeness. If God can speak through Balaam's donkey, he can certainly speak through anything in his world or any of us.<sup>20</sup>

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**God's creation—the world, its peoples and cultures, its learning and experience—also contributes to Christian ethical guidance.**

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and humanities, even its religions and myths must not be arbitrarily dismissed. God has spoken to us (and still speaks) in many different ways.

The world is the arena in which our Christian ethics are to be practiced. This very practice helps us to understand God's guidance. God's ethical guidance "fits" with our life experience in a profound way. Theories, as someone has said, relate to reality (the facts) like shoes relate to feet. A wide variety of shoe styles and designs are possible, but there are limitations, at least if we want shoes we can actually walk in. An elegant appearance has some importance, but the true test of a shoe is whether our feet are comfortable and protected as we walk over a period of time through varied terrain and weather. So too with our ethical systems and theories. Can we actually live with them? Are they practical? Do they make sense of our life and help us through all kinds of situational terrain and weather? Our initial reaction to God's guidance is often shock. It may seem to us absurd to forgive, or to be generous, or to protect marriages so aggressively, or to resist covetousness, and so on. But a deeper examination, and a bit of practical testing of the concepts, will show that what appeared at first to be foolish is profoundly wise. Nature and experience confirm the truth.

Whether Christian or not, all people continue to bear the image and likeness of God. Yes, the world and humanity are sinful and fallen, but *so too is the church*, and yet we can still sense God's presence within it. We need to weigh critically the world's witness on the scales of Scripture and Jesus, and then to accept what is good. The world's philosophy and science, its arts

### Three Reasons to Travel: Three Purposes of Christian Ethics

Why travel? What could motivate us to get out a map or guidebook and use it? What are the results and benefits that make it worthwhile? Some people travel to escape boredom, criticism or danger. Others travel for more positive reasons, perhaps in search of great natural beauty (such as the fjords of Norway) or art and architecture (in Paris or the Alhambra in Granada), or to meet people and experience other cultures (through music, art, food, language). All of these positive reasons are what motivate me to travel. I buy a Michelin *Green Guide* and start planning a trip because I want these results. Travel is also hard work and is often expensive; if it were not for good reasons such as these, I might stay home.

We need to raise the same question about Christian ethics. Why study it? What are the reasons that motivate us, the benefits and pay-offs that make it worthwhile? Why should we work at developing the Christian ethical map and then using it to guide our daily lives? What will our efforts accomplish? Earlier, I argued that just as our desired destination makes a map important, so too a life mission makes ethical principles important. I want to propose a threefold mission served by Christian ethics.

**1. It's good for you.** First, a Christian ethic can guide you in ways that you and yours will truly be blessed. This is not the only or the main reason, but it remains valid and important. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). He promised that all who lose their life will gain it back again (e.g., Mk 8:35). "Your reward is great in heaven," Jesus promises, but even in this lifetime we will be "blessed" as Jesus' Beatitudes describe (Mt 5:12). Being "blessed" (Gk. *makarios*) does not just mean feeling happy (having positive emotional feelings); blessedness is a state of well-being. It's *good for you* to be meek, merciful, pure in heart and so on (Mt 5:3-11).

The Old Testament makes the same point. Love God and keep his commandments "so that you may live" and experience God's "steadfast love" (Deut 4:1; 5:10), so that your "days will be long" and it will "go well" with you "all the days of your life" in a "land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut 6:2-3). "Do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, so that it may go well with you. . . . The LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for

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<sup>20</sup>See Num 22:21-34. This is surely one of the most comforting of all stories for those occasions when we feel inadequate and uncertain that God can use us.

our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case" (Deut 6:18, 24).

The Christian life does entail, of course, some sacrifice and long-suffering. Christianity does not bring automatic health, wealth and happiness, nor does it insulate us from the difficulties of life and death. But neither does any other philosophy or religion in this world. Christianity is profoundly realistic about the trials and tribula-

tions of human life and offers a way of coping with them—by bringing resurrection and hope into our broken world. Even in the hardest of times, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23:4), the best map to follow is the biblical Christian one. No one understands human life like its Creator, and no one under-

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**Being good and doing right the Christian way do not bring us a life without pain, struggle or failure, but they are the best ways of understanding and coping with such challenges, and often bring joy, friendship, contentment, meaning, comfort, freedom and hope.**

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stands human pain, alienation and struggle—and how to overcome them—like our Redeemer.

**2. It's good for our neighbors.** Second, when we travel by the Christian ethical map, we bring blessing and benefit to our neighbors and the nations around us. Jesus taught an ethic that would create "salt" (which preserves against deterioration) and "light" (which provides conditions for vision and growth) in the world. He did not just offer personal blessing for his followers. The promise to Abraham was that through his descendants "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 11:3). Israel was chosen by God to be a light to the nations, not just a self-contained private enclave.

You must observe [the Ten Commandments] diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:6-8)

The Christian ethical map does not lead to selfishness, even though following it is in our best interest and is good for us. It is a map that is also good for the world, for our neighbors both near and distant, contemporary and future.

**3. God is pleased.** Third, following the Christian ethics map leads to God's glory and blessing. Jesus says that when people see our good works they will "give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16). Near the end of his earthly pilgrimage, Jesus himself could say in his prayer, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do" (Jn 17:4). For us too, doing God's work—following his ethical map—brings glory and pleasure to God.

At its foundation, Christian ethics depends on, assumes and sustains a covenant relationship with God: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Jer 7:23). A personal relationship with God underlies the whole ethic. Christian ethical action guides are not just abstract rules or autonomous principles. We relate more to a Commander than to commandments. We are called to *love* God, *seek* God, *live* with God, *talk* with God, *glorify* and *please* God. Christian ethical guidelines are directions on how to arrive at that place where God is glorified.

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**The Christian ethical life is not just good for its practitioners; it is also good for its neighbors, near and far. Doing the right thing in a Christian ethic blesses and helps others.**

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**The primary motivation of our ethical efforts should be to please God. But this does not mean being faithful to a Christian ethic is not at the very same time good for our neighbors and good for us.**

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### For Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the map metaphor for ethics? What other images, metaphors or explanations might help us understand what ethics is and does in our lives?
2. What are some of your basic ethical principles and rules? Where did you get these from? How have you grappled with ethical dilemmas or crises in the past?