Reading assignment: Verhey 3-48

I. Introduction to Christian Ethics

A. What is Christian Ethics?

1. Verhey – “What should I do” is the question of Christian ethics (3).
2. Aim of Christian ethics – to help people think about choices
3. What you should do (ethics) is connected to who you are.
4. Gonzalez – ethics – a moral code or series of practices deemed morally acceptable; “the study of the principles, rules, and the like by which Christian conduct is to be guided, and of their application to a specific situation.” (55)
5. Verhey – three aspects of Christian ethics:
   a. The moral discourse of the Christian community – discussions about what the church should do (involve personal vs. communal responsibilities);
   b. The moral deliberation of the Christian community – deciding why & how we should act (directed through Holy Spirit’s renewal of church through spiritual disciplines [Acts 2:42 apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer] - remembering who Jesus is, so we can know who we are);
   c. The moral discernment of the Christian community – what choices fit the gospel (criteria - place, people, biblical goal of the function of the church [Eph. 4:12], timing, needs). Why we should do certain things based on their appropriateness with our identity as the church.

6. What role does Christian memory play in Christian ethics and what are the constituent parts of Christian memory?
   a. Remembrance constitutes Christian identity and community (worship – communion [anamnesis], baptism). Memory not just mental recollection of historical data; memory involves owning a particular history.
   b. Remembrance constitutes identity (who we are as a church – ecclesiology); dispositions (attitudes & perspectives); and deeds (ethical behavior).

B. What is the relationship between Christian teaching & Christian ethics?

1. For the early church, they were interconnected & inseparable. Hauerwas – “Once there was no Christian ethics simply because Christians could not distinguish between their beliefs and their behavior. They assumed that their lives exemplified . . . their doctrines . . . ” (Hauerwas, 22)
2. Hebrew word “to hear” (shma) is the same word for “to obey,” suggesting these were not separate actions but directly connected. Hearing God's word was integrally connected with obedience.

3. Hauerwas – ethics was not an aspect of life for the early Christians, it was inclusive of all that constituted a person's life (24-25). In other words, early Christians' entire focus was on how they were to live their lives. Point: There was no separation between doctrine (religious teaching) and Christian ethics (how to live a Christian lifestyle).

II. Ethical Theories – Explanations for why we act (motives & reasons):

A. Nonconsequentialist ethical theories – those based on absolutes & not directly based on an anticipated outcome. They may be a combination of deontological (rule-based), axiological (values-based), and/or teleological (explained as the ends for which those involved were created, e.g. predestination).

   a. Universality – only do what you can accept or will that everyone do.
   b. Intrinsic value of persons – do not use people as a means, action not based on outcome. Act based on duty to a moral law through reason.

2. Virtue ethics – based on idealized character qualities (good, truth, beauty, love) which lead to right action. Internal motivation to love & do what is right (Wilkens, 115-132) Virtue is a process of growth toward a standard of perfection.

3. Divine command theory (theological voluntarism) – God is source of truth and communicates his will through commands. (Wilkens, 169-186)
   a. Humans must follow rules, but God is not bound by rules
   b. Good & evil are created by God
   c. Humans can't understand God's purpose.

4. Natural Law ethics – natural laws originate from God and are instilled in human nature through reason (Aquinas) (Wilkens, 149-168). Primary basis is doing good, secondary basis – laws of culture e.g. Ten commandments. Weakness: Denies human depravity & assumes good in all people.

B. Consequentialist ethical theories – those based on anticipated outcome

1. Cultural relativism – right & wrong is determined by the standards of a given culture at a specific time. (Wilkens, 29-44)

2. Ethical egoism – acting on the basis of self-interest (Wilkens 45-62)
3. Behaviorism – actions are conditioned by environment (B.F. Skinner). (Wilkens, 63-81)

4. Utilitarianism – actions are based on what will create happiness for the greatest number (Bentham & J.S. Mill). (Wilkens, 83-98)

5. Situation ethics – makes love the basis of action, while all other ethical norms are contingent (no rules) (Fletcher). Decisions are based solely on the situation (Wilkens 133-148)

III. Ethical Approaches

A. Narrative ethics – the use of stories, such as biblical stories of Jesus, as the basis for action.

B. Deontological ethics – principles, rules, or laws such as the Ten Commandments or imperative guidelines in the New Testament – “Don't let the sun go down on your anger.”

C. Heroic ethics – emphasis is upon a heroic figure as the model for action or as a warning to correct action as the hero embodied certain virtues or vices.

D. Virtue ethics – as above, it emphasizes the modeling of positive character traits

E. Casuistic or contextual ethics – the examination of specific cases as a basis for action.

F. Biblical ethics – the Bible as the basis of moral behavior.

For Further Reading:


