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The Challenge of Contradiction

There can be little doubt that the morality espoused by biblical Christianity has been under relentless attack for some time. Secularists with anti-theistic ideals take special delight in deriding the values and ethics which Christians hold. The "ethics of the Bible," states Charles Watts, past vice-president of England's National Secular Society, "are both contradictory and impracticable. The same line of conduct is enjoined in one passage, and just as explicitly prohibited in another."¹ Similar sentiments abound on the Internet. A web-based article written by a Unitarian Universalist lists a series of supposedly conflicting Christian values and then asserts that "Christian ethics is topsy-turvy and convoluted. It is just a mess."²

Because of these apparent contradictions, it is argued, the logic of the Bible is not a monolithic system of absolutes; to derive any cogent ethical standards from a Biblical standpoint is therefore an utter impossibility. As Watts posits, "...[The Bible] cannot with advantage be accepted as an absolute monitor in human conduct."³ This objection stems from the Law of Non-contradiction, which logicians define by stating that 'A' cannot be equal to the negation of 'A.'⁴ In other words, something cannot be both one thing and its opposite at the same time, in the same way, or in the same sense.⁵ For this reason, those of a rationalistic bent often cry foul when God prohibits premeditated murder in the Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-17) and then enjoins capital punishment only one chapter later (Exodus 21:12). How, they

ask, can it simultaneously be both right and wrong to kill another human being? If it is wrong to kill and yet God commands that a murderer be killed for his crime, then God cannot be obeyed (one must put a murderer to death) without concurrently being disobeyed (one must not kill) as well.

Such objections deserve solid answers -- not merely for the sake of refuting anti-Christian arguments, but also because Christians are called upon to demonstrate the ethics of the Bible through their lives. How do adherents of the Gospel respond to this criticism of contradiction? More importantly, how do Christians make ethical decisions when the Bible prescribes courses of action which seem to contradict one another?

The answer to these questions lies within the revelatory nature of Christian ethics. As will be demonstrated, understanding and obeying biblical principles, *especially* when they appear to contradict, hinges upon a thorough, first-hand knowledge of the nature and character of God. It is beyond the scope of this study to do an exhaustive survey of God's nature and character. However, in order to form a general guiding principle for making godly ethical decisions, a brief overview of God's attributes and how they are known must be undertaken. This principle will then be applied to biblical examples of ethical decision-making when the mandates of God's Law appear to contradict one another.

The Necessity of Divine Revelation

"One of the distinctions of the Judeo-Christian God," says Francis Schaeffer, "is that not all things are the same to him. That may at first may sound rather trivial, but in reality it is one of the most profound things one can say about the Judeo-Christian God. He exists; He has a character; and not all things are the same to Him. Some things conform to His character, and some are opposed to His character."⁶ It could be said, therefore, that Christian ethics is concerned with what conforms to the character of God and what does not.⁷

The Bible explicitly teaches that Christians are to abstain from immoral patterns of behavior exhibited by those who do not know God (I Thessalonians 4:3-5). Hence the need for an understanding of God's nature and character -- one cannot properly adhere to a behavioral code that is founded in the very person of God if they do not know what He is like or what He expects of them. In his book *Christian Personal Ethics*, Carl F. H. Henry underscores this point by arguing that the morality of Christianity is synonymous with what he terms "revelational ethics":

The Hebrew-Christian revelation unveils the fact that God and the good are inseparable considerations. . . . Genuine ethics is theonomous, the good is God-formulated. . . . The ethics of Divine revelation . . . [exhibits] the good as the will of God alone.⁸

This indissoluble bond between God and "the good" (cf. Mark 10:18) means that the knowledge of God is an indispensable aid

to making godly ethical decisions; to know something of God's nature and character is to have an understanding of what conduct is good and right. Behavior that is objectively good and right has its formulation and origin in the nature and character of God alone.

So the question remains: How does mankind know anything about what God is like?

The Forms of Divine Revelation

Among Christians, it is generally accepted that God has revealed Himself to mankind through *general* and *special* revelation. As Norman Geisler puts it, "God has revealed Himself . . . in His world . . . and in His Word."⁹ God's self-revelation through His world is referred to as *general revelation* because it is available to all mankind; *special revelation* refers to a more "particular, focused, and specific" self-revelation of God which is available only to "those who have access to the Bible or its truths."¹⁰

It is clear from Scriptures such as Romans 1:19-20 that God has specific and essential attributes which are plainly evident to all men:

[That] which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul first develops the assertion

of Genesis 1:26 that mankind is made in the image and likeness of God -- according to Paul, what men can know about God "is evident within them." As the image-bearer of God, mankind carries within his soul part of God's self-revelation. In practical terms, what does this mean? According to Romans 2:14-15, when those who do not have the benefit of special revelation (in this case, the written Law of God) "instinctively" do what the Law requires, they demonstrate that God has written the Law on their hearts. In other words, God is revealed in the ethical code He has placed within the conscience of every man and woman. Paul further states that God's "invisible attributes," particularly His "eternal power and divine nature," can be seen through creation. Perhaps Paul had Psalm 19:1-2,4 in mind as he penned his letter to the Roman church:

The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. . . . Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world.

All mankind has only to gaze at the expanse of the heavens and the beauty of the earth in order to see the profound intellect and awesome power of a Creator at work behind the splendor of creation. *General revelation*, therefore, consists of God's self-revelation to all men through creation and the human conscience.¹¹

Unfortunately for the unbeliever, the problem of sin obscures this general revelation. The image and likeness of God in humanity has been sullied by the rebellion of Adam and every subsequent generation since the fall of man (Romans 5:12). As a result, mankind is predisposed to love darkness rather than light (John 3:19), to suppress the truth of God's nature and character in unrighteousness rather than embrace it (Romans 1:18). The moral judgment of unregenerate man is therefore fundamentally impaired. Even the most "logical" arguments against the ethics of God's Law are inherently flawed because of a predisposition in the human heart to love falsity instead of truth. As Paul says in Romans 8:7, the carnal mind of man "is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the Law of God, *for it is not even able to do so.*" To those who bemoan the "illogical" (or, as Watts puts it, "impracticable")¹² nature of biblical morality, the Christian has this response: It comes as no surprise that anti-Christian antagonists would find biblical ethics abhorrent, contradictory, or nonsensical, since they by nature suppress the truth about God which He has made available to them. Accordingly, God's nature, ways, and the ethics of His Law are completely alien to them.

The darkening effect which sin has on the minds of men (Ephesians 4:18) necessitates the *special* self-revelation of God mentioned above.¹³ In essence, the special revelation of God is through Scripture, which claims divine inspiration and authority (II Timothy 3:16-17). Dr. Robert A. Morey further observes:

The Bible is God's infallible and inerrant written Word just as much as Jesus was the infallible and inerrant Living Word. The two Words are one in that Jesus is the Speaker and His words, the Scriptures.¹⁴

The advantage of special revelation through the Word of God over general revelation is that it is "more clear, more precise, more easily promulgated without distortion, and less subject to misunderstanding and misinterpretation than is [general] revelation."¹⁵ For example, it is a difficult task to discern some of God's more abstract attributes, such as His sense of justice or compassion, from a general level of revelation. On the other hand, special revelation through Scripture communicates directly via written words that God is just and full of compassion. In addition to affording mankind a more complete and detailed understanding of who God is and what He is like, special revelation prescribes conduct which is wholly consistent with the person and nature of God (e.g., The Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount) -- "in short, the Scriptures provide more specific information and instruction for those who freely choose to know more about the light."¹⁶ Special revelation is enjoyed by those who have become heirs of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

For the Christian, special revelation makes it clear that the pinnacle of salvation and Christian life is the knowledge of God.¹⁷ Jesus Himself equated eternal life with knowing God:

And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent (John 17:3).

In Philippians 3:8, the Apostle Paul states that he is willing to "count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus." From an ethical standpoint, these truths have profound significance. It has already been established that Christian ethics is concerned with what conforms to the character of God and what does not. Moreover, as Carl F. H. Henry declared, one cannot consider what is objectively good and right apart from God because that which is good inevitably has its origin in God. Jesus fervently asserted that He and the Father are one (John 10:30), that to see Him was to see God (John 14:9). For this reason, Christians are exhorted to follow the example of Christ (I Corinthians 11:1), whose delight was in doing those things which conform to the character of God (John 4:34). It follows logically that the more complete and intimate knowledge a Christian has of the Lord Jesus Christ, the better he or she is able to determine what pleases God and what does not, what conforms to His will and what does not.

A Consideration of God's Character

Given that a thorough acquaintance with the special self-revelation of God is essential if Christians are to obey the precepts of the Bible, it is a worthy exercise to consider what God is like. For the purposes of this study, three of God's

most prominent attributes will be briefly addressed:

1. God is holy. Holiness is an essential part of His nature.

In his vision of heaven in Revelation 4, John describes four living creatures surrounding the throne of God who incessantly proclaim, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Revelation 4:8).¹⁸ According to 1 John 1:5, "God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all." In other words, "God is absolutely free from any moral evil and . . . He is Himself the essence of moral purity."¹⁹ Jerry Bridges states that, "holiness is the perfection of all His other attributes: His power is holy power, His mercy is holy mercy, His wisdom is holy wisdom. It is His holiness more than any other attribute that makes Him worthy of our praise."²⁰ God's holiness precludes Him from ignoring or approving any evil; as Habakkuk 1:13 says, the eyes of the Lord "are too pure to approve evil, and [He] cannot look on wickedness with favor." Consequently, God requires holiness of His people (1 Peter 1:15-16) -- in essence "He has called us to be like Himself. Holiness is nothing less than conformity to the character of God."²¹

2. God is love. 1 John 4:8,16 declare this outrightly. God's love is manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that all mankind rebelled against the moral law and authority of God, His love drove Him to the cross (John 3:16). Because God is love, He calls

His people to walk in love as well. All of the ethics of the Law of God "are merely expressions of two loves, one for God and one for man (Matthew 22:36,37)."²²

3. God is just. All the ways of the Lord are just (Deuteronomy 32:4). Hence the reciprocal laws of the Bible, e.g., a man reaps what he sows (Galatians 6:7), it is "only just" for God to repay those who afflict the church with affliction (II Thessalonians 1:6). As with His other attributes, His sense of justice demands the same from mankind. "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue," He says in Deuteronomy 16:20.

Knowledge of God Applied

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, it can be particularly challenging for Christians to make correct ethical decisions when the Bible prescribes courses of action which appear to contradict one another in a given situation. The three attributes of God which have just been explored -- His holiness, love, and justice -- can be applied to biblical examples of problematic ethical dilemmas for the purpose of determining what conforms to God's character and what does not.

Take, for instance, the issue of capital punishment. In Exodus 20:13, God categorically forbids murder. Then, in Exodus 21:12, He commands that a murderer must be put to death. The argument most often leveled against capital punishment decries this policy of "killing those who kill." Why does God enjoin capital punishment if killing is abhorrent to Him in the first

place? For those with an understanding of God's character, there is no contradiction between these two mandates of God's Law; they are merely an outflow of His character. Since man is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26), a man's life has intrinsic value. In addition, human life is precious to God because of His love for mankind (John 3:16). Because God is holy, it is incumbent upon mankind to love and value human life in the same way He does. It is therefore an affront to Him when one man deliberately and unjustly ends the life of another; it is evil in His sight. A murderer has abrogated the Lord's sense of holiness, justice, and love all at once. God's holiness makes it impossible for Him to ignore or approve of such evil. His sense of justice demands that restitution be made. In God's economy, it is only just that a man who has wrongfully taken the life of another pay with his own life -- whatsoever a man sows, he also reaps. Thus all three of these divine attributes (holiness, justice, love) are at work in every aspect of God's policy of capital punishment for those who commit murder; it is possible to obey both commands and yet be totally consistent with His nature and character.

As a more modern example, suppose that a teenager is invited to attend church with a friend. When the altar call is given, this teenager responds by giving his heart to the Lord. Excited about his new faith in Christ, he rushes home to tell his parents what has just transpired. The only problem is that neither of his parents are Christians -- in fact, they are quite hostile

towards Christianity. In anger, they forbid him from associating with his "fanatical" friend and from attending church. He looks to the Bible for advice on how to handle this difficult situation. On one hand, Exodus 20:12 teaches him to honor his father and mother. On the other hand, Matthew 22:37 teaches him that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all his being. What is he to do? In some ways, this is a more cut-and-dried scenario because the Bible states directly that his obligation to love and serve God supersedes his obligation to honor his parents. That may sound like a recipe for strife at home, but it should be noted that God's holiness demands that our allegiance be first and foremost to Him. Sometimes, "the right course of action may require suffering or even martyrdom."²³ The Bible is replete with the stories of men and women who would have readily died before compromising their devotion to God. However, this does not free the teenager from all obligation to honor His parents; God's holiness demands obedience in that area as well. When the demands of his parents and the precepts of the Bible conflict, he must choose to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Even though this is a difficult situation, God has made a way for him to act in a manner that always conforms to His character.

Conclusion

For Christian and non-Christian alike, it is a grave error to evaluate the ethics of the Christian faith from a sheerly logi-

cal standpoint. Apart from God's self-revelation, the mandates of His Law will seem contradictory and confusing. Only when His Law is viewed through the lens of His nature and character will it come into focus.

In this age of rapid technological advance, the ethical dilemmas which face believers are constantly increasing in their severity and complexity. In spite of this, Christians should take great comfort in the unchanging nature and character of an Almighty God who has lovingly and mercifully chosen to make Himself known humanity. In making Himself known, He has provided a "way of escape," so that men and women of faith can always act in accordance with His nature and character through every temptation or difficult situation (I Corinthians 10:13).

Endnotes

- ¹ Charles Watts, "Bible Morality," <http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/charles_watts/bible_morality.html>, 1873.
- ² "The Morass of Christian Ethics," <<http://crossroads.freethought.net/essays/ethics.html>>.
- ³ Watts.
- ⁴ G. Brady Lenardos, "The Existence of God," <<http://home.sprynet.com/~lenardos/cosmos.htm>>, 1995.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ John Warwick Montgomery, *Human Rights and Human Dignity* (Dallas: Probe Books, 1986), 113.
- ⁷ David A Noebel, *Understanding the Times* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1994), 238.
- ⁸ Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 165.
- ⁹ Norman L. Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 27.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 27.
- ¹¹ It should be noted that not all Christians agree on this point. Christian apologist Cornelius VanTil argues against this idea "that man, though he is a sinner, can have certain true knowledge of God from nature but that for higher things he requires revelation." (Cornelius VanTil, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, 16.) From this objection of VanTil's it is apparent that he does not consider "true knowledge of God from nature" to be part of God's self-revelation to man (he associates "higher things" with revelation, but not what can be known of God "from nature"). VanTil's position is difficult to maintain given the language that Paul has chosen in Romans 1:19, where he asserts that what is known about God is evident within man because God has willfully made it so. If God has indeed made that which is known about Him evident within sinful men, does that not constitute a means by which He has chosen to reveal Himself?
- ¹² Watts.
- ¹³ Geisler, 33.
- ¹⁴ Robert A. Morey, *Here is Your God* (Southbridge: Crowne Publications, 1989), 23.
- ¹⁵ Geisler, 33-34.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 33.
- ¹⁷ Morey, 1.
- ¹⁸ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1978), 29.

¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 29.

²¹ Ibid., 26.

²² Geisler, 40.

²³ John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1993), 7.

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