

Why Your Congregation Needs Christian Ethics Education

We have been reared to assume that Christians, in churches, will always make decisions appropriate to a life lived following Christ.

Assumptions are rampant of “I’m a believer, so I’ve got this Christian life, decision-making, discernment about the will of God and life by the tail on a downhill drag thing under control.”

In the United States, more than a little of respective political parties’ ideologies, not biblical theology or christology, form the ethical discernment patterns for too many congregants.

Challenges to these attitudes and assumptions need to be raised and addressed.

1. The challenge to “Why do we need to study Christian ethics?”

Henlee Barnette in his “Introduction to Christian Ethics” provides responses to why we need to study Christian ethics:

- Every Christian needs to be as intellectually and spiritually well rounded as possible.
- The moral crisis is urgent. Our time is no worse, or no better, than any other time in history. ... Moral issues on every hand need the attention of the Christian gospel.
- Each of us needs to define his or her moral decision-making method. Most have never given much thought to why or how we make decisions that

have moral consequences

- Christian ethics aids us in seeing both the personal and social dimensions of the gospel.
- Christian ministers need to understand Christian ethics in order to give sound moral advice to their people.
- One needs Christian ethics in order to avoid errors in ethical reason, such as extremist thinking or stressing minor issues and neglecting major ones.

2. The challenge to considering Christian ethics as the ability to rehearse a list of absolutes, rules, propositions for living life.

Too many institutional settings, congregations included, ignore developing critical thinking.

Critical thinking calls us to move beyond dispensing factoids, information, abstract propositions, conspiracy theories and oral traditions.

Rather, an intellectual and spiritual maturity is to come into place that will ask questions and investigate more deeply than either-or answers can provide.

3. The challenge to the question, "Can ethics be taught?"

Yes, ethics can be taught when a life crisis gets our attention. Also, one can learn Christian ethics when he or she meets a gripping personality.

These dynamics and personalities, which may be in the same context, will press one to reconsider common assumptions, habitual responses and platitudinous theological assertions.

4. The challenge to “I have a stance or conviction on issues.”

“Issuism” narrows consideration of the often complex interconnectedness of dynamics in our world.

Our calling includes identifying issues. Issues may be how our Christian ethics education processes are initiated.

There is need to identify the conflict of values (accountability, forgiveness and courage) around the three basic areas of life’s issues (money, sex and power) These three, major areas inevitably are intertwined.

Unfortunately, these areas are where the most heat is generated but are treated in too many congregations as if they don’t really exist; so, too little light.

The process of management of the conflict of values requires the use of these basic resources: the Bible, Christian history, Christian congregational dialogue style and application; developing an appropriate framework or methodology for decision-making; giving attention to understanding individual and group character development; identifying appropriate ethical theories; and then discussing the issues through those filters.

The obvious hard work of such a process is the reason why so many congregations use a “fall back” approach - that is discern, decide and act according to “what they’ve always heard” with overriding cultural ideologies that usually have little to do with christologically shaped values.

5. The challenge to “How do we communicate Christian ethics education?”

Those who want a quick, convenient way of doing things will ask, “Are there any ‘magic’ formulae, pedagogies, to teach and learn Christian ethics?”

Communication for our ethical endeavors will happen through Bible studies, retreats, workshops, Sunday School emphases, social media, sermons, discussion groups inside and outside of the congregation’s facilities, and community (local to global) engagement.

Always, the power of story, lives lived following Jesus Christ, will provide the focus, the centering, the energy to convey the message.

6. And, last but not least, the challenge of acting upon what we learn about Christian ethics.

Two dynamics characterize Christian ethics - being ethical and behaving ethically.

Christian ethics is a study, even connective tissue for interdisciplinary studies. As well, Christian ethics is the application of the gospel in our ongoing lives.

The proof of the pudding, the test of whether our faith is authentic, is when we begin to live out these important values we raise, when we engage our cultures and subcultures with the good news message, when we challenge principalities, powers and systems that attempt to neuter or suffocate the good news and its significance for human beings, humanity.

In conclusion, expect resistance. Counter challenges will arise.

Be encouraged to reframe and transform the confirmation biases and coherent

narratives that have come to be normalized and put forward as doing Christian ethics.

Know the rhythm of your prayer life, sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit, convictional framework, attention to Scripture, and the forming and reforming of your character; living out of that character will take on new meaning and value.

Editor's note: This is the first article in a series this week focused on Christian ethics education.