

BIBLICAL ESSENTIALS

BIBLICAL ETHICS

*Choosing Right in a
World Gone Wrong*

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CROSSWAY BOOKS

A DIVISION OF
GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Biblical Ethics: Choosing Right in a World Gone Wrong
Copyright © 2004 by Evangelical Training Association
Published by Crossway Books
a division of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Josh Dennis

Cover photo: Adobe Image Library

First printing 2004

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Eckman, James P. (James Paul)

Biblical ethics : choosing right in a world gone wrong / James P. Eckman.
p. cm. — (Biblical essentials series)

Originally published: Wheaton, Ill. : Evangelical Training Association,
© 1999.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-58134-572-0 (alk. paper)

1. Ethics in the Bible. 2. Christian ethics—Biblical teaching. I. Title.

II. Series.

BS680.E84E33 2004

241—dc22

2003021393

VP	13	12	11	10	09	08	07	06	05	04				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Ethics: An Introduction

IN MODERN CULTURE the terms *ethics* and *morals* are virtual synonyms. Quite frankly the confusion over the interchangeableness of these two terms is understandable, but it is wrong. From history we learn that the two words have different meanings. *Ethics* comes from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning a “stall” for horses, a place of stability and permanence. The word *morality* came from *mores*, which describes the shifting behavioral patterns of society.

Ethics is what is normative, absolute. It refers to a set of standards around which we organize our lives and from which we define our duties and obligations. It results in a set of imperatives that establishes acceptable behavior patterns. It is what people *ought* to do. By contrast, morality is more concerned with what people *do*. It describes what people are already doing, often regardless of any absolute set of standards.¹

We now see the problem of the modern human condition. When ethics and morality are confused and mixed, the result is that the culture makes the norms. The standards become relativistic and changing. That which is the norm is identified with that which is the absolute. The absolute standards are destroyed by the fluid nature of the culture. Relativism triumphs over the absolute.

This is where modern culture is today. We determine the norm of human behavior through statistical studies, like the Kinsey report² did on human sexuality. Behavior the Bible condemns (e.g., adultery, homosexuality) is practiced widely, statistical analysis demonstrates. Therefore, since this behavior is widely practiced, that becomes society's norm and therefore its ethical standard. Ethics becomes a relativistic, floating set of patterns that determines our duty and obligation. Nothing is absolute, and nothing is forever. What the culture thought was nailed down is not. It is as fluid as a changing river.

The Bible will have none of this. The deep-seated conviction of the Christian is the proposition that God exists and that He has revealed Himself. That revelation is verbal and propositional; it is contained in the Bible. That revelation contains the absolute set of standards rooted in God's character and will. He knows what is best for us because He created us and He redeemed us. Therefore, His verbal revelation contains the absolute standard on which we base our lives and construct our duties and obligations to the family, the church, and the state.

To God ethics is not a set of fluid standards. It is a set of absolutes that reflects His character and defines human duty. He wants us to love Him and love our neighbor as ourselves. This twin injunction is a powerful example of duty to God and duty to other humans. It is an imperative for all humans. It constitutes a supernatural window into what is good, right, just, and perfect. As Erwin Lutzer has argued, "We must be willing to set aside temporarily the question of what actions *are* right or wrong to focus on a more basic question: What *makes* an action right or wrong?"³ That is why God has the right to say to us, "Be holy for I am holy." He, the Creator, sets the standard against which we must measure all behavior.

WHY STUDY ETHICS?

There are several reasons for the study of ethics. Each is separate, and yet they overlap. The reasons I offer here are not exhaustive. Rather, they offer compelling evidence that the study of ethics is desperately needed in the church. Few Christians know how to think about the major cultural issues ripping apart our society. Instead, they often sit on the sidelines and allow non-Christians to dominate the discussion on abortion, human sexuality, the role of the state, issues of war, and the environment. Few seem ready to give a defense of the absolute standards of God's Word. This book gives Christians a starting point for thinking and acting on the basis of God's revelation. It enables believers to speak ethical truth to the culture.

The first reason for a study of ethics is that Western culture has relinquished any absolute framework for thinking about ethical standards. One powerful example of this is bioethics. Medical technology is moving so fast that ethical considerations usually are subsumed by the practical. But this is not right!

How should we think about the issue of using animal organs in

human beings? Should we place a baboon's heart in a human being? Should we place animal tissue in humans? Should we use the cells of an anencephalic baby in a human? Should we use *in vitro* fertilization to help infertile couples have a baby? Should we clone human beings? Should we use gender selection when parents want to choose whether to have a boy or girl?

All of these medical practices are being done or can be done. Does the Bible say anything about these issues? As later chapters in this book show, the Bible does speak to these questions and provides a set of standards and principles to guide humans in making these difficult decisions. Christians *must* be involved in this debate over bioethics (see chapter 6).

A second reason focuses on the "slippery slope" nature of so many ethical questions. Consider abortion. In 1973 when the Supreme Court ruled that a woman could have an abortion based on the implied right of privacy it said was in the United States Constitution, no one realized how powerful this doctrine would become. This implied right reframed the whole abortion issue. Now the culture no longer focuses on the rights of the baby; instead, the entire debate focuses on the rights of the woman to the total exclusion of the baby's rights (see chapter 4).

That same logic now informs the euthanasia debate. The discussion focuses on the right of the person to die with dignity. Doctor-assisted suicide is now sanctioned in some states using the implied right of privacy that formerly sanctioned the practice of abortion. A person who is ill and no longer desires to live, based on the implied right of privacy, can receive assistance from a doctor to commit suicide (see chapter 5).

Ethical issues feed on one another. The logic of one is used by the culture to frame the debate on the other. Christians must understand this process, or they will have no impact on the debates about life currently raging in our culture. The slippery slope nature of ethics without divine revelation explains why what was once unthinkable becomes debatable, and soon becomes culturally acceptable. We must come to terms with this aspect of humanistic ethics.

Third, Christians must understand the integrated nature of ethical issues. Most Christians do not know how to use the Bible to approach contemporary ethical issues. For many the Bible seems irrelevant. But this sad state of affairs cannot continue. Christians must learn to think biblically and Christianly about ethical concerns.

The Bible is God's Word. In 2 Timothy Paul argues that the Bible equips for every good work and is beneficial for correction, rebuking, and training in righteousness (3:16-17). Obviously, studying the Word is necessary for ethical decision-making. God's Word gives God's view of life and His absolute standards. One cannot assume that the baby growing in the mother's womb has no value to God. If He is the Creator, as the Bible declares Him, then life is of infinite value to Him. Humans, regardless of any discussion of rights, do not have permission to wantonly destroy life. To do so violates one of God's absolute standards rooted in His character. This process of discerning God's mind on an issue, developing a principle from it, and then reaching an ethical position is the process defended in this book. The Bible is not irrelevant to ethics. Instead, it is the foundation for ethics.

Fourth, many Christians know where they stand on certain ethical issues, but they cannot defend their positions. This book charts a biblical defense for each position presented. For example, most Christians believe that homosexuality is wrong. That is an ethical judgment. But why is it wrong? It is not much help to simply state, "The Bible says it is wrong." Perhaps a better defense is to root the ethical belief about human sexuality in the creation ordinance of God.

God created humanity in two grand streams—male and female. In Genesis 2 He makes clear that His design is that the male and female marry and "become one flesh." This solves the challenge of human loneliness and isolation that Adam experienced. Eve, as God's gift to the man, serves as his spiritual equal (both are in His image, Gen. 1:26-27) but yet his complement. This complementary relationship defines the basis of human sexuality, because men and women rule the creation as God's stewards and populate His planet. Human sexuality relates to the essence of human responsibility—ruling God's creation together as a complementary whole, male and female together (Gen. 1:26ff.). Whenever Jesus or Paul deals with marriage or human sexuality, each goes back to this creation ordinance of God (Matt. 19; 1 Cor. 7). Here we see God's ideal for human sexual relationships, and there is no room for homosexuality in this ordinance (see chapter 7).

Ethical decision-making is a part of everyday life. Christians must not only know what they believe, but they must likewise explain why. This book gives Christians a resource to define ethics as absolute standards that result in proper duty and obligation to God and fellow humans. The next chapter surveys the ethical options for

Christians, defending the position of ethical absolutes as the only biblical option.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Summarize the difference between morality and ethics.
2. What is the result of the confusion of ethics and morality?
3. How does God's revelation impact the view of absolute ethics?
4. List and briefly explain the four reasons for a study of ethics.

Ethical Options for the Christian

THE THESIS OF this book is that ethics must be rooted in the proposition that ethical absolutes exist. Those absolutes are based on God's moral law revealed in His Word. God may be approached and His revelation understood through intellectual analysis. This claim is uniquely Christian and central to reconciliation with ethical absolutes. But before this absolute moral law is examined, the present culture's penchant for relativism needs discussion. This is necessary because relativistic ethical systems are inadequate moral guides. Why is this so?

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Consider the option of cultural relativism. This view argues that whatever a cultural group approves of becomes right; whatever the group disapproves of is wrong. Since there are no fixed principles to guide developing moral codes, culture determines what is right and wrong. Every culture develops its own moral standards, and no other culture has the right to judge another's value system.

Consider the consequences of cultural relativism. The existence of varying cultural norms is undeniable. Whether these cultural differences ought to exist or whether all the moral viewpoints of the culture are equal must be settled by some other means. There simply must be something transcendent to settle these cultural differences. Furthermore, if culture decides the validity of moral behavior, we really cannot condemn any acceptable action within its own culture. For example, the Nazis were acting quite consistently within their cultural worldview. They believed Jews were a threat to their perfect Aryan race. Therefore, to rid European civilization of Jews was logically consistent

within their cultural norms. Following cultural relativism, can Nazism be condemned?

Recent developments in higher education indicate another consequence of cultural relativism. Some students are unwilling to oppose great moral horrors (including human sacrifice, ethnic cleansing, and slavery) because they think no one has the right to criticize the moral views of another group or culture. Professor Robert Simon, who has been teaching philosophy for twenty years at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, indicates that his students acknowledge the Holocaust occurred but cannot bring themselves to say that killing millions of people was wrong. Between 10 percent and 20 percent deplore what the Nazis did, but their disapproval is expressed as a matter of taste or personal preference, not of moral judgment. One student told Simon, "Of course I dislike the Nazis, but who is to say they are wrong?"

Another professor, Kay Haugaard of Pasadena College in California, wrote of a literature student who said of human sacrifice, "I really don't know. If it was a religion of long standing . . ." Haugaard was stunned that her student could not make a moral judgment. "This was a woman who wrote passionately of saving the whales, of concern for the rainforests, of her rescue and tender care of a stray dog."¹

Cultural relativism can also lead to individual relativism. Truth in today's world is relegated to the individual or the group. What is true for one is not necessarily true for another. Truths for two different groups are equally valid, for they are equally based on personal outlook. The result of this ludicrous situation reminds one of the book of Judges: "Every man did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6). Individual relativism leads to social and ethical anarchy.

In the final analysis, cultural relativism propagates an unacceptable inconsistency. Denying the existence of all moral absolutes, the system wants to proclaim its own absolute—culture!² The argument of the ethical relativist can be summarized in three propositions:

- What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society, so that there are no universal moral standards held by all societies.
- Whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he or she belongs.
- Therefore, there are no absolute or objective moral standards that apply to all people everywhere and at all times.³

The fallacy of absolutizing culture is exposed the moment sin

enters into the discussion. Because sin is rebellion against God, one should not expect to see consistency of moral standards across various cultures, despite near universal condemnation of murder and incest, for example. The struggle to enforce even the standards against murder and incest is further evidence of the human need for redemption. It does not invalidate the ethical absolutes revealed in God's Word.

SITUATION ETHICS

Another option is situation ethics, popularized by Joseph Fletcher.⁴ The core of his argument centers on the elimination of absolute moral principles because they place themselves over people. The only absolute that can be affirmed is love. But how is this universal of love defined? For Fletcher it must be defined in a utilitarian sense. Any action that produces more pleasure and less pain, the greatest good for the greatest number, is the "loving" thing to do. In other words, as Lutzer echoes, the end justifies the means.⁵ In its utilitarian understanding of "love," adultery or lying could be justified.

In Fletcher's world, if a husband is married to an invalid, it would be loving for him to have an adulterous affair with another woman because his needs cannot be met by his wife. It is likewise loving for a woman to have an abortion because an unwanted or unintended baby should never be born. But this is biblically indefensible. Who decides what is loving? Who determines the definition of the "greatest good"? You are back to a subjectivism, where each person ultimately decides on his or her own definition of "good" and "loving."

BEHAVIORISM

A third ethical option is a product of behavioral psychology. Whether it is through genetics or the environment, humans are products of forces beyond their control, this position argues. Therefore, moral values and ethical issues are simply the product of genetic makeup or of environmental factors. The result is that people are not responsible for personal behavior.

One of the greatest proponents of behaviorism was the late B. F. Skinner,⁶ famed psychologist from Harvard. Following his work with pigeons, Skinner believed that he could modify the behavior of any human. He argued that ethics are entirely based on responses to the conditioning factors of the environment. Human freedom and dignity

are outmoded concepts that must be discarded if the human race is to survive. Utilizing the manipulative and conditioning techniques so central to behaviorism, Skinner maintained that “man has yet to discover what man can do for man.” We must be willing to surrender human freedom and jettison human dignity if the race is to survive.

The Bible will have none of this. It declares that humans are responsible for their actions (Rom. 1—3). Although a factor, a person’s environment does not totally explain a person’s actions. To excuse someone’s actions as an exclusive product of environmental conditioning flies in the face of the biblical doctrine of sin. Humans, because they are in rebellion against God, are guilty of sin and in need of redemption. No one is ever going to stand before God and offer an acceptable behaviorist response to explain his or her sin.

A CASE FOR ETHICAL ABSOLUTES

Erwin Lutzer makes this compelling argument: “If naturalism is false and if theism is true, and therefore God is responsible for all that is, then revelation is possible. And if revelation is possible, absolute standards are possible, should the Deity choose to make them known.”⁷

Has, then, God chosen to make them known? The resounding answer is yes. He has chosen to reveal Himself in His Son (Heb. 1:1-4), through His creation (Ps. 19; Rom. 1:18ff.), and through His Word (Ps. 119; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). We know about the Son through the Word. These propositional truths form the basis for ethical absolutes.

What are these propositional truths that constitute the ethical framework for the Christian?

1. *God’s moral revelation in His Word is an expression of His own nature.* He is holy, and therefore He insists that His human creatures also meet that standard. If they do not, judgment results. Hence, the vital nature of Jesus’ substitutionary atonement. Appropriating that atoning work by faith makes the human holy in God’s sight. The same could be argued for ethical standards of truth, beauty, love, life, and sexuality.

2. *God’s moral and ethical system consists of more than external conformity to His moral code; it centers on conformity with internal issues of motivation and personal attitudes.* Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount presses this point. The ethical standard of prohibiting adultery involves more than simply the external act; it also involves lust with the heart after another person (Matt. 5:27-28). The ethical standard of prohibiting murder involves more than the external act;

it also involves the standard of bitterness, hatred, and anger in the heart (Matt. 5:21-22).

3. *God provides the absolute criteria for determining the value of human beings.* Because physical, economic, mental, and social/cultural criteria are all arbitrary and relative, they are inadequate for assigning value to humans. For example, Francis Crick, the Nobel prize-winning biologist, has advocated legislation mandating that newborn babies would not be considered legally alive until they were two days old and had been certified as healthy by medical examiners. Former Senator Charles Percy of Illinois argued that abortion is a good deal for the taxpayer because it is considerably cheaper than welfare. Winston L. Duke, a nuclear physicist, stated that reason should define a human being as life that demonstrates self-awareness, volition, and rationality. Since some people do not manifest these qualities, some are not human. Finally, Ashley Montagu, a British anthropologist, believes that a baby is not born human. Instead, it is born with a capacity for becoming human as he or she is molded by social and cultural influences.⁸

God created humans in His image (Gen. 1:26ff.) and established His absolute criteria for assigning value to human beings. Being in the image of God means that humans resemble God. Humans possess self-consciousness, self-will, and moral responsibility, as does God. What humans lost in the Fall (Gen. 3) was righteousness, holiness, and knowledge; these are renewed in the Christian as he or she is conformed to the image of Christ. Theology calls these communicable attributes (e.g., love, holiness, mercy, etc.) as they are present and possible in humans.

Being in His image also means that humans represent God. God's purpose in creating human beings in His image is functional (Gen. 1:26-27). Humans have the responsibility of dominion over creation and of being fruitful and multiplying. Humans represent God as His stewards over all creation. This concept is emphasized in Genesis 2 and reiterated in Psalms 8 and 110. Human beings are God's vice-regents over all creation with power to control, regulate, and harness its potential. The Fall did not abolish this stewardship. Instead, Satan is the usurper and enemy of humans in this dominion status. Humans live out of harmony with themselves and with nature. Created to rule, men and women find that the crown has fallen from their brows.⁹

As Francis Schaeffer argued, "Unlike the evolutionary concept of an impersonal beginning plus time plus chance, the Bible gives an

account of man's origin as a finite person made in God's image. . . ."¹⁰ Humans have personality, dignity, and value and are superbly unique. Unlike the naturalistic worldview, where there is no qualitative difference between human and other life, the Bible declares the infinite value of all humans. This proposition forms the basis for examining all ethical issues that relate to life and provides the foundation for Christians to uphold God's view of human beings in an increasingly pagan culture.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Define and give a reasoned critique of the following ethical options:
 - cultural/ethical relativism
 - situation ethics
 - behaviorism
2. How does the proposition that God has revealed Himself relate to ethical absolutes?
3. What can we say about God's standard concerning the following:
 - The external and internal dimensions of moral/ethical behavior
 - The value of human life to God
 - The image-of-God concept
 - The created-person concept
4. On what basis can we say that humans are of infinite value to God? Explain.

How Should a Christian Relate to Culture?

THE BIBLE WARNS against worldliness and the devastating consequences of following the world rather than Christ (James 4). From the Old Testament we see that the children of Israel got into big trouble when they imitated their pagan neighbors and brought their altars and images into the temple. Yet Christians are somehow to be in the world, but not of the world (John 17:14-18). Christians have been removed from the world's power at conversion (Gal. 6:14), and because the cross established a judicial separation between believers and the world, Christians are citizens of a new kingdom (Phil. 3:20). The Bible both discourages absolute physical separation from the people of the world (1 Cor. 5:9-10) and instructs believers to witness to this world (John 17:18), all the while avoiding the influence of the world (James 1:27; 1 Cor. 7:31; Rom. 12:2; 1 John 2:15). How does one resolve this tension?

This is a profoundly important question for those who hold to ethical absolutes. In a culture that is increasingly pagan and relativistic, how one “speaks” Christianity to the culture is critical. Should Christians separate from the culture and live in isolation? Should Christians seek to accommodate completely to the culture and seek to influence its institutions and values from the inside? Or should Christians try to transform the culture by seeking to control its institutions and claim each for Christ? Historical examples for each approach are readily available from church history and are present today in our world. The goal of this chapter is to examine and evaluate each model biblically.¹

THE SEPARATIONAL MODEL

The separational model of relating to culture argues that Christians must withdraw from any involvement in the world. There is an antithe-

sis between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world, and the choice is clear—withdraw. Clear biblical examples of this choice are Noah (whom God called out of the culture before He destroyed it), Abram (called to separate from pagan Mesopotamia), and Moses (called to separate from idolatrous Egypt). The New Testament buttresses this conviction with verses such as Matthew 6:24 (“No one can serve two masters. . . .”), 1 Peter 2:11, and 1 John 2:15. For this model, the church of Jesus Christ is a counterculture that lives by kingdom principles. She is to have nothing to do with this world.

One historical example of this model centers on the church before Constantine’s critical decree in A.D. 313. During that time, Christians refused to serve in the Roman army, to participate in pagan entertainment, and to bow to Caesar as lord. Christians were antagonistic and separated from the culture and yet sought to win unbelievers to Christ.

Another historical example is Anabaptism, exemplified in the various Mennonite and Amish groups of the sixteenth century, many of whom continue today. For them there is an absolute antithesis between the kingdom of God and this world. This enmity necessitates a rejection of the church-state concept—the revolutionary center of their worldview. The church, in their view, is a free association of believers; there is no “established” state church. Religious liberty, nonresistance, often pacifism, and refusal to take vows and oaths separate these communities from their culture. Isolated and separate, these groups engage in social service to further Christ’s kingdom on earth.

A final historical example was the Christian community movement in the 1960s, when Christian communes dotted the American and European religious landscape. Clearly countercultural, these groups believed that the church had become hopelessly secularized. Therefore, Christianity needed to get back to the book of Acts where resources were shared, lifestyles were simple, and believers were clearly separate from the hostile culture. This alternative way, rooted in a radical separation, would lead the church back to its roots and to revival.

How should we think about the separational model? In a culture that is increasingly pagan and antagonistic, Christianity offers some appealing options. This model stresses the “otherworldly” character of a genuinely biblical Christianity and calls people to recognize that “this world is not my home,” as we often sing. After all, Jesus radically rejected the status quo of His culture and died as a result.

Yet this model has serious dangers that necessitate its rejection as

a viable option. First, separatism can quickly lead to asceticism, a lifestyle of self-denial that ends up denying the goodness of God's creation. From God's declaration in Genesis 1 that all of His creation is "good," to Paul's powerful affirmation that everything is created by God, and nothing is to be rejected (1 Tim. 4:4), the Bible condemns all tendencies toward an asceticism that denies creation's innate goodness.

Second, this model easily produces a dangerous sacred/secular dichotomy. The Bible clearly rejects the compartmentalization of life into things that are sacred and those that are secular. For the Christian, everything is sacred. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that the believer is to "do all to the glory of God." Finally, this model can lead to a complete withdrawal from culture, something clearly condemned in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 Paul chastises the Corinthians for misunderstanding his admonition about disciplining the wayward brother. He says they incorrectly processed his teaching about not associating with sinners. The only way to completely avoid unbelievers, as they seemed to take Paul's instruction, was to die, and that is not what he had in mind. So the separational model is inadequate for the believer.

THE IDENTIFICATIONAL MODEL

Accommodation to the culture is the key word for this model—to live both in the kingdom of God and in the world. God works in the world both through the state and through the church. The believer, therefore, has a dual commitment to both. Identifying with, participating in, and working within all cultural institutions (e.g., business, government, law) is part of the mandate for the Christian. Christians are, therefore, to live both in the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world.

Biblical examples of this model abound. Joseph rose to the top of ancient Egypt, serving as a sort of prime minister (Gen. 41:41-43). Similarly, Daniel played key political and advisory roles in the empires of both Babylon and Persia (Dan. 6:1-4). Jesus identified with the world, eating and drinking with tax collectors and assorted sinners. He clearly did not separate from the world, for He was a friend of Nicodemus and associated with key officials in the Roman army (e.g., the centurion). Finally, the book of Acts records apostles associating with the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius, another Roman official. Paul, in Romans 13:1-7, illustrates the role of the state as a clear sphere of God's work.

Historical examples are likewise numerous. After Constantine's decree in A.D. 313, the church-state dynamic changed. He restored

church property. Bishops became equal with Roman officials. Over time the church became wealthy and powerful. Christianity became popular, the “in thing” for the empire. Complacency resulted. The church’s power became political, and through the medieval period (A.D. 500-1500) it gained immense prestige and dominance. In fact, during the papacy of Innocent III (early 1200s), the church in effect ruled Western Europe.

Another example is modern civil religion, which sees the nation-state as ordained by God for a special redemptive mission. American religious leaders like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, and Lyman Beecher believed that God chose America to be the savior of the world, a chosen people to accomplish redemptive purposes for all humanity. God’s kingdom, they argued, would come first to America and then would spread through the rest of the world. Manifest Destiny, which defined American foreign policy in the pre-Civil War period, saw America’s institutions as ideal, and God destined that those institutions be spread through North America. Such thinking had its origins in civil religion and partially explains the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and other forms of expansionism. Similar arguments could be made about expansionism in the late nineteenth century, specifically the Spanish-American War of 1898.

As we evaluate the identificational model, its strengths are clear. It emphasizes the “this-worldly” character of the Christian life. There is much in this world that can and should be affirmed because it is ultimately good. This model calls people to recognize that there is importance and good in this world now. It likewise affirms that God is at work in and through the cultural institutions—the state, business, and even the arts. A Christian can identify and find benefit in each of these institutions.

However, the weaknesses of this model are glaring. Its principal danger is that it can lull the Christian into complacency, into blindness toward the influence of evil in the culture’s institutions. Anyone involved in politics knows that it is the greatest test of one’s faith to work in politics. Evil is always present, and the pressure to compromise one’s convictions is ever present. This model can also lead to an uncritical acceptance of prevailing cultural practices and attitudes. Particularly in democracies where majority rule is so prevalent, pressures are strong to go with polling data as the basis for decision-making. The more Christians identify with the institutions, the more the institutions influence the Christian. Contemporary society is more per-

missive than that of the past, and the evangelical community is being affected by that permissiveness.

Finally, this model can lead to a loss of the church's prophetic stance. The church can almost become "married to the culture." A disastrous example comes from Nazi Germany. The church was crying, "better Hitler than Stalin," and uncritically embraced Hitler's state as a matter of expediency. The same happened in American culture, especially to justify the Mexican-American War and aspects of the Spanish-American War. This model has the danger, then, of producing a complacent and soft Christianity.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL MODEL

This model takes the transforming power of Christ and applies it to culture. Despite the fallen nature of humanity and the subsequent curse on creation, Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection reversed the curse for both humans and culture. There is now hope of human release from the bondage to sin and for creation as well. This truth is the center of ancient Israel's hope that the world would be restored (Isa. 65) and of the New Testament's focus on Christ's redemptive work (Rom. 5:12-21). Romans 8:19-22 also emphasizes the complete remaking of creation from sin's curse. This hope is easily translated into an optimism about culture's transformation.

Historical examples of this model center on the transforming work of the gospel in a geographical area. During the Reformation, John Calvin's Geneva reflected this transforming power. Calvin taught the total lordship of Christ, that it extended to the state and to economics. Therefore, the government of Geneva experienced radical reform and pursued righteousness in making and enforcing its laws. Work to Calvin and Geneva was a God-ordained vocation, whatever its specific nature. The city, therefore, experienced a remarkable economic transformation as well. A similar process of change characterized the Puritan colony of Massachusetts Bay in the 1600s. The Puritans sought to bring all aspects of their culture into conformity with God's revelation. It was a great cultural transformation.

There is much to affirm in this model. It recognizes the gospel's power to change both individuals and their culture. It is common sense to expect that when a person trusts Christ, his or her lifestyle and culture will therefore change. Ultimately, nothing in culture is immune from the gospel's impact. Likewise, this model calls on Christians to rec-

ognize their responsibility to work toward the day when God's kingdom will come to earth and justice will rule (Amos 5:15, 24).

There are, however, several serious shortcomings with this model. The transformationist can neglect the radical nature of sin's devastation. Humans remain enslaved to sin, and even believers struggle daily with its power. Scripture abounds with warnings about how subtle and powerful the enemies of the world, the flesh, and the devil really are. In addition, the transformational model can promote an unbiblical optimism, a near utopianism. The Bible rejects such optimism apart from the return of Jesus Christ. Humans, even those regenerated by faith, always struggle with sin, and only when Jesus returns will the victory over evil be complete. Therefore the transformational model must also be rejected.

THE INCARNATIONAL MODEL

Robert Webber² proposes a synthesis of all three models as the best alternative. His proposal is modeled after Jesus, for He separated from the evils of His culture, identified with its institutions and people, and yet sought to transform it from the inside out. By adding humanity to His deity, Jesus identified with the world in its social order—its people and its customs. The church is to do something similar. At bottom, this is the heart of Christ's admonition that we are to be in the world but not of it. Yet Christ separated Himself from the evil distortions of the created order. He had nothing to do with the wrong use of wealth, social position, or political power. Finally, through His death, burial, and resurrection, He broke the power of sin and Satan and guaranteed the world's transformation when He returns in glory and power. Similarly, the church is to move culture's institutions toward genuine biblical righteousness, all the while anticipating Christ's final transforming work when He returns.

How does the believer live out Webber's incarnational model? First, the Christian always lives with tension, the tension between what is transformable and that from which he or she must separate. For example, there are many good structures in the culture—art, economics, sports, vocations. Yet there are always the evil distortions of those good structures—pornography, greed, workaholicism, idolatry. The Christian should identify with the good structures and seek their transformation but always separate from those evil distortions.

Second, there is no simple formula for living with or resolving this tension. Looking for *the* biblical answer to each practical question is rarely possible. Applying the principles of Scripture to each person's sit-

uation may well produce considerably different judgments. The believer's responsibility is to know God's Word, to know the mind of Christ, and then choose a course of action that most faithfully represents God's revealed will.

What are some examples of this tension? In seeking to identify with the cultural structures, while separating from their evil distortions, should a Christian own a television set, listen to non-Christian music, darn socks or throw them away? Obviously, believers will answer these questions differently, but how each is answered represents the variety of expressions within the Christian church. How Christians personally resolve this tension should produce a healthy biblical tolerance, a thankfulness for the multiplicity of expressions of Christianity. It is not easy to resolve the tension between identifying with the culture's institutions and structures and separating from the distortions of each. Some Christians will choose not to own a television, not to listen to secular music, and to discard old socks rather than darn them. Agreeing to disagree on such matters guards against unhealthy legalism and promotes a healthy dialogue about living within a non-Christian culture.

Christians must always reconcile the tension of identifying with cultural institutions, seeking to separate from culture's evil distortions, all the while seeking culture's transformation. How we live with that tension is a mark of spiritual maturity.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Summarize the Bible's teaching about the world and the Christian's relation to it.
2. Define the essence of each of the following models of Christians relating to culture. Give the biblical justification for each as well.
 - The separational model
 - The identificational model
 - The transformational model
3. Summarize the strengths and weaknesses of each model.
4. Robert Webber suggests a synthesis of all three models, which he calls the incarnational model. Explain what he means.
5. What does the author mean when he discusses the tension between identifying with culture's institutions and structures and yet separating from its evil distortions? What are some of the guiding principles he offers to help resolve the tension?