



Christian Ethics in a Pluralistic Society

The time is past in which Christian norms and values were respected and honoured. Today, people widely argue for and practice the "right" of private morality and self-determination. Think of the issues of abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, etc. What was once determined by moral standards as wrong is now determined to be the right of the individual.

Ironically, in public morality, we are told to respect operative norms and values, such as toleration. This amounts to formal rule without a moral content. People advocate a narrow social morality and a broad personal morality. The discussion is not in terms of morality (good and evil), but rather in terms of survival. Morality is considered a private matter. Prof. J. Douma pointed this out in his inaugural lecture at the Free University in 1994. He argues that the distinction between a broad individual morality and a narrow social morality in the area of medical ethics is not helpful. All sorts of moral issues need to be addressed in society. They should not be left to the private domain. Also in society there needs to be morality. Morality may not disappear from public life. A society without public morality will at first be non-moral, but in the long run becomes an immoral society.

Can we expect a democratic society to conform to Scripture? Many today answer this in the negative. After all, our democratic society is a multi-faith society and many do not accept the standard of the Bible. What right do we have to expect non-Christians to observe the law of God or the commandments of Christ? In a recent book, the Dutch ethicist, G. De Kruijf, gives scholarly expression to this view. He argues that a Christian who is involved in politics may not openly refer to God's commandments. He may have them in the back of his mind, but he may not openly refer to them.

Over against this position is the position of those who argue for a theocratic society, a society adhering to God's specific laws. This is the position of theonomy, which argues that the Old Testament laws are still to govern life today in exact and minute details. These laws, they say, must be fully and literally applied and enforced in today's society, except those parts of the Mosaic law, which the New Testament states that they have been abolished.

The Dilemma

The question I wish to raise is whether we are indeed faced with the dilemma of either one or the other of these two positions: democracy or theocracy? We can also consider the issue from a more practical angle: how does a Christian who is for instance, a city councillor or a member of parliament implement, carry out his theocratic ideals? Or must he simply compromise? Is it possible to adhere to the Bible as the source for our personal thinking, lifestyle and activities in the Christian church, while the society we live in disregards the Word of God?

Clearly, there is a contextual difference between being in church and having a place in society. In church we listen to the law and gospel of God; in society we work to further the glory of God. Nonetheless, we may not say that we are under the rule of Christ only within the confines of the church, whereas in society we determine our own reality. We remain the same persons wherever we are. We cannot say, "I am a Christian in church, but in society I am a person like every one else. I leave my Bible at home, when I go to work."

It is an essential characteristic of the Christian faith that it embraces all of life and accepts the lordship of Jesus Christ. His Word addresses all of life, not only our inner life, but also the outward manifestations of life. We have one heart and that one heart expresses itself in one voice.

Both in church and in society we are to give expression to the lordship of Christ. As Christians we wish to live by God's Word and we refuse to set aside our obedience to that Word in society. There too, we are oriented to the kingdom of God. As one theologian has eloquently put it: the "chief drive in our lives should be to live under the authority of the King and to see His kingdom extended in every possible way--morally, socially, and geographically, as well as personally, internally, and spiritually." The Lord has promised that in this way all other things will be given to us (Matthew 6:33). After all, the kingdom manifests itself also in all other spheres of life: in business deals, social work, criminal justice, etc.

If we do not live under the lordship of Christ in society, we live under some other spiritual power, namely, humanism. Today's humanism is different from the humanism of the 15th and 16th century. That humanism was still influenced by Christianity. Today's humanism, however, totally rejects and opposes Christianity.

There is no such thing as being spiritually neutral. The Lord Jesus said: "He who is not with Me is against Me" (Matthew 12:30). The lordship of Christ concerns all of life. He is not content to be Lord over part of our life. "No man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24).

The Commandment is Good

How are we to live under the lordship of Christ in the practice of daily life? To answer this question we ought to notice that God gives a prominent place to the commandments in his Word. Paul writes that the commandment of God "is ... good" (Romans 7:12). That is, it "has our welfare in mind... It is beneficent in outlook and aim." Moses also refers to the 'goodness' of the commandments of the LORD when he called the people of Israel to obey them, so "that it may go well with you" (Deuteronomy 4:40; 6:3; 10:13).

We need to emphasize the 'goodness' of the commandment for every person and for all people. That requires more than merely quoting the commandments of the Lord. When referring to them, we need to bring out the content and aim of the commandments. They do not circumvent the needs of people. On the contrary, they have our "welfare in mind." That is why we need to be ready to explain the consequences of our Christian ethical point of view. Rather than simply quoting a Bible verse, we should enter into a discussion with 'our neighbour' in our society. We need to explain the wellbeing the commandments have in view for today. We should pray to the Lord that He give us the wisdom and words to that end.

Will that result in a common position? Will Christians and non-Christians be able to build a consensus? That depends in part on the measure in which others will cooperate with us and give us space to put Christian insights into practice. It may also be that the majority will continue to oppose our Christian point of view.

The Threefold Function of the Law

Is it impossible to work together with non-Christians in society? Let refer to the three aspects to the law of God. (i) The law functions to restrain sin and maintain order in the world; (ii) the law functions to uncover sin and to bring the sinner to see his need of Christ and to be saved; (iii) the law functions to instruct us for our daily lives and exhorts us to continual obedience.

The laws in our country, as far as they are based on the commandments of God, should have something of these three elements in them—first, to restrain evil, secondly, to uncover evil, and thirdly, to aim at the wellbeing of man and society. When this is visible in concrete legislation, there will be something of a consensus. If this is not visible, there will be compromise and collaboration with evil.

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Endnotes:

1. The book is entitled *Waakzaam en nuchter: Over Christelijke ethiek in een democratie* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1994)[transl. Watchful and sober: Christian ethics in a democracy].
2. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Kingdom Life in a Fallen World: Living out the Sermon on the Mount* (Navpress, 1986), 192.
3. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1988), 283. Cf. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans I* (NICNT) (Eerdmans, 1959), 253: It “promotes man’s highest well-being and thus expresses the goodness of God.”
4. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans (IVP)* (Eerdmans, 1988), 283.