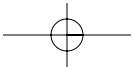
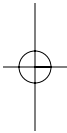
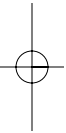


evangelical
ethics



evangelical ethics

ISSUES FACING THE CHURCH TODAY

THIRD EDITION

John Jefferson Davis



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davis, John Jefferson.

Evangelical ethics : issues facing the church today / John Jefferson Davis.—
3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-10: 0-87552-622-5 (paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-87552-622-5

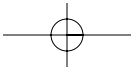
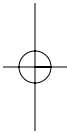
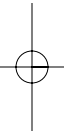
1. Christian ethics—Presbyterian authors. 2. Evangelicalism. I. Title.

BJ1251.D28 2004

241'.0404—dc22

2004044510

To
Robin, Nathaniel, Elizabeth,
Susana, Hilary, and Elliot



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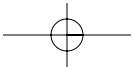
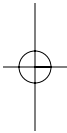
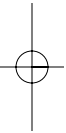
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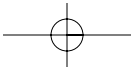
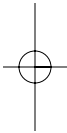
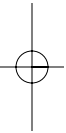
I wish to thank the editors and staff of P&R Publishing for their assistance in the revision of my text, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, for this new, expanded third edition. A new chapter on genetic engineering reviews the history of the development of genetics as a discipline, explains basic scientific terminology, and suggests a theological and ethical framework to interpret issues relating to genetic diagnosis, genetic engineering, cloning, and stem cell research.

A new chapter on environmental ethics outlines the history of the development of the environmental movement, surveys major environmental issues such as global warming, biodiversity, resource depletion, and pollution, and develops a theological framework based on major biblical texts such as Genesis 1 and Genesis 9, Psalm 104, Colossians 1:15–20, and Romans 8:19–21. The chapter encourages readers to be more actively involved in an area of culture where in the past evangelicals have not been notable for their leadership.

Other chapters in *Evangelical Ethics* have been revised and updated, especially in areas where statistical information has become outdated since the publication of the second edition. New material has been included, for example, in the chapters on reproductive technologies, abortion, homosexuality, and just war.

It is my hope that this new edition of *Evangelical Ethics* will continue to help pastors, seminarians, college students, and church members bring a Christian and biblical understanding to the many vital ethical issues facing Christians today.

John Jefferson Davis, Ph.D.
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Hamilton, Massachusetts



Dimensions of Decision Making

“In some of this research,” noted Dr. Robert Foote of Cornell, “I am reminded of a story where the pilot came on and said, ‘This is your captain speaking. We are flying at an altitude of 35,000 feet and the speed of 700 miles an hour. We have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that we are lost. The good news is that we are making excellent time.’ ”

This story, told by Professor Foote in testimony on in vitro fertilization before the federal Ethics Advisory Board, expresses in a humorous way the very serious dilemma facing modern man at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Technologically we are making “excellent time”; morally we at times appear to be lost.

Developments in modern medical technology have been outstripping our ability to understand adequately their long-range ethical ramifications. Does in vitro fertilization represent a welcome solution to the problem of infertility, or does it raise the specter of the further dehumanization of marriage and human sexuality? If the technology is available to parents for the preconception selection of the gender of their children, is it morally legitimate to use such methods? Under what conditions, if any, could sterilization be a legitimate contraceptive choice for the Christian?

Evangelical Christians are challenged to formulate their positions on what are literally matters of life and death. Is it ever morally justifiable to abort an unborn child because of anticipated birth defects?

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Under what conditions can artificial life-support systems be discontinued in cases of terminal illness? In today's society, can capital punishment be applied in a truly nondiscriminatory way? Could a Christian ever be legitimately involved in a violent revolution? Do modern nuclear weapons make the traditional arguments for a just war obsolete? These are some of the pressing issues that will be examined in this volume in the light of Scripture, human reason, and the empirical data of medicine, law, and the social sciences.

Cases and Issues

The focus in this work is on specific issues and cases that are likely to confront the pastor and Christian lay person today, rather than on a general discussion of moral virtues and dispositions¹ or the history of Christian ethics.² Although the latter considerations are important for a comprehensive Christian ethical stance, they are outside the immediate scope of this book.

Since the time of the Reformation, the subject of moral *casuistry* (the study of specific "cases") has become less fashionable in Protestant circles. That in part represents an understandable reaction to abuses associated with practices of the medieval church, such as penance, priestly confession, the subtleties of scholastic theology and canon law, and the later excesses of Jesuitical speculation.

As the noted evangelical church historian Geoffrey Bromiley has observed, however, the principle of casuistry should not be thrown out with the abuse. "The commands of God have to be worked out in the stuff of daily life. . . . Some guidance must be offered even if in the last resort the Christian must form his own judgment and bear responsibility for his own act."³

Although Christ condemned the casuistry of the scribes and Pharisees, which perverted the law of God through human speculation, he in no way minimized the role of specific obedience to the commandments of God, but made such specific obedience a test of the genuineness of the disciple's love (John 14:21). Though obedience to the law of God can never be the basis for earning one's salvation, nevertheless the clear teaching of the apostle Paul is that the law in and of

Dimensions of Decision Making

itself is holy, just, and good (Rom. 7:12). Genuine Christian love motivates the believer to fulfill the requirements of the moral law (Rom. 13:10).

John Calvin taught that the moral law plays a positive role in the believer's life. The law is the instrument for learning more thoroughly the nature of God's will and becoming confirmed in the understanding of it.⁴

In the post-Reformation period, notable English Puritan pastors and theologians recognized the need to provide believers with moral guidance in specific cases of conscience. The works of William Perkins (*Decisions of Certain Cases* [Latin, 1603]), William Ames (*De Conscientia* [Amsterdam, 1630]), and Richard Baxter (*Christian Directory* [1673]) are prime examples.⁵ Given the highly complex and rapidly changing conditions of life in the twenty-first century, it is both appropriate and necessary to recover the best elements in this tradition of Protestant pastoral and moral theology.

Biblical Authority

The teachings of Scripture are the final court of appeal for ethics. Human reason, church tradition, and the natural and social sciences may aid moral reflection, but divine revelation, found in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, constitutes the "bottom line" of the decision-making process.⁶ Informed ethical reflection will carefully weigh the various words of men, both past and present, but the Word of God must cast the deciding vote. Evangelicals believe that the canonical Scriptures are the very Word of God, the only infallible and inerrant rule of faith and practice, and consequently are the highest authority for both doctrine and morals.

The Bible functions normatively in evangelical ethics through its specific commands and precepts, general principles, various precedents, and overall worldview. Many of the specific commandments of Scripture (e.g., "Do not commit adultery") are directly translatable into our present context.⁷ General biblical principles, such as the sacredness of human life made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–28), have crucial implications for modern ethical issues not addressed

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explicitly in Scripture, such as in vitro fertilization and genetic engineering. Old Testament practices such as tithing, while not specifically commanded in the New Testament, can function as a precedent as the people of God seek to fulfill their stewardship obligations in the present age. By teaching foundational truths concerning the nature of God, man, good and evil, and the meaning and destiny of human life, the Bible provides a basic *worldview* within which the various data of the human sciences can be understood.⁸ It has been said that “good facts make good ethics,” but these “facts” must be seen within the proper framework if their true ethical significance is to be understood.

The understanding of Christian morals being advocated here exemplifies the *prescriptive* and *deontological* (Greek: *deon*, that which is obligatory) tradition in the history of ethics.⁹ According to this school of thought, Christian ethics is to be not merely descriptive of human behavior, but prescriptive in the sense of discerning the will of God in concrete situations, and the specific duties that follow from it. Evangelical ethics is concerned not with personal preferences and feelings, but with obligations that command the conscience.

There has been a widespread tendency in modern biblical scholarship to minimize the prescriptive element in New Testament ethics in favor of generalized appeals to Christian “faith” and “love” apart from the specifics of law. As Rudolf Schnackenburg has pointed out, however, “Jesus was not concerned only with interior dispositions, but wanted his demands to be interpreted as real commandments that are to be converted into action.”¹⁰ W. D. Davies has noted that in the mind of the apostle Paul, the exalted Lord was never divorced from Jesus the rabbi, and the Holy Spirit was never divorced from the historic teachings of Jesus.¹¹ Likewise in 1 John there is constant appeal to the commandments of the Lord, and frequent echoes of them.¹² The love of God shed abroad in the heart of the believer is indeed the dynamic motivation of Christian behavior, but this love demonstrates itself in harmony with, and not apart from, the specific commands and precepts of Holy Scripture.

Empirical and Deliberative Elements

Harmon Smith and Louis Hodges have written that there are two poles between which all Christian decision making must be done: “the reality of God on the one hand and the concrete, contingent situation of the actor on the other.”¹³ Biblical authority represents the “revelational-normative” dimension of Christian ethics; human reason, applying the biblical norms to the concrete situation in light of the specific data at hand, represents the “empirical-deliberative” dimension. Good principles and good facts are both necessary for sound decision making.

In the classic language of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the “whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*” (I.6; emphasis added).¹⁴ In this formulation human reason has a legitimate role in extending the general principles of Scripture to analogous circumstances not explicitly addressed in the canonical texts.

Cocaine abuse, for example, while not explicitly addressed in the Bible, is certainly inconsistent with the teaching that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and is not to be abused (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The principles of medical ethics that the physician is to “do no harm” and is always to treat the patient as an end and never as a means only¹⁵—so crucial in the treatment of comatose or incompetent subjects—are essentially applications of the spirit of the Golden Rule to the new challenges of modern medicine. This use of reason in evangelical ethics is similar to the deliberations of a civil judge who, being faced with entirely new circumstances in a pending case, attempts to apply existing law in the light of precedents and all the relevant data in order to serve the cause of justice.

While human reason plays an essential role in evangelical ethics, that role is not an autonomous one, independent of the authority of Scripture. Human reason, being impaired by sin, is not to serve as a separate norm as over against Scripture, but rather as the servant of divine revelation in the application of biblical truth.¹⁶ Information

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from the social sciences, for example, may be relevant to discussions of homosexuality, but the evangelical ethicist will, in the words of J. Robertson McQuilken, maintain “a jealous commitment to the Bible first and last as the originating and controlling source of ideas about man and his relationships.”¹⁷ The Christian ethicist will seek all the facts relevant to the matter at hand, but will recognize the need to interpret those facts with a mind renewed by the Holy Spirit, and within a framework of meaning controlled by the teachings of Holy Scripture.¹⁸

Cases of Conflicting Obligation

In a sinful world, believers may occasionally find themselves confronted with conflicting ethical obligations. In the early church Peter and the other apostles faced conflicting demands for obedience, from the governing authorities and from God (Acts 5:27–29). After Rahab the harlot received the Israelite spies, she was met with a choice between telling the truth and preserving life (Josh. 2). Corrie Ten Boom, when hiding Jews in her home during the Second World War and queried by the Nazi authorities, “Are there any Jews in this house?” faced a dilemma similar to Rahab’s.

Some ethicists have distinguished between *prima facie* (“on first appearance”) duties and *actual* duties.¹⁹ *Prima facie* duties are duties, *other things being equal*. *Actual* duties are duties, *all things considered*.²⁰ Is such a distinction biblical? In a sinful world, is it always possible to find a course of action that is thoroughly pleasing to God, or is it sometimes necessary to choose between the lesser of two sins? Are there general principles from Scripture that can furnish guidelines for resolving cases of conflicting obligations? These and related issues will be addressed in the analysis that follows.

One unsuccessful answer to the problem of conflicting moral obligations is known as “situation ethics.” In this approach there can be no real conflict between two or more absolutes, because presumably there is only one absolute: “love.” In each and every situation, one’s moral obligation is to take the most “loving” course of action, even if that should mean discarding traditional ethical standards.

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Joseph Fletcher, the leading proponent of this school of thought, has little use for codes and rules. “Christian situation ethics,” he says, “reduces law from a statutory system of rules to the love canon alone.”²¹ Universal rules and principles are treated as love’s servants and subordinates, “to be quickly kicked out of the house if they forget their place and try to take over.”²²

This “situational” and incipiently antinomian perspective was not entirely new with Fletcher, but had been anticipated by earlier trends in neoorthodox theology. Emil Brunner, for example, in the widely read *The Divine Imperative*, had written that “we are united to our neighbor by the Command of love, which excludes all legalistic rules and every attempt to stereotype human relationships.”²³ A protest against legalism in the Christian life can easily become a rejection of the binding moral authority of the specific precepts of God’s written Word.

The fundamental difficulty with the “situational” approach, of course, is the absence of a definite criterion for what constitutes a “loving” course of action in any given situation. Harmon Smith asks, “How does a person know that he is doing (or has done) the loving thing in the situation?”²⁴ The question is very much to the point. Apart from the abiding norms of divine revelation, the moral agent is left to the vagaries of personal preference and the constantly changing “spirit of the age” to discern the “loving” thing.

The Bible clearly indicates that human beings, who possess sinful and fallen natures, cannot be left to their own devices to discern the will of God; the ability to rationalize selfish desires in the name of high-sounding principles is all too real. Paul Lehmann, for example, attempts to legitimize extramarital sex by appealing to the “fulfillment of human wholeness” and “free obedience to what God is doing in the world.”²⁵

James Gustafson relates a conversation with a student at a liberal seminary during the late sixties—a conversation that illustrates how “situationism” can lead to the trivialization of serious moral principle. “I get up in the morning and look out the window,” the student said, “to see what God is doing in the world. I read the *New York Times* to find out where he is doing these things today. Then I get with it.”²⁶

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Evidently it did not occur to the student that reading (and obeying) the Bible has anything to do with discerning “what God is doing in the world.” The serious reader of Scripture is confronted by the statement of Jesus that *authentic* love for God is demonstrated by keeping his commandments (John 14:21). The Bible points the moral agent away from the short-term rationalizations of personal preference toward the long-term perspective of eternity—the perspective that alone provides the proper framework for evaluating man’s true and lasting interests.

The view advocated in this work regarding conflicting moral obligations could be termed “contextual absolutism.”²⁷ According to this perspective, there are many moral absolutes, not just one absolute of “love,” as in situation ethics. Examples of moral absolutes are provided by the Decalogue: idolatry, murder, blasphemy, adultery, stealing, and so forth are always morally wrong.²⁸

Contextual absolutism holds that in each and every ethical situation, no matter how extreme, there is a course of action that is morally right and free of sin. God promises that in every situation of temptation or testing there will be a way of escape so that the believer will be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13). This position differs from the “lesser-of-two-evils” position, which holds that in some circumstances any course of action open to the believer will be sinful to some degree.

In some cases the right course of action may require suffering or even martyrdom. Jesus Christ, who is presented as the believer’s moral ideal in the New Testament, did not commit any sin, but always obeyed the Father’s will, even to the point of suffering and death (1 Peter 2:21–22). Daniel and his friends were willing to be martyred rather than compromise their convictions by committing an act of idolatry (Dan. 3:17–18).

Following the course of action that is well pleasing to God may not always be easy in a sinful and fallen world, but such obedient and even heroic options can, by the grace of God, be found and followed even in the most extreme conditions. Such unswerving commitment to discerning and obeying the will of God—including a willingness to pay the “cost of discipleship”—is much needed in the twenty-first-century American church, where believers are all too often tempted by the comforts and compromises of the surrounding culture.

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The term “*contextual* absolutism” contains the implicit reminder that the moral absolutes of Scripture need to be understood and applied within their proper context. Some normal or *prima facie* duties may not be actual duties when all things are taken into consideration. As Charles Hodge, the famous conservative theologian of the nineteenth century, has noted, occasionally a higher obligation suspends a lower one.²⁹ Several examples may help to make this point clear.

There are a number of illustrations in Scripture of the principle that obedience to God takes precedence over the normal obligation (Rom. 13:1) to obey the government. The Hebrew midwives refused to obey the command of Pharaoh to kill the male Hebrew infants, and God blessed them for their courage (Ex. 1:15–17). In the early church the apostles refused to obey the orders of the Jewish authorities to refrain from preaching the gospel, replying, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Daniel and his friends were willing to suffer martyrdom rather than obey Nebuchadnezzar’s command to worship the idol (Dan. 3:17–18). When the laws of God conflict with the laws of men, human laws must yield to the higher authority of God.

The Bible endorses the principle that human life is of far greater value than physical property or possessions. One human life or soul is more valuable in God’s sight than the entire physical world (see Matt. 16:26: “What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?”). A fireman who breaks down the door of a burning home in order to save a child’s life is not guilty of breaking the eighth commandment’s prohibition of stealing, which normally applies to the willful destruction of another’s property. In such an emergency, any reasonable person, if asked, would give permission for the destruction of property in order to save a life. One can suppose that an implied consent justifies the fireman’s action.

Cases involving possible conflicts between telling the truth and saving lives are more difficult to analyze. When Rahab the harlot (Josh. 2:1–7), for example, spoke falsehood to protect the Israelite spies, was she choosing the “lesser of two evils,” or a course of action acceptable to God?

Charles Hodge has pointed out that in such cases one’s *definition* of a lie is crucial. Not every act of deception is the moral equivalent

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of a lie; a lie involves “an intention to deceive when we are expected and bound to speak the truth.”³⁰ In certain contexts full disclosure is not expected. In football, for example, a quarterback is not expected to reveal his plays to the opposing linemen; he intentionally tries to deceive the defense when he fakes to the fullback but passes to the wide receiver. In warfare, opposing generals do not expect their counterparts to willingly reveal their battle plans; deception by camouflage and other means is the “name of the game.”

It could be argued that Rahab, living in the context of war (the invasion of Canaan), and having shifted her allegiance from the king of Jericho to the God of Israel as her true King, had no obligation to make full disclosure to the soldiers. Her higher duty to protect the lives of the servants of God suspended the *prima facie* duty to tell the truth, and her course of action was acceptable to God. In the New Testament, Rahab is cited as an example of faith for receiving the spies and sending them out another way (James 2:25). Nowhere in Scripture is Rahab condemned for her action. On this construction Rahab fulfilled the moral absolute that applied in this wartime context, namely, to save the lives of God’s people; and her actions, rather than being the lesser of two evils, were actually good.³¹

Christian Ethics and Law in a Pluralistic Society

For the Christian the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God, the final authority for faith and practice. The believer lives, however, in a pluralistic society, which does not officially recognize the authority of the Scriptures. To what extent should Christians attempt to have their moral convictions reflected in American law and public policy? Would such attempts constitute an inappropriate effort to “impose” alien moral standards on unbelievers or those of other faiths? Is “legislating morality” an inherently unworkable concept?

Such questions are far from academic. Contemporary issues such as abortion, pornography, “gay rights,” state-sponsored lotteries—to name a few—make such questions urgent ones for the Christian community. Historically, the Judeo-Christian values derived from the Bible have

Dimensions of Decision Making

formed the basis for civil law in Western civilization.³² Since the Second World War, however, that basis has increasingly been contested and even repudiated by secular humanists. The following analysis is an attempt to outline some basic guidelines for evangelical action in this complex area of biblical values and public policy in a pluralistic society.

In our American context discussions of “legislating morality” inevitably involve the concept of the “separation of church and state” derived from the First Amendment. The amendment does not actually contain the words “separation of church and state,” but declares that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”³³ In recent years the federal courts have taken this to mean a virtual separation of Christian *values* from government rather than the separation of church and state as *institutions*, but that is, as we shall see, an understanding quite foreign to the intention of the framers of the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

An examination of American legal and constitutional documents before and after the enactment of the First Amendment in 1791 makes it clear that the framers never intended to exclude Christian values from law and public policy.³⁴ Maryland’s state constitution, enacted in 1776, specified as a test of officeholders a “declaration of belief in the Christian religion.”³⁵ Article 38 of the state constitution of South Carolina, formulated in 1778, was even more specific, stating that “the Christian Protestant religion shall be deemed the established religion of this state.”³⁶ The founding fathers saw no conflict between such practices of the states and the First Amendment. The Establishment Clause was intended to prevent the U.S. Congress from establishing any one *denomination* as the preferred American church, but the amendment left the *states* free to do so if they wished. The state of Massachusetts, for example, continued to have an established state church until 1832, a generation after the adoption of the First Amendment.

U.S. Supreme Court decisions prior to 1947 reflected this historically correct understanding of the framers’ intention.³⁷ Justice Joseph Story, in a unanimous decision, *Vidal v. Girard’s Executors* (1843), could state that “the Christian religion is part of the common law.” The Court clearly understood that the First Amendment was intended

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to rule out preferential treatment for any single Christian denomination, rather than excluding Christian influence as such.

In an 1890 decision, *Church of Latter-Day Saints v. U.S.*, the Court held that the Mormon practice of polygamy was illegal, being “contrary to the spirit of Christianity.” In *Church of Holy Trinity v. U.S.*, the Court could say that “this is a Christian nation.” As late as 1931, in the case of *United States v. Macintosh*, the Court could state that “we are a Christian people, according to one another the equal right of religious freedom, and acknowledging with reverence the duty of obedience to the will of God.” It was only as recently as 1947, in the case of *Everson v. Board of Education*, that the concept of “a wall of separation between church and state” began to take on a perverse life of its own and a meaning quite foreign to the intention of the founding fathers.

If the First Amendment, then, is no barrier to Christian attempts to influence public policy, are there biblical principles that can furnish guidelines for such action? How much Christian morality should be legislated? Is there common moral ground between the believer and the unbeliever? These are only a few of the many questions that naturally arise in this difficult but timely area.

The biblical teachings concerning the *image of God* and *general revelation* are certainly germane to such discussions. All men and women are in fact created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26–28) and, whether they acknowledge the fact or not, live in the moral universe created by God and have an inborn awareness of God’s moral requirements. God reveals his moral will for mankind not only in the special revelation given in the Bible, but also in the general revelation of nature and conscience (Rom. 1:18–32; 2:14–15).³⁸ The apostle Paul clearly teaches that the unbeliever, entirely apart from the Bible, has not only an awareness that God exists, but also an awareness of the fundamental demands of God’s moral law. One does not have to be a Christian to be intuitively aware that murder, stealing, adultery, and disrespect for parents, for example, are contrary to the divine will. Even though this moral awareness is distorted and suppressed by a sinful human nature (Rom. 1:18), it is nevertheless still present and can provide a point of contact in the discussion of public policy issues with moral dimensions.

Dimensions of Decision Making

History also teaches that God calls nations to account for the violation of the basic moral principles revealed in creation and conscience. God sent judgment upon the generation of the flood (Gen. 6–7) and upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18–19). Amos denounced the war atrocities committed by one pagan nation against another (Amos 2:1). Jonah was sent to announce God’s judgment against the pagan city of Nineveh (Jonah). Not having the written revelation of God was no excuse; they were sinning against the light of nature and the moral law engraved upon the heart (Rom. 1:18–32; 2:14–15).

The moral wisdom of God’s general revelation has been confirmed in history by the studies of anthropologists. On the basis of his extensive studies of both ancient and modern civilizations, the British anthropologist J. D. Unwin concluded that the whole of human history does not provide a single example of a society that achieved and consistently maintained a high level of culture without adopting heterosexual monogamy as the standard for marriage and family life.³⁹ Societies that adopted more permissive sexual practices entered into periods of decline in art, science, religion, and military power. The “track record of history” has confirmed the wisdom of the moral standards revealed not only to believers, in Scripture, but to all peoples, through general revelation.

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, the following general principle may be stated: Where Scripture indicates that unbelievers can have moral awareness on a given issue through *general revelation*, then it may be appropriate for Christians to press for legislation in that area.⁴⁰ For example, laws prohibiting the killing of innocent human life and forbidding homosexuality as a way of life are consistent with the basic moral intuitions of believers and unbelievers alike, according to Romans 1:18–32 and 2:14–15. In such cases the unbeliever *ought* to know better, even though in some instances the unbeliever will deny in very vocal terms the voice of conscience. Other behavioral standards, such as attendance at Christian worship, are not mandates of general revelation, but presuppose special revelation and a personal faith commitment, and hence are not appropriate subjects for civil legislation.⁴¹

Christians seeking to influence law and public policy must be sensitive not only to basic biblical and theological principles, but to practical considerations as well. Would the proposed law be enforceable?

EVANGELICAL ETHICS

If not, the actual effect of legislation might be to undercut respect for the rule of law and the credibility of Christian political action. The unsuccessful attempt to outlaw the production and sale of alcoholic beverages during Prohibition is an example.⁴² The enforceability of a given law presupposes a significant degree of *community consensus* regarding its justice and wisdom. At times, however, a prophetic minority may be called to *create* a consensus on a given issue where none exists, as did the abolitionists in the nineteenth century. In certain controversial areas where matters of fundamental justice are at stake, legal change may come first, and community consensus later, as with the civil rights movement in the sixties. The historical examples illustrate the variety and complexity of the circumstances that confront Christians who work for change in the public arena.

One might also consider the criterion known as “clear and present danger.” That is to say, at any given time there may be a whole spectrum of moral issues in society that could be the focus of efforts to change the laws. Given limited time and energy, however, an individual or a church will need to focus on issues that have special urgency or crucial implications for the body politic. Both state-run lotteries and abortion, for example, are public policy issues with moral dimensions. But abortion is literally a matter of life and death, while lotteries are not, and hence the former concern deserves a higher place in the list of priorities for social action, other considerations being equal.

Christians seeking to influence public policy will recognize both the value and limitations of civil law as an instrument of social change. The believer will not (or should not) have *utopian* expectations of what laws can accomplish; only the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit can produce radical transformations in the human heart. At the same time, law not only restrains violent behavior, but serves as an educator. As Lynn Buzzard has observed, “Law not only expresses what is, but is a summons to what ought to be.”⁴³ Civil laws that are consistent with the teachings of Scripture point society to a higher standard of righteousness, which is fulfilled only in Jesus Christ. Such laws remain a worthy object of Christian concern and social action.