

# Christian Ethics

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RPH 320



## Overview

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- Three common approaches to ethics:
  - ▶ Choosing according to outcomes or goals (teleological)
  - ▶ Choosing according to principles or rules (deontological)
  - ▶ Being a certain kind of person, (focusing on virtues and character)
    - Some would add ethics based upon care that arises out of concrete relationships
- Lovin will discuss all three in chapters 2-4
  - ▶ He tends to reduce the third to an outcome of choice rather than the source of choices



## Goals

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### Chapter 1

- “Ethics is the study of [the] human good in its most general terms and how we . . . pursue it.” (p. 9)
  - ▶ Based upon Aristotle’s definition
  - ▶ Key issue (that separates Greek ethics from Christian ethics?) is what is the “good life”?
- Christians tend to learn about the good life through Bible, participation in church, personal prayer (9)
  - ▶ Very Wesleyan--3 of the 4 sides of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason



## Good Life

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- Is a good life the same as living a good life?
- What is good life?
  - More than pleasurable moments--has long term dimension
  - Includes helping others to live good lives (self-sacrifice)
- For Christians, good life includes pursuit of good life for enemies as well as persecution
- “no guarantees of temporal success ... but this is a better life” than seeking self-interests (14)



## Definitions

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- Ethics – “study of our choices about the good life, both individually and in the whole picture of a good life that our choices, taken together, create” (16)
- Morals – “the practices and beliefs by which people live” (16)
- Moral goods vs. Nonmoral or natural goods (17)
- Descriptive ethics – study the ethics that people have
- Normative ethics – study of how we ought to act and be



## Goals

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Chapter 2



## Goals and Goods

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- “A system of ethics that gives primary attention to the goals or goods that we achieve by our actions is called a *teleology* or a *teleological ethics*.” (23)
  - ▶ Utilitarianism is best known teleological ethics (good sought is happiness)
  - ▶ Situation ethics or agapism is a Christian version of utilitarianism (good sought is love)
- Lovin suggests that realistically there are many goods important to ethics – we need to find the combination that will help us live a good life (26 ff.)
  - ▶ In individualistic, secular society the choice of goals seems arbitrary



## Goals & Goods in Christian Perspective

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- Goods in life are *gifts* which can function to build up *community* (30-31)
  - ▶ *Stewardship* and *Community* are thus foundational principles of that guide Christian in choosing personal goals
  - ▶ The *Stewardship* of gifts contribute to the benefit of others in *Community*
  - ▶ “In a moral life guided by the principles of stewardship and community, choices become commitments” (32)
  - ▶ “Shared commitments to goals that are more important than our personal goals create *covenants*” (35)



## Goals and Plans

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- “To live a good life we must know what we would be willing to die for” (37)
- What do we plan to do with our lives?



# Rules

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## Chapter 3

- System of ethics based upon obedience or adherence to rules is *deontology* or *deontological ethics* (42)
  - ▶ An action is right if it conforms to accepted rules or principles and wrong if it violates the rules – regardless of the consequences (goals)
  - ▶ Less uncertainty than determining outcomes of an action
  - ▶ Useful in codes of ethics



# Divine Command Ethics

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- Typically in Christian deontological ethics, one views rules as God's commands
  - ▶ Protestants would see these commands as coming from scripture
  - ▶ Roman Catholics would see these commands as coming from scripture and the teaching authority of the church as well as from natural law
- Problems:
  - ▶ How do we really know what God commands?
  - ▶ Does God command something because it is right, or is something right because God commands it?



# Natural Law Ethics

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- Roots in Augustine, but developed most fully in Aquinas
  - ▶ In addition to commands that God reveals to us, there are principles of right and wrong that anyone can know through reason embedded in the natural order of things, e.g. we ought to seek good and avoid evil
  - ▶ Some Protestants talk about a similar notion when they refer to "orders of creation," i.e., principles that God created to govern life prior to the Fall and our need for Revelation
- Popular example is just war theory
- Has advantage of providing a common ground for talking about morality across cultures and religions
  - ▶ Problem is that it is not always clear that there really are that many common principles accepted across all cultures and religions



## Covenant and Rules

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- Some Christian ethicists talk about commitments and rules that arise out of a covenant relationship initiated by God (as opposed to rules discovered by natural reasoning)
  - Covenants differ from contracts, e.g., social contract of Hobbes or Locke
    - Contracts are commitments based upon self-interest – dump the rules when they are no longer in one's self interest
    - Covenants are commitments based upon enhancing mutual relationships – rules may be set aside when they damage relationships
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## Rules and Goals

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- Rules are concerned with governing the way we attain goals (ends do not justify the means)
  - Lovin suggests that rules also help us structure our personal decisions (55) and allow us to live together in community (56)
  - In short rules complement and limit goals, but do not replace them
    - E.g., while rules may structure our lives so that we can get along together, they don't inspire us to work together
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