

Introduction to Christian Ethics – Protestant Approaches to Ethics

HPRS4092

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Protestant Approaches to Christian Ethics

In the previous section, we explored a couple of distinctive features of Catholic ethics, such as the role that tradition and Church authority play in the production of ethics, and the central importance of 'natural law' in producing Catholic ethics. In both cases, these features are not limited to only Catholic ethics – natural law and religious authority are important across all forms of Christian ethics – but their centrality historically and contemporaneously are distinctive to the Catholic tradition.

In this next section, I want us to do something similar with the Protestant tradition – to explore features that, while being common across Christian ethics, are particularly pronounced or distinctive to the Protestant tradition.

We will be doing this by beginning to look at the centrality of Scripture for Protestantism, before moving on to look at some of the more complicated issues surrounding its use. I then want us to end by looking at some of the general themes running through Christian ethics.



Protestant Approaches to Christian Ethics



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I want us to begin by sketching out the key purpose of the emergence of Protestantism from the Catholic Church in a historical period known as the Reformation.

To do so, we must begin a little earlier, with the early and mid-medieval role of the Catholic Church, which, following the Great Schism between Eastern and Western churches (Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity) in 1054AD.

Following this split, which arose from theological differences over the Trinity and political differences between East and West, we see the development of the High Middle Ages in Europe, with its kings and popes and crusades that I am sure we are all slightly familiar with.



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Protestant Approaches to Christian Ethics

During this time period, we also see a number of developments within the Catholic Church of the time. These included: the gradual accumulation of status and prestige for Rome as the home of the Church, the centralisation of authority within the figure of the Pope, an increasing political role for the Church over temporal power, and a flourishing of the economic and secular power of the Church as an institution.

This accumulation of temporal and economic power by the Church was not looked on favourably by all of its members and was the root cause of much of the dissent that eventually became the Protestant Reformation.



Protestant Approaches to Christian Ethics

This came to a head in 1516, when Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar and papal commissioner for indulgences (a way of buying oneself out of punishment in the afterlife, used by the Church to raise funds), was sent to Germany by the Roman Catholic Church to sell indulgences to raise money to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote to his bishop, Albert of Mainz, protesting the sale of indulgences. He enclosed in his letter a copy of his "Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences", which came to be known as the *Ninety-Five Theses*.



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Protestant Approaches

The Ninety-Five Theses denied the unique authority of the Pope, asserted the re-eminence of Grace in salvation, and cast doubt on the profit motive for indulgences. This led Pope Leo X to write the encyclical *Exsurge Domine* (1520), which excommunicated Luther

Was called to account for his writing and conduct at the Diet of Worms where Luther was asked to recant his teaching and writing.

He replied with the words opposite, foregrounding (1) the role of reason in determining correct action over the authority of the Church and Pope, (2) the direct interpretation of the Scriptures by the individual over their interpretation by a priest, (3) and the importance of the centrality of the Word of God over tradition or hierarchy.

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.

I cannot and I will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.”

Martin Luther, Diet of Worms



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Why might Luther foreground scripture and reason in this way?

Because it is reliable – scripture is what is known as ‘special’, rather than ‘general’, revelation in that it is believed to come directly from God and contain direct access to God’s will. Unlike, say, natural law (which stems from general revelation in Creation), scripture is not seen to require extraneous interpretation and deduction.

In order to discern God’s will we do not need to look at nature and figure out our place within it – we just need to read the specially given instructions provided, the Bible, and figure things out for ourselves from there.



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Luther's thought has formed the basis of Protestant Christianity, and Protestant ethics, since – the protest against the form of the Catholic Church on the basis of its erroneous reliance on authority rather than scripture.

His proposals can be summarized as:

- Sol Scriptura: Only through scripture can certainty be found
- Sola Fidei: Only by faith can someone be saved.
- Sola Gratia: Only through God's grace does salvation come.

The most important of these for our purposes is 'sola scriptura', as it has the greatest impact on the centrality of scripture for Protestant forms of ethical reasoning.



Protestant Approaches

As we have seen in previous sections, to the extent that Scripture, for Christians, is regarded as in some way being an account of God's revelation, scripture is often appealed to in Christian moral and ethical reflection.

The most basic form this takes is the 'proof text' method in which verses and chapters from scripture are drawn upon, often uncritically, to legitimate an ethical position. The Decalogue (10 Commandments), for instance, may be appealed to with respect to questions around filial piety, sexual relations, and murder.

At its more reflective level, however, scripture is often employed hermeneutically in the construction of positions in Christian ethics.

I am the Lord your God: you shall have no other gods but me.

You shall not make for yourself any idol.

You shall not dishonour the name of the Lord your God.

Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Honour your father and mother.

You shall not commit murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not be a false witness.

You shall not covet anything which belongs to your neighbour.

10 Commandments, Church of England Website



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Protestant Approaches to Christian Ethics

That scripture can and should be a source of Christian ethics is generally taken for granted. The ways in which scripture is employed in Christian ethical deliberation is however less straightforward – this is particularly important for traditions, like the Protestant one, that foreground scripture in their ethical reasoning.

Hermeneutical questions of such kind include: the applicability of certain parts of scripture (how do we know what is relevant?), the relation of certain aspects of scripture to the contemporary context (is a text written in one context relevant to another?), the moral ambiguity of certain parts of scripture (if scripture promotes killing, how do we follow it?), and, even more foundationally, the authoritative status of scripture for Christian life (should scripture be the only source of ethical reasoning?) are all contested.



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Protestant Approaches to Christian Ethics

These questions all make the Protestant appeal to scripture over tradition just as problematic as, say, the Catholic appeal to Natural Law and authority.

We face numerous issues if we attempt to only base our ethics on scripture, including:

- Hermeneutics: how do we read scripture the right way?
- Immorality: what should we do when scripture may be immoral or contradictory?
- Canon: what counts as scripture and who decides this? How do we relate different types of scripture to each other?



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New Testament Ethics



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New Testament Ethics

In this part, I want to explore some of the key moral valuations made in treatments of the New Testament and how they effect the development of Christian ethics as a whole, but particularly Protestant Ethics.

We have already done some of this work in the earlier section on scripture, but now, hopefully, we will be able to expand on it in an informed way and see how scripture underpins much of the ethical valuation within the Christian tradition.

This will introduce a fair amount of new Christian vocabulary which will be useful for when we turn to discussing specific ethical issues later in the module.

But why does the New Testament require a new form of ethics?



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New Covenant

The Old Testament is characterised as the story of the covenant (agreement) made between the Jewish people and God.

The prophet Jeremiah predicts a new covenant will be made, as the first has been broken and cannot be kept. This new covenant is identified as that made by the shedding of the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20) in the New Testament.

Furthermore, “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete, and aging will soon disappear” (Heb. 8:13).

³¹ *“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,*

“when I will make a new covenant

with the people of Israel

and with the people of Judah.

³² *It will not be like the covenant*

I made with their ancestors

when I took them by the hand

to lead them out of Egypt,

because they broke my covenant,

though I was a husband to them,”

declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 31:31-32



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New Covenant

But why was this New Covenant necessary?

The Law of Moses in the Old Testament was a good thing but was ultimately impossible for mankind to keep. Christ came to redeem humanity from this impossible Law.

We required a saviour (Christ), to redeem us in the face of our inability to save ourselves through the Mosaic Law.

With the New Testament, there is a new covenant that supersedes the old covenant – this is not to say that the Law has gone away, but that the covenant with Jesus exalts it in a different way.

¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Romans 7:12

¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?

Acts 15:10

⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship

Galatians 4:6

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.

Matthew 5:17



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New Covenant

What, then, is the form of this new covenant?

Quite simply – Love

Just as the law sought to encourage our actions to emulate the example of the divine and God's plan for us, Jesus in the New Testament attempts to express the core character of the divine in a way that can be followed by humanity.

In doing so, we can see the centralisation of love as the characteristic guiding quality of Christian ethics – love for God and love for one another.

³⁶ *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”*

³⁷ *Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

Matthew 22:36-40

⁹ *The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.*

Romans 13:9-10



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Corinthians 1:13

¹³ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.



New Covenant

Love, of course, has many meanings (*eros, agape, philia* etc.) and includes a distinctly Christian flavour, whereby love of God also means obedience to God's will.

Crucially, the importance of love to Christian ethics is not just as a slogan or nice phrase, but as a guiding tool by which the applicability of scriptural injunctions or ethical reasoning can be measure.

It provides, for Christian ethics, a guiding star that can help to apply insights to new contexts and situations in a consistently and focused way.

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:9-21

New Covenant

This can be seen in many parts of the New Testament and has had an immeasurable impact on the development of Christian ethics as a whole.

This is particularly true of Protestant ethics which, because of its reliance and focus on scripture, has required a strong methodology for hermeneutics – a clear and consistent way of reading scripture such that it can be usefully applied in contexts beyond its original one.

This does, of course, leave open many of the questions we have already raised about the use of scripture, tradition, or reason in Christian ethics – but we will cover a few new approaches in the next section.

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

Galatians 5:13

² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Ephesians 4:2

⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

1 Peter 3:8

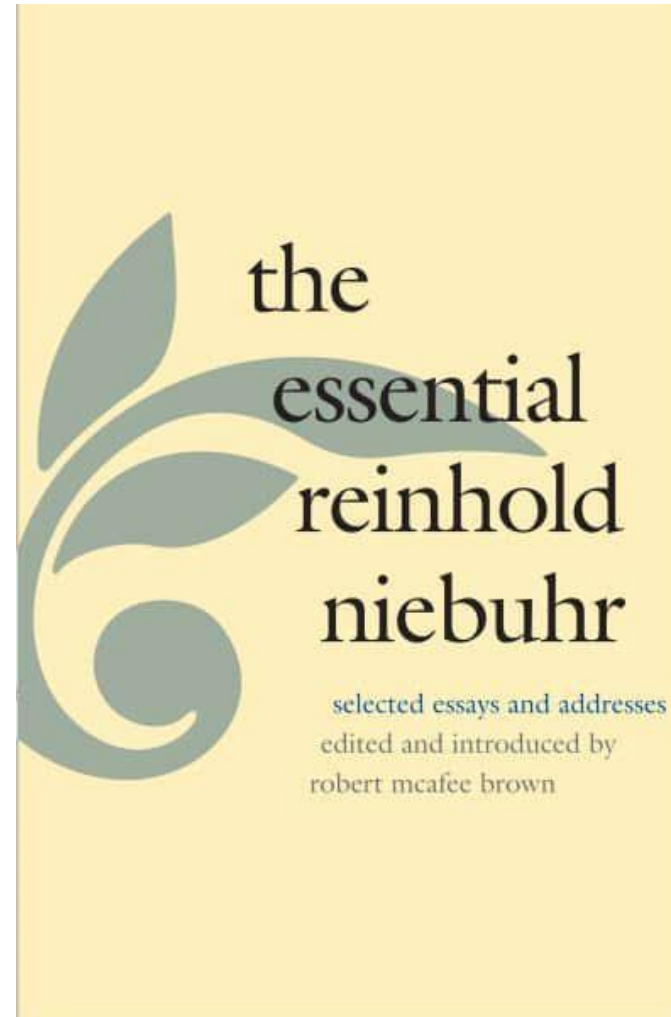


Reading

The readings for this section are two selections from the book "The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr" who was a very prominent Protestant theologian (b. 1892-1971). In both selections, Niebuhr is exploring some of the themes we have picked up either in this section or the previous one.

"Two Sermons." In *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, edited by BROWN ROBERT McAFEE, 33-48. Yale University Press, 1986

"Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism." In *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, edited by BROWN ROBERT McAFEE, 142-59. Yale University Press, 1986



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