

Ethics in Ministry: Definitions, Questions, Case-studies

Ethics in Miriam-Webster:

“A set of moral principles or values;

A theory or system of moral values;

The principles of conduct governing an individual or group.”

What is God’s calling on your life? What is your purpose?

How will you pursue that calling in a way that matches the calling (integrity)?

“The notion that one’s occupation might serve as the means to provide a career was quite foreign at the beginning of the nineteenth century but quite common by its end. Having a career came to mean making progress, moving from preparatory stages of accomplishment up the ladder to larger honor and responsibilities. The occupation in which one was engaged was no longer an end in itself but the means to an end – specifically, the elevation or enrichment of the worker... These changes are echoed rather ominously through the ministry. For if it is the case that careers can be had in the church, then it is inevitable that minister will be judged by the height to which they ascend on the ladder of achievement, and they in turn will judge the church on the extent to which it facilitates this ascent.” Wells, NPFT, 231

Education became less about immersion in knowledge and more about preparation for a career.

“Whereas ministers once focused on such staple interests as brokering God’s truth, caring for the sick and building up Christian character and understanding, they now have to extend their energies to a whole new life of responsibilities, which in some case eclipse the older and more foundational responsibilities.” (Wells NPFT, 232)

From Eugene Peterson/Marva Dawn – *The Unnecessary Pastor*

“There are powerful cultural forces determined to turn...us, the church’s pastors and leaders into kindly religious figures, men and women who provide guidance through difficult times, who dole out inspiration and good cheer on a weekly schedule, who provide smiling reassurance that “God’s in his heaven...” and keep our

congregations busy at tasks that bolster their self-esteem – also good things.

“And if they (the powerful cultural forces) don’t turn us into merely nice people, they turn us into replicas of our cultural leaders, seeking power and influence and prestige. These insistent voices drum away at us, telling us pastors to go out and compete against the successful executives and entertainers who have made it to the top, so that we can put our churches on the map and make it big in the world.

“In such a culture, it is continuously difficult to cultivate an everyday identity that derives (instead) from the crucified and risen Jesus Christ... But the Christian is a witness to a new reality that is entirely counter to the culture. The Christian faith is a proclamation that God’s kingdom has arrived in Jesus, a proclamation that puts the world at risk. What Jesus himself proclaimed and we bear witness to is the truth that the sin-soaked, self-centered world is doomed.

“Pastors are in charge of keeping the distinction between the world’s lies and the gospel’s truth clear...

“The leading premise is that pastors are “unnecessary”, but unnecessary in a defined sense... I mean unnecessary in three ways that we often assume to be necessary:

1. We are unnecessary to what the culture presumes is important as paragons of goodness and niceness...
2. We are also unnecessary to what we ourselves feel is essential: as the linchpin holding a congregation together... None of us is indispensable...
3. And we are unnecessary to what congregations insist that we must do and be: as the experts who will lead them ahead of the competition. Congregations want pastors who will lead them in the world of religious competition and provide a safe alternative to the world’s ways. They want pastors who lead. They want pastors the way the Israelites wanted a king – to make hash of the Philistines. Congregations get their ideas of what makes a pastor from the culture, not from the Scriptures: they want a winner; they want their needs met; they want to be part of something zesty and glamorous.... With hardly an exception they don’t want pastors at all – they want managers of their religious company.

See also chapter 1 in Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter's *Ministerial Ethics, 1993* regarding professionalism – good history.
Ethics in ministry are anchored in an understanding of your calling in life – are you a “professional” climbing a career ladder or a servant honestly yielded to the Lord. Whose glory is your goal?

Wide was his parish, houses far asunder,
But never did he fail, for rain or thunder,
In sickness, or in sin, or any sate,
To visit to the farthest, small and great,
Going afoot, and in his hand a stave.
This fine example to his flock he gave,
That first he wrought and afterwards he taught;
Out of the gospel then that text he caught,
And this figure he added thereunto –
That, if gold rust, what shall poor iron do?
For if the priest be foul, in whom we trust,
What wonder if a layman yield to lust.

Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales
Prologue lines 493-503

“Ethics is about our reasons for doing the things we do and morality is what we do or ought not to do.” W. Willimon in *Calling and Character*, 12

Jonathan Edwards Resolutions: Selected from 72 of them at
http://www.reformed.org/documents/Edwards/index.html?mainframe=/documents/Edwards/j_edwards_resolutions.html

**BEING SENSIBLE THAT I AM UNABLE TO DO ANYTHING
WITHOUT GOD'S HELP, I DO HUMBLY ENTREAT HIM BY HIS
GRACE TO ENABLE ME TO KEEP THESE RESOLUTIONS, SO FAR
AS THEY ARE AGREEABLE TO HIS WILL, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE.**

Remember to read over these Resolutions once a week.

1. Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration,

without any consideration of the time, whether now, or never so many myriads of ages hence. Resolved to do whatever I think to be my duty and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolved to do this, whatever difficulties I meet with, how many soever, and how great soever.

2. Resolved, to be continually endeavoring to find out some new contrivance and invention to promote the aforementioned things.

3. Resolved, if ever I shall fall and grow dull, so as to neglect to keep any part of these Resolutions, to repent of all I can remember, when I come to myself again.

4. Resolved, never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God; nor be, nor suffer it, if I can avoid it.

5. Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.

6. Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.

7. Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.

8. Resolved, to act, in all respects, both speaking and doing, as if nobody had been so vile as I, and as if I had committed the same sins, or had the same infirmities or failings as others; and that I will let the knowledge of their failings promote nothing but shame in myself, and prove only an occasion of my confessing my own sins and misery to God. July 30.

“How Do You Define Ethics?” H.B. London: Ethics reflect who a person is — his conduct, his innermost thoughts, his speaking, teaching, and lifestyle. Christian ethics differ from secular ethics because Christian ethics are linked to the Bible and determined by the unchanging truth of Scripture... Ministerial ethics is a religious code of behavior that is grounded in biblical truth... Ethical issues facing the church today are arrogance and self-centeredness in clergy, etc. http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200404/200404_022_London.cfm

Church of the Brethren, 1996 III. Code of Ethics for Ordained and Licensed Ministers and Lay Speakers

We believe that we have been called by God, through the church, to the set-apart ministry in the Church of the Brethren. It is our calling, and our function, to lead and facilitate the church in its mission to obey and serve Christ and to witness to the good news of the gospel. We are committed to fulfilling the trust the church has placed in us by

maintaining a high standard of Christian conviction, by sincerity of purpose, by nurturing and sharing our gifts, and by integrity of our character. We are dedicated to upholding the dignity and worth of every person who seeks or is reached by our care and proclamation. In order to uphold our standards we, as ministers in the Church of the Brethren, covenant to live out the following:

- A. We will be true to the Judeo-Christian scriptures in our preaching, teaching, and manner of living.
- B. We will be true to Christian convictions as revealed in the Bible and interpreted, taught to, and nurtured in us by the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- C. We will live lives of integrity, upholding the commitments we make to God, to others, to the church, and to ourselves.
- D. We will exercise lifestyles consistent with the teachings of Christ, giving serious attention to relevant Annual Conference statements.
- E. We will assume responsibility for our physical and emotional health and for our spiritual growth and enrichment. We will strive to maintain reasonable expectations for ourselves and not allow others' unreasonable expectations for us to endanger our well-being.
- F. We will treat members of our family with Christian love and respect.
- G. We will treat our congregation with Christian love and respect.
- H. We will not misuse the trust placed in us and the unique power inherent in our role by exploiting in any way those who seek our help or care.
- I. We will not engage in any use of our role within the church to take advantage of the vulnerability of any person by causing that person to engage in sexual activity or contact with us.
- J. We will not engage in any form of child abuse, sexual, physical, or emotional.
- K. We will not use our office or authority to apply influence upon a parishioner or others in order to get bequests, gifts, or loans that would personally benefit us.
- L. We will endeavor to manage our affairs in order to live within our income and neither expect nor specify financial favors or gratuities because of our position.
- M. We will be responsible and honest in the management of all resources and funds entrusted to our care in the course of our employment.

- N. We will give credit for all sources quoted or extensively paraphrased in sermons and prepared papers. We will honor all copyrights.
- O. We will respect the privacy of individuals and will not divulge information obtained in confidence without expressed permission. However, when an individual is a danger to self or others, we will take appropriate action, even when this breaks confidentiality.
- P. We will neither exchange nor tolerate scandalous, malicious, or inaccurate information with or about other persons.
- Q. We will, wherever possible, maintain a friendly, courteous, and cooperative relationship with other ministers, both within our denomination and in the larger Christian community. We will not proselytize people from other churches. We will not render professional service in the congregation being served by another pastor without the knowledge and consent of that pastor, except in emergencies.
- R. We will not perform professional services in former parishes, unless invited to do so by the present pastor. We consider it unethical to be involved in the pastoral affairs of a congregation after leaving it or upon retirement, or to cultivate such relationships with former parishioners as may hinder the ministry of the new pastor.
- S. We believe professional growth is a lifelong process, and we will seek out opportunities to continue to grow spiritually and in ministry skills. We will regularly participate in continuing education opportunities provided by the church and appropriate secular agencies.
- T. We will report all cases of suspected child abuse. We will be knowledgeable of and act in accordance with the mandated reporting requirements of similar professionals within our state.
- U. We will not engage in pastoral counseling which leads us beyond the limits of our training and experience. We will make appropriate use of both consulting and referral services in our community.
- V. We will participate in the denominational process for dealing with allegations of ministerial misconduct in the event of an allegation against us.

Discuss case studies:

Expense accounts – personal lunches, personal books, mileage, etc.
Time management – hours of work, what is work and what is not, etc.

Volunteer who “IM”ed students and who discussed with junior high boys his fantasy of sex with a high school girl. Leading family in the church. Student in youth ministries of grad school.

Youth pastor led session on moral purity, went to office to download “porn” and accidentally hit the print button to the secretary’s printer which she found the next morning. Man was married. Do you tell his wife, et al?

A Pastor had a wealthy builder/donor doing a construction project for his church. Discovered that he was having an affair with another woman in the church. He admitted it but said he would do nothing about it. He was asked to withdraw from all leadership in the church but instead he quit. About a year later he returned with his new girlfriend who had since divorced her husband.

“Spinning” the facts.

Church member who is actively slanderous in his accusations against the pastor.

Staff member who admits he has had inappropriate emotional and physical contact with a church member but has determined it is over.

Staff member who is incompetent in his job but well liked by the congregation. What do you write in an, asked for, “reference” letter to another church?

Years ago, we hired a construction firm to build an addition for us. We did the work on a bid basis. A month or two after the work was completed and the contractor paid, the contractor returned with a request for additional payment. It seems he had made an error in calculating his costs on a part of the project. He had done the work but it cost him \$10,000 more than he had planned. It was true that

error was his but it was also true that we had received “value” for which we did not pay.

The problem intensified when the Trustee chairman who had managed the project for the church, was adamant that a contract was a contract and that we had done all we should do. When pressed on the matter, he threatened to leave the church and take others with him if the church paid any more than the contract called for.

As pastor I was still convinced that we had received “value” for which we had not paid and so I pressed the elders to overrule the Trustee. After several sessions of consideration, the elders refused to do so. What do I do?

A “man” comes to me about marrying a parishioner of mine only for me to find out that the “man” is actually a transgender. My parishioner, the woman, does not know this and the “man” doesn’t want her to know.

A “cross-dressing” man whose wife divorced him wishes to remarry but doesn’t want his fiancé to know about his cross-dressing.

A couple plans to and then does abort their deformed fetus and then asks you to do a funeral for the child.

A woman comes to the pastor in obvious distress and said, “If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone, especially not my husband?”

Her husband, a respected high school principal in the community, was being considered for a leadership position in the church. She went on to say that her husband was a practicing homosexual.

You attend the next nominating committee meeting with this supposed “information.” What do you do?

Man whose neighbor and fellow church member is depreciating property values.

A visiting preacher who “beats people up” with his sermon(s)

True paranoid woman whose husband wasn't certain if she should be committed to institutional care.

The husband admits that he is having an emotional "affair" with an employee. He loves the woman but he doesn't want to leave his wife and children. He wishes to retain both relationships. His wife doesn't know. How do you respond?

One of our staff missionaries called from an Asian country last week to ask my advice. A young Christian Asian female friend of his family's is engaged to man who is nominally Buddhist in an atheistic country. They are planning on a legal proceeding with the court and then a pagan ceremony where offerings are made to the spirits, along with several other pagan elements. They also wish my staff member to subsequently lead them through a Christian marriage ceremony. The missionary knows that the marriage will take place no matter what he says. He knows that his opportunity to influence this couple hinges on his answer to their request. What does he do?

You desperately need an illustration for a significant movement (didn't we use to call it a "point?") in the sermon. You remember an incident that happened to you but to make the illustration work you have to invent a part of the story. Do you do so?

Moral Reasoning in Brief

Will my decision be "good" for people?

Whose good must be considered?

Will my decision be helpful, not hurtful, to as many people as possible?

Will my decision be "right"?

Does it uphold relevant moral principles?

Is it fair? Does it respect people?

Can I invite everyone to act as I will?

Will my decision make us better people?

A slightly more detailed moral reasoning approach is this:

A Christian Leader's Moral Reasoning Framework

1. What relevant, non-moral facts are known or believable in this situation?
2. What alternative actions are available to the decision-makers?
3. Evaluate each alternative action from each of the following moral perspectives:
4. **Love (“the good,” consequential) perspective.** What person(s) have their (non-moral) well-being (e.g., life, property, understanding, relationships, respect) at stake? Which alternative action most advances stakeholders' well-being?
5. **Justice (“the right,” non-consequential) perspective.** What moral principles (e.g., justice, truth-telling) are at stake? Which alternative action best adheres to relevant moral principles?
6. Which of the two perspectives above reveals the strongest, clearest moral grounds for action in this instance? Is it confirmed by the following perspective?
7. **Virtue (“the fitting,” responsible) perspective.** What human virtues are at stake? Which alternative action adheres to virtue, fitting both “the good” and “the right,” and moves people toward Christ-like character?
8. Has this analysis uncovered a new alternative that should be considered? If so, evaluate it as above.
9. Implement that alternative indicated by the love or justice perspective and confirmed by the virtue perspective.