

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

ET501: Christian Ethics
Fall 2010

Tuesdays, 1:15-4:15 p.m.
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DESCRIPTION:

Christian ethics is the serious study of matters of good and evil, right and wrong, from the vantage point of Jesus Christ, Holy Scripture, and the Church. In this perspective . . . What constitutes good, virtuous, healthy character (for individuals, churches and other social groups)? How do we discern and do the right thing in the face of various ethical dilemmas and quandaries? How do Christian moral values play out in a diverse, multicultural, multifaith world? How do individuals, churches, and schools teach and promote moral character and action?

Ethics is oriented toward practice. No subject should be more relevant for theological study and Christian ministry than the exploration of how divine goodness and theological truth can be expressed in our historical realities. No ministry can be faithful or complete if it does not prepare the people for righteous living and accompany them through the ethical minefields of our time and place.

OBJECTIVES & LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Students who complete this course will be able to

1. Define ethics as a field of study and the key process and content distinctives of a *Christian* ethics;
2. Summarize and communicate classic biblical ethics texts such as the Decalogue and Beatitudes;
3. Study and teach the ethical implications of biblical texts;
4. Develop and communicate biblical Christian perspectives on major ethical issues of our time;
5. Develop Christian ethics curricula and study programs for church, parachurch, or other contexts;
6. Draw on historical, ecclesiastical, and academic resources for ethical insight.

FORMAT:

This course will meet once per week from 1:15 – 4:15 p.m. for eleven Tuesday afternoon sessions (spread over thirteen weeks that include two reading weeks). Course sessions will include lectures, discussions, and student presentations. See the schedule below for reading and writing assignments.

REQUIRED READING:

Davis, John Jefferson, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today* (3rd edition; P & R Publishing, 2004). ISBN-10: 0875526225 ISBN-13: 978-0875526225. 359 pp. paperback

Ellul, Jacques *The Presence of the Kingdom*. (Co Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989) ISBN: 0-939443-14-7. 145 pp. pb.

Gill, David W. *Becoming Good: Building Moral Character* (IVP, 2000) ISBN: 0-8308-2272-0 237 pp. pb

Gill, David W. *Doing Right: Practicing Ethical Principles* (IVP, 2004) ISBN: 0-8308-3218-1 342 pp. pb.

RECOMMENDED READING ADDITIONS TO YOUR PERSONAL LIBRARY

Atkinson, David J., et al. (eds) *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (IVP, 1995)

Hays, Richard B., *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (HarperCollins, 1996).

Hollinger, Dennis, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Baker Academic, 2002)

Stassen, Glenn H. & David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (IVP, 2003)

Wright, Christopher J. H., *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, 2004)

ASSIGNMENTS: (assignment details follow "Schedule" in this syllabus)

(submit all work to professor as e-mail attachments in MSWord format; no paper accepted)

Four papers (5-7 pages each; 1250-1750 words) (each 20% of grade; 80% total).

1. exposition/interpretation of the ethical meaning of a selected biblical text

2. analytical account of an important historical figure or movement in Christian ethics
3. analysis of an important contemporary ethical dilemma
4. strategic plan (curriculum) for Christian moral education (general or focused) in a church or parachurch context

Final exam (take home) on whole course, including required readings (20% of grade)

SCHEDULE:

(1) September 14 Introduction: What is Ethics? . . . and What Makes it Christian?

Good & evil, right & wrong; Ethics, Jesus, Scripture, Church, & World; Theological & philosophical traditions in ethics; sociological & historical perspectives on ethics and morality

Read: Presence of the Kingdom; Becoming Good, Ch 1; Doing Right, Ch 1

By Saturday September 19 e-mail to dgill@ethixbiz.com a one-paragraph description (in the text of the e-mail message) of an ethical dilemma or problem case you have personally faced or had to help others cope with. Be discreet and wise: protect actual identities as necessary!

(2) September 21 Case Analysis & Decision-Making

Analyzing & resolving cases; prayer, community, research, discernment, reason, wisdom, courage

Read: Davis, Evangelical Ethics, Ch 1

(3) September 28 Character & Community

Shaping/re-shaping character; clarifying mission/purpose; building moral community; Beatitudes, Pauline virtues (faith, hope, love)

Read: Becoming Good, Chs 2 – 11; memorize Beatitudes

(4) October 5 Principles & Practices

Read: Doing Right, Ch 2; memorize Decalogue

Reading week: October 12

Complete (1) biblical text paper and (2) historical figure/movement paper

(5) October 19 The First Five Principles of Highly Ethical People

Decalogue 1-5: no other gods, no idols/images, no misuse of name, Sabbath & work, honor father/mother

Read: Doing Right, Chs 3-7

(6) October 26 The Ethics of Life & Death

Ethical boundaries protecting---and mandates promoting---life and health.

Read: Doing Right, Ch 8; Evangelical Ethics, Chs 2,3, 6, 7, 12

(7) November 2 The Ethics of Life & Death (continued)

Read: Evangelical Ethics, Chs 8 - 12

Reading Week: November 9

Complete (3) ethical problem paper & (4) ethics curriculum paper

(8) November 16 The Ethics of Relationships & Sexuality

Protecting and promoting faithful covenanted relationships & healthy sexual expression.

Read: Doing Right, Ch 9; Evangelical Ethics, Ch 4

(9) November 23 The Ethics of Relationships & Sexuality (continued)

Evangelical Ethics, Ch 5

(10) November 30 The Ethics of Work & Property

Protecting and promoting fairness and faithful stewardship in the economic arenas of life.

Read: Doing Right, Ch 10

(11) December 7 The Ethics of Truth & Communication; Ethical Attitudes

Protecting and promoting honest and edifying communication in our world. Guarding against bad attitudes and destructive motivations that threaten to displace love and grace.

Read: Doing Right, Ch 11, 12, Postscript

Complete Take-home final exam

PAPER ASSIGNMENT DETAILS

Grading/value: each 20% of grade; 80% total

Length: 5-7 pages each, space-and-a-half format (1250-1750 words)

Footnotes or end-notes or notes in body of text---your choice

Research Method: (use at least three different sources in preparing your papers)

Do a search on web (Google or other engine)

Encyclopedia or dictionary articles

Histories, Bible commentaries

Books, magazines, journal articles

Interview people with expertise on topic

(1) exposition/interpretation of the ethical meaning of a selected biblical text

This course is very big on the idea that Christian ethics ought to be biblical through and through. We will study the Beatitudes and Decalogue in class and in depth and make reference to many other texts. This assignment is intended to get you to improve your ability to interpret and apply the moral teaching of the Bible. Pick a biblical text that interests you and bring it alive as a sermon or lesson. Could be one of the great stories in OT or NT (regarding Joseph, Deborah, Abraham, David, Peter, et al); could be a piece of the didactic ethical teaching of the Law, Writings, or Prophets; or a Psalm; or a parable; or part of the Apostolic teaching; or an eschatological vision. Just don't do the Decalogue or Beatitudes (since they are central in our class already). Here are some questions your paper should answer:

What does the text say about matters of right/wrong, good/evil?

What did it mean in context?

What does it mean to us?

What are the ethical lessons from this text? According to other commentators? You?

(3) analytical account of a historical figure or movement in Christian ethics

Pick a figure or movement you admire or are curious about (maybe your own church tradition?). Needs to be somebody (or some movement) whose impact on our thinking about, or practice of, Christian ethics is significant. Probably not a living, contemporary figure. This assignment gives you an opportunity to explore a historical contributor to Christian ethics in a deeper way. We cannot do justice to the history of Christian ethics in this short course---so here is your chance to make one historical exploration. Here are some examples: Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Menno Simons, the Amish, the Catholic Worker Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, John Wesley, C.S.Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Barth, Walter Rauschenbusch, Soren Kierkegaard, Catholic Social Teachings in the 19th-20th Centuries, Aimee Semple McPherson. But YOU CHOOSE. Doesn't have to be anyone on this list. Here are some questions your brief paper should answer:

Who was this?

Why are they important?

What were their main ideas about right/wrong, good/evil (i.e., ethics)?

What would be a typical, represent quotation or two? (not just secondary reviewers' opinions)

What were their positive contributions to Christian ethics as you see it? Their strengths?

What were their weaknesses? Places where their approach is incomplete or wrong?

(3) analysis of an important contemporary ethical dilemma

We will look at many topical areas in the course---and the required readings will help you engage with others. But in a short course like this we cannot do justice to all issues and topics. So here is your chance to probe a particular topical area in more depth. Your topic could be abortion, the Terry Schiavo case, stem cell research, executive compensation, censorship---whatever interests you.

What are the facts?
What are the ethical/biblical values and principles at stake? Why is there controversy?
What do Christian leaders think is right here? What is the range of opinion?
What are the basic guidelines you propose for this problem area? Why? What grounds?
How should we handle disagreements with other Christians? With society?

(4) strategic plan for moral education in a local congregation (or parachurch context)

We have a serious problem of biblical and ethical illiteracy, ignorance, and even disinformation in our churches. It is our calling and challenge to improve this appalling situation. In this assignment you should think of a topic in Christian ethics (a general introduction . . . or a specific topic like sexual ethics, money & work, environmental stewardship, racial reconciliation, etc.)---and a target audience (the whole congregation . . . or a specific subgroup like young people, old people, nurses, business people, women, men, parents, et al). Then design a strategic plan. Outline a curriculum and give as much detail (but no more) as you can in 5-7 pages.

What are the objectives of your program? Who is the target audience?
What will be done? By whom? When?
How will it be evaluated?
How will you persuade church leaders and members to embrace your program?

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Academic credit for a course requires regular attendance, not just completion of the assignments. Attendance means being present in the class for the entire scheduled class meeting, not just some part of it. In the event of absence for any reason, you are responsible for any information or class content missed. Additional work to make up work may be required for an absence. If you are absent from a significant portion of the course, or if you are frequently late for class meetings, even due to extenuating circumstances, this may result in a lower or even failing grade for the course. Please inform the professor well in advance of any urgent circumstances requiring you to be late or absent.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Students are expected to review and understand the academic integrity standards and commitments of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Our community values serious intellectual engagement and personal faithfulness more highly than grades or degrees. We are committed to being beyond reproach in our academic work as a reflection of a Christian character. We commit to honesty in all aspects of our work. Ask for help from your professor or your counselors and support group if you find yourself tempted to engage in any of the following violations of academic integrity --- or are just having great difficulty in your studies:

- Submitting the same work in whole or in part in more than one course without the permission of the professor(s);
- Submitting as one's own work paper(s) obtained from another source;
- Plagiarism, i.e., large and/or multiple unattributed quotations or paraphrases of ideas from published or unpublished sources;
- Unpermitted collaboration in preparing assignments;
- Cheating on exams by any means;
- Aiding another student on papers and tests in violation of these commitments.

Any of these violations will result in a failing grade in the course and a report to the dean.

Book Discussion: Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948)

Ch 1: The Christian in the World & Ch 2: Revolutionary Christianity

How does Ellul describe the “world” in these two chapters? Do you agree?

How does he describe the desirable character & presence of a Christian in this world? Do you agree?

Ch 3: The End & the Means

What does Ellul mean when he says everything has become a *means*? That the *means* have become the *ends*, etc.? Do you agree? Is this true for Muslim Fundamentalists today?

Ch 4: The Problem of Communication

Define “awareness,” “phenomena,” and “explanatory myth.” How can we become truly aware? Do you agree that “becoming aware” is one of the primary duties of thinking Christians today?

Ch 5: Prologue & Conclusion

What kind of revolution does Ellul propose? Do you agree?

General:

What other insights or ideas did you get out of this book?

How is Ellul’s approach different than what you typically hear from Christian leaders these days?

What are the weaknesses or unanswered questions in Ellul’s book as you see it?