

Christian Ethics. How Should We Live?

8. Ethics Based on Agapeic Love

Sunday, July 17, 2005
9 to 9:50 am, in the Parlor.
Everyone is welcome!

St. John in the Wilderness

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name.

- Book of Common Prayer, p. 101

THE MORAL QUEST

FOUNDATIONS
OF CHRISTIAN
ETHICS

STANLEY
J. GRENZ

- **The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics,** Stanley J. Grenz. InterVarsity Press, 2000. ISBN: 0-830-81568-6. Chapter 5: “Contemporary Christian Proposals”
- Dr. Grenz is professor of theology and ethics at Carey / Regent College in Vancouver, B.C.

An Introduction to
**CHRISTIAN
ETHICS**

Fourth Edition

ROGER H. CROOK

- **An Introduction to Christian Ethics (4th Edition)**, Roger H. Crook. Prentice Hall, 2001. ISBN: 0-130-34149-5 Chapter 3: “Alternatives within Christian Ethics”
- Dr. Crook is Emeritus professor and former chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy of Meredith College

A
SURVEY
OF
CHRISTIAN
ETHICS

Edward LeRoy Long, Jr.

- **A Survey of Christian Ethics**, Edward LeRoy Long Jr., Oxford University Press, 1967. ISBN 0-19-503242-X. Chapter 9: “Response to the Divine Initiative”
- Dr. Long is Professor of Christian Ethics Emeritus in the Theological School and Graduate School of Drew University

Introduction

Introduction

Ethics of Doing (Ethics of Conduct)

- What makes an act *right* or *good*?
- There are two general answers to this question that create the two main divisions in the **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics** = **Ethics of Conduct**):
 - 1. **Teleological Ethics** = **Consequentialist Ethics**. The morality of an act is based on the *outcome* or *consequence* of the act.
 - 2. **Deontological Ethics** = **Nonconsequentialist Ethics**. The morality of an act is based in the *act itself*.

Introduction

Teleological Ethics

- In our last session, we looked at the teleological (= consequentialist) ethical system call **Utilitarianism**.
 - The moral or ethical act in a particular situation is the act that *increases what is good for the **greatest number of people***.
 - The “what is **good** for the greatest number of people” is taken to be the **happiness, pleasure** of the greatest number of people.

Introduction

Deontological Ethical Systems

- In earlier sessions, we discussed three **deontological** systems of ethics (= acts themselves are *intrinsically* good or bad):
 - **The Divine Command Theory.** A good act is whatever God wills, and a bad act whatever God prohibits.
 - **Natural Law Ethics.** Our reason can discern which acts are good or bad because God has imprinted this information in our natures and in the world about us.
 - **The ethics of Immanuel Kant.** There is a “moral law” that is part of the fabric of reality in the same way as are the laws of logic and mathematics, a law that is encapsulated in the “Categorical Imperative” (= “The Golden Rule”).

Introduction

Ethics Based On Love: Agapeism

- Today, we discuss a particularly Christian ethical movement based on the idea that there is only *one absolute principle* on which we should base judgments on whether an act is *right or wrong*.
- *This one principle: Agape or self-giving love* of our neighbor.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

-1 John 4:7-11 (NRSV)

When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” [Jesus] said to him, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”** This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

- Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV)

Agape and Eros

Agape and Eros

Anders Nygren

- Anders Nygren (1890-1978), professor at the University of Lund, and later the Lutheran Bishop of Lund, wrote an influential 3-volume study of Christian love *Agape and Eros*.
- Christianity he argued, had brought the idea of **Agape**, or self-giving love, into a world dominated by **Eros**, or self-regarding love, and caused a revolution in thinking about morality.

Agape and Eros

Eros

- **Eros = self-regarding love. Eros is:**
 - Not merely earthly or sensual love.
 - Love that thrusts upward into the divine, but does so acquisitively, egocentrically, anxiously
 - **“an appetite, a yearning desire, which is aroused by the attractive qualities of its object; and in Eros-love man seeks God in order to satisfy his spiritual hunger by the possession and enjoyment of the Divine perfections.”** (from translator’s prefix to *Agape and Eros*)

Agape and Eros

Agape

- **Agape** = self-giving love. **Agape** is
 - Love that begins in God, who pours out God's self in love for God's creatures.
 - Love that moves downward from God to humanity.
 - Love whose distinctive feature is freedom in giving.

Agape and Eros

Distinctions

Eros is acquisitive desire and longing.	Agape is sacrificial giving.
Eros is an upward movement.	Agape comes down.
Eros is man's way to God.	Agape is God's way to man.
Eros is man's effort: it assumes that man's salvation is his own work.	Agape is God's grace: salvation is the work of Divine love.

Agape and Eros

Distinctions

<p>Eros is egocentric love, a form of self-assertion of the highest, noblest, sublimist kind.</p>	<p>Agape is unselfish love, it “seeketh not its own,” it gives itself away.</p>
<p>Eros seeks to gain its life, a life divine, immortalised.</p>	<p>Agape lives the life of God, therefore dares to “lose it.”</p>
<p>Eros is the will to get and possess which depends on want and need.</p>	<p>Agape is freedom in giving, which depends on wealthy and plenty.</p>

Agape and Eros

Distinctions

Eros is primarily *man's* love; God is the *object* of **Eros**. Even when it is attributed to God, **Eros** is patterned on human love.

Eros is determined by the quality, the beauty and worth, of its object; it is not spontaneous but “evoked,” “motivated.”

Agape is primarily *God's* love; God *is Agape*. Even when it is attributed to man, **Agape** is patterned on Divine love.

Agape is sovereign in relation to its object, and is directed to both “the evil and the good”; it is spontaneous, “overflowing, unmotivated.”

Agape and Eros

Distinctions

Eros recognizes value in its object – and loves it.

Agape loves – and creates value in its object.

Agape and Eros

Agape and Love of Neighbor

- God's Agape ... is both the criterion and the source of all that can be called Christian love. This Divine love ... has its direct continuation in Christian neighborly love, which having received everything freely from God is prepared also to give freely. ... It [Christian neighborly love] is God's own Agape which seeks to make its way out into the world through the Christian as its channel.

- Nygen, *Agape and Eros*, p. 218.

Agape and Eros

Criticisms

- Criticisms of Nygren's distinctions include:
 - Love has several forms of expression, and a division into merely two (**Eros** and **Agape**) is too simplistic.
 - Human beings must have the capacity to love selflessly if God's love is to make contact with human beings. **Agape** therefore is not solely a love that come down from God.
 - **Eros** is also a divine creation, and so like **Agape**, also can be said to come down from God.

Agape and Eros

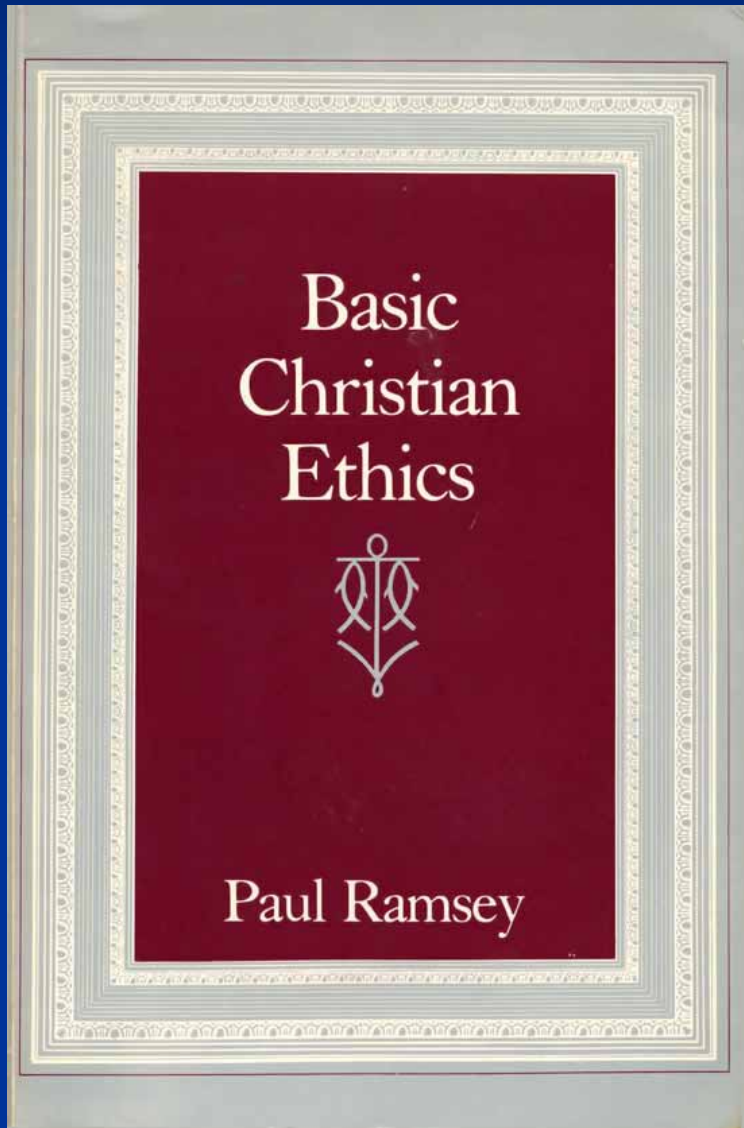
Ethical Systems Based on Agape

- Nygren's argument:
 - that Christianity had brought the idea of **Agape**, of self-giving love, into a world dominated by **Eros**, or self-regarding love, and caused a revolution in thinking about morality,
- spurred the development of distinctively Christian ethical systems based on the principle of **Agape** or self-giving love.

Paul Ramsey's Rule Agapeism

Rule Agapeism

Ramsey's Basic Christian Ethics



- In *Basic Christian Ethics* (1950) Paul Ramsey (1913 to 1988; Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton University) proposed that there should be only *one absolute principle* to judge the morality of an act: Christian Agape-Love.

Rule Agapeism

Ramsey's Basic Christian Ethics

- He did not reject having rules for behavior, but he argued that:

such rules are valid only insofar as they are grounded in and embody Christian love.

- Christian Love alone must reside on the “ground floor” of Christian ethics.
- His ethic is sometimes termed **Rule Agapeism** because it accepts the utility of rules for behavior – to the degree that they are grounded in and embody Christian love.

Rule Agapeism

Meaning of Christian Love

- Christian Love is an agape love which he defined as:
 - The love of neighbor as we love ourselves = “neighbor-love, ” “Neighbor-regarding concern for others.”
 - An “Obedient love,” or “grateful obedience” to Jesus’ work of redemption for us.
 - A love that is known only through knowing Jesus Christ.
 - A Christocentric love

Rule Agapeism

Sources of Christian Love

- The sources of Christian Love:
 - 1. The Righteous of God = God's way of dealing with people as seen in Jesus' selfless work of redemption.
 - Allows us to response in “obedient gratitude” and “obedient love”
 - Christian love can therefore only be understood “by decisive reference to the controlling love of Christ” (p. 21)
 - 2. The Kingdom of God

Rule Agapeism

Christian Love and Law

- While rules for behavior grounded in and embodying Christian love can be useful, the *bedrock foundation* of Christian ethics is Christian love alone.
 - Therefore, on this foundational level, the Christian ethic is “an ethic without rules.”
- Ramsey summarized Jesus’ attitude to the Law: **“A faithful Jew stayed as close as possible to observance of the law even when he had to depart from it. Jesus stayed as close as possible to the fulfillment of human need, no matter how wide of the sabbath law this led him.”** (Ramsey p. 56)

Rule Agapeism

Christian Love and Law

- **“Everything is lawful, everything is permitted which Christian love permits” and “everything is demanded which Christian love requires.” (Ramsey p. 79)**

Rule Agapeism

Christian Love and Law

- Christian love as the single foundational principle of the Christian ethic allows a fluidity not found in systems where rules and laws are fundamental:
- **“Christian love whose nature is to allow itself to be guided by the needs of others changes its tactics as easily as it stands fast; it does either only on account of the quite unalterable strategy of accommodating itself to neighbor-needs.”** (Ramsey p. 80)

Rule Agapeism

Personal Rights

- In Ramsey's ethic, personal rights are "backward derived" from neighbor-love.
- A claim of a personal right by my neighbor is actually a claim
"that my neighbor possesses them in me. If my neighbor possesses them in me, these rights are my duties, duties to myself which also, if they are Christian duties, I owe to my neighbor for Christ's sake." (Ramsey p. 187)

Joseph Fletcher's Act Agapeism

Act Agapeism

Fletcher's Situation Ethics

- In 1966, Joseph Fletcher, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in Cincinnati and later professor of social ethics at the Episcopal School of Theology in Cambridge, published *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (touted by his publishers as an “explosive” book that “will offend some, excite many, and challenge all!”)
- Like Ramsey, he too proposed that there is only *one absolute principle* to judge the morality of an act: Christian Agape-Love.

Act Agapeism

Love Alone is Always Good

- “There is only one thing that is always good and right, intrinsically good regardless of context ... and that one thing is love.” (Fletcher p. 60)
- “When we say that love is always good, what we mean is that whatever is loving in any particular situation is good.” (Fletcher p. 61)

Act Agapeism

Love Alone is Always Good

- Crook summarizes Fletcher's thesis (Crook p. 36):
 - "Because love alone is good, whatever is loving in any situation is good and whatever is unloving is bad.
 - No action is intrinsically good or evil; all actions are good or evil in terms of whether they help or hurt persons."

Act Agapeism

Fletcher vs. Ramsey

- Fletcher and Ramsey agree that there should be only *one absolute principle* to judge the morality of an act: Christian Agape-Love.
- However:
 - Whereas Ramsey suggested that rules grounded in and embodying Christian love could be useful guides to help us when we confront a particular situation,
 - Fletcher claimed that we can *never* decide in advance what is the right thing.
- “Love Decides Then and There:” every situation is unique and without precedent. We must always decide *in the situation* the loving thing to do.

Act Agapeism

Situation Ethics

- Because of his radical and uncompromising emphasis on the need to *always decide in the situation when one is confronted with a choice of actions*, Fletcher's ethic has been termed an **Act Agapeism** (versus Ramsey's **Rule Agapeism**)
- The title of his book: *Situation Ethics, A New Morality*, gave name to what his theory of ethics came to be known as: **Situation Ethics**
 - **Situation Ethics**: “The theory invented by Joseph Fletcher which says that there are no moral rules or guides other than Christian love – what is moral in any situation is the loving thing to do in that situation” (from the Glossary in Thiroux, *Ethics, Theory and Practice, 8th Edition*, p. 509)