

BASICS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

'To be wise, you must first have reverence for the Lord' (Proverbs 9:10.)

'He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

'Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments' (Matthew 22:37–40).

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age' (Matthew 28:18–20).

About this document

What is it for?

This Christian ethical decision-making process will form the basis for developing short guides for Christian decision-making on a range of ethical issues. The issues will be ones the church does not already have position statements on and where the 'Christian position' may not be immediately apparent or may be open to argument. The proposed guides would not have the status of official church documents. They will function as tools for helping people learn about different issues, consider them from a Christian perspective, and make decisions that have been well thought through.

Whose idea was it, and who is responsible for it?

The idea of creating these guides came from LCA Churchwide Bishop John Henderson. He asked the Assistant to the Bishop (Public Theology) to take it on. The first task was to set out a process for wise Christian decision-making, which is what this paper represents. Once the process (or framework) was in place, guides based on it would be developed.

Who is the intended audience?

The guides will be pitched at a senior high school level, with Christian Studies students in mind. But they could also be posted on the LCA website for general access.

What is in it?

This document begins with some preliminary remarks about ethical decision-making from a Christian point of view. It then presents a process for Christian ethical decision-making (see pages 4–6).

Preliminary points

Life involves making choices

We make dozens – perhaps hundreds – of decisions each day. We make most of these decisions without much thought. However, some decisions do require careful thought because they more obviously involve questions of right and wrong. Ethical (or moral) decision-making is about choosing right rather than wrong.

We aren't always well equipped to make good ethical decisions. Our ability to choose wisely and rightly is especially likely to be impaired when:

- Our role models were bad, and our moral education was lacking.
- We lack knowledge and understanding of the particular moral issue we are pondering.

Our ethical choices shape the course of our lives and often the lives of others too. If we are to live well with others, we must think about how our choices will affect them.

The ethical decision-making process described on pages 4 to 6 is designed for users with at least some groundings in Christian moral teaching and virtues and a sincere desire to live them out.

Making the right choices can be difficult and confusing

Making the right choices is most often difficult when our desires to please ourselves or others tempt us to make a choice we know to be wrong.

We are all under the influence of forces that try to shape our ethical choices for good or ill, such as selfishness, peer pressure, parental pressure, religious teaching and political correctness. The power these forces have over us shows that we are not the 'autonomous individuals freely determining our own affairs' as some people imagine themselves to be.

Much less often, making the right choices is difficult or even confusing when:

- There is no obvious right or best choice among the choices available to us – we see no good options at all or discover that all the good options have downsides.
- What seems right in one context seems wrong in another.
- The sources of authority we usually look to are silent or in conflict with each other.

Making the right choices as a Christian

Making ethical decisions as followers of Jesus Christ involves drawing on the resources of our Christian faith – as well as approaches to ethical decision-making that are not specifically Christian or even 'religious'. Because we believe that Jesus is 'the way, the truth, the life' (John 14:6), we look first to his life and teachings as we think through ethical decisions.

Key Christian teachings on making ethical choices

God made us and loves us. We are his children. We belong to him, not to ourselves.

God made us moral beings, innately concerned with truth and justice. He gave each of us a conscience, an inner voice or 'moral compass' to assist our decision-making.

God also made us social beings. We flourish best in community with others. We create healthy communities by doing the right thing by each other and taking special care to look out for the interests of the vulnerable and marginalised.

Ever since Adam and Eve chose to disobey God in the Garden of Eden, all humans have been born with a natural inclination to rebel against God and his will for them. Sin has damaged our moral compass. We want to decide matters for ourselves and leave God out of it.

God's word speaks to our natural tendency to make choices that alienate us from him and bring us into conflict with others. When we inevitably go wrong, God's word calls us back to God's truth. We can receive his forgiveness and make a fresh start.

Contrary to popular belief, the Christian life is not about following rules well enough to avoid hell and earn a place in heaven. The Christian life is really about living a new life – a life won for us by Jesus through his life, death and resurrection and given to us by God's Spirit. In this new life, we express our love, respect, obedience and gratitude to God for all he has done and will yet do for us, and we follow Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved us.

Making ethical choices as a Christian when people around us reject Christian morality

When our friends and fellow citizens reject Christian morality, making Christian ethical choices can mean standing out and exposing ourselves to mockery or criticism. Some people say it is up to us to decide good and evil for ourselves. Others seek to portray acts Christians believe are immoral as harmless or good and find fault with acts that Christians believe are virtuous or good.

Political leaders and governments sometimes propose policies or enact laws that create ethical problems for Christians. Lutherans do not insist that government officials be Christians who explicitly refer to God, God's law, or Jesus' teachings when they make public policy decisions, but if those officials put in place policies or laws that clash with Christian morality, they cannot expect Christians to support those policies or laws or submissively comply with them. (See Acts 4:19; 5:29.)

Jesus warned his followers that they would face opposition for letting their light shine, but he encouraged them to remain faithful, saying:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you, because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:10–12).

In some instances, it might be fair enough to fear the consequences of making Christian ethical choices, but we should feel no shame or embarrassment in seeking to follow God's will. Who is wiser than God? If we can know God's will on a particular matter and want the best possible outcome for everyone concerned, why wouldn't we follow it?

On balance, going against the flow might be more positive than negative. It can be an important sign for others and influence them to change direction. Living a new life of faith, love and humble service and making important decisions using a Christian framework can lead doubters and critics to realise how attractive and good it is to live as Jesus' followers.

A four-step process for helping Christians make ethical decisions

The four parts involved in this process are:

- A. Learn about the matter at hand.
- B. Consider the matter from a Christian ethical perspective.
- C. Make a decision and act on it.
- D. Review the decision.

A. Learn about the matter at hand.

1. If it is not already clear to you why this matter is 'an ethical one', then find out why it raises questions of right and wrong.
2. Recognise that you are more likely to make a good ethical choice about a confusing or controversial matter if you first learn about it and the choices available to you than if you decide impulsively and out of ignorance.
 - a. Find out what the possible choices are and who recommends each of them. Do they argue from a particular worldview or ideological standpoint?
 - b. On what grounds do they argue? What principles and values do they appeal to?

B. Consider the matter from a Christian ethical perspective.

3. Accept that God is the source of ultimate truth and righteousness. Believe that he loves you, and his will for you is what is best for you.
 - a. Pray to God for a spirit of humble obedience where his will for you is clear, but your heart is inclined to rebel.
 - b. Pray to God for guidance and wisdom where his will for you is unclear, that he will lead you towards truth and righteousness.
4. Find out what God has to say about the matter at hand.
 - a. Christians regard Jesus' life and teachings as the best indicator of God's position on ethical matters.
 - b. The Bible more generally reveals God's position on ethical matters. Lutherans believe that, although the books of the Bible were written by human hands, their words were 'inspired by the Holy Spirit'.
 - c. We also hear God speak through various Christian writings. For example, Martin Luther explains in his Small Catechism (and in more detail in his Large Catechism) what God's Ten Commandments mean for us in terms of what God wants us to do as well as what he doesn't want us to do.
 - d. We also hear God's voice coming through the wisdom and experience of fellow Christians, especially those with skills in biblical interpretation, knowledge of the life and teachings of Jesus and of moral principles that run consistently through the Bible.
 - e. At the same time, we should be suspicious of Christians who interpret the Bible in unorthodox ways or disregard what it says. There is always a danger of us reading into the Bible what we want it to say rather than hearing what it actually says.
5. Where Jesus' life and teachings and the Bible more generally don't speak directly to an ethical matter:
 - a. Look to fellow Christians who can help you see what God indirectly says to you. They may be able to lead you to Christlike ways of acting based on biblical principles such as respect for life, human dignity, the importance of truth, caring custodianship, justice tempered with mercy, and love for the neighbour.

- b. Look to people who are well qualified to offer ethical opinions on the matters at hand, such as eminent scholars, scientists and people with extensive experience, and compare what they say with biblical principles.
- c. Ask yourself:
 - i. Which choices are in line with Christian character traits or virtues, eg respect for truth, honesty, responsibility, courtesy, obedience to godly authorities, humility, compassion, gentleness, generosity, charity, gratitude, peacefulness, lovingkindness, contentedness, discernment, prudence, justice, righteousness, mercy, forgiveness, courage, perseverance, faithfulness, chastity, self-control, etc? (See, for example, Galatians 5:22,23 and Matthew 5:3–12.) Will my choice strengthen my Christian character and relationship with God? How will my choice honour God and show loving concern towards others?
 - ii. What are the possible consequences of this or that choice? What effects might my choices have on others? Is that fair? What if everyone else decided to make the same choice? How do the risks stack up against the benefits?
 - iii. If I must choose from a range of imperfect options, which is the least bad?
 - iv. What are my motivations/intentions for making this or that choice?

C. Make a decision and act on it.

- 6. Make a decision based on your Christian ethical assessment of the matter and the options available to you.
- 7. Act on your decision, considering how confident you can be of its correctness.
 - a. If there is wide agreement in the Christian community about the correctness of your ethical position, pray for the courage to hold it firmly and act upon it and for good ways to convince others to hold it too.
 - b. Some issues are difficult and contested, even within the Christian community. People on opposing sides can present their case equally strongly and persuasively. In such situations, it is good to show respect, hold your position and act on it with humility, be willing to learn from others, and be open to changing your mind.
- 8. If you are confident and bold enough to disagree with people who take a different ethical position to you, you should address their arguments and not attack them personally. Christians should be models of respectful dialogue. Those who disagree with you are unlikely to change their minds if you show no love, concern, compassion, empathy and willingness to understand their point of view. 'By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:35). We are called to 'speak the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:21). In this way, God is honoured, and we are blessed in our life together.

D. Review your decision.

- 9. Reflect on your chosen action and your reasons for choosing it.
 - a. What did you learn from making this choice?
 - b. Would you choose the same again? If yes, why? If not, why not?