

Christians Living in a Sin-stained World: Some Ethical Questions Christians Face Today

Evening Class (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) – **Dr. J. Mark Beach**
April 1, 2021

Session #1: Pathways to Moral Reasoning: Basics in Ethical Decision-making

To get started in looking at some basic ethical issues Christians face today, we need to ask ourselves how we come to make moral decisions. What grounds our moral perspective? What counts as fundamental and non-negotiable? What priorities do we apply when things get morally blurry? And what sort of fruits (outcomes or consequences) do our moral decisions produce, both to others and to a community and to ourselves?

Let's begin with a situation that brings about a moral decision.

Jessica, a single woman, in her early thirties, lives with her father, who suffers from dementia. She is his care-giver, but she likes to go out with friends. When she does, he is home alone, sometimes for fourteen hours straight. During that time he wets and dirties himself. He is hungry but can't feed himself. He cries out for his wife, who has died years earlier. He is angry and screams at the neighborhood children. Meanwhile, Jessica is at a party.

- What goes through your mind in reading about this? Let's say, we all agree that what Jessica does is wrong. Why? No doubt, we could think of a lot of things that make this wrong.
 1. Jessica is being selfish (not that she wants to go to a party) but in pursuing her pleasure at the cost of her father's pain.
 2. She has little regard for her father's misery: physical and emotional.
 3. She has not taken steps to "go to the party" but provide for her father.
 4. Her father suffers loneliness, confusion, hunger, humiliation, frustration, and more.
 5. Presupposed in our moral assessment is that people should not be treated this way. (And there are various answers what this is so, including the "golden rule" (Matt. 7:12).
 6. Presupposed, too, is that people have value (that care for one another is a given), that compassion is owed to our parents, and the like. (Think of the fifth commandment to honor parents, e.g.)
- We see, then, that we have basic commitments that call us to care for others (for Christians, such are grounded in God's Word, exhorting us to love our neighbors as ourselves, affirming the dignity of being made in God's image)
- We could calculate other things, too, in this moral situation. What are the consequences of her actions, both for herself and for her father (and for the neighbor kids)? Explore that a moment, for sins have legs and bear fruits elsewhere.

In making moral decisions (making a moral judgment) we can discern categories or ingredients within such a decision or judgment.

Four Ingredients of Moral Decision-Making

- (1) *the action itself.* (Is it right or wrong or unclear?)
- (2) *the motive behind the action?* (Is it pure, selfish, etc.?)
- (3) *the consequences of the moral decision.* (What are the effects and outcomes of your decision, your action? Are people hurt? Are you twisted and shaped in a good or bad moral direction? Is the community shaped in a particular way?)
- (4) *the character of the moral agent.* (That is, what role does a virtuous or vicious moral character matter in such judgments and actions?)

Now let's return to our moral situation above.

- (1) The action itself is wrong.
- (2) The motive behind the action is selfish, self-serving, and, therefore, brings harm to her father.
- (3) The consequences of her decision is (a) her father's suffering and misery; and perhaps (b) for her, a guilty conscience, which can soften her or harden her; or perhaps cause her to try to numb her guilt by abuse of alcohol or more partying (to forget); and so on; and (c) now the neighbor kids feel picked-on by a cranky old man (so they become jaded, mean toward him, maybe they decide to vandalize the old man's house in revenge, etc.)
- (4) Jessica's character, in this moral decision, is not virtuous but vicious – and her action likely nibbles away at her moral integrity and makes her less virtuous.

Here is another moral situation, which is much more benign on the surface.

Norman, a married father of four, makes a \$3,000 donation to a Christian orphanage in Romania. He wants to help the unwanted children who fill the beds and facilities; he wants to relieve suffering and misery.

When we apply the above ingredients to this moral decision, what do we find?

- (1) The action itself (on the face of it) seems noble, kind, and good—and quite possibly it is (but maybe not.) The action does seem to promise a good outcome for the Romanian orphans.
- (2) The motive behind this donation, as stated, is good: to help orphans and relieve suffering. (It is possible, however, that other motives are at work too: recognition, a scheme to get-in-good with the orphanage administrator who can introduce him to a person for potential investment and development in Romania (all to his own substantial financial advantage – so, what's a mere 3,000 bucks?)
- (3) The consequences of the moral decision, at least for the orphans, seems to be good. Depending on the motives behind the donation, the consequences can be positive or negative or a mixture of both. (What if Norman is already in grievous credit-card debt? What then? Is \$3,000 more debt worth it to help others? Who is he hurting by accumulating more debt?)
- (4) The character of the moral agent, Norman, is likewise reflective of his motives, and, as such, the consequences to his moral character follow.
 - o Again, in making an evaluation of this moral situation (as we have just done), there are unexpressed moral assumptions or presuppositions we hold to and apply, and we always do well to explore those. For example, we think it is right to help orphans; we believe that helping them with \$\$

makes sense. Again, a neighbor-love principle applies; a golden-rule principle (and we could also point to specific biblical texts) (such as Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5; James 1:27).

What Moral Standards Shape Our Moral Decisions?

When we explore what goes into moral reasoning, we discover that ethical systems are diverse. Not everyone shares our moral convictions. Below is a rough sketch of *some* ethical approaches.

1. Duty ethics – Deontological systems: (a) *Natural Law*; (b) *Divine Command*; (c) *Ethical rationalism*.
2. Consequence ethics – Teleological systems: (a) *Utilitarianism* (what’s good for the majority?); (b) *Ethical egoism* (what’s good for me?).
3. Relativistic systems (mutual social agreement or individual choice) about preferences (there is no moral order “out there.”) Or: morality is situation specific (not universal).

Christian ethics is principally deontological in nature – that is, duty driven, living according to moral standards that can be discerned or known or discovered. These embrace principles and standards of moral requirements (obligation), permissions (rightness), and prohibitions (wrongness).

Even then, though, having the Bible and the Ten Commandments (the Law), an ethical life is not automatically or even easily solved. The Pharisees were adherents of the Law – yet, in many respects, quite immoral people! They did not temper the application of the law with love. They did not sort out major moral mountains from minor moral molehills. They flattened out duty with little discernment. They needed to learn what this text meant: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13; 12:7; cf. Hos. 6:6).

A Christian approach to ethics (deontological in character) is dependent upon divine command, natural law, but which also cannot disregard the importance of virtue, a degree of utility, and even a pinch of ethical egoism. It must sort out major principles from lesser duties.

Weighing the *Moral Weight* of Moral Decisions

- Stealing candy from a baby *versus* stealing the baby.
- Saying: I *want* to kill you *versus* killing him.
- Lustful leering at a woman (mental adultery) *versus* having innumerable affairs.
- Committing or devoting your money to God (*corban*) *versus* taking care of elderly parents (Mark 7:9-13).
- Tithing spices *versus* doing justice and mercy (Matt. 23:23).
- The Westminster Shorter Catechism echoes the sentiments of the Second Helvetic, “Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous? *Answer*: Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.” (For elaboration see Larger Catechism Q/A 151.)

Christian ethics keeps in play:

- » Law/Exhortation/Principles
- » Love – all law must be governed and applied by love (never raw law); love does no harm to a neighbor (Rom. 13:10).
- » Justice – what we owe others as “others” (as people created by God); giving them their due; what they have a right to expect from us.

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Session #2: A Christian Worldview and Christian Ethics

To address Christian ethics we need to consider a broader picture or conception of what the Christian life is, which takes us to rock bottom ideas about Christ and culture and about the relation of creation to redemption (Nature/Grace).

The relation of grace to nature is the great question!

The way this is conceived issues forth in all sorts of ethical implications: church/state; family and society; science and education, business and vocational life in connection with your Christian calling.

Q: *What is the relation between creation and recreation, kingdoms of the earth and the kingdom of God? The “here below” and the “here and now” with that which is “from above” and “what is to come”?*

Following Calvin, and other Reformed writers, like Kuyper, Bavinck, Berkhof (and others), the answer in shorthand is this: redemption *restores* creation, which is more than paradise restored. It is paradise *restored* and *blossomed!* Paradise in full-flower (something that never happened in the original paradise). Redemption brings creation to its originally intended goal!

- Calvinism, neo-Calvinism – grace restores nature. Nature = creation or the whole created order.

That answer, however, has not been the answer in many parts of Christendom throughout history.

- Roman Catholicism (Lutheranism, some Reformed today) – grace supplements nature.
- Socinian, Pelagianism, Neo-Protestantism (classical liberalism) – nature is grace. (Calls us to world-engagement but breeds moralism and worldliness!) Jesus is the great example!
- Anabaptist, Mennonite, Methodist, Pietist (some Pietist Reformed) – grace enables us to escape nature. (Calls us to world-flight and breeds otherworldliness! – but that, too, is just a form of worldliness.)

The Classic Roman Catholic (*Dualistic*) Approach (All of Life under the Ecclesiastical sphere)

How do you think about the world? Biblically we can say that it is (1) it is created good by God (His grand idea); (2) fallen and in rebellion against God; and we can say (3) it is the object of God’s love and under his redemptive plan (John 3:16).

But if we obscure either 1 or 2 or 3 (or all three together), we under-sale sin, which makes us make peace with a fallen world; or if we under-sale redemption, we abandon the world to its misery.

For Rome, there is the “natural” created order (left intact after the fall); this is rather “neutral” turf, yet it needs supplement. It needs the “supernatural” (as a *super added gift*) to help it out. Nature (the world) is missing the supernatural. Grace and redemption *do not penetrate creation*; rather, these complete (add to) creation. Nature and grace are two quantities: the supernatural above and detached from the natural, the below.

This is dualism. Natural and supernatural are separate realms, a lower and a higher. The natural world (creation) is devalued. It is common versus sacred, profane versus holy. [Many Christians think this way.]

The Lutheran ‘Two-Kingdom’ (*Dualistic*) Approach (Spiritual and Common Kingdoms)

While the Reformers sought to liberate the church from this sort of thinking, Calvin was far more consistent in this than Luther or Zwingli. In fact, Luther really did not escape this dualistic approach to life (and many Christians – even Reformed Christians – operate with it, still). Luther wrote that the gospel has nothing to do with worldly matters [business, commerce, political policy], for the Holy Spirit is unneeded in such affairs. Thus, in the various duties or vocations of life, vocation is independent of any Christian or redemptive influence.

While Luther liberated the public realm of life from the Church, the public, wider creational realm was left without redemptive influence. He called this approach a “two-kingdoms” approach: a spiritual kingdom where Christ reigns in the believer’s heart (a gospel ethic applies); and a common kingdom, where believer and unbeliever alike operate and live benignly alongside one another governed by natural law (i.e., conscience and reason; a creation ethic applies). The view remains in the nature/grace dualism.

Other Sub-Christian Alternatives and/or the Worldly/Other-worldly Alternatives to a Christian Worldview

- Meanwhile, not only Luther, but the Socinians and Anabaptists take sub-Christian paths. Socinians disregard special grace—all we have is nature (this is Pelagianism). The Anabaptists despise common grace. These movements have been very influential, even in Reformed churches. Anabaptist traits are related to Pietism, the Moravian church and Methodism [hence: asceticism, mysticism, withdrawal, world-flight, isolation, waiting for heaven, soul-saving, period]. This Pietism (also in its Reformed expression) is guerilla warfare Christianity—skirmish fighting. Sinful social structures and societal habits are left as is (get to glory is the singular goal). The truth defended here is, yes, there is the Kingdom to come in Glory, but mysticism displaces engagement with the world and pressing gospel sanctification into a world of sinful habits and structures. It lets the devil have free play in the world cultural affairs of life.
- Socinianism is related to neo-Protestantism (Classic Liberalism) and Unitarianism. Liberal theology restricts Christ’s power and word to the heart and inner chamber or reduces it to a moralism. Jesus is merely an example. The world, of course, delights that Christians hide in a corner and withdraw from the public square. They are happy if Christians isolate themselves and give unbelief free reign in the diverse spheres of life. Other forms of Liberal thinking engages life for justice, but it is purely horizontal.
- Each of these movements are caught in the legacy of Roman Catholic dualism. But the catholicity (universal reach) of Christianity and the church, of God’s healing grace, disallow this path. We are not of this world but we are *in* this world. Scholarship, science, political affairs, social structures must not simply be given over to unbelief (which is what Pietism does). Otherworldliness and suspicion of culture (a habit of heart of *Afscheiding* or Pietist churches) only aids the secularization of society. Contempt for created life is sinful. World-flight denies the first article of the Apostles’ Creed. Creation doesn’t need to be battled or denied, but the works of the devil in creation do (1 Tim. 4:4-5; 1 John 3:8). Grace restores nature! *Re-creation*, not discarded and tossed out creation.
- Whereas Rome conceives of redemption as creation *elevated*, for Anabaptism and Pietism, redemption is *escape*. (Pilgrim theology is misconceived to be anti-creation instead of anti-sin afflicting creation). Instead, we must see that redemption is *reparation, restoration*. Grace opposes sin, not nature as such. Sin does not merely afflict human hearts; the curse of sin permeates creation (it groans for liberation – see Rom. 8).

The Reformed Approach: Christ Is ‘King of All-of-Life’ – the Kingdom of God

But the reformation (through Calvin) labored to see that grace brings renewal to creation. *Everything (wherever sin penetrates) needs gospel renewal*. Everything needs to be ‘gospelized’: church, home, school, business, recreation, state—all must come under the principle (foundation and guiding light) of the gospel of Christ’s saving work and Lordship. (Redemption = purchased out of bondage and set free.)

This approach (a Reformed Worldview) bears the following traits:

1. Trinitarian

- No domain of life is excluded from re-creation.
- Creation & Resurrection

2. Sin and Grace are not “things” but each act upon Creation (for ill with sin, for good with grace)

- Sin has a catholicity (or universality – it penetrates everything!), likewise the claims of Christ’s redemptive work has a catholicity/universality – it must penetrate and transform, reform, restore everything!
- We constantly discern the difference between structure and direction. Structure represents creational givens, direction is our use of these givens. Faith directs to the glory of God and of His Christ; unbelief directs it in opposition to Him.

3. Reformation, Not Revolution

- Redemption is about reforming and restoring the God-intended created order. This is not nearly achieved or fully accomplished in this life. We get only first-fruits (but those fruits are more God-honoring than no fruits at all.) We make small steps of obedience here, like elsewhere, within homes, business, social life, creation care, etc.
- The gospel attacks sin alone, but it attacks it always and everywhere. Sin permeates politics, education, scholarship, science, art, the family, marital life, economic life, etc. All these need the gospel, correcting and driving away these sinful behaviors and broken structures

4. Restoration, Not Repristination

- Redemption is not paradise restored, but finally it will become paradise restored and blossomed into full-flower.
- There is an eschatology built into paradise that got derailed with the fall, but Christ restores creation to reach its goal. Thus, grace grants only what was part of the creation-reaching-its-goal to begin with, that is, in the way of obedience to God. The covenant of works and the covenant of grace are both aimed at the same destination. Grace restores nature and brings it to its highest fulfillment.

5. Practical Consequences

- The church isn’t sovereign over all of life. No! The gospel (i.e., Christ) heals and claims the heart, and from heart direction Christ is sovereign over all of life.
- The gospel impacts family, society, state, academics, science, art, recreation, etc.
- The gospel also liberates: redemption commences the-being-set-free to serve in obedience.
- All of life is spiritual. Creation is a holy domain. It awaits full redemption, total Kingdom Come!

Conclusion

Luther and Calvin part way relative to the calling of believers *as believers* in their vocations.

For Luther, Jesus Christ, as the Messiah) is king over church life (preaching, corporate worship, private prayer, etc.) but only the Triune God (not Jesus as the Christ), via natural law, is lord of the rest of life.

Christians, in public life, must behave according to natural law, along with everyone else (believer and unbeliever alike), making use of human reason and conscience to discern the law.

1. Redemption does not reclaim creation by and for Christ, even though all things were created by and for Him (Col. 1:16).
2. Grace therefore does not impact the whole of life. This presents, then, a truncated redemptive program.
3. Human sin and depravity are thought of, principally, in terms of individual corruption and guilt.
4. Justification becomes an end in itself. (Faith in Christ does not penetrate a believer's life in an integrated way. Your life as a believer is bifurcated between Christ as Lord of your spiritual life and God through natural law (conscience and reason) as lord of the rest of your life.)
5. Human reason is to be distrusted relative to salvation but trusted relative to the common affairs of life.
6. The dualism that is given a sanctioned place brings with it an unchristian worldview, which basically, in practice, banishes Christ from the public sphere. Jesus is privatized. Meanwhile, the devil does not play by those rules: he will not be privatized or confined to a spiritual realm! He is left to flourish in the public square.
7. Jesus Christ is the Lord of believers only!
8. The two-kingdoms doctrine of the Lutherans fences off Christ from the broader fabric of life, and, therefore, relies on a natural law ethic (conscience and reason) to carry the heavy freight of moral reasoning in the public square. But a natural law ethic relies on humans rightly reading morality off of their own hearts and nature. That is, it grossly under-estimates how humans suppress the truth in unrighteousness.
9. The notion of a common kingdom shows that Luther and Lutheranism is still caught in the medieval dualism of nature/grace = some of life is spiritual (the churchly) and the rest of life is secular, profane.

For Calvin, Jesus Christ (as the Christ, as Savior-King) is King over all of life. Christians must behave and think *Christianly* in everything! This means using gospel truth and scriptural teaching in a principled way to produce Christian implications for behavior and practice in public life and vocations.

1. Christian endeavor and influence is not coercive but moral – direct and indirect. Redemption!
2. Redemption, and the grace in back of it, impacts life in all its dimensions.
3. Human sin and depravity are thought of, principally, in terms of both individual corruption and guilt and cosmic and corporate disorder and accursedness.
4. Justification issues forth in sanctification – if possible, as far as curse is found! (This is the healing work of the kingdom of God.)
5. Human reason is to be distrusted not only in relation to salvation but also distrusted relative to the rest of human affairs: human sexuality, educational practices, political policies, etc.
6. Jesus Christ has *all authority in heaven and on earth*. He will not be privatized—though, to be sure, Christians can be forced out of the public arena by coercion and force, or by Christians advocating unchristian compromise. (Still, everything, in principle, belongs to Christ!)
7. Jesus Christ is the Lord of believers, to be sure; but He is also Lord *of lords* and King *of kings*.
8. This means that Christ's claim upon the whole creation includes all creatures and encompasses the arts, sciences, family, society, state, and the whole of life. There is no “neutral” turf. For the devil lays claim to it all and seeks to pervert life in every crack and crevice. The devil yields no domain to Christ. Christ yields no domain to the devil.
9. There is one holy kingdom, and One King – King Jesus, the Savior of the world, King of kings.

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Session #3: Issues surrounding Human Sexuality: Pornography & Marital Dysfunction

Western society has changed radically from the 1950s. Consider the sexual standards of 1950s television and movies. Gays were in the closet (mostly), gender dysphoria was a culturally unknown concept, pornography was a scandalous, hidden indulgence—kept in private drawers or stashed behind boxes in the basement. Pregnancy out of wedlock was the occasion for shame and public embarrassment. Even divorce was a sort of scarlet “D” branded to one’s chest.

With the advent of Playboy magazine in 1953 the sexual revolution commenced (which was partly underway from the era of the roaring 20s, though side-tracked by the Great Depression and WWII). It gained real momentum with the arrival of “the pill” in 1960. James Bond, playboy extraordinaire, enticed a whole generation of young men to fantasize about the exploits of the sexually conquering male, with little emotional attachment to any female. Then, too, the 60s revolution and the hippie movement (free love), along with women’s liberation, and more, each and all coincided in ushering in a brave new world of sexual freedom—with gay rights gaining sway in the late 1970s and an onward march ever since. Most recently, transgenderism has become the focus of attention, most notably with Bruce Jenner (the famed Olympian decathlete) transitioning to become Caitlyn Jenner.

We have moved from the world of “Ozzy and Harriet” and “Leave It to Beaver” to “The Conners” (with a transgendering child) and “Bevis and Butthead” (with every rude-and-crude sexist cliché imaginable). Pornography—of the vilest sort—is only a few clicks of some buttons on your computer or cell phone. Pregnancy out of wedlock is now publicly paraded as an occasion for celebration—even on national TV. Gay persons have moved from the closet to the spotlight (from a hall of shame to a hall of fame). In fact, the old values and social mores are increasingly viewed as what should be shut-into-closets or forced-into-exile.

In these two sessions we want first to examine pornography and its associated marital dysfunction. In the second session (session 4 of the series), we will briefly look at transgenderism.

Pornography

Our culture indulges lust. That is, it is no longer a vice. It is no longer a deadly sin. It is a charm. It is an engine that fires life’s adventure. It fuels fun! Such is the media version of this vice. Lust contains nothing vicious. Of course, the biblical portrait is different. As a vice, lust is vicious—a sexual coveting of “bodies.” Outside the bounds of vowed love (marriage), it is desire gone astray. This vice, in a world alienated from God (1 John 2:16), is often packaged with other sorts of sins: greed, envy, anger, and the like. Sexual lust can be pre-marital, extra-marital, and post-marital. It can include any sort of sexual desire or pleasure or satisfaction contrary to or outside of God’s will.

And though the window of the eyes can breed lust in the heart—it is the heart that is disordered and misdirected, so that what we see with our eyes (even with our mind’s imagination) is twisted into lust. Fornication, adultery, lustful fantasizing, and everything associated with the same, is easily practiced in the

privacy of one's heart. Yet, inevitably, lust aims to push beyond such confines and find satiation through another. Even though our culture judges lust as harmless and private—"just as long as you don't hurt anyone"—a corrupted imagination is a type of self-harm; and if one is in a committed relationship, it harms one's partner—compromising or altogether corrupting trust, commitment, fellowship, and union. Part of the fidelity of marriage includes mental fidelity!

Of course, sex itself is good. It is a wonderful gift of God. We are designed for it. God invented it (what a great invention!) God is not ashamed of it—only we make it shameful. Certainly a part of sex has the purpose of procreation, but that is not its sole purpose. Humans aren't merely animals that come into heat. We are not meant for just any "body" handy—but for life lived together in committed love and fidelity. That is the design plan for human happiness and flourishing—God's plan. The Song of Songs celebrates wedded sexuality.

Pornography, by contrast, mounts a full frontal assault on this divine plan. Pornography, the word being derived from two Greek words, *porne* (prostitute, whoring) and *graphein* (drawing or writing), is the portrayal of sexually oriented material, in written, audio or visual form, deliberately designed to stimulate sexually. It contains explicit descriptions or displays of sexual actions and/or organs, with the aim of stimulating sexually feelings, desires, and the like, versus, say, mere artistic expression of the human body. Ancient pornography once came in the form of painting, carvings, drawings, and literature. Now pornography comes in the form of photographs, films, and live sex shows. Internet pornography is now the dominant avenue in which pornography is consumed: via personal computer, tablet, or cell phone.

One of the most troublesome features of pornography, as some authors have noted, is not that it reveals *too much*, but that it reveals *too little*. All it reveals are objectified bodies (body parts) for sexual arousal rather than God's image bearer—a person's heart, mind, soul or spirit. It incites lust, not love. It arouses but does not satisfy. It objectifies persons and reduces them to sexual play things. It also sells a fantasy world of sexuality that is just that "fantasy." That is, the persons performing in pornographic media are "acting," indeed. Women are reduced to sex-starved sex machines that enjoy being disrespected, brutalized, becoming the sex object for any sex organ, performing most any possible sex act. Men are reduced to sex-starved sex machines as well—who live for that one singular purpose to be satiated by any and every possible sexual activity. In pornography's devolution (the sinking corruption of the human soul) that next sexual "high" is to go "lower"—thus, the descent into child porn, incest, rape, bestiality, a descent lower and lower.

Why Pornography?

Why pornography? Why is it legal and why does it remains legal in Western society? The biblical answer is that pornography is a reflection and result of human depravity and corruption. The legal answer that pornography represents a form of "free speech." Truth be told, however, the legal answer is but the outcome of human depravity having its way, for, in brief, much of the male population, including the white-collar judges, lawyers, and politicians, have a porn habit or want to indulge in some pornography on-the-side. Porn is here to stay because much of the male population enjoys pornography—and more recently, with the rise of internet porn, an increasing percentage of women and girls are becoming regular users of online porn.

So, what's the harm? It is a person's private business. How does it harm individuals or families or society at large? In fact, it is argued, porn is healthy inasmuch as it frees people from their sexual inhibitions. It is public sex education. The statistics will unsettle you,¹ but while many churches and sessions and consistories act

¹ Among the statistics are the following: 90 percent of American children between the ages of 8-16 have been exposed to pornography. There are over 1 billion online pornography sites. According to a 2016 Barna study, the majority of pastors (at least 54%) have reported being former or current users of porn, and many practicing Christians report feeling no guilt about their porn use—though others wallow in deep shame and misery from it. About two-thirds of Christian men view pornography at least monthly, the same rate as men who do not claim to be Christian.

innocent in regard to pornography, the facts suggest otherwise. While it is unedifying for a pastor to focus too much attention to the porn-problem in our midst, it is likewise unhelpful to act like ostriches, with our heads in the sand, because we are too ashamed to admit our own churches are seething with the sin of lust.

Interestingly, the Presidential Commission on Pornography appointed in 1967, which basically gave pornography a clean bill of health as having no social negative repercussions on society, was refuted, virtually on every conclusion it reached, by the Attorney General's 1986 Commission on Pornography. (Like all political debates, however, public debates on morals or morality wallows in a quagmire of opinion and so-called scientific findings.)

Scriptural Perspectives

For our purposes, we turn to what Scripture has to say about this topic? Although the Bible does not address pornography directly, it does address lust, sexual immorality, violence, racism, and abusive or exploitative attitudes and actions. Pornography fosters all such behaviors. First, we know that lusting in our heart is mental adultery (Matt. 5:28). Likewise, we are told to make no provision for the flesh (Rom. 13:12-14), something pornography incites in a most deliberate manner. Believers are exhorted not walk in the way of immorality, impurity, coarse joking, or filthiness. None of these befits the way of faith (see Eph. 5:2-3). By contrast, we are urged to dwell on what is noble, just, pure, lovely, and also excellent, what is of good repute and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8). Pornography, on the contrary, is dastardly, debased, debauched, impure, shameful, disgraceful, and leaves minds in the gutter. Women are reduced to sexual objects for sexual exploits. It leaves the minds of its consumers choked with poisonous sexual imagery, with a sensual idolatry itched in the mind. In this way, pornography inhabits the mind long after a given visual display is over. This, in turn, feeds a sex-saturated heart, which feeds our sex-saturated society. All this is the opposite of loving our neighbors as ourselves, or loving God with our hearts and our minds, or of directing our thoughts to God in thanksgiving or toward our neighbors for their welfare. This involves a "taking off" of Christ and pursuing "waywardness" rather than "putting on" Christ and pursuing "righteousness" (see Eph. 5:3-4).

Scripture is clear: sexual desire is permitted and natural, but it must be directed toward one's spouse alone (see James 1:15; cf. Matt. 5:27-28). Meanwhile, porn works in opposition to the exhortation of 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, where husband and wife rightly may expect conjugal rights from one another, and are not to deprive one another except by mutual agreement, and, then, for a set purpose. Pornography, however, given that it is mostly accompanied by masturbation, involves isolated sex versus a communion between partners. It all too easily involves depriving the victim-spouse of sexual affection, being replaced by a fantasy on the screen. Or, it is used in a manipulative way to guilt the victim-partner (usually the wife) into becoming more like the fantasy as found in the imagery of pornography, to do or perform or act like what the women in porn do or perform or act like.

Hebrews 14:4 informs us that marriage is honorable among all, and the marriage bed is to remain undefiled—that in contrast to God's judgment upon adulterers and fornicators. Pornography does not honor marriage. Quite the contrary. Pornography is wholly disinterested in sex between a husband and wife, unless a third party is brought into the situation: a (step)daughter, a sister-in-law, a neighbor friend, etc. It feeds human perversity and evokes deviant behaviors as normative. The naughtier, the better. The more scandalous, the more exciting. The more corrupting and debauched and novel, the more sexually creative and fulfilling. Perversity is pleasure, by this account.

So, in short form, pornography takes the beauty and wonder of sex, and debases it, cheapens and poisons it. It dishonors fidelity. It celebrates sinful behavior and incites the same in the lives of all its consumers—believers and unbelievers alike. It cultivates lust and adultery in the heart, which tempts some to find casual sex from internet sites, or induces men to go to strip-clubs, pay prostitutes, or turn to other partners in the pursuit of

sexual excitement. It also debases our view of persons (especially women), darkens the heart and mind, damages marriage, and brings disintegration of families.

Pornography's Harm in General

1. It commodifies human beings, who are actually made in God's image. God advocates for the poor against those who would afflict or exploit them (Prov. 22:22-23; Amos 8:4ff.; Ps. 82:3-4). Yet pornographers are such persons: they exploit runaways, women forced into porn by abusive boyfriends, women and girls trafficked from poor nations, and other financially needy women, and such. Meanwhile, for most of those who are the performers, the profits do not find a way into their pockets. Others get rich from pornography.
2. It sexually humiliates women, in particular—often depicting extreme forms of sex acts that are forms of abuse: choking, hitting, gagging, and many other acts not fit for description.
3. It reinforces racist stereotypes.
4. Online porn is designed to offer free services which are to lead to paid services and habitual use.
5. It hyper-activates the appetitive system and creates new maps in the human brain based on the pornographic images. These map areas long to be activated and used—such that porn users start to act like rats pressing the bar to get a shot of dopamine or its equivalent. This may be likened to drug-like additions
6. The multibillion dollar porn industry fuels other industries—selling email addresses to spammers and others.
7. It fosters deceit within relationships and compromises and/or breaks marital fidelity.
8. Users of porn participate in all of the exploitative behaviors mentioned above, and indulge in and support a form of prostitution, pure and simple.

Pornography's Harm in Particular

1. Porn harms woman. It exploits and traffics women and children, and incites (first by way of fantasy) sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, child abuse, spousal abuse, incest, and more. Inasmuch as women are often, in pornography, objectified and reduced to sexual pleasure toys, the users (more predominantly males) witness emotional and psychological behaviors that they want to emulate. Some women and girls feel an emotional need to become what is expected of them as portrayed in pornography, which only leads to shame, abuse, and brokenness. Sexual degradation is a long distance from sexual fulfillment.
2. Harms to children:
3. Harms to girls and women:
4. Harms to boys and men:
5. Harms to marriages and relationships. Pornography breaks trust and intimacy between couples. Wives who catch their husbands viewing porn feel betrayed, diminished, distrust follows, not to mention a diminishment of respect, and marital breakdown is more easily escalated.

Personal

1. Acknowledge and confess it as a sin—a forgivable sin at that!
2. Separate yourself from sources of temptation.
3. Find and facilitate a good sexual relationship within marriage.
4. Pray regularly for God's help and forgiveness—acknowledge your sinful propensities and weakness.
5. Replace bad sources of image input with good ones.
6. Find an accountability partner.

Christians Living in a Sin-stained World: Some Ethical Questions Christians Face Today

Evening Class (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) – Dr. J. Mark Beach
April 8, 2021

Session #4: Issues surrounding Human Sexuality: Transgenderism & Homosexuality

Transgenderism is a rather recent trend, following in the wake of homosexual activism and the wider social shift regarding homosexuality. What is now branded as the LGBTQ+, *lesbian, gay, trans, bi, queer or questioning*, + (others), has become normative within large segments of society, especially in the academic world, corporate America, and large swathes of the liberal political and media world.

Definitions

What does it mean to be transgender? “*Transgender* is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. It is sometimes abbreviated to *trans*. *Transsexual* refers to persons who experience a gender identity inconsistent or not culturally associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.” Perhaps another term that needs definition is that of *gender dysphoria*, which refers to the distress a person experiences whose gender identity differs from their biological sex. *Gender identity*, then, has reference to a person’s internal sense of being male or female (or other). *Sex* refers to biological sexual organs, physical, biological, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics. In this connection we also note that some people suffer with disorders of sexual development, and this is referred to as *intersex*, and historically referred to persons who were *hermaphrodites* (denoting a congenital condition in which the development of a person’s chromosomal, gonadal, internal, and/or external anatomical sex is atypical. Some are visible at birth; others appear at later stages because of malfunctioning of hormones.

From the above, we see that *sex* and *gender* are viewed as distinct, such that persons can take on roles and identity of a sex different from their biological sex. *Gender* has reference to roles and sense of identity (not biological make-up). *Gender* also has reference to culturally defined roles, behaviors, expressions, which often are labeled as masculine or feminine. In that light, *gender nonconforming* persons refuse to act or identify according to those labels. Other terms used are *queer, genderfluid, or nonbinary*. Some persons who are transgender have transitioned or are transitioning, having undergone or are undergoing medical treatments (such as hormone therapy) and sex reassignment surgeries to bring their bodies into alignment with the gender with which they identify. Others make only a social transition, that is, they make nonmedical changes in their person: clothing, name, personal pronouns and the like, in order to live in alignment with their gender identity.

Mix-and-Match as Human Choice

Increasingly (though rare) we meet persons who count themselves as transgender. Key to this debate is the question whether sex and gender are distinct from one another. Beginning in the 1960s and over time this distinction become normative in the field of psychology.

From a biblical point of view, believers are placed in an awkward position in counting as “normative” what seems to be, *prima facie*, disordered or malfunctioning or not normative. Yet, human language has now been turned on its head. Terms like “natural” or “normative” and the like, if used one way, are branded oppressive or phobic or sexist or bigoted, but if used as descriptors of freedom to decide what is natural or normative,

then they have wholesome import. With the concept of gender fluidity and the like, humans are to be viewed as a mix-and-match assemblage of parts: physical sexual biology, gender identities across ranges, and sexual desires (across ranges). Some may opt for an internal coherence to match physical biology and sexual preference, but the idea of internal coherence is itself oppressive and Neanderthal.

Rival Worldviews

In an earlier session, we noted that worldview plays into ethical issues in a significant way. A worldview is “*a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.*”² As C. S. Lewis noted: “The Christian and the Materialist [a secular worldview—all there is physical stuff, and that is all we are!] hold different beliefs about the universe. They can’t both be right. The one who is wrong will act in a way which simply doesn’t fit the real universe.” Christians, of course, believe they are right about the universe—including the moral universe God has put in place. Secularists (humanists, materialists) believe they are right.

In addressing this issue, we must recognize that we interact with a rival worldview to that of Christianity—the worldview of secularism. (There is no God, there is no law-giver, there is no moral standard, except what we construct for ourselves, there is no right and wrong, again, except what we collectively decide to call such, and there is no heaven or hell or after-life. There is only this life, now. As such, there are no consequences beyond immediate gratification for self or the selves that embrace your “self.”) (Of course, there are many rival worldviews to the Christian faith, but everyone has a worldview!

Worldviews shape and account for: *authority* (who or what can tell us what to do?); *knowledge* (who knows what is right or best?); and *trustworthiness* (who loves us and wants the best for us?) As one author points out, in the simple decision to eat or not eat ice cream, we can listen to our feelings and physical desires, or follow reason, and so we rationally refrain from eating ice cream for health reasons, or we can trust the advice of mom that too much sugar should be avoided or contrariwise follow our successful sibling who never denies herself a treat.

Looking at the worldview of secularism, we see that it prizes science but truth is fluid. Natural order (even so-called natural law) is all a matter of interpretation. Morality is a choice, not an objective state-of-affairs. Morality consists of feelings and preferences, like “ouch!” or “aaah!” In keeping with this view, life is split into a public sector and a private sector. The private sector is where this view places religious beliefs and morality derived or dependent on them. That realm is regarded as subjective, personal, private, relative and only valid for yourself—or those who share your beliefs. The public sector looks to scientific authority and sanction—this forms values for the public square, for it is objective and valid for everyone; it is also incontestable, for it is how the universe works. (To speak of values here is only to say that science supports a kind of fluid and evolving set of opinions about how humans should behave toward one another. Again, this is not morality in an objective, out there, sense.)

In order to understand a secularist/materialist worldview, we must understand that this worldview splits apart “facts” and “values.” This means that there is, finally, no objective truth at all (“facts”). We only have ourselves creating our own “values” as we see fit. But Christianity denies this split. Theological/biblical facts are inseparably related to moral values. Of course, if one denies the facts, if one denies the Giver of those facts, then one can also deny the connection between those facts and moral values. F. Nietzsche’s program, in part, was to declare God dead, along with the Judeo-Christian values grounded on Him, in order to “transvalue” to a world of our own making.

² James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 17.

Because of the dualism we examined in part two of the first sessions of this class, many Christians are content with splitting life into sacred/secular. The sacred (or spiritual) realm consists of your soul or spirit, and such church related activities like worship and prayer and giving alms; the secular realm is really aimed at the physical aspects of life: making a living, recreation, vocation, your sex life, and hobbies, etc. This produces a piety that *disinvites* God into large portions of your life. It divides one's loyalties—it regards Jesus as Lord of pieces of your life (not your whole life). It produces, too, a concept of redemption that is mostly escape. The spiritual is good and important; the physical is lesser or lower. In fact, it gives over (as in surrenders) much of life to the devil. The public school can educate our kids; we'll pray with our kids. The secular world will teach them to live and pursue life; we, at home, will teach them to prepare for death. This piety thinks itself spiritual—but it is more spiritual than God, who made us physical beings, who invented the material stuff of life, and calls it good. In Jesus Christ, God (the Son) even took on human flesh; He promises us glorified versions of our bodies (see 1 Cor. 15:42, 44). Which is to say, the physical and material are the stuff of spiritual life!

Meanwhile, in reference to the question of transgenderism, Scripture does not endorse the notion of self-identity or being self-made—at least, not with respect to human sexuality. In contrast to the current blinding-of-genders and/or transforming or transitioning from one identity to another, or seeking internal coherence or rejecting that idea, or opting for one preference of sexuality versus another, Scripture lays out principles that present a different account of what ails us as human beings, and even an account why we can experience gender dysphoria and associated conflicting desires or yearnings.

Biblical Perspectives

The Bible teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It calls us to respect persons as persons. It calls us to be compassionate and sensitive to humans suffering in their own sin and misery and the sin and misery of the world that afflicts and wounds us all. The Bible informs us that we are fellow-sinners; so, in that light, there is always a “we-self” about us. As sinners, we are sinners together that need the same divine grace and rescue. The Bible also teaches us that God's love for sinners is the help and heal them, to forgive and save them; even to transform them and transition them from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom, from shame to innocence. Salvation is liberation and deliverance. Salvation, fully accomplished, never leaves us where we started or lets us stagnate halfway, stuck along the journey. It brings us fully home, fully healed, even transformed in the twinkling of the eye (1 Cor. 15:52).

The degree of healing persons experience in this life is diverse—some deep and radical; others meager and faltering. But forgiveness and God's patient grace is always and ever deep and radical, just as it is also persistent and patient; it is infallible and irresistible. Thus, Scripture (and a biblically informed worldview) offer different diagnoses and remedies to the issues surrounding gender dysphoria and transgenderism, for no matter how much modern advocates have sought to erase any differences between men and women, biology (the facts of the universe) refuse a radical erasure.

The Bible is pro-body, pro-sex, pro-male and female, pro-marriage, pro-love, and pro-fidelity. That is, the body is good; sex is good. Male and female is good. Marriage is good. Love and fidelity are good. And yet from a biblical and Christian understanding of life, each and all of these can be and are disordered; each is subject to corruption, can be (and has been) twisted and misdirected (structure = good created order; direction = either good or evil). And from this corruption dualism reigns.

- Genesis 1 and 2 serve us the biblical blueprint for human beings and human sexuality (see Gen. 1:26-29).
- He made us male and female not only for procreation (but, yes, for that) but also for intimacy, for fellowship, for vowed-love community, for one-fleshed companionship (see Gen. 2:21-24). [All this in

stark contrast to transgender thought, where autonomous selves are free to impose their own interpretations on their body; meanwhile their bodies are simply raw material with no intrinsic identity or purpose or sexual orientation or design.]

- Moreover, we belong to God as His creatures (see Psalm 24:1-2). This means that we live in a world structured by God. Structure/created/the natural order (though damaged by sin) as created suffers most when it is misdirected rather than directed back to God, according to his design plan and purpose, and for our wellbeing.
- As such, it is not my choice to disregard my physical biology, to disunite my body from my person or to disunite my mind (soul) as an autonomous, self-governing entity from my body. (Transgenderism grounds identity not in biology but in one's mind. You are what you *feel*. The world, or at least yourself, is what you decide it is. There is *no created order*.)
- God sets the script, not we ourselves. By contrast, according to our secular culture, a “gay script” (or fill in the blank “_____ script”) declares that any person who experiences same-sex desires or wishes to transition to a different gender identity has discovered their authentic self; such persons are embracing their true identity. Oddly, gay same-sex desires have long been regarded as hard-wired into a person; there is no “choice-making” with respect to sexual orientation; to attempt to change that orientation is to act contrary to your nature; yet, now, all of the above may be a matter of choice. The highest prize and the upmost respect should be afforded to the persons who is “self-made,” according to personal choice. (It is difficult to see how both ideas are true—or if they are, why changing one's sexual orientation [from gay to straight] is either immoral or impossible.)
- The Bible gives us the interpretative moral-grid by which we evaluate and assess our various feelings, impulses, and desires, such that we sift them, support or loathe them, and the like. An adult who has a sexual attraction to children can say, well, that's my identity. Or that person can declare that attraction, though real, as disordered and needing to change. A rapist, who enjoys humiliating women sexually, can declare that impulse valid and as who he really is, and, act accordingly; or, he can denounce it as disordered, even sinful and reprehensible, and suppress it, etc. Virtually all human beings have sexually deviant desires (along with other sorts of desires) and impulses that do not, and ought not to form their identity, but rather need to be rebuked, denounced as disordered, broken, and repressed as harmful to the self (and to others). We can have deep convictions which make us loathe such impulses or orientations or desires.
- Many Christians have lived and died with same-sex attraction as their impulse, desire, and disposition, but their identity in Christ trumps such desires and dispositions. They live happier lives following biblical mandates, and knowing God's embrace of them in their brokenness, than following after desires that are contrary to God's will and design for them as those made in his image.
- Being distorted by sin is very different from being made by God—God creates us as sexual beings, male and female; sin distorts and redirects our sexuality away from God's design.
- Chastity is a biblical standard for all human beings, of any predisposition, orientation, confusion, etc.
- Matthew 19:12 on eunuchs is helpful in showing us that some are born as, what we might call, intersex, with physical anomalies and find themselves infertile. Some are eunuchs, probably by castration, and have been made so by others (likely such persons were taken as captives). Still others take a vow of celibacy—spiritual eunuchs. In our sex-saturated society, it seems inconceivable, but the Bible tells us otherwise, for it is possible to happy and chaste.