

Teaching Ethics: From Reasoning to Responsibility

Ethical dilemmas occur daily in classrooms, corporate boardrooms, and legislatures.

BY JANE SABES

Ethical issues appear in nearly every daily newspaper and network news show. Of the global news reported in the September 2006 issue of the *Economist* magazine, nearly all the stories presented serious ethical dilemmas:

- Disagreements about the permissible use of frozen embryos;
- Allegations that athletes in many different sports have used illegal performance-enhancing drugs;
- Crime and murder rates up significantly in Houston, Texas, since the city welcomed Hurricane Katrina evacuees;
- Severe restrictions put on American grain by Germany and other foreign countries, due to the crops being genetically altered, in violation of trade agreements;
- Canada embroiled in land-claim disputes with its aboriginal populations; and
- Chile's health minister, confronted by the fact that 15 percent of all babies in the country are born to teenage mothers, recommending that the national health service prescribe

the morning-after pill to girls over 14 years of age.¹

Major moral dilemmas!

Ethics—A Universal Dilemma

Ethical dilemmas occur daily in classrooms, corporate boardrooms, and legislatures. On January 1, 2006, amidst allegations that his son improperly managed the Iraqi “Oil for Food” program, the United Nations secretary-general established an Ethics Office, charged with fostering “a culture of ethics,” “developing and disseminating standards for appropriate professional conduct,” and providing “leadership, management and oversight of the United Nations ethics infrastructure.”² Similarly, the National Science Foundation, along with the U.S. National Institutes of Health, recently applied considerable pressure on colleges re-



ceiving grant funding, demanding that the recipient organizations establish and enforce policies requiring ethical conduct.

Perhaps the conclusion reached by the editorial staff of *Reader's Digest* is



correct: “It’s becoming clear that everyone cheats—the government (Homeland Security rip-offs in the Gulf Coast), the media (plagiarism), sports (steroids), and the CEOs who rake in millions of stockholder dollars as they float away in their golden parachutes. The message to our kids is that cheating is a perfectly acceptable practice because ‘everyone does it.’”³

The Decline of Ethics

Why the seeming vacuum of morality in society today? J. P. Moreland places the blame squarely at the feet of the religious community. He argues that around the turn of the 19th century, fundamentalists withdrew from society, starting their own Bible institutes. “This withdrawal from the broader, intellectual culture and public discourse contributed to the isolation of the church, the marginalization of Christian ideas from the public arena, and the shallowness and trivialization of Christian living, thought, and activism. In short, the culture became saltless.”⁴

In his book, *Community, State,*

and Church, Karl Barth portrays the civil community as spiritually blind. “It has neither faith, nor love, nor hope. It has no creed and no gospel. Prayer is not part of its life, and its members are not brothers and sisters.”⁵ Barth and Foy Valentine argue on behalf of Christians filling that void. Valentine asserts that “this whole world of citizenship, it is crystal clear, should be entered by the people of God with Christian courage, Christian convictions, and Christian commitment. The alternative is to leave the running of the land to the wisdom of unbelievers, and this alternative is un-

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acceptable to the people of God.”⁶

Moreland makes additional accusations against the Christian world—not

only its withdrawal from society but also dumbing-down, becoming anti-intellectual in its response to issues. But this is not the inevitable outcome of religious faith. Solomon proved that one could be both godly and wise. The Queen of Sheba extolled Israel’s king when she said, “In wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. Because of the Lord’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness” (1 Kings 10:3-9, NIV). Neither could allegations of anti-intellectualism be made against Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar judged to be 10 times wiser than their cohorts, all of whom had completed a three-year intensive course in Babylonian languages and laws (Daniel 1:20). And we find the Apostle Paul engaging legislators and leading scholars of his day, demonstrating his familiarity with for-



Karl Barth

eign philosophers (Acts 17:28). From these examples, we can conclude that it is possible to equip Christian youth intellectually and ethically for the world today.

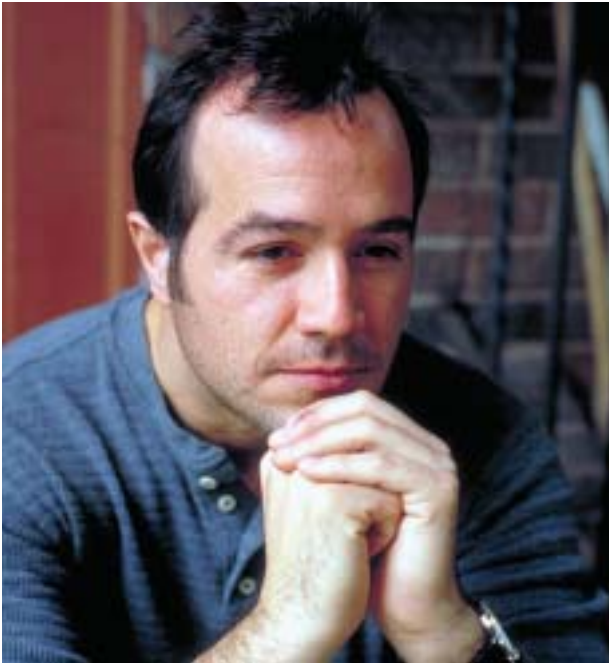
One of the primary purposes of church-sponsored education is to prepare young people to engage the world from the mindset of Christ. If we believe that ethics is integral to the fabric of a civil society, should not Christian education be at the forefront in the search to apply biblical principles to everyday living? Christ regularly modeled ethics quite differently than the secular or religious communities of His day. While others shunned them,

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science and moral values in their previous science classes. In fact, Goldfarb found that the vast majority clung tenaciously to the idea that science was value-free. He set out to find ways to introduce moral thinking to students before they entered college. Armed with funding from the National Science Foundation, Goldfarb created summer camps for high school and middle school science teachers to help them determine how best to introduce moral values and ethics in the their classrooms.⁷

Dr. Goldfarb’s initiative was aimed at the high school level, but that is rather late to begin the

proper discussions of an ethical and moral nature. Most behavioralists agree that the clarifying of values, although unconscious, begins around the age of 3—when children are old enough to start to lie. The youngster lies about having peed in his pants, having taken the quarter off the dresser, or having scribbled on the wall. Although the evidence against the child is overwhelming, he or she lies in order to make the adult believe that their value systems agree—and of course, to avoid punishment. Given the early-age formation of personal morals, schools cannot reserve discussions of ethics and moral certainties until the later grades, when young people are deemed to be more mature.



He befriended prostitutes and those with mental illness; while others taught hate, He demonstrated love for one’s enemies; while others demanded retribution of “an eye for an eye,” He spoke of forgiving 70 times seven; and while others proclaimed self-importance, Jesus claimed that only those with childlike humility could enter His kingdom.

Equipping Students to Reason

Dr. Ted Goldfarb, of the State University of New York, Stony Brook, discovered that few of his graduate and undergraduate students had discussed



Teaching Ethics—Establishing a Moral Base

To teach ethics, we must first appreciate the importance of having a moral base from which to make decisions. Reluctance to explore morals, values, ethics, and character development with students can lead to personal and collective harm, present and eternal loss. Make no mistake, students are making moral decisions on a daily basis—inside and outside the classroom (e.g., whether to engage in heavy petting on a date, how best to support a pregnant teenage friend, whether to accept an alcoholic beverage or marijuana cigarette, whether to violate a confidence, whether to cheat on an intensely competitive national exam).

Second, we must present ethics as a dynamic process and a lifelong activity rather than a set of facts to be memorized. As teachers, our approach should be to educate rather than indoctrinate. The benefit of discussing ethics is that it promotes thoughtful reasoning about all aspects of life.

Although there is no specific formula for teaching ethics,

certain definitions prevail. For example, ethical individuals are those who:

1. are well informed, avoiding unwarranted assumptions;
2. work collaboratively with others, in a spirit of honesty and openness, not suppressing but rather sharing relevant information;
3. are open to new evidence that may go against the grain of firmly held beliefs;
4. apply the standards of logical argument, subject themselves to outside scrutiny, comparing the relationships between and among conflicting sets of information.

Third, those guiding the educational process must recognize that the teaching of ethics cannot be confined to an occasional class period or subject;

it must pervade every aspect of our teaching, behavior, and responses to students. Wheaton College philosophy professor Arthur F. Holmes⁸ advocates that ethics and morality not be relegated to the status of a subspecialty. He believes that because Christian institutions are to transmit biblical values, ethics should be integral to the curriculum. It is to be woven into every teaching moment. Every discipline—biology, literature, religion, history, government, geography—contains issues with moral consequences—access to scarce commodities such as food, minerals, and oil; euthanasia, stem cell research, athletes' use of steroids, the denial of human rights to women and minorities throughout history, the squandering of natural resources, pollution and global warming, storage and sale of nuclear weapons, foreign policies that advocate assassination of foreign leaders, and inhumane meth-



Throughout history, women and minorities have been denied basic human rights.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS THAT ARE NEVER OUT OF DATE INCLUDE SOME OF THE FOLLOWING:

- A wine company executive has offered a generous endowment to your school—including free laptops for every student. Should the school accept the donation?
- Should you tell on a friend who is cheating on her boyfriend?
- Which takes precedence: community health concerns or individual privacy?
- Should a winning coach be fired because he engages in abusive behavior and foul language?
- You have been invited to go on a summer mission project to rebuild a community recently devastated by natural disaster. You've also been selected for a prestigious internship. Which do you choose?
- A released sex offender begins attending your church. You have two little sisters under the age of five. What would be your response?
- Would you pay Sudanese government officials a bribe to be able to deliver medicine to a refugee camp?
- The state requires reporting of all suspected cases of child abuse. Should you honor the confidentiality of a friend or protect her child?
- Should corporations be forced to produce more energy-efficient automobiles, even if it threatens their profits?
- You've recently discovered that a family of illegal immigrants occupies a small building behind your church. Should you report them?
- You work for the U.S. president. He has requested that under no circumstances should you reveal details about the firings of eight staff attorneys. How do you respond when called before Congress to give an account of the matter?
- You learn that the long-term trade embargo your country has imposed against another nation is having devastating consequences upon the lives and health of its citizens. Do you act upon this information or let national officials deal with it?
- Your college fund is earning a higher-than-average return from being invested in hedge funds. You read in the newspaper that that most of the money the Chinese government gets for electronic surveillance to spy on democracy activists, people seeking to worship God according to their consciences, and visitors to Internet cafes comes from hedge funds. Should you reinvest the money in a savings account or stock that pays less interest?

ods for eliciting useful information from captured enemy combatants.

Fourth, those who think the teaching of ethical decisions should be simplistic (just do what's right in every situation) are in for a rude surprise. Life's situations rarely have straightforward responses. Teachers must have well-considered ethical convictions that are worth sharing and which they can use to mentor students as they aid them in discovering God's path in their lives. It is crucial that they do research and prayerfully and thoroughly consider the ethical issues prior to presenting them for class discussion. In this way, they will be equipped to guide the dis-

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Declaration Toward a Global Ethic



Parliament
of the
World's Religions Chicago, U.S.A.
4 September 1993

cussion rather than having it float freely without reaching a positive or productive conclusion.

Feeling Intimidated About Teaching Ethics?

Teachers may feel intimidated by student inquisitiveness regarding sensitive ethical issues. But only when students ask, search, and probe will they discover answers for themselves. Students should be encouraged to question using the Socratic dialectic method, rather than argument and debate. Teachers should "say it as they see it," inviting students to do likewise. This does require courage. The goal should be to inspire students to become moral agents, not just repositories of other people's ideas.

Another source of intimidation may come from parents and community members. But the teacher should regard these groups as resources rather than combatants. Their collective life experiences provide intergenerational, multiethnic, diverse economic, and ca-



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reer viewpoints from which to highlight ethical dilemmas faced as well as the diverse thought processes and approaches used in resolving difficult issues.

Neither should teachers be intimidated by the claim that exploring and



taking action on national issues violates the principle of “separation of church and state.” The work of government, according to David Easton, is the “authoritative allocation of values”—policy making that helps guide a nation and its people toward peaceful and prosperous lives. In order to achieve these ends, citizens must behave lawfully and practice charity toward one another. Where do those values originate if not from within communities of faith? If they renege on this responsibility, then who will provide leadership in the application of justice and mercy?

Nor must teachers be deterred from teaching ethics because of society’s (and even students’) preference for relativistic values. Adventist teachers must forthrightly yet respectfully promote principles derived from the only source of wisdom and right-doing, the Scriptures. The idea is to share, not impose, beliefs. Teachers can compare the tenets of various religions to show their similarities in demanding ethical behavior of their followers. It is thus possible to remain nonjudgmental and non-partisan, and appeal to all cultures represented within the student body.

Recognizing Responsibility

In 2005, a conference entitled “World Parliament: Toward a Global Ethic” was convened.⁹ For an entire weekend, the attendees grappled with adopting a global ethic to which all nations, creeds, and people could subscribe. The objective was to overcome the moral decay of society and to stem the rise of corruption in government and the corporate world.

Toward the end of the weekend, Tim Loonsfoot, Sr., an American In-

dian, was invited to speak. He spoke slowly, almost falteringly: “Ethics? I don’t know what that word means. We don’t have that word in my native Ojibwa language. So I asked the elders. After much discussion, we came to believe that by speaking your word ‘ethics’ you are meaning to say ‘responsibility.’ I can now understand that because as American Indians, we are taught from childhood that we have responsibility to Mother Earth, Father God, and to you, my brothers and sisters.”

Neither our society nor our communities of faith can afford to have students dodging ethical dilemmas of the day; rather, as Mr. Loonsfoot points out, they must be taught to think, to choose, and to live responsibly. ✍



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