Christian Ethics and the Ethics of Virtue
Stephen S. Bilynskyj, Pastor
Valley Covenant Church, Eugene, Oregon

Copyright © 1987 by Covenant Publications, Chicago, Illinois

Recently I watched part of a television documentary which interviewed several women who had decided to have abortions. The women ranged from a sixteen-year-old, who could not face the responsibility of marriage and raising a child, to a forty-year-old, whose child had been determined to be seriously defective by amniocentesis, to a gynecologist, who had an abortion in her first year of medical school because a child would have seriously hampered her education. The thing that struck me about this program is that the view of each woman–and the view of a commenting physician was that the decision of each woman was an extremely "personal" matter. The private and personal nature of such a decision demanded that society, whether in the legal or medical realm, remain neutral on the character of such a decision and, what is more, seek to maintain the individual's right to make a decision for abortion.

This is not a paper about abortion, but I chose the example above because it illustrates the ethical quandary which a few recent ethicists have suggested is the downfall of ethics in modern society. (The example is also appropriate since the Annual Meeting has once again considered a resolution on abortion.) It has become commonplace to maintain that ethical decision-making is a matter which is ultimately private. Each individual must be free to make autonomous choices about those things which matter most. Yet alongside this privatization of ethics there is a demand that ethical choices be rational, that they have some basis. Thus there is an increasing demand for "ethics." Hospitals form ethics committees and business schools add ethics courses to their curricula.

What remains unseen is that the call for ethical inquiry and advice in business, medicine, and other areas is in fundamental conflict with the widespread conviction that ethical decision-making is essentially private. The only basis for such inquiry is in some general ethical principles which may be accepted by all participants in an ethical dialogue. But the commitment to ethical individualism makes such principles impossible to formulate. The only principle that can be agreed upon is the principle of individual freedom. Yet the freedom of the individual has almost no ethical content, for part of the guarantee of freedom is a freedom to decide what is, ultimately, of value.

Thus contemporary ethical discussion takes place in a situation in which ethics is fragmented between a concern for individual autonomy in moral decision-making and a concern for some sort of justification for a universal moral consensus. The history of this fragmentation has been chronicled by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue.* MacIntyre argues that our current ethical situation is in fact a chaos of incommensurable fragments of past ethical systems. The fragmentation began with the rejection of the classical-medieval view of ethics as teleological; that is, as oriented to the production of a certain end, which is understood as the good for humanity. In classical ethics the aim is not so much a procedure for decision-making, but, rather, a procedure for producing a certain kind of person. Classically, that kind of person was described as "the good man." It was a consensus concerning "the good" for humanity that made possible a unified ethic in classical and medieval culture. In such a situation there was really no need to
justify morality. Morality, in the form of virtue, was clearly seen to have its justification in its orientation to that which was the end of humanity, the good.

When the classical tradition encountered Christianity in the Middle Ages teleological ethics was able to survive, as the good for humanity was construed to be supernatural and the means for achieving that good, the virtues, were enlarged and redefined. To the classical list of virtues were added faith, hope, and love. In both the classical and medieval tradition ethics proceeded as the science of the practice of becoming a certain sort of person, a person with a good character. Character was understood in terms of the possession or lack of virtues.

But in the modern world, where there is no consensus concerning human good – indeed, such a consensus is forbidden by the belief that the individual is free to determine what is good for him/her – it is not possible for ethics to be justified in a united end for human life. If some conception of an end for humanity is proposed for modern society, such as freedom or happiness, it quickly becomes apparent that such a notion of the "good" has little ethical content. For our society is based on the view that freedom involves the freedom to determine what form one's individual happiness will take. But then "happiness" as an end or goal for human life offers no practical guidance for the conduct of human life.

The contemporary ethical movement often called "virtue ethics" is a call to address the fragmentation of ethics in the modern world with a return to something like the classical-medieval view that ethics is primarily the science of developing human character through the fostering of the virtues. Stanley Hauerwas, now at Duke University, is the primary proponent of virtue ethics as a viable approach to Christian ethics. In the rest of this paper I will examine Hauerwas' proposals for a Christian ethic structured along the lines suggested by virtue ethics.

**Being and Doing**

One of the characteristics of the modern ethical situation is, suggests Hauerwas, an excessive concern with ethical dilemmas or quandaries. Ethicists are asked to help us decide whether or not to have an abortion, whether to lie to protect someone's feelings, or whether to tell a terminally ill patient that she is dying. The focus on such dilemmas leads us to believe that ethics is primarily concerned with making decisions, usually difficult decisions. The Covenant's first resolution on abortion, proposed at the Annual Meeting in 1985, reflects this cultural conviction that a major ethical category is the dilemma.

Hauerwas argues that the concern for ethical dilemma is symptomatic of the modern concern that ethics be both, somehow, individual yet universally applicable. In concern for the general applicability of ethical principles we focus on the character of a decision as such. Is the act of abortion, as such, an act of murder? If so, then we may develop a general moral principle that abortion is wrong. But that approach to decision-making ignores the fact that decisions have a history. The history of the decision is the life of the person deciding and the life of the community in which that person lives. Either history may render it impossible for the individual to embrace that upon which the principle that abortion is wrong is based, i.e., that abortion is murder.

So Hauerwas maintains that there is a question which is prior to "What shall I do?" That question deals with the character and history which is the context for ethical decision-making-before we
ask what shall we do, he suggests that we ask, "What shall I be?"

The question of what I ought to do is actually about what I am or ought to be. "Should I or should I not have an abortion?" is not a question about an "act" but about what kind of person I am going to be.3

This is not to say that ethics is unconcerned with decisions or with principles which can guide decisions. But it is to say that decisions and principles for making them grow out of a history, or as Hauerwas would put it, a narrative, which is more about what kind of people we are than about particular acts.

Thus for the Christian what will be distinctive about our ethics is not so much the acceptance of certain principles such as "life is sacred," but the fact that we are who we are, that is, the people of Jesus Christ. Because of who we are we may have certain principles, but it is not those principles which define us. It is our commitment to follow Jesus Christ which defines us both individually and as a community.

Christian ethics, then, is to be the practice of being a certain kind of people. It is to learn to embody a character which is defined in relation to the life of Jesus Christ. This kind of ethic still involves making decisions, but individual acts are placed in their context as the acts of people with a particular history and character. More often than not, what we do is not really decided. We act and then see that our action has shown what kind of person we are... or are not. Hauerwas tells the story of a friend who traveled a great deal and often fantasized the possibility of an adulterous encounter while traveling. Yet when the opportunity for such an encounter actually became available, his friend rejected the possibility without even genuinely considering it. His fantasies aside, his action came simply from a character which had already been developed. In other words, having already become the kind of person for whom an extramarital affair was not an option, his decision not to engage in such an affair simply manifests what kind of person he is.

To be sure, there is a kind of circularity in the acquisition of virtue. For it is by acting virtuously that we acquire a virtue, yet it is the possession of virtue which allows us to act virtuously. This circularity was recognized by Aristotle, but it was not considered a particularly significant problem for the classical conception of virtue ethics. For the circularity involved is a bit like the infamous hermeneutic circle. The meaning of a text may not be discerned without some background presuppositions about the text, yet all of our presuppositions about the text must be tested in light of what the text actually says. And, just as the movement back and forth between my understanding of the text and what the text says results in progress in comprehension of the text, so the movement between what I do and my understanding of what I am or ought to be results in progress in character.

So then, if the question of what we are precedes the question of what we are to do, a different sort of approach to ethical questions on subjects like abortion is dictated. Approaching abortion as a social issue, we are doomed to failure if our concern is to locate the correct principles for dealing with the issue. That is, if we attempt to formulate some sort of principle of the "sanctity of life" to which all people ought to agree, we will be stymied by the simple rejection of our principle or the rejection of the principle's application to a fetus. If we go to the Bible to discover our principles it will quickly become apparent that we have no means to convince society at large of the validity of our principles. Biblical principles will only carry weight within a community.
for which the Bible is formative.

What we come to see is that abortion must be addressed in relation to who we are - as the people of Jesus Christ. Hauerwas maintains that historically Christians have seen abortion as inconsistent with their character as followers of Christ. In essence, the answer has often been, in relation to abortion, "Christians don't do that sort of thing." And, from the point of view of a Christian ethic of virtue, it is a good answer. However, when that self-understanding of the Christian community is challenged from the outside it becomes necessary for Christian ethics to exhibit what it is about being the people of Jesus Christ that makes the practice of abortion inconsistent with who we are.

Now we come to two issues which must be addressed. How is it that we learn and become who we are as the Church of Jesus Christ? And, if ethical issues are to be addressed in terms of who we are as the community of the Church, how can the Church have anything ethical to say in the wider context of society? It is to these questions that I turn in the next two sections.

**The Church as Story-formed Community**

Crucial to the development of the understanding of virtue ethics has been a specific conception of how it is that human character is formed. The primary concept here is that of narrative or story. As I have already indicated, part of the confusion involved in an ethic which focuses primarily on making difficult decisions is the failure to acknowledge that our decisions have a history in the life of the individual and the individual's community. Decisions are made out of the context of a character that has been formed by the ongoing story of a life within a particular community. To describe an ethical situation apart from the stories of individuals and communities is to produce a distorted description. Therefore, for Hauerwas, there is no such things as an unqualified ethic, an ethic in the abstract that applies to all people simply because they are human. An ethic is always qualified by the story of a particular community. Thus Hauerwas insists that ethics for the Christian must always be Christian ethics. One might suppose that this insistence on the particularity of Christian ethics makes our ethical deliberations irrelevant to society at large. But the relation of ethical decisions to character formed by a particular story makes it clear that without a qualifier we have only ethics in the abstract.

The ethics of the Christian community, then, is an ethic produced by the narrative that forms that community. That narrative is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is by being true to that story that we find ourselves to be people of character, people who embody certain virtues. "We Christians are not called on to be ‘moral’ but faithful to the true story, the story that we are creatures under the Lordship of God." It is important that we see that as Christians our faithfulness to a story is faithfulness to a true story. For if ethics is always qualified by the narrative of a particular community, we might suppose that what is being suggested is simply a form of relativism. But the Christian commitment to the story of Jesus as formative for our character is a commitment to the truth of that story as it comprehends human life and our relationship to God. What I cannot do is abstract bits of ethical truth from that story and hold them up as principles to guide decision-making in some general way applicable to all situations.

The nature of Christian ethics is determined by the fact that Christian convictions take the form of a story, or perhaps better, a set of stories that constitutes a tradition, which in turn creates and
forms a community. So Christian ethics arises when the Church takes seriously its commitment to the story of Jesus Christ, when it seeks to make its own story a continuation of the story of its Lord. The title of this section is taken from Hauerwas' book, A Community of Character. The story of Jesus makes us who we are as we seek to continue that story in our own lives. Indeed, it is impossible to really understand who Jesus is without becoming part of his story, without learning to follow him. The Gospels, especially the Gospel of Mark, display the need to follow Christ in order to learn who he is. It is only as the disciples continue the story of Christ in their own lives that they begin to approach a comprehension of the person they have followed. One interesting solution to the problem of the ending of Mark's Gospel is the suggestion that it originally had no ending. The ending is to be found in the response of the reader, in his/her choice to make the story his/her own by following Christ.

The ethical question for the Christian, therefore, becomes a question about who I am in relationship to the story which is to form me. What kind of person shall I be in order to be faithful to the story of Jesus Christ? As the Church, what kind of people shall we be in order to be able to continue to tell the story of Jesus faithfully? Ethically, we will seek to become people who possess the virtues necessary for a faithful living of the story. Hauerwas does not produce a definitive list of the virtues which are to be formed in the Christian community. If the story is continually in process, then the virtues necessary to the telling of the story will be in process as well as our understanding of the practical implications of those virtues. The classical virtue of justice, for instance, while clearly a virtue for the Christian, is possible only in combination with the distinctively Christian virtues of patience and hope.

The temptation in an ethic of virtue is to attempt to make the virtues into principles by deriving them all from some single, preeminent virtue. For the Christian, we might be tempted to single out love as the distinctive mark of Christian character. Love is certainly given a prominent place in the Christian story. But to base all of Christian ethics on a single principle of love, a la Joseph Fletcher’s Situation Ethics, is to forget that the story we live as Christians is a complex story. It is no accident that love abides with faith and hope, for, in the complexity of the story that God is telling in the life of Christ and his people, love could not abide without faith and hope. Once again, we may not simply read off from the story as we find it in the Bible a list of principles, rules, or even virtues which are definitive for Christian ethics. What is definitive for our ethics is just the story, and we comprehend that story just as far as we have learned to live it.

We find, then, that virtue ethics, far from leading us away from the Christian message into what might be regarded as a non-Christian appropriation of classical Greek culture, instead calls us to greater attention to the story which makes us who we are. One of the classical questions about virtue concerned the way in which it is learned. Since virtue is a practice rather than a principle the way it is learned is closer to the way one learns a skill as opposed to learning a set of facts. Skills are learned by practice and by observation of and contact with a person who possesses the skill one wishes to learn. I continue to learn to preach by comparing my pulpit performance with skilled preachers whom I observe. It is in this way also that the life of Jesus is formative of who we are as Christian people.

Virtue is learned from the person who already possesses it. So as the Church of Jesus Christ we learn the virtues necessary to be his people from our contact with his life as we find it told to us in Scripture. It is not as though the answers to our ethical questions may simply be discovered in the life of Jesus by asking some simple question like, "What would Jesus do in this situation?"
To ask that kind of question is again to focus on what is to be done as opposed to what kind of person I am to be. Moreover, serious reflection makes it clear that asking what Jesus would do if he had to choose whether to have an abortion approaches nonsense. But what does make sense is to ask what kind of person I must be if my life is to be a continued telling of the story of Jesus, if my life is to be the same kind of life as his.

Yet there are decisions to make. It is all very well to say that we ought to focus on the kind of people we ought to be, but the decisions remain: whether to have an abortion, whether to disconnect life support from a "brain-dead" patient, whether to support our government's military intervention in various parts of the world, and so on. How does the Church, as a people formed by the story of Jesus Christ, address a society in which decisions like these are made every day? How do we, given the particularity of Christian ethics, develop a social ethic that can successfully address the world we live in?

The Church as Social Ethic

The first thing to note is that the title of this section is not an error for "The Church and Social Ethics" or some such. The Church, argues, Hauerwas, is a social ethic. Moreover, from what we have already seen, we may deduce that there is no ethic that is not social. Every ethic is qualified; that is, it operates within a community or people with a particular history or story. It is our community that makes us who we are ethically. In that sense ethics is always social.

That the Church cannot simply have a social ethic is apparent from the fact that Christian ethics is an embodiment of the story of Jesus in the life of the Church. That story addresses the world as a story embodied in the lives of Christian people. And if our ethics is necessarily a consequence of the story that forms us, then we have nothing ethical to say apart from our participation in that story.

As the Church, we often get the impression that our approach to social ethics ought to downplay that which is distinctively Christian about our ethical stance. Our Christian commitment to justice, peace, sexual morality, or preservation of human life seems to suggest that we should set aside our doctrine and work together with "like-minded people" to bring about good in these areas.

But Hauerwas says:

I am in fact challenging the very idea that Christian social ethics is primarily an attempt to make the world more peaceable or just. Put starkly, the first social ethical task of the Church is to be the Church—the servant community.... What makes the Church the Church is its faithful manifestation of the peaceable kingdom in the world. As such the Church does not have a social ethic; the Church is a social ethic.

The social ethic of the Church, what the Church has to say to the world on the subject of ethics, is its own life as a community formed by the life of our Savior. For the Church to abandon its distinctive character as the people of God would also be for it to abandon the world. The Church has something to say to the world only insofar as it displays to the world the world's own nature as sinful and inadequate. The world needs the Church in order to truly know itself as the world.

By being itself the Church offers to the world an alternative approach to the world's own
problems. Thus the ethic being proposed is not one of withdrawal from the world. By being itself the Church shows the world that the skills, that is, the virtues, exist which are necessary to survive in a sinful world.

But that means that the Church must indeed be a community of virtue. Christians must strive to make our community a place where the story of Jesus is told faithfully in such a way that it produces the growth in character necessary to life in the present world. If the Church is to truly be a social ethic it must not offer principles to live by but must offer training in the skills for living, training in faith, hope, love, patience, etc.

I began this paper with the example of abortion as a contemporary dilemma. It would be instructive to conclude with a brief consideration of the way in which Hauerwas deals with the issue of abortion, not as a dilemma to be resolved, but as a question about what kind of people we will be in relation to abortion.

In *A Community of Character*, Hauerwas argues that Christians have lost their ability to say anything constructive in the abortion controversy because they have accepted the constraint of speaking within the framework of a pluralistic society. That is, whatever we say about abortion must be based on principles acceptable to society at large, that is, on principles with no distinctive religious character. So the anti-abortionists have made their case on the principle, acceptable to all, that life is sacred and murder is wrong. Thus, since abortion is the taking of human life, abortion is murder and is wrong. However, it was quickly discovered that not all of society accepts the contention that a fetus is a human person and the abortion debate quickly became a question about the starting point of human life. And there seems to be no route to agreement about the latter question.

Hauerwas contends that our moral error as Christians has been to enter the debate about abortion as religiously neutral participants. He counsels us to consider the issue in the terms of virtue ethics, to ask the question, "Who are we and who do we wish to be in relation to this issue?" To answer that question, we must step back and ask ourselves who we are in relation to sex and children. What kind of people must we be if we are to welcome children into the world?

We regard life as sacred, not because of any perception of an intrinsic quality of holiness, but because of our particular convictions about God. God in Jesus Christ is working to redeem the lives of human persons, lives which are, in the first place, his creation. It is this creative and redemptive work of God which makes the life of a human person sacred, not some special quality of life as such. Thus far, I believe, Hauerwas would be in sympathy with the resolution proposed to the Covenant Annual Meeting. But Hauerwas says our character in relation to abortion goes further than a commitment to life as created and redeemed by God. God's redemptive activity is historic, working through an historic community. As Christians we are historic people with a stake in the continuity of our community. As such, we raise children as a symbol (not the object!) of hope. We hope and trust in a God who will continue to create and redeem a people for himself. By raising children we express our confidence that God continues to welcome men and women into his kingdom.

Looking at the history of the Church we find good reason to value the raising of children. The emphasis on singleness in the early Church, far from devaluing marriage as simply the natural state of affairs, indicates that marriage and the raising of children, like singleness, is a vocation.
Those who marry do so as people called by God to express the truth of the story of God's redemption in Jesus Christ in a particular way, by bringing into life new people whom God may also call to be a part of the ongoing story of the people of Jesus.

Thus, "Christians are trained to be the kind of people who are ready to receive and welcome children into the world.... It is, of course, true that children will often be conceived and born under conditions that are less than ideal ... that is all the more reason we must be the kind of people that can receive children into our midst."\(^9\) As Christians, we simply "abandon society to its own limits" if our voice in the debate does not carry our own particular convictions as Christians. Moreover, as the community which embodies those convictions in our own story, our life as a people ready to welcome children is a constant challenge to the life of society.

**People of Virtue**

It is my hope that what I have shared here communicates the essence of an ethical position which has impressed me as a stimulating and refreshing challenge to our usual manner of approaching ethical issues. I believe that the work of Hauerwas and other "virtue ethicists" is in strong accord with our biblical conviction that God has called us to be a unique people, a people made "peculiar" by our participation in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**ENDNOTES**


