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R. C. SPROUL

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Preface

Almost every major discussion of ethics these days begins with an analysis of the chaotic situation of modern culture. Even secular writers and thinkers are calling for some sort of basic agreement on ethical behavior. Humanity's "margin of error," they say, is shrinking with each new day. Our survival is at stake.

These "prophets of doom" point out that man's destructive capability increased from 1945 to 1960 by the same ratio as it did from the primitive weapons of the Stone Age to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The thawing of the Cold War provided little comfort. Numerous nations have nuclear arms now or are close to having them. What, besides ethics, will keep them from using these weapons?

This stark reality is compounded by the profusion of social injustice in many areas, the rise of international

terrorism, and the general decline of personal and social values. Who is to say what's right and wrong? One technical volume, Thomas E. Hill's *Contemporary Ethical Theories*, lists more than eighty theories of ethics competing for acceptance in our modern world. It is not just a matter of "doing the right thing" but of figuring out what the right thing is. This proliferation of options generates confusion in our world and, for many, a sense of despair. Will we ever reach a cultural consensus that will stabilize the shifting sands of pluralism?

All this talk of "theories of ethics" may leave you cold. However, ethical decisions enter into every aspect of our lives. No field or career is immune from ethical judgments. In politics, in psychology, and in medicine, ethical decisions are made regularly. Legislative action, economic policy, academic curricula, psychiatric advice—all involve ethical considerations. Every vote cast in the ballot box marks an ethical decision.

On what basis should we make these decisions? That's where the "ethical theories" come in. The Christian may say, "I simply obey God's Word." However, what about those issues where the Bible has no specific "thou shalt"? Can we find ethical principles in Scripture, and in the very

Preface

nature of God, that will guide us through this difficult terrain? How can we communicate these principles to others? How does God's Word stand up against the eighty-some other standards?

Let us start by looking deeper into the field of ethics to consider how society deals with such questions. Then we will see how God's Word fits in, and we will seek to apply biblical teaching to several modern dilemmas.

Chapter One

Ethics and Morals

In present word usage, the term *ethics* is often used interchangeably with the word *morality*. That the two have become virtual synonyms is a sign of the confusion that permeates the modern ethical scene. Historically, the two words had quite distinctive meanings. *Ethics* comes from the Greek *ethos*, which is derived from a root word meaning “stall,” a place for horses. It conveyed the sense of a dwelling place, a place of stability and permanence. On the

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other hand, *morality* comes from the word *mores*, which describes the behavioral patterns of a given society.

Ethics is a normative science, searching for the principal foundations that prescribe obligations or “oughtness.” It is concerned primarily with the imperative and with the philosophical premises on which imperatives are based. *Morality* is a descriptive science, concerned with “isness” and the indicative. Ethics define what people ought to do; morals describe what people actually do. The difference between them is between the normal and the descriptive.

ETHICS	MORALS
1. normative	1. descriptive
2. imperative	2. indicative
3. oughtness	3. isness
4. absolute	4. relative

When morality is identified with ethics, the descriptive becomes the normative and the imperative is swallowed by the status quo. This creates a kind of “statistical morality.” In this schema, the good is determined by the normal and the normal is determined by the statistical average. The

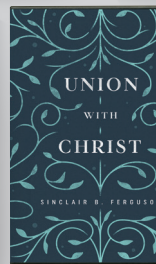
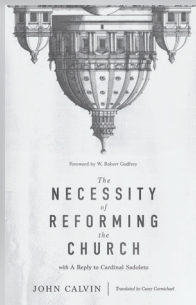
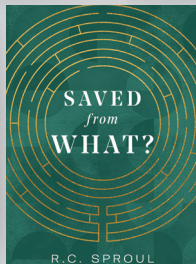
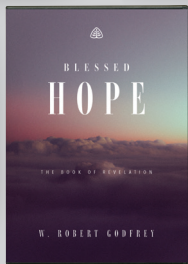
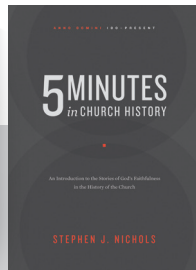
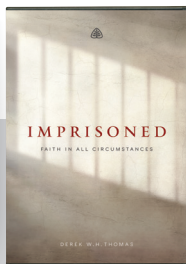
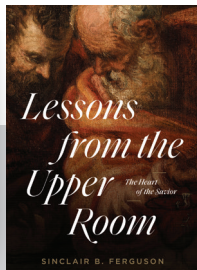
“norm” is discovered by an analysis of the normal, or by counting noses. Conformity to that norm then becomes the ethical obligation. It works like this:

Step 1. We compile an analysis of statistical behavior patterns, such as those integral to the groundbreaking Kinsey Reports in the twentieth century. If we discover that most people are participating in premarital sexual intercourse, then we declare such activity “normal.”

Step 2. We move quickly from the normal to a description of what is authentically “human.” Humanness is defined by what human beings do. Hence, if the normal human being engages in premarital sexual intercourse, we conclude that such activity is normal and therefore “good.”

Step 3. The third step is to declare patterns that deviate from the normal to be abnormal, inhuman, and inauthentic. In this schema, chastity becomes a form of deviant sexual behavior and the stigma is placed on the virgin rather than the nonvirgin.

We want to see men and women
around the world connect the deep truths
of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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