Introducing *Introducing Christian Ethics*

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Prelude

This paper was written to open the May 2022 conference on Christian ethics hosted by the International Baptist Theological Study Centre (IBTS), Amsterdam. The purpose of the conference was to strengthen Christian ethical reflection and practice in the European Baptist Federation (EBF) and global Baptist life. The strategy was to focus on a common text — my new book, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today* (henceforth abbreviated as *ICE*).[1] We further narrowed the focus down to five chapters, which focus on truthfulness, sacredness, justice, love, and forgiveness (chapters 8–12).

The specific goals of the conference, from my perspective, were the following:

- To strengthen Christian ethics in our church and academic communities.
- To provide opportunity for Christian fellowship and shared intellectual inquiry.
- To find common ground around five themes that might be seen as ‘the heart of Christian ethics’ (the title of the conference).
- To bridge divides between scholars, clergy, and laity.
- To seek ways across typical liberal, moderate, and conservative divides.
- To develop a common vocabulary and framework for ethics.

[1] David P. Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today* (Canton, MI: Front Edge, 2022).

- To prepare for upcoming IBTS/EBF Learning Network initiatives.[2]
- To explore whether the new *Introducing Christian Ethics* text can be effective in cross-cultural EBF church and classroom settings.

My own experience of the rich discussions at the conference was that these goals were met, at least at an initial level, and will now be advanced through future conversations.

Overview of *ICE* Methodology

Lineage

I open *ICE* by situating the discipline of Christian ethics in historical terms. Christian ethics has a historical lineage that can be said to begin (of course) with the moral teachings and example of Jesus Christ. Christian ethics is about following Jesus.

But Jesus does not come from nowhere. He does not just come from God. He also comes from Israel. This means that the Jewish tradition and first-century Palestinian Jewish social realities that formed Jesus, *ipso facto* form a crucial part of the moral lineage of Christian ethics. Christian ethics is a kind of offshoot of Jewish ethics.

Then comes the Greco-Roman background and context that was so crucial to the first-century Mediterranean Basin world in which Christianity was born and spread. In its formative early years, Christian ethics was deeply affected by Greek and Roman ideas, practices, and power. Christian ethics, then, is in some sense a product of the classical world.

Looking further along in history, the entire epic history of Christianity has mattered in the shaping of Christian ethics. In *ICE*, I focus especially on the distorting impact not just of the 'Constantinian turn' and the creation of a Christendom mentality, but the later European colonial project. Christian ethics as it developed is

[2] For the Learning Network and Learning Network courses see the IBTS website, <https://ibts.eu/programmes/learning-network> [accessed 10 October 2022].

inextricably connected to the Roman Empire and its successors, to Europe, to Christendom, and to colonialism.

Equipping the Saints to Follow Jesus

If Christian ethics is defined in normative terms as something like 'the moral convictions and practices that are fitting for and demanded of those who seek to follow Jesus Christ', then this historical lineage of two thousand years of Christian ethics must be understood as containing both successes and failures in the faithful following of Jesus. Nobody had better dare to claim infallibility for the history of Christian theology, ethics, or practice. The churches today in their quest for moral faithfulness to Jesus need to study Jesus above all, the biblical canon in its entire witness, and the historical lineage of Christian moral teaching and practice, knowing that they are not equal in authority but are collectively the tradition which we inherit and the place that we start.

The work of Christian ethics as a discipline can be summarised as the effort to describe, analyse, and propose Christian moral norms. Christian ethicists are simultaneously historians and sociologists in our descriptive work, internal communal critics in our analytical work, and moral leaders in our normative work. Specialists in Christian ethics may have unique training, skills, and calling, but (a) Christian ethicists should emerge from within the Christian community and be devoted followers of Jesus like everyone else, and (b) the work of Christian ethics belongs to pastors, laity, and the whole community of Christ-followers. Christian ethics can be viewed as an equipping ministry like other ministries — equipping the saints for greater moral fidelity to Jesus.

The Ethics Highway

In *ICE*, I use the metaphor of an 'Ethics Highway' to describe the analytical work of Christian ethics. This metaphor seemed to get some 'traction' at the conference.

Imagine yourself getting in a car to begin a long journey. The reason you get in a car is to go somewhere. The 'end' of your journey is to arrive at the destination. Most people do not just drive aimlessly. They are going somewhere. This corresponds to the 'teleological' dimension of Christian ethics, which has to do with analysing the various 'ends'

that Christian people do and should, or do not and should not, strive for. Some of the ends (*teloi*, in Greek) approved in Christian ethics include holiness, love, justice, and the reign of God.

Anyone driving must operate their vehicle according to the established rules of the road. This corresponds to the *deontological*, or rule-focused, dimension of Christian ethics. When we drive, we head toward a destination just like all other drivers. But we are not free to conduct ourselves behind the wheel in just any way we feel like. Our behaviour must conform to the laws that govern driving on each particular stretch of road. Just so, morality is about moral rules — at highest strength these are called moral laws, at weakest strength they are called moral guidelines or aspirations. Many significant moral rules in (Jewish and) Christian ethics are stated as prohibitions, such as bans on idolatry, murder, and adultery. Some moral rules are stated as positive admonitions, such as demands to care for the weak, tell the truth, and keep covenant promises.

The Ethics Highway can be understood to be a community of drivers in a temporary relationship with all nearby drivers. This is a community that cannot succeed unless all members of the community not only adhere to the rules of the road, but also take responsibility for their actions, and are capable of doing so because they are of sound mind, body, and character. These categories correspond to the themes of moral community, relationality, responsibility, and character, which are crucial in most ethical traditions, including Christian ethics.

The full picture of the Ethics Highway connects rather comprehensively to key themes not just in Christian ethics but in all ethical reflection. Good ethics looks like human beings having sound personal character, relating to other human beings by recognising that all are together a community, practising responsibility toward other persons, self-governing according to recognised moral rules that function as needed guardrails in human life, and seeking morally justifiable ends in their journey through life. Christian ethics is distinctive from other ethical systems in that the entire project is undertaken with reference to Jesus Christ. He is the end. He sets the rules. He shows what responsibility requires. He demonstrates the meaning of community. His life sets the paradigm for personal

character. This, at least, is what Christians confess. This sets the course of our temporary sojourn on the Ethics Highway.

Sourcing for Christian Ethics

Christian ethics is about discerning what it means to follow Jesus faithfully. A question which inevitably follows is where Christian ethicists and regular Christians should look to get the information needed to do that discerning. A typical Baptist response would simply be to say, 'the Bible'. And certainly, the Bible, with a focus on materials about Jesus himself, is a central source for Christian ethics.

But *ICE* makes the broader claim that the repertoire of Christian moral sources is quite large. Anywhere we can learn anything helpful for shaping the Christian moral life, we should keep our eyes and ears open. This includes the classic list of Christian sources, including moral tradition, Christian leaders, religious or spiritual experiences, and the voice of the Christian community, local and global. We should be open to learning from the teachings of other religious traditions, especially those most closely kin to us. And we should pay attention to the broad human 'moral quest', available in all kinds of resources, including philosophy, great literature, and the wise cabdriver. I argue for a humble, open-minded spirit of Christian discernment which recognises both the fallibility of our own tradition and the insights of others. The goal is to follow Jesus faithfully. Whatever helps us do that ought to be in play.

ICE does make a significant methodological move in emphasising the perspective 'from below', from 'the margins'. Focusing on the breakthrough insights of twentieth-century Black theologian Howard Thurman, but also influenced by various forms of liberation ethics and by the biblical prophetic tradition and Jesus himself, *ICE* claims that a fundamental commitment of Christian ethics must be to listen to and stand with the 'dispossessed', 'disinherited', those with 'their backs against the wall'. Every moral issue is understood most clearly if it is viewed from the perspective of those who are weakest and most powerless and how they are affected by current or proposed actions. When Jesus himself is understood as emerging from and standing up for those 'below', the authority for attempting to view all

moral issues from this vantage point is made even more incontrovertible.

Kingdom; Sermon on the Mount; Virtue Ethics

Three other methodological hallmarks are worth noting before we turn to the five core moral norms that centred the IBTS conference. These are the kingdom of God, the unique role of the Sermon on the Mount, and virtue ethics. Each receives a chapter in *Introducing Christian Ethics*. Each has been a focus of my earlier work in ethics as well.

In *ICE*, I consider whether the kingdom of God, as proclaimed by Jesus himself, should continue to constitute the central 'narrative frame' for Christian ethics. In *Kingdom Ethics*,[3] Glen Stassen and I indeed made the kingdom of God the central narrative frame for Christian ethics. We argued that Jesus understood the kingdom to be the reclaiming of this world by God through Jesus, with normative content including deliverance, justice, peace, healing, and the restoration or building of restored and inclusive community. We then situated specific teachings of Jesus as, at least much of the time, directing practices and behaviours that would advance these aspects of God's reign. Thus, for example, the reason we are taught to pray for our enemies and forgive them is to break the cycles of retaliatory vengeance that so often lead to violence and warfare. In this way, Jesus's teachings do not just hang out in space as random bits of instruction but instead fit into his (and God's) broader project: reclaiming this rebellious world, not just through belief but through transformation. While I now raise some questions as to some of the limits of kingdom framing for ethics — for example, for everyday domestic moral challenges — I still believe it is true to what Jesus was doing and a powerful, highly motivating frame for Christian moral obligation.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) is the largest single block of Jesus's teaching that we find in the New Testament. It has been a focal point of Christian ethical instruction since the very earliest days of Christianity. It has a radical, demanding, even absolutist edge, with no space offered for retaliation, unforgiveness, wealth accumulation, lying,

[3] David P. Gushee and Glen Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016.)

or sexual immorality. The Sermon on the Mount contains many crucial moral teachings, at least for those parts of the Church that take it as something more than unreachable aspirations and high ideals. *ICE* revisits the *Kingdom Ethics* teaching that much of the Sermon on the Mount offers concrete, doable, 'transforming initiatives' and should *not* be viewed as unreachable high ideals. Jesus never, ever used the language of ideals. *ICE* does acknowledge that several of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are extremely hard to coordinate with the exercise of any form of public responsibility; for example, the clash between a totalistic commitment to nonviolence and the security responsibilities of government officials. I conclude that the Sermon on the Mount should remain central in Christian moral instruction, and that through these teachings Jesus offers a way of deliverance from the vicious circles caused by human sin. But it does not stand alone as a teaching resource in Christian ethics.

Virtue ethics is the name given to those strands of ethics (including but not limited to Christian ethics) emphasising not norms for moral practice, or moral rules, but instead the moral character that drives the entire moral self of a person. The central insight of virtue ethics in its Christian form relates to the significance of 'soulcraft', in various forms of community, to create persons of virtue (good character) who will fulfil God's design, find true happiness, be good people in community life, and have the ability to conform ever more fully to the way of being taught and modelled by Jesus. Character is thus both preliminary and essential to human decision-making and action. Specific desirable character qualities (for example, virtue) are taught by Jesus, Paul, and others in the New Testament. The fact that the character of Jesus always stands available as the ultimate paradigm of human character is a powerful and somewhat unique dimension of the Christian version of religious ethics. I do argue, however, that — consider the Ethics Highway image — the moral life must not be reduced to character. We do still need rules of the road, proper goals, and so on. It is reductionistic to argue that the person of good character needs no rules. One reason is because persons of good character remain imperfect in knowledge and fallible in decisions.

The Moral Core: Truthfulness, Sacredness, Justice, Love, Forgiveness

The reader can see that the version of Christian ethics offered in *ICE* contains multiple elements. It is not reducible to the five themes that we called 'the heart of Christian ethics' and that we offered as the theme for the IBTS ethics conference of May 2022. However, those five themes were featured at the conference. They can be understood in various ways: as core *teloi* (goals), as core moral principles, even as core moral practices of the Christian life. At the conference I described them using further directional metaphors — this moral core is like a compass, or a GPS, or a centring device on a map. Whatever we decide, wherever we choose to 'drive' in the Christian moral life, this moral core helps us with our moral mapping. If we want to land somewhere within the land called 'plausible places of Christian faithfulness', we will pay close attention to truthfulness, sacredness, love, justice, and forgiveness. Key elements of my treatment of these five themes follow.

Truthfulness

Truth is, fundamentally, expressing reality in words. Truthfulness is a character quality in which one habitually tells the truth, keeps promises, and holds to covenants undertaken. All serious moral theories recognise a general moral obligation to tell the truth, even if some approaches recognise that there might be emergency exceptions. These rare emergency exceptions do not come close to authorising the systemic lying and government disinformation that dominates private and public life in many lands today. Systemic lying in public life is often linked to tyranny and injustice. Truth needs a comeback both in practice and as a theme in Christian ethics.

Close study of the Hebrew Bible shows a combination of a focus on telling the truth with an emphasis on the character quality, not just of truthfulness in speech, but of *being true* in character — a profound innovation. The recognition here, rooted above all in the character of God, is that being true — solid, sound, integral, whole, faithful — precedes and undergirds the practice of telling the truth, which includes keeping promises and covenants. Thus, it is not enough to teach rules

about truth telling, or even the character quality of truthfulness, but the fundamental significance of *being true*.

Study of the New Testament leads to the conclusion offered in *ICE* that while truth, truth-telling, and being true continue as themes, truth in the New Testament is mystical, participatory, and eschatological. This has much to do with the identification of Jesus as The Truth, and then the identification of the church as the body of Christ. The idea that truth is interpersonal/covenantal is elevated, as this concept is at least implicit in New Testament teachings related to the health and soundness of the body of Christ. Community depends on implicit or explicit 'truth-telling covenants'. This then opens up the theme of lying in public life — for it has become apparent that such truth-telling covenants are as crucial in public life as they are in the churches and in personal and family life. Several papers at the conference reflected on themes associated with truthfulness.

Sacredness of Life

The sacredness of life, in Christian terms, is the conviction that 'God has consecrated each and every human being […] as a unique, incalculably precious being of elevated status and dignity'.[4] The fitting moral response for those who believe this is to adopt a 'posture of reverence', take responsibility for life, offer respect and care to all, protect human life from harm and destruction, and seek the flourishing of human life. I have argued elsewhere that while all life has an appropriate sacredness, Scripture teaches an especial elevation of the sacredness of human life.

Sifting through a long historical and contemporary discussion of these themes in both secular and Christian ethics, I argue that it is best to understand 'sacredness' (secular cognate: dignity) as a moral status ascribed, and commanded, by God. It is not based on anything intrinsic about human beings or any unique human capacities that set us apart from or 'above' non-humans. Claims to intrinsic human worth founder on the authority for such claims, or the basis of them. Making capacities the basis of sacredness or dignity claims risks the abandonment of sacredness and related treatment norms if persons are viewed as not, or

[4] Gushee, *ICE*, p.107.

no longer, having the requisite capacities — such as consciousness, speech, rationality, and so on.

ICE follows earlier work of mine in reviewing the rather comprehensive, though not univocal, biblical basis for claims to the sacredness of human life. From creation to exodus, from Sinai to the prophets, then into the New Testament in the person and work of Jesus Christ, a bright red sacredness through-line can be identified. Humans as God's creation, God's deliverance of suffering people, God's law as applying to all with special concern for the most vulnerable, God's prophets as calling God's people back to the Law but also projecting forward a vision in which all life is restored, secure, and sacred — these lovely themes take us in the direction of a sacredness-of-life ethic. Jesus's teaching and ministry, his abundant love for all, especially the disinherited and despised, his declaration of God's tender love for all, and the meaning of his incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, all add profoundly to the sacredness-of-life biblical trajectory. Sometimes this latter strand is called 'Christian humanism', which means a marriage both of an exalted vision of Christ and an exalted vision of the worth of the human being as declared and revealed in Christ.

Justice

I argue in *ICE* that justice is the central moral (and legal) norm in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish ethics, that it is a central theme in Jesus's ministry, but that it has been strangely neglected in at least popular Christian understanding. The Hebrew Bible's understanding of justice emphasises protecting the rights of the vulnerable and powerless, which involves resisting unjust uses of power in community. Israel is established to be a just covenant community, which requires leaders and people to be committed to all aspects of the work of justice. Justice looks like laws aimed at protecting the weak, judges who attend especially to those vulnerable to mistreatment and who punish those who do injustice, kings who understand their vocation as protecting the poor, and prophets who remind Israel of its covenant obligations and call out those who violate them, whoever they might be. Justice can take many forms, including simple truth-telling about injustice, public moral and legal accountability, processes of restitution, reparation, and

restoration, and structural changes in society to advance incremental progress toward greater justice.

ICE treats at length Luke 18:1–8, the parable of the unjust judge. This astonishing parable is framed by the narrator as calling for perseverance in prayer, which (in passing) Jesus does. But it is also fundamentally a parable about justice, the obligation of judges and other authorities to do justice, the suffering of those vulnerable ones victimised by injustice, the difficulty of finding justice in this unjust world, and the great threat to faith that sustained injustice creates for people. 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' — that is, in a world filled with grotesque injustice, faith in a God of justice is hard. Jesus calls not just for persistent prayer and faith, but also for justice.

Love

Jesus defined love of God and neighbour as the true heart of the law, the greatest commandment, and the path to eternal life (see Matt 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–37). Ever since, Christian ethics has consistently defined love as the ultimate moral core of Christianity — not that Christians have not all too often fallen woefully short in meeting love's requirements. *ICE* explores the difficult questions that emerge once love of neighbour is defined as the moral core: Are all neighbours to be treated with the same type and intensity of love? Are there any legitimate limits to the obligation to love? Does our behaviour toward others properly take into account their behaviour toward us? What is the place of self-love? What do we do when love of self and love of neighbour seem to create conflicting obligations?

These questions help set the framework for the long discussion in the history of Christian ethics of different types or dimensions of love. Mutual love between friends and lovers, sacrificial love where one receives nothing in return, equal-regard love, in which all persons are treated the same, and delivering love, in which one is called to step in to rescue someone in great need — all are aspects of love, applicable in proper contexts and relationships. *ICE* concludes that covenant love may be the best overall understanding of the demands of love in this

sense: what exactly we owe to a person in loving them depends a very great deal on the nature of the covenant that exists between us.

Reinhold Niebuhr famously described love as 'the impossible possibility',[5] and there is great truth to this. In terms of the Ethics Highway image, love is rather like a destination that one never quite reaches as it always recedes just beyond the horizon. This also helps us understand a bit better the relationship between love and justice. One might say, with Niebuhr, that justice is the approximation of love in daily life. Or, justice is the floor, and love is the ceiling. Or, with Cornel West, that justice is love in public.[6]

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a biblical concept that retains currency in everyday life, all over the world. We all know both that there can be no decent human life without plenty of forgiveness, but also that forgiveness is hard — and that there are good reasons not to give it away too easily. And yet there is Jesus, regularly and persistently calling his followers to forgive. He does so with such urgency and frequency that in *ICE* forgiveness becomes part of the moral core, 'the heart of Christian ethics'.

Etymology helps when studying forgiveness. The core concept involves giving up something completely. *ICE* argues that what is given up completely when we forgive is any claim on a person who has wronged us to pay the moral debt that their wrongdoing has created. We cancel that debt rather than demand its repayment. There are good reasons to do this, and also good reasons why this is challenging. In terms of Jesus's teaching, the best reason I should cancel the moral debts incurred by others through their harms to me is that God cancels my debts for the wrongs I do to God. 'Measure for measure' (Matt 7:2), says Jesus — either we forgive as God forgives, or our relationships will be marked by the relentless logic of unforgiveness on all sides, including God's unforgiveness toward us.

ICE explores relational dynamics that include but go beyond forgiveness. For example, when a significant wrong is done by Person

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[5] Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper, 1935), p. 72.

[6] This is something consistently expressed by West. See, for example, Cornel West, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, a Memoir* (New York: Smiley Books, 2009), p. 232.

A to Person B, Person B suffers harm that requires their own efforts at healing. Person A incurs a moral debt to Person B that must be addressed either through 'payment' or forgiveness. The relationship between A and B is harmed and requires restoration, if possible. And Person A may incur harm to their own well-being that requires restorative work. Forgiveness is only a part of what needs to happen when individuals and relationships are bruised by wrongdoing.

Conclusion

Our experience at the May 2022 IBTS 'Heart of Christian Ethics' conference demonstrated that sustained reflection on core moral themes such as truthfulness, sacredness, justice, love, and forgiveness can indeed be fruitful at multiple levels. The themes themselves have considerable richness that makes them worthy of sustained reflection in their own right. Hopefully such reflection, valuable in itself, can lay the foundation for deploying these themes constructively in cross-cultural Christian engagement with some of the world's most difficult and controversial moral issues.