

# SITUATION ETHICS: A BIBLICAL EVALUATION

By: Scott K. Leafe, M. Div., D.Min.

## INTRODUCTION

Beginning with Adam and Eve's fateful decision to eat from the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, humankind has been challenged to evaluate what is morally right and wrong in decision-making processes. For individuals, these evaluations are "typically" based upon an adopted system of ethics which "typically" defines morally good and appropriate actions, and also morally wrong and inappropriate actions. Yet notice the repeated use of the adjective "typical." This is done because many would assert ethical decision-making is so complicated by myriads of choices that perhaps it becomes impossible to know what the truth is – a descent into skepticism. Others may even suggest that truth is variable or individual – a moral subjectivity where people create their own truth, or as Steve Wilkens quips, "at least they think they do."<sup>1</sup>

Though a number of ethical decision-making systems have been proposed over the past two millennia, one system raced onto the scene in the late 1960s that was resoundingly embraced by secular and seminary academia alike. This system was deemed to be "the new morality" and was labeled *situation ethics* by Joseph Fletcher's provocative book of the same title published in 1966. James Childress recalls, "The book brought widespread attention to a new way of thinking about morality – *Newsweek*, *Time*, and other mass media focused, perhaps for the first time, on debates and methods in ethics."<sup>2</sup> Fletcher had proposed a method of situational or contextual

---

<sup>1</sup> Steve Wilkens, *Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics: An Introduction to Theories of Right and Wrong*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), 14.

<sup>2</sup> James F. Childress in Joseph F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, Library of Theological Ethics (Philadelphia; Louisville, KY: Westminster /John Knox Press, 1966), 1.

decision-making, rooted in pragmatism, which rejected socialist and Christian worldviews – worldviews he had previously embraced but had subsequently rejected when he became convinced these systems did not work – first socialism, then Christianity. Childress writes, “With his ‘auto de-Christianization,’ as [Fletcher] described it, he arrived at ‘the end of theology’ – ‘along with Christianity went all ideology of any kind. *Situation ethics* was for Fletcher the ‘fruit’ of a ‘rejection of the doctrinaire and the dogmatic.’”<sup>3</sup> In other words, Fletcher rejected the premise of universal moral principles, relying instead on existential decision-making.

So is Fletcher’s ethical system a serious possible alternative to Christian ethics and biblical morality? Does situationism leave Christians with what John Montgomery describes as “no ethical moorings in the face of more and more agonizing moral dilemmas (stem cell research, gun control, capital punishment, etc.)”?<sup>4</sup> The objective of this study will be to evaluate situation ethics theory in light of biblical evidence for objective, non-arbitrary, and universal norms that source the divine perspective in the decision-making formula.<sup>5</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF SITUATION ETHICS

Situation ethics asserts that “situations” determine what is moral or immoral based on the premise that there are no universal moral principles. Fletcher’s summary rule is: Do the most loving thing. Norman Geisler notes that Fletcher’s position is “neither a lawless relativism, which says there is no law for anything, nor a legalistic absolutism, which has laws for

---

<sup>3</sup> Joseph F. Fletcher, *Joseph Fletcher: Memoir of an Ex-Radical* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 55-92. Cited by James Childress in Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, "Some Remarks on Punishment and Freewill in Legal Theory Classical Christian Theology," *Global Journal of Classical Theology Volume 8*, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Barry R. Leventhal, "Holocaust Apologetics: Toward a Case for the Existence of God," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 7.

everything. Rather, he contends that there is one law for everything, the law of love.”<sup>6</sup> Fletcher explains his position as follows:

*Christian situation ethics has only one norm or principle or law (call it what you will) that is binding and unexceptionable, always good and right regardless of the circumstances. That is “love” – the agapē of the summary commandment to love God and the neighbor. Everything else without exception, all laws and rules and principles and ideals and norms, are only contingent, only valid if they happen to serve love in any situation.*<sup>7</sup>

Fletcher argues that situationism resides firmly between the absolutes of legalism, where every decision-making situation is encumbered by a bundle of predetermined rules and regulations, and antinomianism, where there are no norms or laws whatsoever. Situationism is grounded in a singular absolute with one maxim for everything – love. Versus a “law” of love, though he consistently uses this label, Fletcher insists that situation ethics makes “full and respectful use of principles, to be treated as maxims but not as laws or precepts” – laws are to be kept in a subservient place so that “only love and reason really count when the chips are down.”<sup>8</sup>

### Three Approaches to Situation Ethics

Borrowing terms from Paul Tillich and others, Fletcher suggests situation ethics proceeds from three approaches: 1) the one and only law, *agapē* (love); (2) many general rules of *sophia* (wisdom) of the church and culture, which are more or less reliable; and (3) *kairos*, the moment of decision in which “*the responsible self in the situation* decides whether the *sophia* can serve

---

<sup>6</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues & Options*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 30. Fletcher cites the following Scriptures in support of his *agapē* identification: Matt. 5:43-48, 22:34-40; Luke 6:27-28, 10:25-28, 10:29-37; Mark 12:28-34; Ga. 5:14; and Rom. 13:8-10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

love there, or not.”<sup>9</sup> Utilizing reason, then, every person must decide for him/herself whether the actions or means he/she takes will in the end be consistent with the single universal norm of love. For example, in the case of a mentally ill woman who has been raped and has become pregnant, situationists would condone, if not demand, termination of the pregnancy through abortion “for the sake of the patient’s physical and mental health. . . It is even likely they would favor abortion for the sake of the victim’s self-respect or reputation or happiness or simply on the ground that *no unwanted and unintended* baby should ever be born.”<sup>10</sup> So the means of expressing love to this woman is to remove the burden of a child altogether. Situationists would not reason that the abortion is killing since the end, love for the woman, justifies the means.

According to Geisler, there are two primary reasons for accepting one universal norm:

In the first case, universals cannot be derived by deduction from other universals like “middle axioms” – one cannot derive an underived norm. Second, each situation is so different from each other situation that it is questionable whether a rule that applies to one situation can be applied to all situations like it, since the others may not really be like it. Only the single axiom or norm of love is broad enough to be applied to all circumstances and contexts.<sup>11</sup>

For example, consider the following imaginary excerpt from the situationist encyclopedia of moral obligations, presented in schematic form by Douglas Chismar and David Rausch:

In any situation, characterized by C<sub>1</sub>, do w;  
 in any situation characterized by C<sub>2</sub>, do x;  
 in any situation characterized by C<sub>3</sub>, do y; etc.

In this example, w, x, and y represent actions, and C<sub>1</sub> to C<sub>3</sub> denote sets of situational variants – “morally relevant properties affecting the decision in each case, but different enough from each

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>11</sup> Geisler, 37.

other to avoid being captured by a general rule.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, there are no rules which apply to everybody and individual decisions are situationally and uniquely made on the basis of how a person feels they should act out of love.<sup>13</sup>

### Propositions of Situation Ethics

Fletcher summarizes the fundamentals of situation ethics in a series of six propositions.<sup>14</sup> Proposition one states that love is the only thing that is intrinsically good. In using the word “good,” situationism holds that something is good because God wills it so – nothing in and for itself is good, but decisions are good if they help people and bad if they hurt people.<sup>15</sup> The value of the decisions is determined by persons – God, self, neighbor, but no act has intrinsic value. Only God *is* goodness and love; all others only *do* love.<sup>16</sup> On the opposing side of love is malevolence, which is intrinsically evil. Rather than personifying evil as hate, Fletcher views this malevolence as indifference in the sense that people are treated as inanimate objects – people and their needs are ignored, thus depersonalizing them.

The second proposition of situation ethics is that the ultimate norm of Christian decisions is love, and nothing else. Fletcher recognizes the term “love” can represent romantic/sexual love (*eros*) and friendship (*philia*) – types of love that depend on mutuality; each requires a two-way street. However, he distinguishes the love norm of Christian ethics as *agapē* love. This type of

---

<sup>12</sup> Douglas E. Chismar and David A. Rausch, "Regarding Theonomy: An Essay of Concern," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27, no. 3 (1984): 316.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon W. Blackwell and L. D. Johnson, "The Campus Crisis: The Generation Gap," *Review and Expositor* 66, no. 5 (1969): 66-67.

<sup>14</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 57-145.

<sup>15</sup> Geisler, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 64.

Christian love is sacrificial – a love that is not predicated by a response from the other person. In fact, *agapē* love does not even require the actors to like each other (a leap forward to Fletcher's fourth proposition: to love one's neighbor as oneself, no matter what). Rather, *agapē* is love is given to a receiving person no matter what the receiver does. Fletcher also recognizes that *agapē* is the only form of love that is exclusive; that is, *agapē* love can be given to all people and is commanded to be given to all people by God. Conversely, *eros* and *philia* represent exclusive love. Wilkens notes, "While it makes no sense to command people to have romantic feelings (*eros*) or a bond of friendship with all (*philia*), we can act in a benevolent manner toward everyone. *Agapē* is a matter of reason, whereas *eros* and *philia* are primarily emotional."<sup>17</sup>

Since love is the single Christian norm, then no other laws can govern ethical decision-making, including the Old Testament Law and those portions of the Law restated in the New Testament. In this regard Fletcher states, "Situation ethics has good reason to hold it as a *duty* in some situations to break [the Ten Commandments], *any or all of them*. We would be better advised and better off to drop the legalist's love of law, and accept only the law of love."<sup>18</sup> Thus, to a situationist, breaking any rule, even fundamental Commandments of the Law, is acceptable if the result is an expression of *agapē* love. Here Fletcher enjoins Martin Luther, who preached,

Therefore, when the law impels one against love, it ceases and should no longer be law; but where no obstacle is in the way, the keeping of the law is a proof of love, which is hidden in the heart. Therefore you have need of the law, that love may be manifested; but if it cannot be kept without injury to the neighbor, God wants us to suspend and ignore the law.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Wilkens, 166.

<sup>18</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, "Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity," *The Church Postil*, (Augsburg: Luther House, 1905), 175. Quoted in Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 62.

Fletcher finds a theological basis for this position in Scripture. More specifically, he points to Jesus plucking wheat on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28), a technical violation of the Law that prohibited work on the Sabbath. Christ justified setting aside or disobeying the Law in this case, stating, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). The Law is not of greatest importance; people are.

The third proposition of situationism is that love and justice are identical since justice is merely love distributed. Justice means that every person is given their due, and their due is *agapē* love. Christian ethics embraces law and order as precepts or maxims for love’s sake, and even foresees situations where loving force would be appropriate to protect innocents. In the end, love borrows from utilitarian principles, trying to bring the greatest good to the most people. Fletcher summarizes, “Justice is Christian love using its head, calculating its duties obligations, opportunities, and resources.”<sup>20</sup> Discovering loving responses requires people to think, plan, and make rational judgments.<sup>21</sup>

As previously noted, Fletcher’s fourth proposition states that love wills a neighbor’s good, even if the neighbor is not liked. Here he examines four interpretations of the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself: 1) loving a neighbor as much as oneself, 2) loving a neighbor in addition to loving oneself, 3) loving a neighbor in the way one ought to love oneself, and 4) loving a neighbor instead of oneself.<sup>22</sup> From these interpretations, Fletcher concludes there is a progression of love of oneself for one’s own sake, to love of a neighbor for one’s own sake, to

---

<sup>20</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Wilkens, 169.

<sup>22</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 109-112.

love of a neighbor for the neighbor's sake, to love of oneself for the neighbor's sake – the final, highest, and best expression of love: the love of oneself for the sake of loving others.<sup>23</sup>

The fifth proposition of situationism is that only the end justifies the means in any situation. Wilkens classifies this proposition as consequentialism, summarizing the concept that “good is determined by the results we obtain.”<sup>24</sup> As long as the end has love in view, then any means can be employed to reach this goal – e.g., telling lies to save another from an attacker or committing suicide to save others. In his 1971 debate with Montgomery, Fletcher remarked, “And what I want to contend for is the view that if I tell a lie for love's sake . . . then I haven't committed a sin for which I am to beat my breasts you know . . . but rather I'm to say that having acted out of love I've done the right thing!”<sup>25</sup> He concludes writing, “Love could justify anything. There is no justification other than love's expedients.”<sup>26</sup>

Fletcher's final proposition states that decisions ought to be made based on the situation alone versus prescriptively. That is, a person must wait for the situation to arise before they can decide how to act in love. Love does not operate within a system of prefabricated moral rules. Rather, love functions circumstantially – it does not make a decision until all the facts have been presented, and the facts only come from the situation. Situationism does have some advance decision-making information: a general knowledge of what one should do (love), why one

---

<sup>23</sup> Geisler, 40-41.

<sup>24</sup> Wilkens, 169.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph F. Fletcher and John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation Ethics; True or False? A Dialogue between Joseph Fletcher and John Warwick Montgomery*, Dimension Books (Minneapolis; Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Bethany Fellowship; Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, Inc., 1972, 1999), 55.

<sup>26</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 126.

should do it (for God's sake), and to whom it should be done (one's neighbors).<sup>27</sup> These represent the only absolutes of situationism; the "how" remains relative to each situation.

### BIBLICAL EVALUATION OF SITUATION ETHICS

One finds it hard to argue with the premise of Fletcher's absolutism, that there is one unbreakable law, the law of love. Further, in a very practical sense, there are situations that appear to arise in life where actionable decisions are made to achieve the greatest good for oneself and others, but at the gravest costs. Moreover, to most evangelical Christians the Bible provides a system of plural universal laws, but in this sinful and fallen world these rules sometimes appear, on face value, to come into moral conflict – a concept situationism embraces. However, even with these apparent strengths or "gray areas," situationism does not in the end stand firmly against tests of truth found in God's Word. As Wilkens opines, "Most of the difficulties with situationism are not found in what it includes but in what it omits."<sup>28</sup>

### What's Love Got to Do with It?

Perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses found in the situational ethics theory is the mere concept of love. Fletcher has chosen *agapē* as the type of love that represents the single norm in Christian ethics. But he fails to adequately define what this love actually is, leaving an adherent to this ethical system with a multiplicity of possible characterizations.<sup>29</sup> In the first case, love is

---

<sup>27</sup> Geisler, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Wilkens, 172.

<sup>29</sup> Erwin Lutzer suggests Fletcher uses the word love in a dozen different ways in his 1966 book. Quoting Aristotle Lutzer writes, "A term must not only mean something but it must mean not-something as well." Lutzer continues, "There must be a limit to the meaning of a given word. Clearly, a term compatible with anything and everything is meaningless. The word love in particular suffers from much ambiguity because [Fletcher uses it] in a

defined by situationism as the intention of the agent. Fletcher writes, "...nothing can justify an act except a loving purpose."<sup>30</sup> Love is "...an attitude, a disposition ... a purpose."<sup>31</sup> So individual actions are based on intention and the consequences of such actions are irrelevant. When faced with a decision to lie or tell the truth, a situationist would say his/her lie is moral (if, of course, he/she had good intentions in mind) even if later on it was discovered, and in the discovery a greater harm occurred. The decision would be considered a moral decision because the action was done in love – with a loving purpose.

In a second case, Fletcher states that "...love is not something we have or are, it is something we do."<sup>32</sup> No action has value in and of itself; rather, actions gain or acquire value because they happen to help people (good) or hurt people (bad). Again, the morality of the decision is placed within the context of the consequences of the actions. Put bluntly, "The good is whatever works." An historical woman living on the western plains kills her crying infant with her own hands to prevent savages from killing her and her companions.<sup>33</sup> A pedophile attracted to little girls is rescued by a woman who seduces him, releasing him from his pathology.<sup>34</sup> In these examples provided by Fletcher, the moral actions facilitate certain consequences – the most important thing is to achieve an end by any available means.

---

variety of contexts." See Erwin W. Lutzer, "Crisis in Morality Part I: Philosophical Dilemmas of the New Morality," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129, no. 515 (1972): 227.

<sup>30</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 125.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

So in the first case situationism insists moral actions are based on the intention of the actor, but in the second case the act cannot be counted moral until it helps someone.

Reconciliation of these two views or definitions for love remains difficult if not impossible. For most evangelical Christians, Scripture provides the revealed will of God and contains moral law. Therefore, obedience to God's universal moral principles is required apart from any calculation of the results of obedience. That is, an action can have moral value independently of its consequences – it can be immoral even if some good happens to result, or can be moral even if the resulting consequences are bad.<sup>35</sup> Under situation ethics, Lutzer questions,

If love is the criterion for good and evil, and if there is no clear statement as to what constitutes a loving act, then morality becomes at best confusing. . . No one could ever be judged for an act per se; each action is morally neutral and only the intention or the consequences (not both!) can be evaluated to see whether he is guilty or innocent.<sup>36</sup>

Situation ethics' summary rule of love "is equivalent to a football game where only one summary rule exists: *fair play*."<sup>37</sup>

### A Flight from Rule-Based Ethical Systems

Situation ethics argues that as a system it falls between legalism and antinomianism. While Fletcher quickly rules out the validity and acknowledges the likely anarchy of antinomian ethics, he also rejects any rules within an ethical system beyond the norm of love. In the case of Christian ethics, moral laws contained in Scripture are reduced to mores that can be massaged to fit a given situation. However, under situationism, God's moral laws are not timeless and

---

<sup>35</sup> Lutzer, "Crisis in Morality Part I: Philosophical Dilemmas of the New Morality," 228-229.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>37</sup> Erwin W. Lutzer, "Crisis in Morality Part II: Philosophical Dilemmas of the New Morality " *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129, no. 516 (1972): 340.

absolute, and certainly no one is mandated to strictly obey them. To be sure, a situationist would agree that certain of God's moral laws do fit many situations and result in good for oneself and a neighbor. But situationism also argues there remain ethical "gray areas" that perplex the conscience, moral conflicts that arise when attempting to obey God's commands in every conceivable situation.

Fletcher's example of a "gray area" was presented earlier in this paper. There Jesus was found plucking wheat on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28). A situationist would interpret this event as Jesus ignoring the Sabbath law. But this was not a case of Christ ignoring the law; rather, Jesus was challenging the application of the law – two different arguments altogether. Situation ethics does not embrace the possibility of suspending a particular rule for good reason. Instead, situationism requires eliminating the normative value of the rule, reducing the rule to a flexible guideline at best, or tossing the rule altogether at the least. The system assumes all rule-based ethical approaches are legalistic because they do not rely upon the situation.<sup>38</sup> Montgomery suggests this is perhaps the greatest problem with situation ethics; that is, "the situation ethicist properly recognizes the ambiguity of situations and the extreme difficulty, often, in knowing what ought to be done; but he endeavors, in these situations, to justify himself."<sup>39</sup> Conversely, for people observing moral laws and universal rules in Scripture, telling a lie for a greater good does not vacate the sin in the lie. Instead of justifying the action as moral, they would be driven to the Cross of Christ for forgiveness.

God did not create standards of morality or goodness – nor does He obey them. In fact, absolute goodness was never created because it is God's immutable character. Kenneth Boa

---

<sup>38</sup> Wilkens, 175.

<sup>39</sup> Fletcher and Montgomery, 51.

concludes, “God revealed His character in the Old and New Testaments, and the God-man Jesus Christ perfectly lived it before men. God’s character is above the vicissitudes of time and space, meaning that there is a changeless criterion for right and wrong. This provides an absolute basis for morality.”<sup>40</sup>

### Situationism and Biblical Anthropology

In the prior section, Montgomery accused situation ethics of providing a basis for justifying any action done in love (for the good of oneself or another) – even if the action was a sin against God’s holiness. In further analysis, Fletcher suggests the only difference between non-Christian and Christian situation ethics is the biblical law of love. Yet situationism casts a wide net here by assuming a homogenous relationship with God apart from His grace. To wit, *agapē* love is a gift of grace to all believers in Jesus Christ. *Agapē* love is not something gained by human endeavor apart from God’s grace. However, situation ethics clearly embraces the view that *agapē* love is available to all of humanity and that sin has no effect on a person’s capacity to express *agapē* love.<sup>41</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the truth of Scripture.

The picture the Bible paints of the heart of an unsaved, unreconciled, unregenerate person is not pretty. First, this person’s heart is said to be unrighteous (Psa. 58:1-2). Second, because their heart is essentially unrighteous, they have a natural inclination toward evil (Eccl. 8:11, 9:3). Third, this person’s heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9; Isa. 44:18-20; Prov. 12:20). King David wrote about the perversity and arrogance of a person’s heart when he said: “A perverse heart shall depart from me. No one who has a haughty look and an arrogant heart

---

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth D. Boa, "What Is Behind Morality?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133, no. 530 (1976): 162.

<sup>41</sup> Wilkens, 176.

will I endure” (Psa. 101:4, 5). Finally, this person’s heart is characterized as stubborn and rebellious (Jer. 5:23).

Motives are an important consideration when trying to understand people. Why does a person do what he/she does? God’s Word states that a person’s intents or motives are present in his/her heart: “For the word of God . . . (is) able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). Motives incite action, which requires the formulation of goals and objectives. Since a person’s motives are motivated by what resides in his/her heart, then how can an unregenerate person possibly comprehend *agapē* love? Moreover, since this person is unable to fully comprehend *agapē* love apart from God’s grace, how could they possibly determine the appropriate moral decision/action in any given situation? “In short,” concludes Wilkens, “situationism seems to have far too much confidence in human nature apart from God’s grace.”<sup>42</sup>

### Utilitarianism in Sheep’s Clothing

Since there truly is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1:9), it is of no surprise that Fletcher admits that situationism is directly related to the utilitarian theory of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.<sup>43</sup> Fletcher readily admits that situationism “takes over from Bentham and Mill the strategic principle of ‘the greatest good of the greatest number.’”<sup>44</sup> Wyndy Corbin-Reuschling synthesizes utilitarian theory as follows, “In common parlance, utilitarianism is maximizing the greatest good or happiness for the greatest number of persons. The moral emphasis is placed on

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>43</sup> Mill states the principle of utility as: “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.” See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 2002 Modern Library pbk. ed., The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 239.

<sup>44</sup> Lutzer, “Crisis in Morality Part I: Philosophical Dilemmas of the New Morality,” 232.

the consequences of decisions and actions as they are needed for achieving a desired end.”<sup>45</sup>

Recall the greatest good or happiness in situation ethics is *agapē* love. Therefore, Fletcher has given utilitarianism a Christian flavor. Of the clear coalition between utilitarianism and situationism, Fletcher writes, “Observe that this is a genuine coalition, even though it reshapes the ‘good’ of utilitarians, replacing their pleasure principle with agape. In the coalition the hedonistic calculus becomes agapeic calculus, the greatest amount of neighbor welfare for the largest number of neighbors possible.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the meme remains the same; that is, the ends justify the means. However, as has been discussed previously, just because an end itself is good does not mean the actions themselves were good. One can heartily agree with Geisler who notes there are evil acts, and “no amount of good intentions can make an evil act good.”<sup>47</sup>

## CONCLUSION

William Luck observes that many Christian ethicists rightly criticize situation ethics, but do so by choosing the wrong ground from which to respond. He suggests these failing responses have done nothing more than substantiate the concept “that one cannot have a coherent plural absolutism and yet admit to the conflict of (absolute) moral rules.”<sup>48</sup> Those such as Fletcher, who admittedly abandoned Christianity as a system, attempted to replace the alleged “prescriptive

---

<sup>45</sup> Wyndy Corbin-Reuschling, *Reviving Evangelical Ethics: The Promises and Pitfalls of Classic Models of Morality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2008), 42.

<sup>46</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics; the New Morality*, 95.

<sup>47</sup> Geisler, 50.

<sup>48</sup> William F. Luck, "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics: A Second Look at the Salvaging Operations," *Grace Theological Journal* 8, (1987): 19.

legalism” of biblical revelation with situationism that does not necessarily rely on principle but, as Montgomery suggests, “on existential decision-making and ill-defined notions of ‘love.’”<sup>49</sup>

A truly Christian ethic begins with God’s Word. The apostle Paul reminds us that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Thus the entirety of Scripture is the norm of Christian ethics, not just situation ethics’ singular norm of *agapē* love. Walter Kaiser suggest Scripture can be used in four different ways in connection with moral decision-making: 1) as a guide – pointing out the appropriate route, 2) as a guard – warning against wrong decisions or courses of action, 3) as a compass – helps us gain our orientation, and 4) as a principle – consolidate abstract ideas that encapsulate a number of examples found in Scripture.<sup>50</sup>

To be sure, the Ten Commandments have taken quite a beating over the past several decades. Why? Because they represent laws/rules specifying particular things people should and should not do. People, because of their fallen nature, dislike laws and rules; so rises Fletcher’s idea that all people, including Christians, should not be directed by laws or rules, only by love. Yet law and love are not in opposition to each other; rather, law is driven by love. Recall Luther’s statement, “Therefore you have need of the law, that love may be manifested.”<sup>51</sup> In this vein, J. I. Packer provides the following instructional imperative:

Keep two truths in view. First, God’s law expresses his character. It reflects his own behavior; it alerts us to what he will love and hate to see in us. It is a recipe for holiness,

---

<sup>49</sup> Montgomery, "Some Remarks on Punishment and Freewill in Legal Theory Classical Christian Theology."

<sup>50</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *What Does the Lord Require?: A Guide for Preaching and Teaching Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 10.

<sup>51</sup> Luther, 62.

consecrated conformity to God, which is his true image in man. And as such (this is the second truth) God's law fits human nature.<sup>52</sup>

God's law represents objective, non-arbitrary, and universal norms that apply to general types of situations (or cases), and these normative commands are rooted in the unchanging absolutes of his character as revealed in Scripture. Any approach to ethics that leaves the divine perspective out of the formula leaves humankind in the hands of others, such as situationists, who have enough power and/or persuasion to determine what moral and ethical truth should be at any given moment (situation).<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> J. I. Packer, *Growing in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 232.

<sup>53</sup> Leventhal, "Holocaust Apologetics: Toward a Case for the Existence of God," 10.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blackwell, Gordon W. and L. D. Johnson. "The Campus Crisis: The Generation Gap." *Review and Expositor* 66, no. 5 (1969): 53-73.
- Boa, Kenneth D. "What Is Behind Morality?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133, no. 530 (1976): 152-164.
- Chismar, Douglas E. and David A. Rausch. "Regarding Theonomy: An Essay of Concern." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27, no. 3 (1984): 313-323.
- Corbin-Reuschling, Wyndy. *Reviving Evangelical Ethics: The Promises and Pitfalls of Classic Models of Morality*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2008.
- Fletcher, Joseph F. *Situation Ethics; the New Morality Library of Theological Ethics*. Philadelphia; Louisville, KY: Westminster /John Knox Press, 1966.
- . *Joseph Fletcher: Memoir of an Ex-Radical*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.
- Fletcher, Joseph F. and John Warwick Montgomery. *Situation Ethics; True or False? A Dialogue between Joseph Fletcher and John Warwick Montgomery* Dimension Books. Minneapolis; Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Bethany Fellowship; Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, Inc., 1972, 1999.
- Geisler, Norman L. *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues & Options*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010.
- Kaiser, Walter C. *What Does the Lord Require?: A Guide for Preaching and Teaching Biblical Ethics*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009.
- Leventhal, Barry R. "Holocaust Apologetics: Toward a Case for the Existence of God." *Christian Apologetics Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 7-11.
- Luck, William F. "Moral Conflicts and Evangelical Ethics: A Second Look at the Salvaging Operations." *Grace Theological Journal* 8, (1987): 19-34.
- Luther, Martin. *Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity*. Edited by J. N. Linker. Augsburg: Luther House, 1905.
- Lutzer, Erwin W. "Crisis in Morality Part I: Philosophical Dilemmas of the New Morality." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129, no. 515 (1972): 226-234.
- . "Crisis in Morality Part II: Philosophical Dilemmas of the New Morality " *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129, no. 516 (1972): 336-343.

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. 2002 Modern Library pbk. ed. *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill*. New York: Modern Library, 2002.

Montgomery, John Warwick. "Some Remarks on Punishment and Freewill in Legal Theory Classical Christian Theology." *Global Journal of Classical Theology* Volume 8, no. 2 (2010).

Packer, J. I. *Growing in Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994.

Wilkins, Steve. *Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics: An Introduction to Theories of Right and Wrong*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011.