

# The Choice Is Yours

## How to Make Ethical Decisions

James W. Walters

**O**ur church is confronting a mixed blessing—an increasingly educated membership.

The Advent Movement was begun by intelligent and dedicated pioneers, few of whom had much formal education. Nonetheless, they strongly emphasized the value of education, and now Adventism in the United States boasts a membership with more than twice the number of college graduates as the general citizenry, calculated on a per capita basis. Throughout the world, thousands of Adventist students are enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs in both denominational and public institutions.

The educated Adventist is a blessing in that he or she is equipped to make a significant contribution to the church, both as a leader and member. On the other hand, a challenge arises because traditionally the church has not had a large number of highly educated members, and many policies and practices have not been subjected to the questions that an educated membership tends to raise.

Regardless of the difficulties a more educated membership may bring, the net benefit is overwhelmingly positive. The church has long taught that each person is created in the image of God, with the "power to think and to do."<sup>1</sup> The church has long advocated that true education is the development of the whole person—including the intellect. Any growing pains the church may experience as a result of a more educated membership, are just that—adolescent adjustments as the organism matures into the socially and spiritually adult body of believers God would have us be-

come.

It is my conviction that our church—dedicated from its inception to the pursuit of truth regardless of the cost—must be proud of, and supportive of its worldwide community of college and university graduates and educated professionals.

### Making Decisions

The use of the human mind is expected—indeed required—by God, and nowhere is the need for careful thinking more important than in making contemporary ethical decisions. These decisions arise whenever a person faces a moral dilemma—a conflict between apparently conflicting duties or principles. A myriad of such conflicts—large and small—arise when the Adventist student steps into the non-Adventist classroom and as the Adventist professional enters the marketplace.

How is the educated professional to make important religious and moral decisions? A generation ago in the United States, the first response to decision-making was to consult the comprehensive *Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* or thumb through a Bible concordance. If a clear statement from Mrs. White could be found or if a "thus saith the Lord" could be located, one need search no further. Today, however, with our more accurate understanding of the process of divine revelation,<sup>2</sup> and the development of new technologies—particularly in the biomedical sciences—ethical decision-making has become more complex than before.

Of course, divine revelation must ever remain foundational. Contemporary insights demand

that we redouble the earnest study of the Bible and appropriately utilize Ellen White's writings. As never before, we need to approach these sacred resources with reverence, praying that God will soften our hearts and enlighten our minds. After having studied these inspired sources, however, we can gain further illumination from certain models of Christian ethics. Four such models are very helpful: (a) virtue ethics, (b) principle ethics, (c) authority ethics, and (d) situation ethics.<sup>3</sup> These models are not a substitute for "revealed" truth; they presuppose that such truth exists. These models are offered as four different lenses or eyeglasses through which the educated believer may gain a clearer view of the elements comprising a decision. Each model has a role to play in decision-making, but the model adopted as one's "favorite" is a leading indicator of how one's decisions will go.

### Four Models

**Virtue Ethics.** The focus of this model is one's character. The emphasis is on *being* rather than *doing*—on being the right sort of person rather than merely performing the correct action.

In a sense, this model is the most basic. It focuses on the essential substance of a person—the basis for all good actions. Ethics of character will be the final basis for divine judgment. Only God can look at the heart, and it is the motivations of the heart that are most important. In the final analysis, the issue is not whether one was able to live a perfect life, but rather whether one *intended* to do what is right.

Logically, the ethics of the virtue model take precedence over other models of decision making. One's basic motivation for living a moral life comes from deep within. Regardless of the validity of the rules and principles that govern an individual's life, there will never be enough rules to cover every nuanced situation. It is because of something more fundamental than rules—one's character—that the gaps between the rules can be fully covered. Rules are merely concrete extensions of character-based intentions.

The Bible underscores the importance of character. A compelling catalog of character traits is found in Galatians 5—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, kindness, etc. Is this list of character traits secondary to the Ten Commandments? It need not be. This is not an either/or issue, just as the issue of faith and works is not an either/or issue. Just as faith precedes works, so the Spirit precedes law. It is because of one's character that one even has the desire to keep *any* commandments.

Thinkers throughout history have underscored the importance of basic virtue. The ancient Greeks listed four cardinal virtues—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. The apostle Paul said that regardless of the good acts a Christian might do, if his or her actions are not prompted by love they are worthless. Hence, Paul enumerated what have come to be called the theological virtues—faith, hope, and love, the greatest of them being love.

Regardless of the importance of virtues or traits of character, virtue ethics has a weakness. What one person sees as love or kindness may be very different from the next person's definition. An egomaniac may actually believe that he or she has the best of intentions while being tragically self-deluded. Particularly in a pluralistic society, virtue ethics, for all its benefit, is too subjective.

**Principle Ethics.** As was indi-

cated above, only God can judge the heart. Because of the importance of one's intentions, they comprise the essential basis of final divine judgment.<sup>4</sup> However, in our life together as church members and citizens, good intentions are not sufficient. Hence we have rules. Regardless of one's intentions, certain basic societal



rules must be kept, or consequences will be meted out. Ethics of principle is a focus on *doing* the right thing, quite aside from motivation.

It would be impossible to operate any society or organization without basic rules. For example, regardless of how one feels about it, everyone in a given country must drive on the designated side of the road. In a professional setting, say medicine, there must be certain rules of conduct. For example, the idea of gaining "informed consent" before doing an invasive procedure is mandatory. It is not enough to say, "Be a considerate physician."

All rules are not created equal. There are lesser and greater rules. Respect for persons, in my field of bioethics, is a major "rule" or principle. From this high-level principle come several derivative rules, one of which is the rule of informed consent. From derivative rules come many "rules of thumb." For instance, from informed consent comes the rule stating that patients have the right to decide what they will have for breakfast. Rules of thumb are much more

plentiful and easily changed than are higher-level principles and rules. For example, the faculty handbook of the university where I teach has 221 pages. Many of these pages contain rules of thumb—that is, delineations of procedure that can be changed with relative ease. The higher-level principles, like basic respect for faculty members and derivative rules, such as protection of academic freedom and due process, are much more weighty and difficult to change. In making a decision in the principle ethics school of thought, one utilizes rules of thumb unless there is conflict; when there is conflict between two or more rules of thumb, one goes to the next higher level of rules to seek resolution.

In my teaching, I work with four high-level principles—respect for persons, beneficence, societal well being, and justice. Respect for persons, often referred to as the principle of autonomy, is the valuing of fellow human beings as ends in their own right. Beneficence means the doing of good for others. Societal well being is the principle that indicates our need to seek the welfare of the larger community, of society itself. Justice is the notion of giving to each person his or her just due. Justice, usually interpreted as equality among persons, is the principle that condemns such evils as racism and sexism.

**Authority Ethics.** Why do two equally educated and intelligent persons decide so differently on certain moral issues? For example, why do the Vatican and the General Conference view abortion differently? Why might two equally committed Adventists view the issue of capital punishment in opposite ways? The answer is many faceted, but it is tied to the issue of authority—that basis for right and wrong, truth and error—which exists in corporate and individual existence.

Sometimes authority ethics is taken to an extreme. To make decisions some Christians open

the Bible, close their eyes, and prayerfully point their finger at random to a text on the open page. Whatever the text says is taken as the authoritative answer to their dilemma. This is, dare I say, a naive view of biblical authority. A more useful and adequate Christian model of authority ethics was advocated by John Wesley, who saw the Bible as the first of four touchstones of authority, the other three being tradition, experience, and reason.<sup>5</sup>

I am thankful for my Christian upbringing and for the importance of the Holy Scriptures in my life. Through the Bible, I have a sense of who I am—my origin, my destiny, and my ultimate meaning for living. In the most basic sense of the word, the Bible, by pointing to the Divine Author, is authority for my existence.

This does not mean that I suspend my critical faculties. However, reason is itself merely a technical tool, not an end in itself. It works from certain givens, certain authorities. Christians happily accept biblical faith as a given.

**Situation Ethics.** A fourth model for making decisions emphasizes the context in which the decision is made. As with authority, here also there is a simplistic *and* an adequate use of the model. The simplistic use of "situation ethics" is that the situation alone determines the decision. Choices about right and wrong depend entirely on the situation. Anything that the situation calls for is right, because no absolute models of right and wrong exist beyond the particular situation.

I reject such situation ethics as not only simplistic, but also destructive to Christian morality—indeed, destructive to any adequate moral system. However, an ethical model that takes the situation into account need not be so simple-minded. The unique contexts of a moral dilemma can and should influence (but not itself determine!) the moral decision. Take for instance, two

biblical stories: first, that of the Good Samaritan. Finding a dying man lying alongside the Jericho road made—and should have made—a difference to the Samaritan as he decided between stopping to help and keeping his promise to meet a business appointment in Jericho (Luke 10:29-37). Second, consider Sabbath ob-



servance. It rightly made—and should have made—a difference to Jesus whether an ox had fallen into a ditch in determining whether a believer should enjoy usual Sabbath rest (Luke 14:5, 6).

Further, consider a story from our Adventist heritage. A. G. Daniells tells of an encounter with a Scandinavian missionary who practiced a very stringent vegetarian diet. To Daniells, the man appeared as if he "had hardly blood in his body," because he lived "a good deal on the north wind." The man was not getting an adequate diet, but claimed he was following Ellen White's health counsel. When Daniells returned to the States, he discussed this case with Ellen White. She replied, "Why don't the people use common sense? Why don't they know that we are to be governed by the places we are located?"<sup>6</sup> These three illustrations make a common point: although principles do not change, application may vary with the situation.

### Conclusion

These four models of ethical

decision-making are no substitute for Bible study and prayer. But after study and prayer—as the educated Adventist thinks deeply about a pressing moral decision—these perspectives can be helpful in carefully analyzing the decision.

The four models are not exclusive. That is, one doesn't have to choose one or two and reject the others. They are complementary. However, the model that emerges as primary in one's approach to decision-making can make a distinctive difference. For instance, if authority ethics looms large in one's mind, one will likely come to quite different conclusions than if one put more emphasis on situation ethics.

In my experience, religious faith is my primary authority (authority ethics). And because my faith is biblical and Adventist, it is a dynamic faith. That is, it is relevant to the historical setting in which it is being lived. An illustration of biblical faith's dynamism comes from Ezekiel 18: pre-exilic believers tended to see themselves suffering because of their forebears' sins; but God told post-exilic believers to assume personal responsibility for their own lives. The historic Adventist notions of "progressive revelation" and "present truth" are important because they assert that faith must be lived out in relation to concrete times and settings (situation ethics).

It is from my authoritative faith's scripture and my faith's lived community, the church, that I learn who I ought to be (virtue ethics) and what I ought to do (principle ethics). I do not consult the Bhagavad Gita for foundational guidance on the virtues, nor look to the Communist Manifesto for life's basic principles. Rather, I look to the narrative of my Judeo-Christian heritage in the Bible. It is not that I can't learn from other traditions, but in my confession of Christianity I embrace a particular approach to life that fundamentally affects how I make moral decisions.

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Although this is how the four models interact in my own Christian experience, I know and appreciate that others may arrange the components of their ethical lives differently. That is fine. Healthy diversity highlights the variety of God's creation. However, despite the increasing cultural and educational diversity in our Adventist community, the authority of the Bible must always play a foundational role in our moral decision making.

### NOTES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1952), p. 17.
2. See Fred Veltman, "The Desire of Ages Project: The Data," *Ministry*, Vol. 62 [63 is the actual correct volume number] (October 1990), pp. 4-7; and "The Desire of Ages Project: The Conclusion," *Ministry*, Vol. 62 [63] (December 1990), pp. 11-15.
3. David Larson, a colleague with me in ethics, has written a very helpful article on decision-making. Like the proverbial elephant, the issue of Christian decision-making is a large and complex subject that can be approached from many sides and directions. Larson and I are—to some degree—examining different parts of the same animal. See David R. Larson, "Four Ways of Making Ethical Decisions," *Spectrum*, 12:2 (December 1981), pp. 17-26.
4. The importance of the chief virtue of love vis-à-vis all principled works is the point of 1 Corinthians 13.
5. Dennis M. Campbell, *Authority and the Renewal of American Theology* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1976).
6. This story is taken from the 1919 Bible Conference as published in *Spectrum*, 10:1 (May 1979), p. 40.

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