

THE EFFECT OF SITUATION ETHICS UPON MORAL VALUES

by

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

Copyright © Apologetics Press

All rights reserved. This document may be printed or stored on computer media, on the condition that it will not be republished in print, on-line (including reposting on any personal Web sites, corporate Web sites, organizational Web sites, electronic bulletin boards, etc.), or on computer media, and will not be used for any commercial purposes. Further, it must be copied with source statements (publisher, author, title, bibliographic references, etc.), and must include this paragraph granting limited rights for copying and reproduction, along with the name and address of the publisher and owner of these rights, as listed below. Except for those exclusions mentioned above, and brief quotations in articles or critical reviews, or distribution for educational purposes (including students in classes), no part of this document may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher.

Apologetics Press, Inc.
230 Landmark Drive
Montgomery, AL 36117 U.S.A.
334/272-8558
800/234-8558



www.ApologeticsPress.org

THE EFFECT OF SITUATION ETHICS UPON MORAL VALUES

by

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

The late Edward John Carnell, in his book, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, began his chapter on ethics with these words:

If it has not been evident to men before that we must be guided in our social life by universal and necessary ethical rules, it certainly is clear today. With the nations trembling for fear as the west and the east feel each other out for a Third World War; with stock piles of atom bombs being kept in order “just in case”; with world diplomats vetoing each other out of commission; with starvation, disease, and death marking the aftermath of the recently consummated world-holocaust; and with the threat of economic revolution looming over the entire human race, one can appreciate why even the followers of the scientific method are meeting together in seminars through lengths and breadth of the country, discussing what can be done to protect civilization... (1948, p. 315).

Men and women worldwide are clammering about, trying first one thing and then another, in an attempt to discover what they **ought** to do in this instance or in that. All rational people, it seems, to a greater or lesser degree, are interested in, and concerned with, human ethical conduct. What **ought** we to do? As Dr. Carnell went on to note:

It is evident that we must act, if we are to remain alive, but we find ourselves in such multifarious circumstances that it is difficult to know at times whether it is better to turn to the right or better to turn to the left, or better not to turn at all. And, before one can choose a direction in which to turn, he must answer the question, better in relation to **what** or to **whom**? In other words, if a man is going to act **meaningfully** and not haphazardly, he must rationally count the cost; he must think before he acts. Right judgment, then, and proper actions always go together (p. 316, emp. in orig.).

The point is well taken indeed. We must act in our daily lives. But by what standard (standards?) are those actions to be measured and judged? But further, how shall we act “rightly” in view of the ever-increasing judgment calls we are being called upon to make? How shall we choose **to do** one thing, while choosing **not to do** another?

Make no mistake about it: the actions that we today are being required to take, and the judgments that those actions require on our part, are becoming increasingly complex and far reaching in both their outcomes and their implications. A whole host of problems now sits at our doorstep, each of which awaits rational, reasonable, sound solution regarding how we ought to act in a particular situation. Shall we

countenance abortion? Shall we encourage surrogate motherhood? Shall we recommend euthanasia? Shall we embrace each and every level of genetic engineering (e.g., artificial insemination, etc.)? A great deal of in-depth study is needed in this area. We will not solve these problems, or even discuss them meaningfully, by relying merely on our own intuition or emotions. And in many instances the solutions offered by previous generations will provide no comfort. In many ways, the set of problems now facing us is entirely different than the set of problems facing generations long since gone. Morals and ethics **are** important. Even those who disavow any belief in God, and consequently any absolute standard of morality/ethics, concede that morality and ethics are vital. The late George Gaylord Simpson, famous evolutionist of Harvard, stated for example that although “man is the result of a purposeless and materialistic process that did not have him in mind,” nonetheless “good and evil, right and wrong, concepts irrelevant in nature except from the human viewpoint, become **real and pressing features** of the whole cosmos as viewed by Man—the only possible way in which the cosmos can be viewed morally because **morals arise only in man**” (1967, p. 346, emp. added). As Wayne Jackson aptly pointed out:

The **existence of** and **need for** morality are thus apparent. No sane person will argue that absolutely “anything goes.” The expressions “ought” and “ought not” are as much a part of the atheist’s vocabulary as anyone else’s. One may indeed become so insensitive that he abandons virtually all of his personal ethical obligations, but he will never ignore the lack of such in those **who would abuse him!** (1984, p. 320, emp. in orig.).

If: (a) every living person must act from day to day in one way or another—and he must; (b) during the course of our actions choices **must** be made—and they must, (c) the **range** of those choices is broadening every single day—and it is; (d) the **scope** of both the choices in front of us and the implications of those choices is widening—and it is; and (e) morality and ethics **are** important—and they are (even to those who believe in no objective, unchanging standard), then by what rule, set of rules, decision-making process, or knowledge system shall human beings determine what they **ought** to do or how they **ought** to act? How shall we come to grips with, and evaluate, these “real and pressing features” of “good and evil, right and wrong”? Stated simply, by what ethical/moral/value system shall we live and thereby justify our actions and choices?

A DEFINITION OF TERMS

Let us begin this study into morality and ethics by examining and defining some commonly used terms. Our English word “morality” derives from the Latin word *mores*, meaning habits or customs. Morality, therefore, is “the character of being in accord with the principles or standards of right conduct” (Jackson, 1984, p. 319). Our English word “ethics” is from a Greek word meaning “character.” Ethics is defined as “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad or right and wrong; a group of moral principles or a set of values.” Ethics, then, “is generally viewed as the system or code by which attitudes and actions are determined to be either right or wrong” (Jackson, p. 319). Or, as Carnell put it: “Ethics is the science of conduct, and the fundamental problem of ethics is determining what constitutes proper conduct” (1948, p. 315). The English word “right” derives from the Latin *rectus*, meaning “straight, according to the rule.” Moral or ethical philosophy, then, deals with right conduct, ethical duty, and virtue. Ethics deals with how we **ought** to behave. The question now is: How ought we to behave?

LIMITING THE SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

If ethics concerns itself with how men ought to behave, and if men have certain inherent desires regarding one matter or another, then it is apparent that the problem with which we now are faced is how to establish an ethical system with regard to those desires. As Carnell put it:

But where shall we locate these rules of duty? **That** is the question. In answering the question, however, one has little latitude of choice. Since duty is proper meaning, and since meaning is a property of either mind or of law, we can expect to locate our rule of duty either in a mind or in a law. Either the law that rules the mind is supreme, or the mind which makes the law is paramount. These fairly well exhaust the possibilities, for, if mind does not make the law, it is law that makes the mind. The Christian will defend the primacy of the lawgiver; non-Christianity will defend the primacy of the law... (1948, pp. 320-321, emp. in orig.).

Where, indeed, shall we locate these “rules of duty” that govern how man ought to act, thereby making him an ethical creature? Shall we find them in mind (Lawgiver) or merely in the law (i.e.: man’s own rules and sanctions)?

That there is a conflict (and that there has been for a long time) between those who assert that ethics stems only from man’s own law, and those who assert that ethics stems from the Ultimate Lawgiver, is so well documented as to need no comment. Men down through the centuries have tried to do away with the

Lawgiver (God) and replace Him with their own brand of ethics. The results of these various attempts are well chronicled. One ethical system after another has come and gone as men have attempted to establish some sort of philosophical, intellectual, or practical ethical system apart from God and His Word. It would take an entire book just to list and briefly summarize the various ethical systems that have been suggested as replacements for God's system of ethics as given in the Bible. Norman Geisler, in fact, authored a book titled *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (1981) in which he listed and discussed these various ethical systems. [NOTE: I recommend Dr. Geisler's book for a listing and historical discussion of the various philosophies of ethics, but I do not recommend the system of ethics Geisler proposes.]

It is not my intent here to deal with each and every ethical system that has been set forth in the past. Instead, it is my intention to deal with one specific ethical system. The remainder of my remarks will be addressed toward an examination and refutation of the false system popularly known as "situation ethics."

THE DEFINITIONS, PROPONENTS, AND FEATURES OF SITUATION ETHICS

It would be difficult to suggest any ethical system that has been more widely accepted in circles of both non-believers and believers in God than has situationism (known as "situation ethics"). Therefore, I would like to consider this ethical system as espoused by proponents of both ideologies.

The Situation Ethics of Non-Believers in God

The situation ethics of those who do not believe in God probably has been set forth most forcefully in that infamous document, *Humanist Manifestos 1 & 2*. Written in 1933 and 1973 respectively, and signed by such notables as John Dewey, Sir Julian Huxley, Sir Francis Crick, Isaac Asimov, Antony Flew, and others, it contains what many feel is the clearest expression of the situation ethics philosophy currently advocated by non-believers. Within its covers the following assertions may be found.

We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is **autonomous** and **situational**, needing no theological or ideological sanction. Ethics stems from human need and interest. To deny this distorts the whole basis of human life. Human life has meaning because we create and develop our futures. Happiness and the creative realization of human needs and desires, individually and in shared enjoyment, are continuous themes of humanism. We strive for the good life, here and now (1973, p. 17, emp. in orig.).

Humanism is an ethical process through which we all can move, above and beyond the divisive particulars, heroic personalities, dogmatic creeds, and ritual customs of past religions or their mere negation (p. 15).

As in 1933, humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival (p. 13).

But we can discover no divine purpose or providence for the human species. While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are and will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves (p. 16).

It is clear from such statements that the philosophy of situation ethics is at the very heart and core of humanism. George Gaylord Simpson made a clear (though probably inadvertent) admission regarding the fact that the evolutionary, humanistic system of origins cannot account for any kind of objective moral/ethical system when he wrote:

Discovery that the universe apart from man or before his coming lacks and lacked any purpose or plan has the inevitable corollary that the workings of the universe cannot provide any automatic, universal, eternal, or absolute ethical criteria of right or wrong. This discovery has completely undermined all older attempts to find an intuitive ethic or to accept such an ethic as revelation (1967, p. 346).

Those who opt for atheism, humanism, agnosticism etc. have no choice but to accept a relativistic system of ethics since they are forced, by definition, to contend that there is not (and cannot be) any ultimate standard of ethical truth.

The Situation Ethics of Believers in God

Those who profess a belief in God have not been immune from the false ethical system of situation ethics. Masquerading under the title of the “new morality,” situation ethics has been advocated in modern times by such men as John A.T. Robinson in his book, *Honest to God*, and Joseph Fletcher in his work, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. Fletcher, in fact, has been the leading defender of situation ethics among those who profess a belief in God. Everything, Fletcher has suggested, is relative to the situation (1966, pp. 43-44). In his view, words that are absolutistic (such as “never,” “always,” “no,” and “only”) must be avoided at all cost. The only thing absolute, Fletcher has said, is love. Even the biblical injunctions that we heretofore considered “absolute” are only generally or provisionally true. The Ten Commandments, according to Fletcher, would fall into this category because there can be exceptions to each and every command.

Fletcher contends that there are only three approaches to follow in making moral decisions: (1) legalistic; (2) antinomian; and (3) situational. Concerning the legalistic approach, he wrote: "One enters into every decision-making situation encumbered with a whole apparatus of prefabricated rules and regulations" (1966, p. 18). Over against legalism is the approach of nomianism. The term antinomian derives from two Greek words, *anti* (against, instead of) and *nomos* (law). So an antinomian is one who does not believe there are any ethical laws. Fletcher contends that by antinomianism "one enters into the decision-making situation armed with no principles or maxims whatsoever, to say nothing of rules" (p. 22). The decisions of the antinomian are random, unpredictable, and erratic.

Fletcher rejects both the legalistic and antinomian approaches and opts instead for situation ethics. According to him, moral decisions cannot be made on the basis that some things always are right and some things always are wrong; rather, each moral decision should be made in view of the specific situation on the basis of "love" alone.

The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared **in any situation** to compromise them or set them aside in the situation if love seems better served by doing so (1966, p. 26, emp. added).

Fletcher views situationism as differing from both legalism and antinomianism in that it keeps "law in a subservient place" (1966, p. 31). Law therefore is subservient to love at all costs. If love is best served by stealing, murdering, lying, etc., then the laws regarding stealing, murdering, lying, etc., are set aside. For Fletcher, "the end justifies the means." In fact, Fletcher made his position quite clear when he wrote: "Jesus said nothing about birth control, masturbation, fornication, or premarital intercourse, sterilization, artificial insemination, abortion, sex play, petting, and courtship. Whether any form of sex (hetero, homo, or auto) is good or evil depends on whether love is fully served" (1966, p. 139). He continued by saying:

People are learning that we can have sex without love, and love without sex, that baby-making can be (and often ought to be) separated from lovemaking. It is, indeed, for recreation as well as for procreation. But if people do not believe it is wrong to have sex relations outside marriage, it isn't unless they hurt themselves, their partners, or others.... All situationists would agree with Mrs. Patrick Campbell's remark that they can do what they want "as long as they don't do it in the street and frighten the horses" (1966, p. 140).

It should not then surprise us, therefore, when Fletcher concludes: "For the situationist there are no

rules—none at all” (1966, p. 55).

WHY SITUATION ETHICS?

The January 21, 1966 issue of *Time* magazine reported that situation ethics was experiencing rapid and wide-spread growth among both American and European theologians. Men such as Paul Lehmann and Joseph Fletcher in this country, and men such as Bonhoeffer, Barth, and Bultman in Europe, were beginning to advocate it in one form or another. Among non-believers of course, it always has enjoyed immense popularity (not so much by design as by necessity). But why is situation ethics now so popular among those who profess belief in God? Leon Morris, writing in *Christianity Today*, suggested: “The new morality is an excuse for doing the things that deep down men know are wrong. Men have tired of following God’s laws of absolutes, and are now looking for ‘a way out.’ Situationism is that ‘way out’” (1967, p. 6).

Additionally, there may be some who accept situation ethics because they simply are unable to correlate certain “real-life” situations with the absolutism demanded by God’s Word. For example, in his book, *Situation Ethics*, Fletcher took great delight in raising “sticky situations” that he felt could be solved only through the use of situation ethics. For example, Fletcher related the story of how, in 1841, the passenger ship *William Brown* struck an iceberg off Newfoundland, causing it to sink. Only two lifeboats were launched. One carried the captain and a few survivors and was rescued shortly after being launched. The other boat contained the first mate, seven seamen, and thirty-two passengers—about twice its normal capacity. Because of the rough seas, the overloaded craft threatened to sink at any moment and the mate therefore ordered most of the men out of the boat and into the sea. When the men refused to go, a seaman by the name of Holmes proceeded to throw them in. Later, after the boat’s rescue, Holmes was arrested and tried for murder. He was convicted, but with a “recommendation of mercy” (1966, p. 136). In Fletcher’s opinion, Holmes had done a “bravely sinful good thing” (which Fletcher called *agape* love).

Or, consider this sequence of events, which is another of the “sticky situations” Fletcher raised in his book in an attempt to justify his position.

At the Battle of the Bulge (World War 2, winter of 1944), a German infantryman named Bergmeier was

captured and taken into a prisoner of war camp in Wales. Later, his wife, compelled to forage for food for their three children, was picked up by a Soviet patrol. Before she could get word back to them, she was sent off to a prison camp in the Ukraine.

Within a few months, Bergmeier was released and upon return to Berlin began to search for his family. He found Paul, who was 10, and Ilse, who was 12, in a Russian detention school. Their 15-year-old brother, Hans, was found hiding in a cellar. But they searched in vain for some word of their mother. Her whereabouts remained a mystery. During those agonizing months of heartache, hunger and fear, they needed their mother to reknit them as a family.

Meanwhile, in the Ukraine, Mrs. Bergmeier learned through a sympathetic commandant that her husband and children were together in Berlin and were desperately trying to find her. But the Russian rules would allow her release for only two reasons: (1) an illness requiring medical care beyond the camp facilities, in which case she would be sent to a Soviet hospital elsewhere, and (2) pregnancy, in which case she would be returned to Germany as a liability.

She wrestled with the alternatives and finally asked a friendly camp guard to impregnate her. When her condition was medically verified, she was immediately returned to Berlin and to her family. They welcomed her with open arms even when she told them how she managed it. When little Dietrich was born, they especially loved him, feeling that he had done what no one else could do—bring the family back together (1968, p. 1).

This is yet another example, according to Fletcher, where acts that otherwise might be considered wrong and sinful (like adultery) are, in fact, right. He called Mrs. Bergmeier's act "sacrificial adultery," and even suggested that the family should be grateful to the friendly camp guard because in at least one sense he was responsible for bringing the family back together again. As one writer observed, "Fletcher uses this story, which is based on fact, to show, that in a certain situation, doing the loving thing might make it necessary to 'set aside' that stodgy, stiff seventh commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' [Exodus 20:14]" (Ridenour, 1969, p. 74).

In other words, Fletcher's advocacy of situationism is based on his contention that there are **some** circumstances that militate **against** absolutism. You simply cannot take a stiff, unbendable, unbreakable set of rules and make them apply to **every** set of circumstances, according to Fletcher's way of thinking. And so while some may use situationism to justify what they know "deep down to be wrong," others use situationism to say that it is literally the "only way out" of certain situations that can be handled in no other way.

A CRITIQUE OF SITUATIONISM

Let us now examine the logical, ethical, and biblical fallacies of the system known as "situation ethics."

The Situation Ethics of the Non-Believer in God

Those who do not believe in God suggest that “ethics is **autonomous** and **situational**.” That, of course, is a contradiction in terms, as Wayne Jackson has pointed out:

A more contradictory and absurd position would be difficult to conceive! Let us briefly analyze the statement. If one argues that ethics is **situational**, he is suggesting that an act cannot be judged by an absolute standard and that its rightness or wrongness is dependent upon the situation. For example, it would be wrong to lie if that falsehood was hurtful to others, however, if the lie could be helpful, it is said, then it would be right. Further, as previously indicated, morality is alleged to be **autonomous**. That word means “self law.” It means that every man is his **own law**! Well, if that is the case, how could there ever be a situation in which a person could do wrong? **Human ethical autonomy and situational morality are mutually exclusive propositions!** (1984, p. 329, emp. in orig.).

How can the **situation** determine in one instance what is “right or wrong” while at the same time allowing the individual to remain “autonomous” by determining for himself what is “right or wrong?” As Eben Gilbert noted in his work, *Philosophy and New Testament Faith*:

It is not too difficult to see that, on the subjective view, there cannot be clear right and wrong. Two apparently contradictory judgments both can not be correct. All we can say is that one judgment arouses a feeling in us of approval while the other arouses the emotion of disapproval. There is no real basis for absolute right and wrong, only feelings conditioned by unseen influences. This leaves man floating around in a turbulent sea of moral uncertainty (1977, p. 44).

It also is important to note that “the deficiency in ethical individualism is too overt to comment upon. If every man is a law to himself, we have anarchy, not ethics” (Carnell, 1948, p. 325). As Carnell went on to observe:

When Christianity is scrapped, man becomes one minor gear in a mechanical universe; he contributes his little part, just as do mud, hair, and filth. Each is a gear, and each in its own way makes for the smoother movement of the whole. But it is not at all clear that humanity is worthy of any more honor than the other gears in the machine. Why should man be more laudable than, for example, the elephant? Both are doomed to die without hope in a universe which is under the decrees of the second law of thermodynamics, and the animal is bigger than the human. Without God to tell us otherwise, humanity appears to be a huddling mass of groveling protoplasm, crowded together in a nervous wait for death, not unlike a group of helpless children that aggregate together in a burning building, pledging to love each other till the end comes. But, since we are **all** going to die, and since “the wages of virtue is dust,” as Sidgwick expresses it, what possible incentive for heroic personal living can humanism proffer? Shall I give up **my** own desires to follow some abstractly conceived theory of justice, prudence, and benevolence, when, as a result of **my** lifetime sacrifice, all I receive is a dash of dirt? Inasmuch as I can be assured of **my** happiness here and now if I do my own, rather than the will of the whole, what reason is there for me **not** to follow my own desires? After all, it is just one gear against another, and may the best gear win (1948, pp. 327-328, emp. in orig.).

If, as the non-believer asserts, ethics is situational and autonomous and no one piece of matter is worth more than any other piece of matter, then why should a person do anything other than what he sim-

ply **wants** to do? And that being the case, what would prevent ethics from being completely replaced by anarchy? According to Simpson:

The point is that an evolutionary ethic for man (which is of course the one we, as men, seek, if not the only possible kind) should be based on man's own nature, on his evolutionary position and significance.... It cannot be expected to be absolute, but must be subject to evolution itself and must be the result of responsible and rational choice in the full light of such knowledge of man and of life as we have (1967, p. 309, parenthetical comment in orig.).

But what is the result of man's ethical systems being based on "light of such knowledge" as we now have rather than on absolutes? Carnell addressed this question when he wrote:

Since humanism is committed to the scientific method in its epistemology, it cannot prove that any norm of ethics, such as the wrongfulness of murder, which might be valid today, will necessarily be wrong **tomorrow**. In an open universe, i.e., a universe without God to keep it regular, not only may doors have one side tomorrow, but also what we value and praise today we may despise and depreciate tomorrow. Through the expedient of a flux epistemology, it is impossible to relieve human values and human decencies from a moment-by-moment jeopardy. Now, since we cannot know whether any ethical truth which we firmly hold today will be valid tomorrow, it follows that present ethical norms are not really normative at all. Not only are our values contingent upon tomorrow's experience, but, also, they wait upon our experience one-tenth of a second from now. Therefore, it is impossible to know whether it is better at any onetime to turn to the left or turn to the right, for what may have been the proper course of action yesterday may be the improper one a moment from now. This is ethical skepticism (1948, p. 326, emp. in orig.).

What a horrible void situation ethics brings with it, First it is self-contradictory, asserting that it is both situational and autonomous. Second, it promotes anarchy. And third, it changes continually so that what is "right" one moment may well turn out to be "wrong" the very next! What is there within such a system that would recommend itself to us?

The Situation Ethics of the Believer in God

The first criticism of Fletcher's type of situation ethics is that it completely reduces to antinomianism. Advocates of situation ethics deny this, of course, because they forcefully assert that there is a single absolute in situation ethics—**love**. But, as Geisler has observed,

a single but contentless absolute is the same as no absolute at all. Commanding "love" in every situation without being able to define what "love" means is like commanding one to do X in every situation, when X is unknown. Further, Fletcher's view is plainly inconsistent when spelled out in straightforward English. "Avoid words such as 'never' and 'always' like the plague" really translates as, "One should never use the word 'never.'" Worse yet, it implies that "it is absolutely necessary to avoid all absolutes." But if one does not avoid universal statements in warning about universal statements, then his position is self-defeating. Finally, Fletcher does not heed his own warning to avoid universal words. He says love is the "only" norm for a Christian. Even in specific matters Fletcher uses universal language. On abortion he writes, "No unwanted baby should **ever** be born" (emp. added). Absolutes are, apparently, unavoidable (1981, p. 36; Fletcher's statement is on p. 39 of *Situation Ethics*; emp. is Geisler's).

Antinomianism is “against (or instead of) law.” Fletcher has gone to great lengths in his situation ethics to avoid the appearance of being “against law,” yet he ended up right in the midst of antinomianism anyway. Remember that it was Fletcher who said: “For the situationist there are no rules, none at all” (1966, p. 55). If that is not antinomianism, one would be hard pressed to find something that is!

In commenting on these matters, Wayne Jackson wrote: “The theory is fraught with insuperable logical difficulties. First, it affirms, ‘There are no absolutes.’ **Are you sure?** ‘Absolutely!’ It claims there are no rules save the rule of love, yet by their own rules the situationists would define love” (1984, p. 330, emp. in orig.). This last point, on the definition of the word “love,” is an interesting and important one. Writing in *His* magazine, Vernon Grounds observed that Fletcher gives almost a dozen different definitions to the word “love” (1967, p. 24).^{*} According to Fletcher, love can be an action, a motive, a principle, or just plain “good will.” The “absolute” of “love” suddenly has become not so “absolute” after all. It is, in fact, capable of almost any possible definition. Fletcher himself eventually admitted that “the word ‘love’ is a swampy one, a semantic confusion” (1966, p. 15).

The second criticism of Fletcher’s situation ethics centers on the fact that Fletcher (and all situationists) make law and love mutually exclusive. As Fritz Ridenour correctly commented: “Joseph Fletcher would have you believe that when it comes to ethics and morals, all that counts is love. The Bible, however, teaches that you need love and law” (1969, p. 79). David Lipe pursued the same line of thinking when he remarked:

For Fletcher, it is **either** law **or** love; but, for the Christian, it is **both** law **and** love. Fletcher even misunderstands the nature of love. Love is **preceded** by faith and **followed** by obedience. In John 14:15 Jesus says, “If ye love me, **keep** my commandments.” Fletcher says, “If ye love me, **set aside** my commandments.” Thus, according to the Bible, love is defined by acting in harmony with the will of God.

From this it can be seen that any ethical system must have content. For Fletcher the **content** of his ethical system is totally relative, and only specified by the principle of the “loving thing to do.” But, the loving thing to do must be defined; otherwise, one collapses into complete subjectivism where it cannot be held that any action is either absolutely right or absolutely wrong (which is the ultimate consequence of human ethics). There is content to Christian ethics, and that content is law.... Thus, it should not be concluded that law and love are mutually exclusive but are mutually interrelated (1978, p. 4, emp. in orig.).

^{*} See also Fletcher’s varying definitions of the word “love” on pages 60-61,63,79,104-105,155 of *Situation Ethics*.

Third, Fletcher's system of situational ethics stresses the principle of doing the "loving thing"—even when it means violating plain teachings of Scripture. Consider the examples given earlier. Take the case of Mrs. Bergmeier. Surely, we are told, her motives to get home to her family made her act of "sacrificial adultery" a good thing. But was it really? Was it actually a good example of Christian love and ethics? Fletcher does not consider the whole, but instead concentrates on only a small part. William Banowsky, in his book, *The New Morality: A Christian Solution*, pointed out that despite the fact that Mrs. Bergmeier's purpose may have been noble in her own eyes, she "...cunningly exploited a fellow human being to serve her purpose. Would situation ethicists really believe that she treated the guard as a person-or a thing? Was the guard a married man? Did he have a family? In her concern for her own family, Mrs. Bergmeier lost sight of love's interest for his family" (1968, p. 19). Another critic of situationism, Bernard Eller, carried the case of Mrs. Bergmeier even farther (1968, p. 965). Suppose, mused Eller, Mrs. Bergmeier got out of camp but was some 200 miles away from home and it is winter. She will starve to death unless she gets food. Suppose she goes to a farmhouse nearby, but the farmer will give her food only if she grants him "sexual favors." So she does. Then suppose she is hitchhiking home and a truck driver offers to give her a lift, but only for "sexual favors," which she then grants. If "sacrificial adultery" was right with the guard, surely it would be right with the farmer and the truck driver! But suppose she finally arrives home, only to find her family destitute and starving, so she commits "sacrificial adultery" as a prostitute to raise money for her destitute family. What then? Eller admits that he has reduced Fletcher's example to absurdity, but then asks an interesting question. **At what point did the story become absurd?** At the camp? At the farmer's? With the truck driver? As a prostitute? The point is this: if Christian ethics means anything, it means more than "solving the immediate problem," no matter how noble our intentions might be. Christian ethics, by definition, involves Jesus Christ and His law, and therefore a responsibility to God Himself first and foremost.

Wayne Jackson offered a similar example to concerning the so-called "love principle" that rules situation ethics. Suppose a young woman is jilted by her fiancé, enters a state of depression, and then is "comforted" by a married man as he has an "affair" with her. Fletcher would argue that this fornication

and adultery would be good. But consider the “rest of the story.” Suppose the man’s wife learned of his adulterous relationship, divorced him, and eventually committed suicide. One of his sons, disillusioned with the immorality of his father and his mother’s death, turns to a life of crime and eventually ends up in prison for the murder of three people. Another son, likewise disillusioned, becomes a drunkard and is killed in an auto accident that also kills three others. Now, with all the facts in, will situationists tell us that the adulterous relationship was the “loving thing to do?” The point, of course, is this: even when one suggests that “love” is the criterion for ethical decisions, **he presupposes some standard for determining what love really is!** In most instances of situation ethics coupled with this “love principle,” the word “love” should be spelled **lust!** Fletcher even titled one of the chapters in his book, “Love Decides There and Then” (1966, pp. 134ff.). Surely that should tell us something!

THE BIBLICAL SYSTEM OF ETHICS AS OPPOSED TO SITUATION ETHICS

“Ethics,” wrote John Waddey, “is the part of Christianity that teaches us how we ought to behave. Paul wrote to Timothy that he might know ‘how men ought to behave themselves’ (1 Timothy 3:15). The study of Christian ethics teaches us how to conform our human wills to the will of the Lord Jesus” (1977, p. 6). Herbert Lockyer observed: “Being made righteous before God, it is imperative for us to live righteously before men” (1964, p. 221). I wonder if situationists have considered that important point? Dr. Lockyer continued:

God, however, has not only a standard for us, He intends Christians **to be standards** (1 Timothy 4:12; James 1:22). Think of these manifold requirements. We are told to be different from the world (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:4; 12:1-2). We are to shine as lights amidst the world’s darkness (Matthew 5:14-16). We are to walk worthy of God, as His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 5:8). We are to live pleasing to God (1 Thessalonians 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:17; Colossians 1:10). We are to be examples to others in all things (1 Corinthians 4:13; 1 Timothy 4:12). We are to be victorious in temptation and tribulation (Romans 12:12; Colossians 1:11; James 1:2-4). We are to be conspicuous for our humility (Ephesians 4:12; Colossians 3:13; 1 Peter 3:3-4). We must appropriate divine power for the accomplishment of all God wants to make us, and desires us to be (Philippians 3:13; 3:21; 2 Peter 1:3)....

Throughout all of the **epistles** are scattered rules and directions, covering the whole ground of private and social life. The apostles taught that as a man **believes**, so must he **behave**. Creed should be reflected in conduct. **Virtues** must be acquired (Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 3:12-17; 2 Peter 1:5-7; Titus 2:12), and **vices** shunned (Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5-9). Love, as the parent of all virtue must be fostered (Romans 5:1,2,7,8; 1 Corinthians 13; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Hebrews 11). Christ’s image must be reflected in the lives of those He saves (Romans 8:37-39; 1 Corinthians 15:49-58; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 3:8-14).

Truly, ours is a high and holy calling. Belonging to Christ, we must behave accordingly. Having accepted Christ we must **live** Christ, which is not a mere fleshly imitation of Him but the outworking of His own life within. If His law is written upon our heart (Hebrews 8:10), and His Spirit enlightens our conscience (John 16:13); then, with a will harmonized to the Lord's will (Psalm 143:10), and affections set on heavenly things (Colossians 3:1), there will be no contradiction between profession and practice. What we believe will influence behavior, and creed will harmonize with conduct and character" (1964, pp. 221-223, emp. in orig.).

Situation ethics takes the laws of God and makes them provisional at best. Joseph Fletcher has said: "...situation ethics has good reason to hold it as a duty in some situations to break them, **any or all of them**. We would be better advised and better off to drop the legalist's love of law and adopt only the law of love" (1966, p. 74). David Lipe then observed: "This contention applied to some of God's commandments goes something like this: 'Thou shalt not commit adultery **ordinarily**.' Thou shalt not steal, **ordinarily**'" (1978, p. 3). Robert Taylor took the situation even farther.

Think how ridiculous the Decalogue would have been if given a situational framework. Here is how it might have read. (1) "Thou shalt have no other gods before me unless the situation demands occasional idolatry." (2) "Thou shalt not make graven images ordinarily but time and place may well demand deviation from this law." (3) "Thou shalt not take God's name in vain unless the situation seemingly demands profanity." (4) "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy unless certain unforeseen situations occasionally demand a temporary deviation of this holy practice." (5) "Honor parents ordinarily but situations may call for occasional rebellion as generation gaps widen." (6) "Thou shalt not kill unless the situation calls for murder." (7) "Thou shalt not commit adultery usually but certain situations may make premarital and extramarital affairs quite beautiful and desirable." (8) "Thou shalt not steal usually but no hard and fast rules demanding total and continuous honesty will work all the time." (9) "Thou shalt not bear false witness unless a lie will better serve the situation than will the truth." (10) "Thou shalt not covet unless the object is so beautiful to behold and desirable to have that further resistance toward this prohibition of the mind is both foolish and futile" (1972, pp. 25-26).

Taylor then investigated the "absolutes of biblical morality" in an in-depth fashion.

Biblical morality and the "new morality" are poles apart... God had absolutes for people of the Patriarchal Age. It was wrong for Cain to slay Abel and no possible type of situation in the field where it occurred could be urged in justification (Genesis 4:1-15). It was wrong for Jacob to deceive his blind father Isaac and for this deliberate deception he reaped a whirlwind of future consequences (Genesis 27:29,37). Joseph recognized that no situation would justify his fleshly entanglement with the wanton wife of his esteemed Master. Every principle of virtue in this goodly Hebrew lad cooperated beautifully in his courageous refusal to be successfully ensnared. His decision was made with his head and right reason prevailing. He said "how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9). Said act would have been premarital sex on his part but extra-marital on her part. Joseph believed in the morality of absolutes; his persistent would-be paramour was an ancient practitioner of "situation ethics." A surrender to moral relativity that day would have closed forever the door to the Egyptian governorship and the ultimate salvation of his people. Absolutes won the day.

Contrary to Fletcher's baseless declarations that Jesus left morality almost untouched, our Lord really put additional teeth in the moral laws of the Old Testament. Murder, adultery, etc. would not only be wrong under Christianity but the very thoughts and motives productive of such were given comprehensive legislation (Matthew 5:21-28). Absolutes run throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus recognized **no** situations where wrong would become right and immorality a desirable aspect of admirable activity. Jesus and his apostles never sought to sugar-coat the crimes and corruptions of their day. Murder was murder

whether done by Herod Antipas to John, Pilate to the worshipping Galileans or an unknown zealot killing a Roman soldier. Adultery was adultery whether committed by Felix and Drusilla or the unnamed brother in I Corinthians 5.

Morality is so absolute in the New Testament that both the overt act and the motive of evil prompting it are of strict legislation in the Lord's law. Morality may be relative to Fletcher and the situationists but **absolute** is Jehovah's final word on human ethics. For Fletcher there may be no rules—none at all—but every rule of ethical behavior incorporated into the Christian covenant is still binding. Situations, regardless of what they may be, do not change sin into virtue, wrong into right and impurity into purity (1972, pp. 25-26, emp. in orig.).

I would like to close this examination of situation ethics with a quote from Edward John Carnell, which I believe provides a fitting end to our study.

Death is the one sure arch under which all men must pass. But if death ends all—and it very well may unless we have inerrant revelation to assure us to the contrary—what virtue is there in present striving? Job ...expressed (that) man lives as if there is a sense to life, but in the end, his mortal remains provide but a banquet for the worms, for man dies and “The worm shall feed sweetly on him” (Job 24:20)....

The only full relief man can find from the clutches of these “tiny cannibals” is to locate some point of reference outside of the flux of time and space which can serve as an elevated place of rest. In Christianity, and in it alone, we find the necessary help, the help of the Almighty, He who rules eternity; He promises that there is life after physical death, happiness after despair. Relieved by this assurance, the Christian can say with David, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4) [1948, pp. 332-333].

REFERENCES

- Banowsky, William S. (1968), *The New Morality: A Christian Perspective* (Campus Evangelism).
- Carnell, John Edward (1948), *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).
- Eben Gilbert (1977), *Philosophy and New Testament Faith* (McMinnville, TN: Privately published by author).
- Eller, Bernard (1968), “The Ethic of Promise,” *Christian Century*, July.
- Fletcher, Joseph (1966), *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press).
- Geisler, Norman (1981), *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).
- Grounds, Vernon (1967), “The New Morality: What’s Wrong with the New View of Right?” (Part 2), *His* magazine, November.
- Humanist Manifestos 1 & 2* (1973), (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus).
- Jackson, Wayne (1984), “False Doctrines about Human Conduct,” *Doctrines and Commandments of Men: A Handbook on Religious Error*, ed. John Wadley (Knoxville, TN: East Tennessee School of Preaching & Missions)
- Lipe, David (1978), “Situation Ethics,” *The Spiritual Sword*, July.
- Lockyer, Herbert (1964), *All the Doctrines of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).
- Morris Leon (1967), *Christianity Today*, July.
- Ridenour, Fritz (1969), *The Other Side of Morality*, (Glendale, CA: Gospel Light).
- Robinson, John A.T. (1966), *Honest to God* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).
- Simpson, George Gaylord (1967), *The Meaning of Evolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), revised edition.
- Taylor, Robert (1972), “How Does Modernism Affect Ethics?” *The Spiritual Sword*, July.

Wadley, John (1977), "Aspects of Christian Ethics," *Firm Foundation*, June.