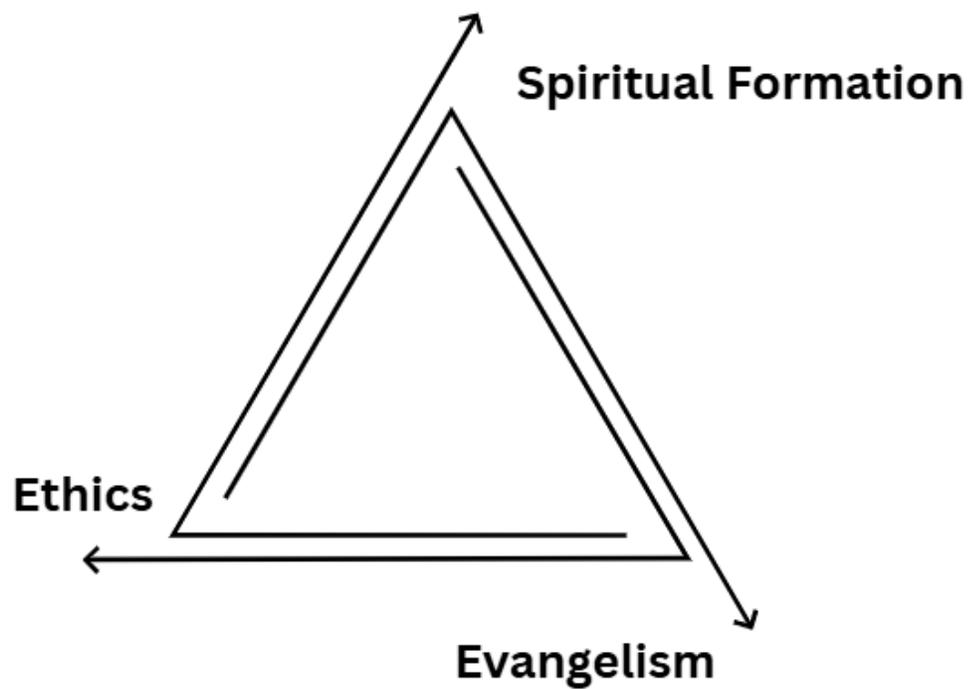


Christian Ethics: A Triadic Approach

By

Bill Tillman



Introduction

This little book is a revised version of a title “How My Mind Has Changed About Teaching Christian Ethics. That version was posted on the Center for Congregational Ethics Facebook page in serial form in 2021. The current expression, “Christian Ethics: A Triadic Approach,” has been distilled in form, style, and content from that 2021 publication. There is still merit for each of us, though, toward consideration of how our minds change in regard to the what, why, and how we make decisions day by day—some small, some medium, some large.

Over a period of about thirty years, The Christian Century sponsored a series of articles built around the theme “How My Mind Has Changed.” Theologians of notoriety through those decades contributed rather personal reflections over how they considered themselves to have experienced some evolution in their theological perspectives.

At the time, I had not heard of most of those people. Out of the congregational background that I had been reared in, I still had the thought in my head that one should come to some quite succinct conclusions theologically early on and hold onto those. After all, as I was taught, “God is an unchanging God, now and forevermore.” And, from more than just those congregations I knew there was a sense of defensiveness about that conviction. So, anyone who countered the idea of God being unchanging would immediately be labeled as a Liberal, the worst condition anyone could occupy.

I didn’t know then the term “immutability,” but the never-changedness of God theme was supposed to set my own sense of theology into an unchanging mode. If I did change, I was expressing double mindedness, being tossed about like winds over the sea, doubting, per James 1 as a proof text! Any of this apparent mental shifting of sand was to be disdained, dismissed, and discouraged.

In addition, those who would come to be called process theologians, even as they tried to express that any perspective by humans to describe and explain God is limited were shunted off into the pit of intellectual darkness, evidently where their detractors considered they came from. Little consideration was given to how the detractors had reversed the biblical narrative of God creating humanity in God’s image. Rather ideas, imaginings, visions of God became shaped in the image of humanity. Those persons back there became successors to the long tradition of anthropocentrism.

As well, any acquaintance with, much more mention of, Joseph Fletcher’s Situation Ethics was verboten. The irony was that those who had a gag response to anything Fletcher operated out of pragmatism and situations, like Fletcher, only usually with much less attention to love than Fletcher.

Little room was left for anyone who offered some different perspectives to what had become embedded oral tradition about any of the foregoing ideas or persons. At the root of the situation was the matter of maintaining what I eventually could describe as pack thinking.

Later, I had read some of these “mind changed” theologians’ books and other articles. Still later, I met some of those theologians. None of them had horns, nor even the hint of a forked tail or cloven hooves. Of course, I had been taught that Satan was the best camouflage and shape shifter in creation. Only in retrospect, would I realize that I was becoming one of the mind-has-changed types. I arrived at the conclusion that being one whose mind/perspective did change was more the path one should be on.

There is a myth going around. That is, one can know completely the will of God, or as a student once boasted that he had “the full counsel of God on this matter.” Such a claim is narcissistic, egocentric, Pharisaical, heretical—you get the picture. I have learned that such claims also reflect a fear, a threatened-ness, on the part of the claimant.

Some of those realizations came to a head as I was finishing my first theological degree and asked to serve as a teaching fellow at the seminary. During that time, I met the professor who became my mentor. He was one of the leading voices in Christian ethics among the tradition I’d become a part of. I found, ironically, my background and experience to that point fit nicely with Christian ethics.

I used that professor’s syllabus for my teaching fellow classes I’d been assigned, a big help in those days. That teaching fellow endeavor lasted a year or so until I was interviewed and employed by the denominational agency that dealt with ethical and moral concerns. My perspective broadened considerably through those years. Interestingly, and unexpectedly, I realized that as I left that agency and went to a theological seminary that considered itself to be one which drew students from all over the world and sent out students to serve all over the world, truly a global perspective had come up closer than ever.

After a couple of years, four regular semesters with some summer semesters included, with the same syllabus from my teaching fellow days, I realized that I had been making some changes on how I was thinking about Christian ethics here and there and changes with the syllabus. Why change?

It began to dawn on me that I was using outlines that were a few decades old. And, though the directions and objectives of the course were still expressing dynamics, directions, biblical interpretations that would be called pushing the envelope a bit for some of the students coming in, the thirty-fifty-year-old outline points had a certain tiredness about them. Any editorial changes I was making was an attempt at relevance. The students I had were different from those who had been in that ethics course decades and more before.

By the end of those days on that faculty the course syllabus/outline had evolved further. Conversations in class, hallways, in congregations, made impressions in directions that I considered to be more relevant for students and congregations. There was the impact of doing a sabbatical, half of which was involved with studying with Hans Kung, which experience led me to be a faculty sponsor with students from my school being involved with those practicing Catholicism, Judaism, a variety of “mainline” Protestant traditions. Those experiences brought up closer another facet of interfaith conversation, world religions, more world view perspectives.

There were elective courses I co-taught with one of the leading children's religious educators for the course "Children and Ethical Issues" that found primary elements into the basic course. Certainly, with these opportunities not only was my knowledge base deepened and broadened but also my pedagogical skills were sharpened. Can one teach ethics, after all, remains a question for reflection and application.

However, some of need for constant working at relevance involved making some changes that I would call simplification of the course. The tag became "Christian Ethics—A Triadic Approach." The stack pole of the course was built around three major areas, each described by means of an equilateral triangle. There were Ethical Theories, Ethical Values, and Ethical Applications. The idea was to provide some core ideas for (1) the students who came more and more without much theological, even biblical, background who could (2) use the course material to develop their own study course(s) in a congregation—where most people needed a simplified approach to thinking about Christian ethics.

Another dynamic continued making itself known in that school, though—an ultra-right perspective about all things in the culture. Especially those of us in the Ethics Department were not welcome in the party those newcomers wanted to throw. I realized that what I had grown up in was essentially an antebellum rhetoric culture, that laid just beneath the surface in the infrastructure to which I had attached myself. And, that antebellum rhetoric arose with a vengeance.

As it turned out, I was offered a job in a state denominational infrastructure, a position that took me out of classroom activity and fit my credentials and experience. But, after two years I was lured back into academia at a denominational university. The initial offer was that I would teach Christian Ethics courses and a biblical survey course. My choice was to take on an Old Testament survey course. I told the dean I was choosing that because there were so many more moral dilemmas in the Old Testament that needed attention. In retrospect, I think my three-decades-before-self would have been appalled to hear that comment.

The expectation would be that I'd develop Ethics courses for the theology school. With that opportunity I dove back into that Basic Ethics Course and pulled out facets, elements, and portions of it toward building more specific courses in ethics that might find broader appeal in that university setting.

Almost at the point of beginning the semester the dean said that he had the need for me to drop the biblical studies course and develop a Spiritual Formation course, suitable for both undergraduates and graduates. I'd not taught such a course before, and so to my query of "What do you want me to do with that?" the dean replied that he didn't expect me to gather the students in the corner and pray for fifty minutes. Relatively quickly, though, we negotiated around what I had done in the former seminary setting with an elective constructed around decision making and character development. The cliché is true, there is nothing like a crisis to develop one's focus. For this course development process had to start in high gear and hit the ground quickly. But by then, with two denominational stretches and several years in the denomination's largest seminary, I found I could create new courses pretty quickly.

After a semester on that faculty the dean came to me asking if I'd lead the courses they needed at undergrad and grad levels on Evangelism. That request was one met by my comment of "But, you know very well that Ethicists don't do evangelism!" The dean, though, knew my sense of humor and laughed with me. Again, he gave me the opportunity to develop a course in Evangelism for that school's constituency. I found it to be one of the best and most enjoyable course developing experiences of my whole academic career. Later, I suggested to the dean that he not ask anyone else to lead the evangelism courses, I had it in hand, liked the course, the students liked the course.

By then, I realized that I had put together another triad: Ethics, Spiritual Formation, and Evangelism—concepts that had suffered denominationally and congregationally as they were treated as separate, unrelated concepts. Another dawning for me was that all the way back to my first ethics professor's professor, whom I had come to know quite well, had actually been articulating that triad through his forty-year career. A wholistic Gospel, if you please, could be transmitted through my course load each semester. He offered the triad through Christian ethics nomenclature only.

With this three-discipline course load I found myself taking on a different perspective with regard to especially Evangelism and Spiritual Formation. Putting together courses in those areas pressed me into doing more investigation into the spread of Christianity, why more into Western Culture, than Eastern Culture, for instance? And, why the split between Eastern and Western Christianity's expressions? No attention had been given any time in my theological education toward the Eastern Church. As well as any attention to what came to be called Celtic Christianity. Eastern and Celtic Christianity expressions bear some faint resemblance to each other, but especially in their essential rejection of the Roman form of Christianity.

During those years in the last academic setting, two other dynamics came into my experience that had a great deal to do with how I thought about Christian ethics—how I could best be the teacher of the subject, the discipline, especially toward applied theology/ethics emphases. One of those was becoming involved in the Baptist World Alliance, especially in the Evangelism/Missions Commission and the Christian Ethics Commission. That global view that had been enhanced from former years became even sharper as I traveled to places around the globe that otherwise I would have never gotten to.

As well, I met persons who were the denominational leaders, the institutional presidents, and representatives of regional organizations who gave me first-hand acquaintance with their opportunities and challenges in their part of the world regarding Christian ethics. Back to the present, it's been ten years since I've led a course on basic Christian ethics. That last delivery was based on where my thoughts, theology, so forth had gone over thirty years.

The Triadic Approach was there. But, there was also the integration of energies, personalities, themes, perspectives, from those experiences laid out above. I realized I had become one of those who had to say "How my mind has changed" on theology, especially the applied part. The current project is an attempt to relegate these mind changes into a form that perhaps makes these changes more clear for me, but may, as well, give opportunity for others to allow their own minds to change.

As well, the attempt here is to break through the academic language and present these ideas for more regular consumption, make Christian ethics more accessible for lay people, for instance, but also for those considered ministers, as well.

The book will move roughly through the following pattern. The first section will be made up of a chapter given to establishing rapport with a class, a study group, a conversation with others regarding the realm of Christian ethics. The next two chapters will be based on two papers I presented in 2011 and 2012 to the Baptist World Alliance Christian Ethics Commission. These are intended to provide some of the backdrop of my thinking over the years regarding Creation theology, ecumenicism, the place of culture toward understanding and finding relevance between congregations and cultures. For the reader, these two chapters may at first not quite fit with the others. However, the intent behind them is to demonstrate these dynamics of world view are ever present in all parts of the rest of the chapters exhibiting emphasis on respective triads.

The overarching values of accountability, forgiveness, and courage—the second part of a triadic approach, with a chapter dedicated to each of these value constellations--demonstrate that the values of justice, forgiveness, and acting on the best we know are not just congregational insider terms. Rather, these are at the heart of those interchanges in culture between groups and individuals toward finding at least the lowest common denominator of socially accepted morality. Indeed, there is more than a hint of delving into the matter that Christians, congregations, should be learning from the culture.

The third section/part will have three chapters divided among money, sex, and power. These are large concepts, of course, but form, I maintain, the basis for any and all issues that come upon us, that form inside of us. They are the stuff of the conflictual dynamics all about us. By the end there will be an epilogue providing some retrospect, even prospect, of what may amount for you the reader, as one of my early pastors described his sermons, as scattered thoughts, but toward further mind changing and Christian ethics.

If I last ten more years, and write another Christian ethics book, it no doubt will reflect some more mind changing on my part. I don't think yet that I've even touched the hem of the garment that could be called "applied theology/Christian ethics." I do think my reaching toward the hem has gotten a little closer, however.

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